Fish

by Gottahavemyncis

Summary

With the team about to once again solve a case for the FBI, McGee goes missing and Papa Gibbs is determined to find him. A Gibbs-and-McGee-centric story. Includes DiNozzo & rest of the team, set in 2015. Does not follow canon although it does include spoilers for Seasons 12,14 (and probably 13) and I’ve messed with the timelines again. Disclaimer on my profile.

Notes

Yep, I've done it again. Said I'd be back with a new story in a number of weeks, waited three days and here I am! Decided I want to get this started before the Season 15 premier (in one week!!) and was easily persuaded by a friend.

This story has NOTHING to do with any other story I've posted, it is a true stand-alone. Please shake all thoughts of Serendipity, At What Price, The Letter and Connections out of your heads! In this tale, I've used pieces of canon and pieces of my 'personal fanon' for Tim's background. Enough yabba yabba, here you go.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

FISH

Chapter 1

Gibbs frowned as he hurried down the staircase from the Director's suite, reviewing the plans he and Vance had made as well as the assignments. He'd just been handed a case that was already in the hands of the FBI. Eight murders in the last 10 months, the victims in different areas of the county. The last two victims were sailors, thus the inclusion of NCIS at the insistence of the Secretary of the Navy, supported by her boss, the Secretary of Defense. The Bureau had been working the case for 8 months. Their files should be here by now.

He sighed as he looked at the bullpen, realizing once again that Bishop had already left on her week's vacation, after which she'd be at FLETC for a 2-week training class. He hoped their temporarily assigned duty or TAD agent would be able to work with McGee on the electronics. Looked like there was enough of that to need 2 agents and that was definitely not in his or DiNozzo's wheelhouse.

His team looked up as he entered the bullpen. "SecNav pulled us into the Stoneridge case. Last 2 victims were sailors."

DiNozzo frowned, exchanging looks with McGee before turning back to Gibbs, "Boss, hasn't the Bureau been on that for months?"

Gibbs opened his mouth to reply but spotted a look on McGee's face who was looking at his monitor. "McGee?"

"Boss, we just got a huge file from the FBI."

"Put it up."

Tim was already scrambling. "Need two minutes to save it first."

Gibbs nodded. One minute and 35 seconds later, McGee picked up the remote as documents and photos appeared on the plasma. Gibbs smiled to himself, pleased with Tim's speed and maybe a little bit perversely proud that his agent deliberately overestimated the time needed.

Across the aisle, Tim quietly promised himself to find an analogy to explain the electronic saving of a file. Maybe he could use some sort of woodworking or building analogy.

The rest of the day was spent reviewing the files. It was frustrating and sometimes boring work but it had to be done. Before he dismissed them for the night, he'd laid out the plan and assignments, relieved to find their TAD, Bob Chalmers, was comfortable working with Tim on the electronic side of things.

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A week later, the four of them were in MTAC where McGee was using satellite tracking to determine heat signatures in a remote area of Wyoming.

"Got it! Boss, there's the cabin where they've been hiding. Two hours outside of the town of West Boston."
Without saying a word, Gibbs squeezed Tim's shoulder and the younger agent sat up straighter, not sure which was more satisfying - finding the killers or making his boss proud.

While McGee signed off, Gibbs turned to DiNozzo and Chalmers, noticing Vance had joined them. "Once the warrant requests are in, go home and pack. We're going into rough country so boots, jeans, etc., don't bother with anything formal. And bring warm jackets, it's early spring, Wyoming's had twice as much snow as usual this winter. It's colder than here."

He looked at Vance who nodded as he disconnected a call, "Pamela is booking flights for the morning. What else do you need?"

"Two vehicles, both with 4-wheel drive. If one's a truck, needs to have a double cab. It would help if they weren't black SUVs or shiny new. And...the cooperation of the locals. Couple of motel rooms. What about the Bureau?"

"You expect them to show up? They'd have to hear about your discovery first and I don't have a call scheduled with them for another few days. As far as Secretary Porter and I are concerned, this is our collar. If we have a press conference, I'll be sure to thank them for the 7 months of legwork they did."

"Ouch!"

"Don't worry about the FBI, I'll handle the politics."

Gibbs huffed, "Better you than me."

Vance just tilted his head in agreement.

While Gibbs spoke with Vance, his agents returned to the bullpen where Tony was muttering to himself. Tim looked over, "REI is probably your best bet. Bob might want to go with you."

Chalmers nodded, "I brought some of everything I have but nothing in the cowboy or mountain man look."

They both looked at Tim who shrugged, "I have 2 pairs of hiking boots, one for day hikes, the second pair is more rugged for backpacking, plus flannel shirts, jeans and a jacket I can take."

Tony frowned, "How? Why?"

Tim smiled, "Been dating someone who loves the outdoors. We hike in Shenandoah, backpack on the Appalachian Trail, canoe, horseback ride, paddleboard on the Chesapeake, camped on a beach a couple of times."

"Traitor!"

Bob looked puzzled while Tim laughed, "You'd do it too if the right woman came along."

"The right...ah ha, McOutdoorsygeek, what haven't you been telling us?"

"Nothing he's going to tell you now. Go! Meet here at 0600, we're flying cargo into Laramie and then a small plane to West Boston."

Tim frowned as he looked at something on his phone. "Boss, according to the weather forecast, that region is having a heat wave. High temperature today was 84 and forecast is for 89 tomorrow."
"All right, mix it up then, still need outdoor gear - jeans and boots. That means none of your fancy shoes, DiNozzo!"

Nodding, the three younger agents took their gear, personal belongings and left.

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DiNozzo bit back a groan and stretched as he climbed out of the small plane onto the airstrip. "How many days did that take?"

Tim laughed as he landed beside him, "At least 3."

Gibbs growled at them, "Knock it off. The vehicles are over there. DiNozzo, with me in the truck."

"Yes, Boss."

Chalmers waited until he and McGee climbed into the second vehicle, an SUV, before grinning. "They always like this on field trips?"

Tim nodded, "When we fly, yeah. Tony is not a big fan of flying Air Marine, hard on his back. Gibbs is a Marine, he'd fly a C-130 to work if he could. But he hates the time it takes to travel. If he could just beam us to West Boston, he'd be a happy guy."

Bob chuckled, "I'm learning from the best in the business and you guys are a trip!"

"Can't help being human. Except for Boss, he's got superpowers."

"So I've been told."

"Never did hear about your shopping trip with Tony."

"DiNozzo is the new poster boy for outdoor wear. He bought 3 pairs of jeans, in different weights for the weather and two different pairs of boots, socks. When he asked for western style shirts they politely informed him they sell sporting goods, camping gear, travel equipment and clothing for those activities, that they were not a country-and-western store. He bought a pair of jeans, boots, socks, a couple of shirts and a warmer jacket that they said I can return if I don't need it. I also bought a spray can of waterproofing for our new boots."

"Good! I should have gone shopping too, went home to do laundry and forgot to do my socks, so all I have are gym socks and a funky pair I got for Christmas as a joke."

"Ah well, as long as they keep you from getting blisters and keep your feet dry!"

"You're right, no one's going to see them!"

Following Gibbs, they parked outside the county sheriff's department and walked in. The sheriff grinned at Gibbs, "I heard they were sending in the Marines! I'm Tom Rohner, sheriff of this county."

"And a Marine?"

"Retired as a master sergeant."

"Former gunnery sergeant Gibbs."

"HooRah! And your team?"
Gibbs introduced them to the sheriff who then led them to a conference room where a deputy was waiting. "This is Sean Hawes, the deputy you'll be working with. This county is big geographically but we have less than 15,000 year-round residents so it's just Hawes, me, a part-time deputy and dispatch most of the year, with volunteers helping when they're needed. During the summer and hunting season, we bring on more help.

"Now, I've read your e-mails and we've mapped out the best way to reach that cabin. We'll have to be quick though. With this heat wave, the snow is melting fast which means all the creeks are running high. There's already flooding farther north and it's gonna happen here too. And with the amount of snow we've had, the flooding is going to be bad. Could block your way to the cabin. Although from the satellite image you sent, Siffert and Meran will have to get out soon as there's a stream behind that cabin that'll flood them out."

"They ever come into town?"

"One of our volunteers lives in West Boston, runs the grocery store there. He's got their photos and has people keeping an eye out for them but he didn't recognize them and his is the only grocery store in town. If they were smart about it, they've got everything they need for several weeks, maybe longer. They can hunt out there without anyone knowing."

"All right. Like to take a dry run out there today, see what the terrain is like."

"Be fine. Don't recommend taking both vehicles though." Gibbs nodded, "Dead giveaway, I know. You have any fishing gear I can borrow?"

"You're going to fish?"

"No, gonna have it in the truck so we look like fishermen rather than cops."

"Good idea. Yeah, I'll get it for you before you leave. You have a place to stay?"

"Motel in West Boston."

"Good. The cabin is 2 hours south of town and another 20 to 30-minute drive east. And that part is off-road. Two hours south on Route 997, there's a wooden bridge over the creek. Take that and then follow whatever path you can find due east to that cabin."

"We'll drive to the bridge today. Don't want to play our hand any more than that."

And with that they were done. The sheriff took two fishing rods, tackle box and hats out of the trunk of his county car, handing them to Gibbs and Chalmers, who happened to be standing closest to Gibbs. "Here, you look like you could be a fisherman. Or McGee. DiNozzo looks like a city boy. You ever been fishing, son?"

"Yeah sure, with my dad when I was a kid, in the Atlantic."

"Well, I guess fishing's fishing."

Gibbs shook his head as if to clear it and gestured to Chalmers. "Come on, let's get to the motel, change clothes."

Deputy Hawes had given them directions to West Boston and the motel they'd stay in. They traveled for nearly 40 minutes before entering the small town. The motel was on the state route and they pulled around back to park, not wanting to advertise their presence. Gibbs' request for vehicles
that would blend in resulted in them driving a 4-wheel drive, double cab Dodge Ram pickup truck and a 4-wheel drive Jeep Cherokee, both in excellent shape although a few years old.

They checked into their rooms, Gibbs sharing with DiNozzo, McGee with Chalmers. Gibbs and Chalmers quickly changed, donning the baseball caps from Sheriff Rohner, each advertising local bait stores and left to scout the vicinity around the bridge.

McGee got busy with his laptop, checking for news on the case and anything else. DiNozzo contacted Vance for an update and ended up representing Gibbs on an MTAC call about another case. McGee was grateful to have the time to catch up with his girlfriend, he grinned at the thought. She was done with her work for the day and the two spent some time together on Skype. They hadn't seen each other in person for several days and both were smiling when they logged off.

Knowing their partners would be gone at least 3 hours, considering Gibbs' mad driving, the two decided to have dinner in town and bring back meals for the other two. Each room had a microwave, mini-refrigerator and coffee maker. Tim laughed when Tony asked that his attire be inspected for suitability.

"Tony, just be yourself. So what if we look like city boys, that doesn't automatically mean we're cops! We're here for some fishing and whatever hunting is available this time of year."

"Do we know what hunting is available?"

"Right now, it's turkey and mountain lion, I don't even want to think about eating that. Black bear starts April 15th. There's a short archery season for black bear, starts the same day and ends on the 20th. Firearms for black bears ends June 15th."

"Archery? There's a special season for bow and arrow kills?"

"Yeah and that actually sounds interesting."

"Have you ever done that?"

"Killed with bow and arrow – no. But I have a bow and arrows, took archery in school and again when I was doing the paintball to improve my shooting skills. It helped with that too."

"Huh, you never stop surprising me, McRobinHood! Do you play bows and arrows with your outdoorsy girl?"

"Yes, we've done that."

They drove into town, deciding to eat at the local diner. When they walked in, the cashier blinked, smiled and bent down to look at something under the register. The two agents shook their heads as they walked to a booth, she needed to be more discreet than that! It was obvious to them that she was looking at the photos of Siffert and Meran.

They liked the menu as it had classic diner cuisine, burgers, salads, breakfast all day long and comfort food such as meatloaf, as well as local cuisine. Both men chose the local specialties. Tim ordered a venison steak dinner while Tony opted for a salmon that was native to the area. Both enjoyed their meals but didn't tarry, they still had work to do.

Halfway through their meals, they ordered venison steak and meatloaf entrees to go. Tim's thought was Boss and Chalmers could split each entrée so they'd get a taste of the local and the classic. They thought the dark roast coffee would please Gibbs but knew he'd also brought his own.
Back at the motel, they worked together on their plan, knowing the team would be working in pairs, Gibbs and Chalmers, DiNozzo and McGee. When the other two returned from their scouting trip, Gibbs was pleased with their work and the entrees they'd brought back for them.

McGee looked at their boss, "How's the road to the turnoff?"

"Pretty hairy. The good thing is there was very little traffic. The road's two lanes, narrow with twists and turns the entire way out there. Glad we went, there's nothing to tell you where the bridge is. Chalmers marked the mileage on the way back so we'll have that. The locals would know where things are because they've been here for years. No need to spend tax dollars on signs. There was a sign on the highway for something else but that's a state route."

"Where does it go?"

Bob grinned, 'Sign said 'Denver' but the maps don't show the route going all the way through the mountains."

"Weird."

Gibbs shrugged, "Unless our two decide to make a run in that direction, not gonna worry about it."

Tim nodded, "According to everything I could find, prior to his current residency Meran hasn't spent more than 2-3 days here in his lifetime. Inherited the property from his great-uncle but only visited once as a kid."

"And his activities don't show a lot of outdoor stuff. Neither do Siffert's."

That offering was from Tony and the others nodded, they thought Meran and Siffert would be even more 'fish out of water' than they were.

Gibbs nodded, "Good observation. Where can we expect to find them?"

"They were smart enough to come with provisions so they won't be in town unless they get bored. Cabin or bridge, I'd guess."

Chalmers grinned, "We placed a few cameras while we were out there."

McGee returned the grin, "Time to look!"

Bob gave him the coordinates and Tim pulled up the feed on his laptop. They watched, fascinated with the wildlife as it appeared and disappeared. Gibbs and Chalmers heated their meals, split them and ate while the four of them watched a deer family and a raccoon cross the bridge. They occasionally caught sight of an owl as it swooped down to snatch up a tasty morsel of something they'd rather not think about. Over the next couple of hours they saw a moose wander through, a rabbit scurrying along by his side and wondered if the moose would protect him from the owl.

As they were tired and would need to be up at first light, Tony took the first watch, Tim the second, then Bob Chalmers would watch on his laptop and finally Gibbs. While they had interesting animal stories to tell the next morning, no humans were spotted in range of the cameras.
Borrowing more fishing gear, this time from Deputy Hawes, the four agents split to their respective vehicles and drove south to the bridge. Gibbs and Chalmers went a few miles further south, McGee and DiNozzo stopped about a mile north of the bridge. They were waiting for satellite confirmation that two humans were still near the cabin. Once that was confirmed, they'd move in.

Tony blanched at the creek, now near flooding. "Would anyone be fishing when it's like this?"

His partner shrugged, "I don't know. We are though! Geez, that water's moving fast. Careful, Tony, it's only 3 feet below the embankment and who knows how strong the current is! If you hook a fish, you might lose the line and the pole because the current is too strong for the fish or us. Guess that answers your question, huh?"

"Yeah, unless you want to play 'chicken' with the current."

"Not me, I'm fine with fake fishing."

"Me too."

They backed two feet away from the edge of the embankment, grimacing as parts of it slid into the water.

"Sheriff was right, we won't be able to get over that bridge, bust them and get back over."

"Any ideas?"

Tony twisted his lips, "Zipline in and out?"

"Ha! Too bad the tree cover is so heavy, we could have a helo drop us."

"Might be able to do that anyway, just a longer line down. Trouble would be the noise."

"Yeah, too bad. No way to hide that."

Soon after, the techs in MTAC who were doing the satellite work reported they were unable to use the satellite due to solar flares. Luckily, they'd contacted Gibbs who brought McGee in on it. Tim knew to ask how long the flares were expected to cause interference and the reply was several hours.

With a four-hour drive to town and back, there was no way the team was going to abandon the site now to return later. McGee had reminded DiNozzo of previous waits to bust suspects, they warned Chalmers and the three agents had prepared, bringing food and beverages with them. Gibbs had coffee and motioning to Chalmers, removed two sandwiches from a cold pack. "Got sliced beef or turkey and the turkey's local. You pick."

Chalmers, a bright fellow, took the turkey sandwich and was rewarded with a thermos cup of coffee. McGee and DiNozzo also had sandwiches and split the halves between them, drinking their own coffee.

Within a couple of hours, both teams were in their vehicles with the air conditioning running as the temperatures increased. The water was currently holding at 3 feet below flood stage, that is when it
would spill over the 10-foot embankments but the sheriff reported they expected flooding by
nightfall.

The country was already on Daylight Savings Time which meant sunset here was technically at
7:41 PM. However, with all the tall trees, Deputy Hawes warned them they'd lose daylight by 6:30.

Gibbs tried not to growl in his frustration with the universe, who could plan for solar flares? In the
meantime, Chalmers was such a good sport that his frustrated boss calmed a bit and while keeping
an eye on the feeds from the cameras, played a few hands of cards.

DiNozzo and McGee, while also keeping an eye on the feeds, were playing games on their phones,
making sure they didn't run down the batteries. Both vehicles were pulled off the road, across from
the creek, where they were less visible to passing vehicles. Although there hadn't been any since
they'd arrived.

While they waited, Gibbs conferred with the sheriff and concluded that their vehicles weren't going
to work for the takedown. By 1600, Deputy Hawes arrived in his truck, delivering four dirt bikes to
the team, pointing out the modifications – all four had headlights. That not only gave them more
leverage, easier to chase criminals on two wheels than by foot, but the sheriff felt it would give
them more options for crossing the creek. He'd recommended they go south several miles to find a
crossing that was not yet flooded. While this bridge was the only one built for cars and trucks,
there were apparently several foot bridges that could handle the dirt bikes.

It was 1730 before MTAC, back online, confirmed two heat signatures, both behind the cabin. The
team believed this meant Siffert and Meran were watching the creek that ran there, gauging when
they'd need to leave to avoid the flood.

Gibbs made the decision, they were going in. He'd rather catch the killers and chance having to
wait for rescue to get the 6 of them back across the creek. He had emergency supplies with him,
enough for his team. If they had to share with their prisoners, they would. They were just setting
out when Gibbs' cell buzzed with a call from Sheriff Rohner, "We just got a report of two
motocross racing bikes stolen sometime in the last month. The residents have been away, got home
yesterday but didn't notice until today that their bikes are gone. This could be your guys."

"All right, thanks for the heads up."

"Hawes and I will split the county tonight. He'll be south of West Boston, can't justify too far south
but within 30 minutes of your location. I'll be farther north. With the creek flooding, we have to be
ready to help our residents. Be careful and I'll see you later tonight or tomorrow."

Gibbs made a noise and disconnected, shaking his head, "We cannot catch a break with this damn
case!"

He quickly updated the team who felt the same. Taking their weapons and stuffing extra
ammunition, handcuffs, badges, IDs, legal paperwork, rope and phones into their packs, they
mounted the dirt bikes to cross the bridge.

Their plan was to approach Siffert and Meran from the north and south but as they rode into the
woods toward the cabin, they heard two other bikes. One moving south, one north. Knowing the
suspects could also hear them, they split as planned.

Gibbs and Chalmers headed south, chasing whichever suspect was ahead of them, while McGee
and DiNozzo headed north.
By this time there was little daylight left under the thick mantle of trees and that gave the agents an advantage. While they'd been waiting, McGee did some research, discovering with a quick call to the Sheriff's Dept., who in turn called the owners, that the motocross bikes had no headlights.

The two teams split further as each pair split to cut the motocross rider off from the front and side. DiNozzo and McGee had already determined they were chasing Meran, the smarter of the two men. When he suddenly turned, Tony had a hunch where he was headed and using broken ASL, hard to steer with one hand and spell with the other while racing through heavy brush, told his partner. There was no time to update the other team.

Having failed to stop Siffert, who knew enough about motocross to do some impressive jumps with only a headband light in almost complete darkness over rocks and logs, Gibbs watched as he disappeared into the trees. He suspected the man was deliberately leading them away but from what he didn't know. There'd been no hint of evidence that anyone besides these two was involved in the murders. That didn't matter much now, they'd lost their suspect. They continued riding for another 15 minutes, splitting up to check for tracks but found nothing.

When they heard gunshots, Gibbs motioned Chalmers to find the others while he continued riding. He'd give it two more minutes and then he'd follow Chalmers.

Following the noise of the gunshots, Chalmers rode toward the bridge.

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DiNozzo's hunch proved correct, Meran was headed for the bridge. However, as the two agents approached, they were met with gunfire and realized they'd been set up. Meran had taken cover and was sniping at them. When they heard another bike skidding to a stop, they realized Siffert must have joined him. Now their headlights made them sitting ducks and they quickly turned them off, diving off the bikes as the bullets flew. With little cover where they landed, they returned fire in the dark having no idea if their quarry had remained in the same location.

When the shots from the suspects drew closer, the agents knew they had to move and do so very quickly. In agreement, they quickly took cover in the only place available.

As Chalmers approached the firefight, he could distinguish between the semi-automatic Sigs and the handguns fired by the suspects. When there was a slight lull, he frowned. The frown grew deeper when he realized the shooting was now one-sided, he could no longer hear the Sigs. Then he let out the breath he didn't know he was holding when one of the Sigs fired.

Cutting off the dirt bike as he neared the scene, he dumped the bike and approached on foot. He could hear Gibbs' dirt bike in the distance and hoped the suspects would believe they were both some distance away. He angled himself between the suspects' cover and where he believed his colleagues were. That way he could cover them and the suspects would think it was one of them firing.

Several minutes – and bullets – later, he heard Gibbs and left his position to creep behind the suspects, meeting Gibbs. Within three minutes they'd disarmed the shooters, had them in handcuffs on the ground. When DiNozzo and McGee didn't appear, Gibbs sent Chalmers to find them.

Using his flashlight, Chalmers swept the area, continuing to move west toward the bridge and the creek. He called out, identifying himself and finally heard a voice, Deputy Hawes.

"You need to get over the bridge now, we're about 10 minutes from flooding here and the bridge
"Gibbs has the suspects; can you get back and help him? They're handcuffed and tied, they can walk but not much else."

"Yeah, on my way."

Chalmers called again with no response. As Hawes crossed the bridge, Bob pointed him in the direction of Gibbs. Then he moved onto the bridge, looking closely at the wooden roadway. Spotting what looked like drops of blood, he followed them to the railing.

Gibbs saw Chalmers tracking something on the bridge. His heart pounding, he quickly helped Deputy Hawes load the prisoners in the sheriff's vehicle and then turned to join Bob. Chills went down Gibbs' spine when he heard the man calling for DiNozzo and McGee by their first names. What really frightened him was that Bob was no longer looking on the bridge but toward the water and the flooded embankment.

Chalmers turned, "I didn't hear them go in the water, they were still shooting as I approached. I'm gonna look underneath." Gibbs grabbed him, "Hang on, I've got rope. We'll tie a lifeline for you and then take more for them."

They quickly tied a rudimentary line for Chalmers who removed his pack, stuck a small but powerful flashlight in his mouth and climbed over the railing. In a minute, Gibbs heard a shout, "Tony's here. He's breathing but unconscious. He's wedged inside part of the underpinnings. I don't see Tim anywhere."

Gibbs had to fight to focus, knowing better than to give up on Timothy McGee. Tying his own rope, he climbed down to help Bob with Tony. Once the two were on the bridge, Gibbs swung down again, looking for any sign of Tim. What he found chilled him even more. Two bloody handprints, not far from Tony's perch, with the blood smeared to the bottom of the railing. Tim was in the water.

By now the bridge was groaning, the water level almost equal with Gibbs as he looked for any more clues. With Chalmers yelling at him to get off the bridge, Gibbs looked out into the water nearly level with him and saw how fast the current is. He knew it was icy cold, this was snow melt. Tim was injured, in the icy water. He'd have hypothermia in minutes and be carried God knows where in the current. With the realization that he couldn't help either of his boys if he too landed in the floodwaters, Gibbs climbed up. Hearing sirens, he nodded at Chalmers for his quick actions.

By his calculations, by now Tim had been in the water anywhere from 15-25 minutes. The blood from his handprints was tacky. Chalmers had been on the scene for 14 minutes and Gibbs was sure the man would have heard Tim hitting the water if he was already there. After hearing the gunshots, it took Chalmers 10 minutes and Gibbs 13 minutes to reach the bridge and take out the bad guys. Gibbs marked the time they heard the gunshots, knowing it could be important at some point.

While the EMTs worked on Tony, Gibbs took the guide rope, using it as a makeshift safety belt and scrambled along the flood line for about 500 feet. Seeing no sign of his agent, he realized he was wasting precious time, they needed more help. He turned back, calling out to Chalmers. They'd need helicopters, dogs and more manpower, a search and rescue team.

With urging from Agent Chalmers, Deputy Hawes had already contacted Sheriff Rohner; the Search and Rescue team was on the way. However, the one and only helicopter in the county was transporting a heart patient to Laramie and wouldn't be available for at least 5 hours. The sheriff
was working with other counties and the state to free up an aircraft.

Frustrated and nearly out of his mind with worry, not only did Gibbs not know if McGee was alive, he still didn't know the extent of DiNozzo's injuries. Chalmers finally reported that DiNozzo had no life-threatening injuries. The EMTs found a bullet wound in his upper right arm, a through and through. They thought the bullet had broken the humerus on its way through his body. There was also a crease in his hairline where a bullet took out a chunk of hair, a broken left foot and tibia, broken by a 3rd bullet.

Although the Search and Rescue team arrived in 20 minutes, to Gibbs it felt like hours. Every second counted, every second Tim was in the water meant he was closer to hypothermia or bleeding out from his injuries. Or drowning. Or he was already dead and his body was being quickly, too quickly, absorbed by the creek.
He feels himself slipping, knows his hands are too damaged to hold on much longer. Swinging his
legs, he tries to bring one up to the railing, let it do the work of holding on. He'd forgotten the
injury to his hip and he moans in pain. Exhausted, he manages to loop his arms over the railings,
letting his shoulders hold him up. Probably should have tried that before the leg thing, no matter
how much it hurts. He turns his head to where he believes Tony is also hanging on but it's pitch
black and if he can't see, neither can anyone else.

Then he's falling. He has no memory of his shoulders, arms or bloody hands slipping off the railing
or whatever knocked him off his perch into mid-air. He's still hazily conscious when he hits the
water, cold and moving way too fast for him to exert any control but the cold brings him out of the
haze.

Swept underwater, he fights his way to the surface, using all his strength to move through the
water toward where he believes the creek bank to be, to no avail. The current is relentless and pulls
him back in, once again underwater. Again, he fights his way to the surface and works himself into
a floating position. His best bet now is to find something to hold onto.

As he's again pulled downstream, something hits his head. His last conscious thoughts are regret
that Boss will think he gave up and overwhelming grief for the woman he loves, that she'll be hurt
and their dreams lost.
Chapter 4

Gibbs squared his shoulders as he climbed the stairs to the Director's suite, preparing himself for whatever was about to happen.

As he walked in, he noted the double doors were open. He nodded at Pamela as he went in, closing the doors behind him.

Vance looked up, "What's the news?"

"I'm cleared for the field. So is DiNozzo, he's downstairs. But I'm leaving." Gibbs palmed his badge and id, placing them on Vance's desk and then removed his weapon from the holster, placing it next to the other items. "Retiring, paperwork's done, should be in your mail."

"Leaving? Gibbs, we've talked about this. McGee knew the dangers. If he were here right now, he'd tell you not to go. We need you."

"Not giving up on him, Leon, and he needs me more than the agency does. He needs someone to believe in him and look for him full-time. I know the deputies, the park service and other people go looking on their days off, I know that's where Carter, O'Brien, Balboa and Dorneget went on their time off and I'm grateful for that but it's not enough. I need to be there. I need to know that every square inch has been searched and I still won't be done." He paused before continuing, "DiNozzo's back, he's capable of taking the team. Bishop's gaining experience and Chalmers has been a decent addition. Tim's out there somewhere, Director, and I'm going to find him."

Vance looked sad, "Jethro…"

"People have survived worse things. And if there's anything we've discovered about Timothy McGee, it's that he's a warrior, he doesn't give up. Like DiNozzo says, he has the heart of a lion. I am not giving up on him."

Vance stood up, walking around his desk to stand next to his agent. "Jethro, it's been nearly 4 months."

"Which means he's had time to heal. Maybe he's trying to find his way home. No reason I can't go help him." He looked at Vance and Leon knew there was nothing he could say to change his mind. Truth be told, he didn't want to change it. If he weren't a single parent, he might go with him.

He swallowed, "How can I help?"

Gibbs' shoulders relaxed a little. "Not sure yet. Might need a word in the right ear every now and then."

"You have all the equipment you need?" Vance shook his head, "Never mind, stupid question."

Gibbs huffed, "I've got maps covering the entire southeastern section of Wyoming and northern Colorado. I've been studying the area south of that damn bridge, over 200 miles downstream to the largest forks and 75 miles inland each way. I'll be searching all of that, including the other waterways. I've talked with a few back-country folks. Marine buddy put me in touch with another Marine who lives out there, he's helping me organize things in Wyoming."
"It's remote country, rumor has it that there are people living off the grid back there in the woods. Not necessarily the ones who come to mind, the anti-government survivalists, just people who don't care for modern life. I've got camping and hiking gear, have a 4-wheel drive truck and a boat waiting for me. I've been brushing up on archery, survival and deep woods skills while DiNozzo and I were recuperating. Damn good thing I didn't hurt my new knee any worse than I did."

While searching for McGee in the days following his disappearance, he'd managed to injure his knee, the one he'd had replaced several months before. To his disgust, it'd cost him precious time, nearly 4 months before the doctor and physical therapist cleared him for the field.

"How long will you…be out there?" Leon couldn't bring himself to ask how long he would look, he'd been as devastated as everyone else at the loss of Tim McGee.

"Don't know, Leon, I'm not setting a deadline. I've got dry rations for about 6 months but I'll also hunt and forage. I'm prepared for cold weather, rain, snow."

"Lot colder in Wyoming than it is here." He got a look for that and almost smiled. "What about a satellite phone?"

"Don't have one yet. I'll buy one this afternoon."

"No." Vance went to a file cabinet, opened a drawer and pulled out a piece of paper. "Here, sign this. Then you can have one from NCIS, with a solar charger. Which came from McGee. Before he patented his brand, he gave us a few." Vance sighed, "You can also use it to recharge batteries and assorted other things." He walked back to the file cabinet, pulled out a small booklet and walked to the double doors, poking his head out.

"Pamela, would you please make a copy of this for Agent Gibbs?"

While she did that, Gibbs frowned, "What's that?"

"Instructions for the solar charger, you can use it for all sorts of things. You gonna have a motor for the boat?"

"Maybe. Boat guy found a flat-backed inflatable canoe. Be easier to use a motor on that. Probably won't use it until our way back, don't want the noise to frighten anyone off."

Now Leon let himself smile, beginning to believe this might be possible. Hell, if McGee was alive, Gibbs would be the one to find him, bring him home. Then he lost the smile, thinking at least he'd find out what happened to him.

"Good thinking. This thing will also charge coffee pots, razors, heaters, lanterns…all kinds of things you'll need."

"Heater especially. Already have a solar lantern."

"Weapons?"

"Rifle, my backup piece, ammo for both, might take a crossbow, also on hold for me in Wyoming. Been practicing that. Gonna take some of my tools too."

"Got local back-up?"

"Of a sort. Boat guy is the Marine I mentioned. He's the only one who knows what Tim and I do for a living."
"Good idea. Gibbs…can you afford this? I know you have your pension from the Corps, but you're gonna need a lot of supplies."

For the first time since he walked into the office, Gibbs blinked back moisture.

"I don't care how much it takes, Leon. Tim's my kid and my kids are all I've got left. I will find him."

"If you retire, you'll get your pension. If you take a leave of absence, there's no money but some of your medical benefits."

Gibbs shook his head, "Rather have the money. My medical benefits won't do Tim any good."

Vance smiled, "Not yours - but his would. He's still being paid, Jethro, still has all his benefits. You're not the only one who hasn't wanted to give up on him and due to the nature of our operations, we can keep it going for 12 months without question. Maybe another 6 months beyond that with some tap dancing. Here," Vance pulled something out of his jacket pocket, "I've been carrying these around to give you, one of the deputies found them in the rental car that night and sent them to us. Already gave DiNozzo his while he was still in the hospital." He handed Tim's driver's license and medical card to Gibbs.

Gibbs nodded his thanks, rubbing his thumb over Tim's photo, carefully placing the cards in his own wallet.

Vance sighed, reached into a drawer and withdrew two more items. "These are replacements."

Swallowing hard, Gibbs took the badge and Tim's agency ID, carefully tucking them in his own pocket.

"Last question, do the others know?"

A nod answered Vance who was surprised when there was more.

"They've helped me with the maps and planning the grids I'll be searching. Ducky wants to go with me. We compromised; I'll call him when I find Tim and he can meet us at the nearest airport. I'll pull them down to the lab before I leave, tell them goodbye."

"Better make it Autopsy and make it fast. Carter's got a kidnapping with physical evidence but no bodies. His SFA is on his way back with the evidence, be here in about 90 minutes. What about Tim's family?"

Jethro tilted his head back, swallowing hard. "I can't, Leon. I can't do that to them. I'd rather they be angry with me later for not telling them than give them…you know."

Leon nodded, mentally completing the sentence, "than give them false hope." He sighed, then held out his hand.

"Retirement reluctantly approved. Stay in touch when you can, Gibbs. Anything happens, you need any help, call me, call Ducky, call DiNozzo or Carter, we'll get the help or us to you asap." They shook hands and then Vance did the nearly unthinkable, pulling Gibbs in for a one-armed hug.

Pam knocked, looked in and handed Gibbs the booklet, smiling. Gibbs smiled back and looked at Vance who shook his head once, "Semper Fi, Jethro."

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As much as he'd dreaded the talk with Vance, he dreaded breaking the retirement news and saying goodbye to his team, his former team, even more. Even though they knew, had helped him plot the search grids, they didn't know when he'd be leaving or that he wasn't coming back to the agency.

Walking down the stairs, he caught DiNozzo's eye and gave him a head tilt to join him. Tony caught up to him at the elevator, no sense tiring out that foot of his unless they were on a case. Jethro wouldn't be with them then anyway.

When they got to the coffee cart, Gibbs treated, making an already suspicious DiNozzo more so. "Boss?"

"Not your boss anymore, DiNozzo. Vance will ask you formally but he and I agree you're more than capable of leading the MCRT."

"Then...you're going to find Tim." Tony blinked.

"Yeah. Taking retirement, have everything ready, boat and a truck waiting for me in Wyoming."

"Boss, I mean, oh hell, you'll always be Boss. You waited for me to be cleared for the field."

Gibbs nodded, "And me – had to get my knee back into shape. Took the time to prepare. Brushed up on my archery, I'll have a bow and arrows, maybe a crossbow, plus rock climbing, when I was allowed, and deep woods survival skills. Gotten a bit rusty since my knee first went wonky. Had camping equipment but exchanged it for survival equipment for winter, snow, rain, etc. Got a sat phone and maps of that damn creek. I think I have maps, paper maps, Tony, of every inch of Wyoming."

"Weapons?"

"Yep, rifle, my backup handgun, knives and plenty of ammo. Enough rations for 6 months, take me through the winter although I also plan to hunt and fish."

"Ice fishing."

"Probably, yeah. That 17-in-1 multi-purpose Wave tool you and Tim gave me for my birthday last year, hatchet, folding shovel, ax, machete, good for dense forest and defense. A second saw blade, besides the one on the Wave tool, for tree limbs. Hand drill, bits, hammer, screws...in case I need to build a shelter for winter, ice ax, climbing gear. I sent all the tools ahead to the guy who helped me with the truck and the canoe."

"Gloves? Rope?"

"Two pair wool glove liners, two pair to go over them or wear alone. One pair leather gloves. Four lighters and 2 big boxes of matches. Lot of rope."

"You'd know what you'd need, sounds like you've got it all. Are you taking clothes for Tim? And what about your house?"

Gibbs looked at him, "Yeah, have clothes, boots, winter jacket, gloves, hat, sleeping bag and blankets for Tim. Sent those with the tools. As for my house, I'd like you to take care of it for me, Anthony. Live in it while I'm gone. Maybe sublet your place?"

"Yeah, as long as you promise to come back."

Gibbs shook his head, "Not coming back without Tim or knowledge of what happened to him."
Tony nodded, he felt the same. If he had more experience or skills in the outdoors, he'd go with him. "Gonna say something sappy, Boss, so deal. You know how I feel about Tim – and you too. Want you both back."

Gibbs chuckled as he gave the back of Tony's neck an affectionate squeeze. "I want us both back too, DiNozzo. You concentrate on your new team and I'll concentrate on our family, right?"

"Right!" His phone buzzed with a text from Vance. "Uh, Boss, Vance wants to see me."

"Good, he won't keep you long. Come down to Autopsy when you're done, bring your team."

"Uh, who is my team?"

Gibbs smiled as he affectionately patted his face, "Up to you, Boss!"

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While DiNozzo headed upstairs, Gibbs took the stairs down to Autopsy. He was tempted to go to Abby's lab but only wanted to say the words he needed to say once.

He felt tired and sad when he thought of Abby; the woman had been a mess for most of the last 4 months, since Tim had been missing. She'd been angry, sad, depressed, various stages of grief. Her emotions had been very difficult to deal with, particularly for Ducky and him. The two men had enough problems dealing with their own feelings along with Gibbs' frustration at having to waste precious time while his knee healed again. Of course, not knowing whether Tim was alive or dead made things worse. At least with Kate, Jenny and Mike, there was no doubt, they'd been able to mourn.

Things changed a few weeks ago when Breena Palmer stepped in and told Abby to stop leaning so heavily on Gibbs and Ducky. That she wasn't the only one mourning. That Ducky and Gibbs had lost someone each regarded as a son and she needed to offer comfort as well as be comforted. And just like that it worked. Of course, it helped that Breena first spoke with Sister Rosita, Abby's bowling friend.

The weekend after Breena intervened, Gibbs slept 18 hours straight. Ducky outdid him, sleeping an entire day.

Gibbs nodded at Palmer when he walked into Autopsy. Ducky looked at him, sighing. "You and Anthony have been cleared for the field?"

"Yes. I've already spoken with Vance. He's up there now. I'd rather wait here."

"Of course. Abigail?"

"Rather wait for the others to get here before calling her down."

Palmer looked at him, "I have something for you." He held out a closed fist and Gibbs opened his palm, looking at the stone Jimmy dropped into it. It was an uncut topaz. When he looked at the younger man, Jimmy gave him a half-smile, "It's my good luck rock. I've had it since I was 6 and got lost on a family hike in Colorado. I picked it up and made a wish that my dad would find me and he did. It's also our birthstone, mine and Tim's. There are other good things that have happened with it. Both times you and Tim went to Afghanistan, I gave it to him to carry. Now it's your turn. Bring him home."

Once again swallowing hard, Gibbs nodded and pulled the young doctor into an embrace,
whispering, "Thank you."

He wondered if Bishop, Chalmers or Abby also knew today was the day or if Ducky had told Jimmy. Then he shook his head; Abby didn't know, she would have said something. Bishop and Chalmers…well, they were both investigators; he'd pushed his physical therapy, along with having his share of late mornings and early evenings while he recovered and prepared. They knew the grids were plotted out, the maps marked, the truck in Wyoming purchased. And Tony had been excited when he came in with his medical release. At the very least he didn't think they'd be surprised.

His question was answered when the three walked through the double doors. Chalmers gave him a solemn nod while Ellie was obviously trying to hold on to her emotions. Hard for her as Gibbs thought she'd had a thing for Tim after her divorce. Whether it was a crush or something more he had no idea. He had to refrain from holding his arms open to her, otherwise he'd have Abby in them too and he was not doing that today. He had a schedule and vowed to stick with it. Besides, Bishop had a father, one with whom she was close.

Abby came in on Tony's heels. She looked at all of them and then at Gibbs. "What's going on, is there news?"

Briefly he told them about Tony assuming the leadership of the MCRT and then about what he was doing. He answered a few questions and then mercifully escaped with a quick hug and kiss while Jimmy and Tony immediately went to work distracting Abby. Ellie followed him into the elevator, standing there nervously. "We love you, come home and bring Tim with you. If he's…if you can't find him, find out what happened. He'd want that, he'd understand."

With a hug, she planted a bold kiss on his cheek and then stepped out, watching him as the doors shut. Thinking he couldn't stand more goodbyes or explanations, Gibbs headed for the evidence garage, only to find Rick Carter, Jim O'Brien, Al Balboa and some of the others there. "Good luck, Godspeed, we're here if you need help. Anything…” He shook hands with them and then with a head tilt, walked out to his car. Whatever happened, he was finished with his work here. His immediate future was spoken for and he hoped, prayed that he wouldn't be alone on his return.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

To all those affected by the hurricanes, floods and earthquakes...prayers and positive thoughts for all of you.

In this story, I've only used little bits of my personal fanon. Tim's family is canon: deceased father Admiral John McGee, grandmother Penny, sister Sarah. No Rob, no Geordie, no shelter or camp.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta, Alix33! And to all of you reading, following, fave'ing and reviewing. Thanks!

This is probably the last chapter I'll post before the Season 15 premier on Tuesday, unless I'm disappointed (for instance, if they 'band-aid' the whole being held by bad guys like they did with Tim's shard of glass after Dearing's bomb) or mad (like Tim being off screen in Spider & Fly or whatever the end of that horrible arc was). Then I'll post a chapter because I know I won't be the only one feeling let down. Otherwise I'll post a chapter on Thursday or Friday. Enjoy the show, I do expect to be happy with it, the trailer's great and I trust that the new show runners will do justice to our McGee.

Chapter 5

Gibbs climbed out of the small plane into the warm August sunshine. He was here, finally. He'd flown from DC to Denver where his 50-minute layover turned into 14 hours due to a storm that grounded all aircraft in the Rockies. When the storm passed, his connecting flight to Laramie, Wyoming, took off and at Laramie he'd climbed aboard a small 4-seater plane and flown to this tiny airstrip outside the small town of West Boston. Flying from Laramie saved him some of the time he lost in Denver. He'd reached his starting point.

The man he'd referred to as the 'boat guy' met him, taking his pack from him. "You have a tent, clothes, boots, jackets and everything else in here? Nicely done, Gunny!"

Jethro held up the case carrying his rifle. He had to thank Vance for his help with that, his handgun and the ammunition for both; he'd cleared it with SecNav so Gibbs could bring them aboard his flights. That meant he had to identify himself to an air marshal, but it also meant not having to worry about the rifle, gun and ammo disappearing.

"This was the only thing I couldn't fit in and I couldn't have done that without sending you the box of tools and things for Tim."

Chuck Payton, the 'boat guy', a Marine and the friend of a friend, grinned, "Bet you could've if you really tried. Come on, got your wheels and canoe all ready for you. Get on the road, we can be at your first stop by dark."

Jethro nodded and then looked at Chuck, "We? Are you going with me?"
"For a few days, figure your first two or three stops. Hope you won't mind towing a trailer with my motorcycle, then I'll tow the trailer home. Want to make sure I remember to tell you everything you need to know. This is the West and you're a Yankee, even if you are a Marine."

He chuckled when the Yankee rolled his eyes at him. They were at Chuck's house and inside his garage in minutes. Jethro frowned when the truck was locked. "The price doesn't include the keys?"

He looked at the truck he'd purchased. A large, sturdy 4-wheel drive vehicle with a 8-foot full-sized truck bed, tow bar, snow tread tires, and a covered storage area in the truck well that ran the entire length of the bed. The cover had a sturdy lock and was hinged about a quarter of the way from the cab to the tailgate so that the lid could be lifted without having to move everything in the truck bed.

"It does but I promised your friend Ducky I'd make sure you ate something before we left."

"Ah, crap. He's gonna babysit me from 2000 miles away? We wait, it'll be full dark!"

"Nah, I got sandwiches, chips, apples, oranges and drinks. We can eat on the way."

"So, where are they?"

Chuck disappeared into the garage, reappearing with a large square bag with a carry handle. "This is an insulated bag, a cooler, and fits in the storage bin of my motorcycle for coming home."

Opening the bed cover, Jethro nodded in approval at the large box with the canoe and paddles. He watched Chuck hitch his trailer to the tow bar and then helped him attach the ramp to the trailer. Next the motorcycle went up the ramp and was secured in the trailer, along with the ramp. Finally the two men climbed in the cab, Jethro shaking his head when his stomach growled. Then he realized he hadn't eaten anything but a sandwich, apple and a couple of cookies since he'd left DC. Maybe food wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Chuck drove for the first two hours and then Jethro took over, he'd had enough of having to sit and do nothing. As they switched drivers, his companion pointed to the left. "That's the bridge."

Jethro grimaced at the memory, "They rebuilt it? Like to knock it down again."

"Only had to rebuild the roadway, the top part. Somehow the structure underneath survived. You can tear it down on your way back. Softly he added, "You can still see Tim's handprints. The blood nearly washed out but they're there and someone put a clear coat over them so now they won't ever wash out."

He grunted, forcing himself to focus on the road and his search for Tim, convinced he still lived. Four hours later Chuck pointed him to a trail on the side of the road, "Turn in there."

Remembering he was driving a 4-wheel drive vehicle for a reason and that he was also pulling a small trailer, Jethro turned in and Chuck marked the spot on the map. They drove east through the woods about two miles, found enough of a clearing in the trees and turned right in a southerly direction again, making their own road with the truck. Another 30 minutes and Chuck pointed to an area off to their left. "That's your first stop."

Jethro nodded, pulling off into the trees. Despite making good time, they only had about 15 minutes of dusk left in the deep woods, too late to do any searching tonight. The two debated about sleeping in the back of the truck or setting up the tent. Jethro shook his head, "Beds will be just as comfortable in the truck as the tent and I have a feeling I'll eventually be living in that thing."
Chuck nodded, "All right." He chuckled when Gibbs pulled his sleeping bag, self-inflating mattress and pillow out of his pack. He'd brought something similar.

Gibbs gave him a half-smile, "I'm too old to sleep on the ground."

"Yep, me too. Got a tarp for underneath?" He rolled his eyes when Gibbs pulled a pouch out of his pack, opening it up into a tarp large enough for their sleeping bags.

"You'll probably need a blanket tonight, gets cold."

Gibbs smirked as his well-used Mylar thermal blanket appeared. "I usually put this between the mattress and bag. Sleeping bag is rated for comfort in sub-zero temperatures. Anything else? I have a solar lantern, all charged up."

"Great! You get that and I'll build a fire. I brought dinner too, all cooked, just need to heat it a bit. Or do you have a solar powered microwave with you?"

Gibbs chuckled, "No, although I wouldn't be surprised if McGee's charger works on one of those."

"Huh, tell me about that over dinner." Chuck quickly dug a shallow fire pit, lined the edges with rocks, found enough fallen wood and kindling, built it up, got the fire going and placed a grill over it, balanced on the rocks. From his cooler, he took out a packet of already cooked steaks and placed them on the grill with previously baked potatoes wrapped in foil next to them. "You want a vegetable?"

Gibbs snorted, "Potato's a vegetable."

Chuck nodded, "And there was lettuce in the sandwiches. And a tomato."

"Vitamin C in that."

"Yep. You bring enough of that?"

"Ducky and Jimmy put together my medical kit, so yeah."

"That counts as medicine?"

"Does to me."

Chuck smiled, a big happy smile, when Gibbs pulled out an old-fashioned aluminum coffeepot. "I brought coffee, didn't think it was fair to ask you to share with me when you don't know how long you'll be out here." He handed over a large sack. Gibbs smiled, the first whole smile he'd smiled in months. "Thanks, man." Using bottled water, they'd filter water and fill up their thermoses tomorrow, he made the coffee and set it on the edge of the grill, which was getting a little crowded.

As they sat on their sleeping bags eating dinner, Chuck asked about Tim and the solar charger. Gibbs happily talked about his agent, his younger boy, for several minutes. He told his new friend about Tim's different skills, his imagination, his writing, his dabbling in various hobbies.

Chuck nodded along, finally saying, "What will you do if there's no trace of him?"

Gibbs shrugged, "Look again. I'm an investigator and tracker, I'll find a trace...something."

"Jethro, that creek at full snow melt, it takes people away almost every year. It's possible you won't find him or anything about him."
Gibbs took a deep breath, nodding, "I understand. But I need to look, he needs help, needs me and I need to know. He and Tony and the others, they're family, my family. Tim and Tony, they're like my sons, my boys. I lost my only child when she was a little girl, there was nothing I could do. For this child, I can look, I can help, I can bring him home."

He looked at Chuck, "Not just for me. He has a grandmother, a sister and a mother although she doesn't seem close to him. His father was a real bastard, an Admiral, died the end of last year. Just seemed like Tim was finally living his life the way he wanted when this happened. Penny and Sarah, they need to know, they deserve to know. Tony's a city boy and I needed him to take over the team, otherwise he'd be here. Ellie and Abby need the income, need to work, Jimmy has a family. Ducky's too old, Chalmers is too new and DiNozzo needs him. I'm here for all of them, for everyone who loves Tim."

"That's a heavy burden."

"Maybe. Not if I find him. Anyway, it's a risk I'll take and a burden I'm willing to handle. I want my boy home!"

Chuck nodded, understanding as well as he could. He had two grown daughters, if one of them disappeared, he'd be doing the same thing.

Letting the fire die, they covered it, made sure all the food, including Gibbs' dry 'rations' were in the 'bear' bag, that is Chuck's cooler bag, and using a length of rope and some sturdy loops and knots, hung it about 12 feet high in the trees. Chuck told Gibbs that in a couple of months when the bears were stuffing themselves in preparation for winter, he needed to hang it even higher. Smirking, Jethro dug in his pack, pulling out a harness, a couple of spurs and non-stretching rope, all needed for tree climbing. When he also retrieved a lightweight pulley system, Chuck laughed, shaking his head, glad the Gunny did his homework. Climbing into the truck bed, they raised the tailgate, settling in for the night.

Awake at first light, Jethro climbed out of the truck bed, taking his handgun, a handful of personal wipes, plastic bag and a small folding shovel with him, quickly finding a spot far enough away from the campsite. He looked around but didn't see anything that said another human had been there in the past months. That was okay, they were about a half-mile from the creek, they'd search closer and on the other side if they could find a place to walk or wade across. If not, they'd take the canoe to cross over and search.

He'd asked Chuck yesterday how often campers and hunters were out this way and the man shook his head. "Not your casual campers, that's for sure. It's too far off the beaten path and there are always wild animals to contend with. Too many deer and with deer come their predators, which is just about anything bigger than a raccoon. Most of this area is a preserve, the hunters have plenty of other hunting grounds. As we go deeper into the wilderness, there are fewer chances of running into other people." He got a thoughtful look on his face, "Of course, there's always talk of off-the-grid folks out here."

"Survivalists?"

"Not that I know of, not the kind you mean. Maybe a few individuals or a family but not whole enclaves. I'd say you'll find that people out here want to live off the grid, be self-sustainable, who maybe don't like neighbors on top of them or all the noise and stress of civilization. I know it sounds strange, Jethro but there are people allergic to how we live these days. They just can't deal with it. Even a small town like West Boston is too much."

Jethro nodded, he could understand that. His basement helped him deal with his own problems
with 'civilization'.

After they cleaned up, they packed everything, locking it in the well of the truck. Jethro looked twice, there was something in there he hadn't noticed before, a small boat motor. He looked at Chuck who smiled, "I wouldn't have had time if you weren't stuck in Denver. Dr. Mallard called, asking if I could find a motor for the canoe, said he and your boss talked about it, wanted to buy it for you. There's a sporting goods store about 40 miles from town, I was able to get there and back in time to meet you."

"And they paid for it?"

"Yep, called Ducky from the shop and he gave the owner his credit card number. Good thing I know the owner – too trusting of your friend, if you ask me."

Gibbs smiled, "Not really. He probably used his extra card, the only funds on it would be whatever the cost of the motor would be and it's not tied into his bank account. It was Tim's idea, came up with it after Ducky worried about thieves while traveling overseas."

"Huh, smart idea."

Taking day packs with food, water, binoculars, the clean again folding shovel, a magnifying glass, a few plastic bags, flashlights, their handguns and a few other items, the two set out. They'd divided the area between the creek and the truck into grids and split up for the search.

Before they started, Jethro asked. "Chuck, how wide would the creek have been 4 months ago?"

Checking his phone for notes he'd made after agreeing to help Gibbs, Chuck did some quick thinking before saying, "The night McGee disappeared, the water was a foot below flood stage less than a mile upstream from the bridge. The embankment at that point is normally 10 feet high on either side. At flood stage, the water is already over the top of the embankments. Out here, figure the water spilled out a good 20 feet on either side."

"And how deep?"

"As fast as that snow melted, probably 8 feet deep in the flood zones back there, maybe a little less out here, say 6 feet where we're standing now. Deeper in the creek bed itself and the current would have been awfully powerful, even in the spill zones. Might have been a little calmer at the edges but it would have been hard to get there."

Jethro nodded, "Then to establish a baseline, we need to look for water marks on the trees and measure them."

"Yeah, good idea. I have a measuring tape, do you…of course you do."

Chuck nodded as Gibbs pulled out his measuring tape, pencil and notepad. "I want to know how far from the creek bed the water spilled and the highest water marks. Might give us some idea how far from the creek bed Tim might have been carried."

"Thinking we might need to expand the grids, on either side?"

Gibbs nodded and the two men split. At the edge of the grid they'd drawn, Jethro found plenty of trees with water marks and carefully measured the height. When he measured a range of 3 feet, 10 inches to 4 feet on several trees, he marked that down. Now he needed to search the rest of his part of the grid and then measure the distance from the creek bed to the water-marked tree the farthest from the creek. That would give them a more realistic range to search.
Jethro found he could canvass several square feet at a time, then he needed to look away to give his eyes a rest. He used that time to examine the trees and shrubs for any kind of evidence that humans had been there. When he needed a break, he measured the distance from the creek to the tree he'd noted as the farthest from the water with the lowest water mark, the edge of the flood line. It was 22 feet west of the creek bed, close to Chuck's estimate.

Taking a break, he figured out the new grid and then called to the other man. "Hey, Chuck!"

"Hang on a sec."

Gibbs marked where he'd left off by shoving a fallen tree branch in the ground, and placing a large rock next to it before walking south to meet the other man. When he showed him the new grid pattern, Chuck nodded. "I did the same thing. Came up with 21 feet but there are some big boulders that would have blocked the water. Want to cover the expanded part before we go across?"

"Yeah. I've got a couple more sections to do."

"Me too, then we can backtrack, get it done. Gibbs, before I forget, around Grid 19 the closer you get to the creek and the edge of the woods, be very careful. The ground can be very unstable, there are sinkholes, dirt and rock slides all along there. You'll be all right on foot but keep the truck at least a couple miles west of the search grid. Rather have you backpack in for the search than lose you and the truck."

Jethro nodded, making a mental note about sinkholes and backpacking into #19.

Altogether, it took four hours for the men to complete the search of the western grid: three-quarters of a mile west to east by half-mile north to south. Meeting at the creek at the southernmost part of the half-mile, they walked the length, finally finding a spot where they could cross the creek without the canoe.

Marking the spot on the west or camp side, they crossed and then found a shady spot to have something to eat and drink a bottle of water each. Jethro pulled out the small water filtration system he'd brought and filtered enough of the creek water to fill each thermos and a collapsible water jug. Then they started their work again, leaving the water jug as the mark for the expanded part. This time they used the new grid pattern from the start. Again, they found the farthest water marks around 21-22 feet east of the creek and the marks were about the same, 3 ½ to 4 feet high.

Again, they found nothing. Both men were experienced trackers and occasionally found a blade of grass that was bent or a broken branch of a tree, but nothing to prove any human had been there.

By late afternoon, they'd finished but rather than return to their camp or move on, swapped grids to make sure neither had missed anything. Finally satisfied, they returned to the truck, relieved to see no evidence of visits from animals, human or otherwise.

They erased any sign of their camp, re-filling the fire pit with dirt, raking over it with a stick and scattering leaves, they took the rest of the wood with them, driving through the forest to the next grid. With the new pattern, they first drove a quarter mile west before turning south again. Gibbs wouldn't see pavement again until Grid 19 or 20.

Chuck stayed with Gibbs for four days, staying over the fourth night. By then they had a routine going although they hadn't found anything. Not a scrap of litter, which was both encouraging and maddening, or any other sign of humanity.

On the fifth morning, they put the ramp up on the trailer, moving the motorcycle onto the ground
and Chuck packed his belongings into the storage compartments on either side of the rear wheel. Leaving out the coffee, he handed the bag to Gibbs. "I'll be home tomorrow morning. Think you'll need this more than me. You need anything, call! You should be able to reach me on the sat phone for another week or so, then you'll have sporadic service until you move out of the woods or find some clear spots. When I can, I'll drive south along the river, give you a call. When I get home tomorrow, I'll call Dr. Mallard and give him an update."

Jethro nodded, "Thanks for everything, Chuck, you've been a lifesaver. Tell them I'm even more confident now than when I left home."

With a pat on his shoulder, Chuck strapped his helmet on, started the motor and took off, calling out "Semper Fi" as he left. Jethro allowed himself an extra half cup of coffee, listening to the sound of the motorcycle for several minutes and then giving himself time to adjust to the silence. For a man who hated noise and a lot of talk, he knew he was going to miss the sound of another voice. He shook himself, even more reason to get busy and find Tim!

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When Chuck reached his home the next day, the first thing he did was take a long hot shower. Second thing was to make a pot of coffee; third was to call Jethro's friends in DC.

In Autopsy, both doctors jumped a bit when the agency phone rang. They'd been busy the first few days Jethro was gone but things had been quiet, too quiet, since then. Not that they wished death on anyone but this was not the best time for a lull. They'd not only finished their normally dreaded and procrastinated-till-the-last-minute-inventory ahead of time, they'd cleaned Ducky's office, including his desk drawers, an eye opener for Jimmy. He knew in a vague way that the doctor kept a bottle of scotch around but he hadn't expected to find several bottles of different types of alcohol. Ducky explained, "When Director Shepard died, she left behind several bottles and we weren't sure who would be our next director. Jethro and I decided this was the best place to store her drinks supply."

Jimmy didn't buy that for a second but didn't say a word, managing not to roll his eyes or laugh in the face of his mentor.

Now, when the phone rang, they were online researching window coverings for the Palmers' home. Breena wanted new ones and Jimmy knew nothing about them. Dr. Mallard answered the phone and then with a gesture to Jimmy to join him, put the call on speaker.

"Hello Dr. Mallard, this is Chuck Payton out in Wyoming. I've just returned from helping Jethro with the start of his search and told him I'd give you an update. Although we didn't find anything, we learned a lot about the creek and the flooding. And I don't think he was expecting to find anything in the first few grids. If your friend landed there, he surely would have been found by now. Gibbs is fine, said to tell you he's even more confident and I'll add determined that he'll find Tim at some point."

"How long were you with him then? Longer than expected."

"Yes, I thought I'd stay a day or two but ended up helping him for 4 days. And if I didn't have to earn a living, I'd still be out there. My next days off, I may go find him again. The sat phone should still be in range. Once he gets out of the trees and up into the mountains, if he gets that far, he'll have reception again. Oh, he also said to tell you thanks for the boat motor, he was surprised and said that's hard to do."

"Indeed it is. He's all right?"
"Yes. The first day we searched we realized the creek had flooded all along the way and figured out from water marks on the trees how far out the flood waters spread. Then we had to re-think our grid pattern but we were both relieved that we figured that out right away. It's grueling work, keeping your eyes focused for any little hint for hours on end, but he found if he re-focuses, say on trees, bushes and shrubs, it keeps his eyes from getting too tired."

"And you ate well?"

"Of course! We had potatoes every night along with steak the first night, couple of fish we caught the second night, ham and eggs the third night and fish again last night and a few vegetables. He's got a soft-sided, insulated, hard bottomed little cooler that operates on electricity or a solar charge, more like a tiny refrigerator than an old-fashioned ice chest. It'll safely keep eggs, meat or fish for a few days."

"Oh yes, Director Vance told me he'd given him a couple of Tim's solar chargers. That all sounds good, Chuck, thank you. When you see or speak with him again, please give him our best. We'll let everyone know."

After ending the call, Ducky and Jimmy sat grinning at each other. Then they got busy. Ducky called Vance while Jimmy called Tony. Abby was in court that day, she would have to wait until she checked her messages to hear about the call.

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The MCRT were faring a little better than Autopsy, even if that wasn't the healthiest perspective for the team having criminal cases to investigate. While they'd had no dead bodies, there was a very interesting drug case they'd started to investigate. Until the FBI and DEA swept it out from under their noses. DiNozzo protested and Vance agreed but the larger agencies wouldn't budge.

There was also an embezzlement case that nearly broke DiNozzo's heart. This was Tim's favorite kind of case, running all kinds of searches and delving into people's financial records, finding all the dirt, tracing the money – after obtaining warrants, of course.

Ellie did a great job and Chalmers pitched right in, indeed Tony thought he was now the only non-technically oriented agent on the team although he knew more than he'd ever let on.

He missed Tim, he missed Gibbs and spent hours wondering how long it would take Boss to find his probie. It would be great if they were home by Labor Day, although that was only a week away. As the days passed he revised his wish to Columbus Day in October or maybe Halloween.

When Jimmy called, DiNozzo brightened at the news and motioned to his team to join him. Giving them the update, he noticed Chalmers was encouraged while Ellie nodded quietly, gave him a polite smile and returned to her desk. He made a mental note to talk with her later. Not as her team leader but as a friend to her and Tim.

When he called Ellie that evening he heard voices in the background and asked if he was interrupting anything. Ellie replied that she was at a friend's house and not to worry. He thought she'd been crying. Not that he'd ever heard or seen her cry but she sounded tired and upset.

He told her he'd guessed that she and Tim were involved in some way, that as far as Rule 12 it didn't matter while he was away and they'd figure things out when Tim and Gibbs returned. He didn't know if he'd said the right thing as she was audibly crying by the time they disconnected. When he asked Breena later, she nodded. "You did the right thing, Tony. You're her boss now and were looking out for her well-being. She…well you what you did and said was good."
Feeling better about his side of it and worse for Bishop, Tony decided there wasn't much more he could do. He felt a little better the next workday when Bishop gave him a nod of appreciation as she walked into the bullpen.

After considerable thought, he'd decided to offer his apartment to Chalmers who was still a TAD. It would be a decent commute for him and the rent would be within his ability to pay. If Chalmers agreed, DiNozzo would pack his clothes, much of his kitchenware, his DVDs, TV, surround-sound system and move into Gibbs' home. He'd leave the piano, there really wasn't any place for it and would be expensive to have it professionally moved.

He wished he'd had time to ask Gibbs if he could do some renovations, now he thought he'd at least do some painting. And maybe rent a refrigerator made in this century with a decent sized freezer, although if he could find a slightly used one in good condition, he'd buy it. They could move the icebox into the garage for the duration. He thought about moving his couch over and storing Gibbs' old one but that would leave Chalmers with nothing to sit on. He would be renting or buying a TV as it was, taking the couch seemed a little mean.

One of the first changes he made extended his cable service to Gibbs' house, bringing in internet access as well as television. When Jimmy said his in-laws were having an estate sale at the home of a recently deceased relative, DiNozzo jumped at the chance. Driving Gibbs' truck to the sale, he was thrilled to buy a nearly new refrigerator and a portable, convertible dishwasher, both in stainless steel. Looking like a built-in dishwasher but with wheels on it, the dishwasher had hoses to connect to the faucets or it could be permanently installed later if Gibbs wanted. It was functional and there was a perfect spot for it in the back of the kitchen; Tony would roll it over to the sink when it was time to wash.

He also bought a multi-shelf stand he would use to store his spices, food processor, additional pots, pans and baking dishes. And there was a table and chairs that looked infinitely more comfortable and modern than Gibbs' perfectly serviceable table from the 1950's. While DiNozzo understood the love for mid-century furnishings, he didn't personally share that affection.

Although it took persuading from Ducky and both Palmers, he also bought the deceased woman's couch. Only a few years old, it was in great shape, long enough and close enough to Tony's style and preferred color. It was a good thing he had the truck! Borrowing an appliance dolly from the Slaters, Jimmy and one of Breena's brothers-in-law helped him load and unload all his estate sale finds. For free pizza and drinks, both of his helpers stayed to help move Gibbs' couch, icebox, kitchen table and chairs to the garage, carefully covering them all.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

For me, the Season 15 premier with "House Divided" was a smash hit. I'm still squeeing and fangirling about it. Finally an episode with enough of my two favorite characters! YES! In my humble opinion, this episode ranks a teeny, tiny smidge below "Truth or Consequences", my favorite episode of the series and my favorite season opener. And if I rated favorites solely for Gibbs & McGee time, "House Divided" would win the top spot. Highly recommended!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6

As usual, Gibbs woke at first light, noticing the morning air was noticeably cooler than it had been. While he was still following the creek, the embankments were growing steeper as the elevation rose. He'd be out of the woods in two more stops. He looked at his pocket calendar, the 3rd of September. Here in the mountains of Wyoming, winter would start early although he thought it would at least be another month.

Before he left the truck bed, he took a good look around but saw no evidence of wildlife. He'd scared a bobcat away a couple of nights ago. He wasn't surprised, there were a lot of deer around. If he had a bigger cooler, he'd go hunting but with his little cooler and Chuck's cooler bag, he'd only be able to keep maybe a quarter of the meat, too much waste. He'd have to wait for the snow for more cold storage. He smiled at the cooler bag, left behind - likely 'accidentally on purpose'. While it wasn't as efficient as his little electric cooler, it would come in handy during the winter. He'd pack it with snow and ice, then he could do a little hunting. He'd had an idea for setting up a smoker too.

He was comfortable in the truck bed and decided to sleep in it as much as possible. He'd even figured out a way to set the tent up on top of the hard shell, which would be great once the snow started. He could sleep inside the cab but only if he had everything but the tent inside with him. And the food, of course. Thinking about snow reminded him of Chuck's caution about bears preparing for winter and he made a mental note to start stashing the bear bag higher than he'd been doing.

Taking his handgun, trash bag, shovel, cleansing and bleach wipes along with the trash bag, he started his morning routine. Then he hauled the bear bag down, fishing out the bag of coffee and his solar cooler.

After building the fire, he poured filtered water into the coffee pot, filled the basket with coffee and set the pot on the grill next to his small skillet. From the cooler, he took a couple of eggs, sliced potatoes he'd partially cooked last night, an orange and a tiny wedge of butter. Once the skillet was hot enough, he tossed the potatoes in and let them finishing getting nice and brown before he cracked the eggs into the pan, scrambling them. That frequently gave him a smile as he thought of his boys and their mutual hatred of fried eggs. He swore it was one of the cornerstones of their friendship.

He'd cut and carved a chair for himself out of a fallen log. It had a low back and he'd left the
bottom solid so there were no legs, he'd carved out a seat. It didn't fold but that just meant he
couldn't take it anywhere without the truck. For now, it was fine. He'd keep his eyes out for
another big solid piece of wood, maybe part of a tree trunk, and make another one for Tim. After
rummaging through his pack, he sat on the chair to eat his meal and enjoy his coffee. With an eye
roll sent eastwards toward Ducky, he swallowed the multivitamin his friend insisted he take every
day, to help make up for the lack of vegetables.

He'd hoarded the oranges and apples but was nearing the end of his supply and wasn't crazy about
the now wizened fruit. Last night he'd cut up the rest of the apples and cooked them slowly in his
saucepan, adding a little of his dwindling supply of brown sugar and a little water.

At least he hadn't wasted the apples. He wasn't sure what to do with the last two oranges and finally
decided to leave them as they were, maybe he'd juice them and eat the peel, somehow. He vaguely
remembered that orange oil was volatile, maybe he could use some of it for fire starters. That could
be useful when it was harder to find kindling. He'd miss eating the fresh fruit but he had a lot of
dried fruit with him and as per Ducky's orders, plenty of Vitamin C.

As much terrain as he might need to cover before finding Tim, after a month in the woods he found
he needed to rest now and then. Every week, he'd take at least a half-day off to read, write some
notes (that always made him feel good, knowing Tim would appreciate that), hunt or fish, have a
decent meal, heat water for a camp shower and/or wash his clothes.

The first few times he'd washed them, he'd strung a rope between two trees and they dried by the
time he started his cook fire. With the weather cooling off, the dry time was lengthening. He'd
begun lighting the fire first and locating it closer to his wet clothes. Soon he'd have to dry them
with his heater. And probably in an enclosed space. He thought on wash days he'd put his wet
clothes in the well of the truck with the heater. If he propped the hard shell open a few inches, that
should be safe enough to dry the clothes and not fry them! To that end, one of his new tasks was to
make sure the solar charger, along with his solar lantern, was always fully charged.

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A few days later, the sat phone rang while he was working. He pulled the phone from his pocket,
looking at it almost stupidly, he'd almost forgotten he had it. Finally answering it, he smiled to
hear another voice, Chuck's.

"Hey Jethro, how are you, where are you?"

"Hey Chuck, good to hear your voice! I'm doing all right; I've just finished Grid 15, gonna move
on to 16 this afternoon. A few more and I'll be out of the trees. Trying to get as much done in the
woods before the snow, I'd rather be out in the open. Really hoping I find him soon, before full
winter kicks in."

"Good thought! Yeah, they're predicting the first snow will hit within the next 10 days. And they're
saying it's going to be a bad winter. You ever figure out that smoker you were talking about?"

"Yeah, but haven't done anything about it yet."

"Get it going and start hunting and fishing, you're going to need all the provisions you can get."

"All right, I'll do that. Another 10 days, that helps to know. How far did you have to drive to get
through?"

"The cutoff for Grid 3. Took me a nearly full day to get here but I've got my truck with me and
plenty of equipment so I'm good. Wish I could join you but gotta earn a paycheck, you know?"

"Oh yeah, I know. I appreciate the thought and as I said, it's great to hear another voice. I listen to the radio when I can get anything, that helps a lot."

"I bet. I called your friends before I left home, they said to tell you they're all right, they miss you and Tim and hope you'll find him before winter. I didn't tell them how soon winter is going to hit here. Oh, your other kid, Tony, said to tell you he had the chimney cleaned and he's learned to cook cowboy steaks."

"Huh, wonder how bad the fire was?"

The other man laughed, "I asked Dr. Mallard the same thing and he said there wasn't any fire - other than in the fireplace – but that Tony started worrying about the chimney, he got tired of hearing about it and told him to hire a chimney sweep."

Jethro chuckled, "Ah, the sounds of home!"

"He also said to tell you that someone named Tobias wants to join you for a few days. I told him to let me know, I can run him up to you."

"Wow, that's...he's an old friend. Don't know, he hates winter in DC, can't imagine him out here. And a few days won't work from a transportation standpoint. Take you probably 4 days to reach me, even if I drove down, still take time away from your job and mine and then come back a 'few days' later? If he wants to rent a truck and find me, that's fine but I don't want to cut into your work life any more than I have."

"Appreciate the thought, I'll talk to Ducky and maybe Tobias about it. Listen, Jethro, start cutting firewood and putting it under the hard shell. Collect enough big rocks for a fire pit, wish I'd thought to bring my fire pit along. Got one of those metal ones, really a bowl, you could use it all winter. Call me when you find a clear spot in the trees, I know a guy who cuts firewood out there, maybe he can get it to you. Otherwise you're going to have a hard time with that. I know you have the heater, the one burner stove and the Sterno thing but you're going to need fire, man. You know, the more I think about it let me make a couple calls now, see what we can come up with."

"Chuck...yeah, all right, thanks. But don't fret, man, I'll be fine if you can't make it work."

"Call you back as soon as I know something. Might mean you'll have to backtrack some."

"That's ok, I can use the paved road to and from. Maybe I'll start now."

"Yeah, do that and I'll have him bring some diesel too."

"All right, let me know where to meet you."

Hanging up, he packed up the truck and drove nearly 15 miles back to the paved road. It felt good to drive faster than 2 miles an hour and on solid pavement. He sent a thought to Tim to hang on, he'd be back on the search as quickly as he could.

By the time Chuck called back, Jethro was nearly to the turnoff for Grid 9, glad he was making good time. This time he was ready when the phone rang.

"Hey Chuck, I'm almost to Grid 9."

"Good! Listen, my wood cutter friend is about 30 miles north of me, too far to get back to my place
but he called a friend of ours back in town, had him go over to the house for the fire pit. He's bringing diesel for the truck and other provisions too. He'll get it to Ben the wood cutter, and Ben will meet me halfway. You keep driving until you see us! The guy from town is already on his way so by the time you reach me, I should have everything."

"Thanks, man. You know, I was so proud of getting everything into my pack, I never considered needing anything else up here."

"No worries, we'll get you kitted out. Had him get some thermal underwear for Tim and more for you, too. And some other warm clothes for Tim along with one of my extra sleeping bags. When my daughter and her husband lived closer, he and I used to hunt in late fall, early winter. They're in Puerto Rico now, no need for a sleeping bag rated for below freezing temperatures; he left it with me."

" Appreciate that, Chuck. I have a sleeping bag, parka, set of sweats, underwear, gloves, hat, flannel shirt, jeans, snow pants, wool socks and snow boots for him. We'll use the additional sleeping bag as extra padding and warmth underneath us."

"Great, then you'll be warm and he'll have a change of clothes." Chuck laughed, "Be good to see you!"

"You too."

They disconnected, Jethro idly wondering how much the sat phone calls cost and hoping there weren't any problems with his checking account. He'd set it up so the bill would be paid automatically every month. He shook his head, Ducky had access to everything, he wasn't going to worry.

It was 2355, just before midnight when he spotted a truck by the side of the road flashing his headlights at him. With a sigh of relief, he pulled over and stopped.

Grabbing his jacket, he met Chuck between their two trucks. The other man nodded in approval, "That wasn't bad, you made better time than I thought you would. I figured it'd be 0200, even later."

Gibbs snorted, "No traffic."

"Yeah, that always helps. Come on, let's get this stuff loaded and then decide the next step."

Jethro frowned at that but followed his friend. His eyes widened as he saw the black plastic garbage bags full of winter clothing, footwear and two new, larger backpacks with straps on the outside. He smiled as he spotted two pairs of snowshoes and a travois, a kind of sled. That would be handy for hunting, if he killed a large animal, he could haul it back to the truck on the travois. He hadn't used snowshoes since he left Stillwater, that could be fun. Along with the snowshoes were what he thought of as ski poles. Chuck said they were called trek poles, much better for use in deep snow.

All that went in the cab with him while several 5-gallon gas cans full of diesel fuel were carefully loaded and secured in the truck well. As the fuel tank was still half full, Jethro hadn't been too worried, he still had 4 5-gallon cans of diesel but now he was set. When he returned to town, he'd return the extra fuel to Chuck, whose truck was also diesel.

A large cooler full of ice and frozen meat was next. After that came several bags of fresh fruits and vegetables, bags of pasta and many packets of beef, chicken, vegetables, soup, chili and stew.
Under that were 2 boxes of processed cheese, a large bag of onions, 2 10-pound sacks of sweet potatoes, 2 10-pound bags of russet potatoes and 2 bags of fresh garlic bulbs. Additionally, he was handed a can of olive oil.

Chuck laughed at the look on Jethro's face. "I know you'd be fine with the MREs and dry rations you brought. In case you get tired of that or Tim wants something else, you can have pasta with the beef or chicken and make a sauce with the garlic, onions and olive oil. You may be out there all winter, Gibbs. As chillly as it's getting to be, the ice in that cooler is going to stay solid for ten days or more. If it snows before the ice inside melts, bury the cooler in snow during the day and you'll have ice for another couple of weeks after that. That meat is gonna stay frozen! And…drum roll please," He handed Gibbs a large metal bowl with a grate that covered the top. "Ta da! The fire pit, really a fire bowl. When it snows, you can put it right on top of the snow. It's 2 feet wide and almost 1 foot deep. Big enough for a fire that'll brew your coffee, cook your meals and keep you warm.

"If it's snowing and you want a fire, find several 4-6 ft. long logs, light enough for you to pick up, and make a raised shelter with your tarp over the fire. Just make sure the end closest to the fire is raised higher so the tarp doesn't get too hot and there's plenty of air exchange. Dale, the guy from town, brought an electric smoker you can also use as an oven – that'll work with your solar charger. And Ben donated a half cord of wood, so let's get that moved. It's all seasoned, no green and you have a hatchet and ax, so you shouldn't have problems with kindling. Just don't get complacent about the amount, you'll easily burn half a cord in a month, maybe 6 weeks if you add to it, so chop and cut wood every chance you get. I have a wood stove with a furnace asbackup and I burn 4 or 5 cords each winter."

Gibbs nodded, "Yeah, I buy a couple of cords for my fireplace every winter." He shook his head, "I can't believe…all this, Chuck. It's…thanks, man!"

"I know, we went overboard but you don't know how long you'll be out there and we can't be there with you, so there you go. And we figure we'll get a lot of this back, the equipment anyway."

Gibbs laughed, "You're right there, unless we drive home there's no way we can get all this onto a commercial airline!"

Chuck noticed the use of "we" and nodded to himself, glad his friend still had faith he'd find his missing surrogate son. Jethro looked at him, "If you've got a few minutes, would you mind waiting while I scribble a note and then please mail it for me?"

"I've got more than a few minutes and so do you. It's past midnight, you worked all day, I think after we transfer the wood we should find a spot and get some sleep."

Jethro thought about that before nodding. "Yeah, ok."

They got busy stacking the wood. Their first inclination was to stack it in the truck well, underneath the hard shell but neither liked the combination of the wood with the many gallons of diesel fuel, in a moving vehicle. When Gibbs said he'd sleep in the cab, the wood was instead stacked in the truck bed.

When they had everything transferred, Chuck persuaded Gibbs to sleep inside the shell he had on the back of his truck. It wasn't a camper but it would keep the cold night air out and give him more room to stretch out than the bench seat of Jethro's truck.

Gibbs threw a tarp over the wood, tying it in place. Then the two trucks moved off the road, hauled several bags of food into the trees and hoped the frozen meat would not entice any bears. At first,
they locked it in the cab of Jethro's truck but then he shook his head, "I don't want to be forced to give up on Tim or delay his rescue because a hungry bear broke into the truck. It's frozen and the ice is frozen, I'm going to leave it outside. It's cold enough to keep the ice solid but it's not snowing yet and there are plenty of deer and fish. The bears won't bother it."

Chuck nodded, "Sorry man, didn't even think of that."

Jethro shook his head, "I'll get that cooler into a tree! But not tonight."

Taking his pack, he smiled at the thick carpet and blankets lining the truck bed, "Oh, this is going to be nice!"

He slept better that night than he had since Chuck left.

Chapter End Notes

This story is, among other things, about the fight to survive in the wild. Although Gibbs appears to be living comfortably in the tent and truck, there's no grocery store within 100 miles, no garden to pick beans or other non-animal forms of protein. So yes, there will be hunting and although there will be dead animals who help keep him alive, there won't be gruesome scenes. I dislike blood and gore and am not enthusiastic about reading or writing it!
He left early the next morning, after writing a letter to Ducky and the others, addressing a blank envelope Chuck found in his glove box. Feeling refreshed and relieved to have the snowshoes, fire bowl, wood, more food and warm clothes for Tim, he returned to his site at Grid 15, marked it and made his way through the woods to #16. He was nearly halfway through when he realized how dark it'd become. Marking his stopping point with his usual stick in the dirt with a rock at the base, he headed back to the truck as quickly as possible, glad one of his larger flashlights was in his day pack.

He managed to get the food into the trees and put the cooler outside, well away from the truck and the bear bag trees and then went back the truck for a cold dinner. Tired after the long round trip, he spread his sleeping bag out on the bench seat, pushing everything else onto the floor, made sure his weapons were close, looked at the time and shrugging, turned the lantern off, opened the window a crack for oxygen and went to sleep. Who cared if it was only 2000?

He felt better the next morning and made a fire, cooking eggs and ham, enjoying his coffee and orange. Once again, the cooler hadn't been touched. Before he started work, he set the solar charger out, thinking of using the smoker at some point. Back on the grid, he found his marker and by the time he stopped to eat in mid-afternoon, he was three-quarters of the way through. He wished he could just go straight, out of the trees into the open but he couldn't take the chance that Tim was here in the woods. Or people who might have seen him. Or any kind of clue.

By late afternoon he was done. Hurriedly packing up, he had the truck moving through the woods toward #17 by 1800 and parked it again by 2000. Tonight, he made himself dinner before he stashed the bear bags in the trees, put the tent up, hauled the cooler out of the truck and crawled inside the tent with two more blankets than he'd used previously.

There was frost the next morning and he eyed the cooler, he needed to cook that damn meat or just leave it somewhere. He dug out the smoker out of the truck, looking at it and the solar charger. If he started now, he could get most if not all the meat cooked during the day. And it would be hot to the touch, burn any animal who tried to get into it. He didn't like that but it needed to be hooked up to the solar charger so couldn't be buried, an idea he'd considered. Managing to stuff all the meat into the smoker, he quickly set it up with the solar charger and then built a jerry-rigged nearly circular rock wall around it and the charger, leaving the top of the circle open for ventilation. After switching it on and making sure it worked, he moved the truck far enough away that he hoped the animals wouldn't associate it or him with the smells coming from the smoker. After putting food, a thermos of coffee and bottles of water in his knapsack, he decided to take the rifle today. Once he was ready, he put the rest of the food, including the cooler, still full of ice, into the trees. Then he set off for his day's search.

When he returned that evening, he prayed that Tim wasn't in this quadrant because he knew he'd done a mediocre job of searching. He smiled when he found his truck, untouched as well as the bear bags and cooler in the trees. Putting his knapsack in the truck, he took his handgun and rifle over to the walled-in smoker. While the area around it had plenty of paw prints, the smoker was still within the rock wall and the meat was done. Now he could put it back in the cooler where it would take up less room, slide the rope harness he'd made around the cooler and haul it up. If something got it, so be it. He was already tired of worrying about it.

That night he made himself pasta with some of the smoked beef, olive oil, garlic, parmesan cheese
and a serving of broccoli which he'd cooked while reheating the beef. It was a nice change and after he hauled the last bag of food and scented things – the olive oil, his toothpaste, deodorant and other items – up a tree, he sat by the fire on his chair, enjoying his last coffee of the day. Making sure the saucepan, skillet, mug and thermos were clean, they joined the rest of the items in the tree. He banked the fire and gathered his pack, ready to put the tent up and get some sleep. When he heard something moving in the bushes, he changed his mind, taking his rifle, pack and sleeping bag and climbing into the cab to sleep. He did not feel like messing with a hungry animal.

Looking out an hour later, he saw a large shape sniffing around the smoker circle wall. The smoker itself was in a separate tree than his food. It might be empty of the meat but it still smelled like it. While there were growls and grumbles throughout the night, nothing came close to the truck and Gibbs was thankful he'd thought to move it before loading up the smoker.

After a night of fitful sleep, he waited until full light before venturing out from the truck. He shook his head at the number of bear bags he had hanging from trees, including the coolers and smoker, he needed to organize and consolidate! Hauling his cooler down, he stopped to think and then brought down the rest of the bear bags, taking some trail mix for his morning work and then tucking the bags, coolers and smoker into the truck well. Packing everything else into the cab, he stuffed the trail mix and thermos of water into his knapsack and set out to finish the grid. He wanted to be done and get out of here, he'd have a hot meal after he moved to the next grid.

Doing a better job than he had the day before, he finished the grid, finding nothing and then moved on to the next grid. This was Grid 18, the last one in this section of the woods. And now he was starving!

He made eggs and potatoes to go with his coffee and orange juice. He'd eaten his food and drank most of his coffee when he reached for the orange juice. Forgetting it was already opened, he squeezed the bottle and the liquid spurted all over and inside his knapsack. Swearing, he drank what was left and then looked at the knapsack, there was no way he'd take that with him today, it would dry sticky and sweet, drawing every insect and possibly animals within 10 miles of him.

Grabbing his pack, he dumped everything onto the seat of the truck and then item by item moved what he'd need for his search from the smaller knapsack to the larger pack. He'd worry about repacking later.

Returning to his already disturbed routine, he heated water for washing the skillet, his coffee mug, the smoker and now the knapsack. After washing and rinsing the smaller items, he poured boiling water, vinegar and lemon juice from a fake lemon into the smoker, leaving it to soak. He'd heard vinegar and lemon juice were good for masking or removing odors. He wasn't sure why Chuck included a bottle of vinegar or the lemon juice with the food but it'd come in handy today. The next bucket of warm water had his knapsack soaking in it. He left both smoker and knapsack to soak while he prepared to start his search of Grid 18.

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Determined not to 'call in' his search and frustrated that there had been no sign of Tim or any other human, he nearly crawled along the floor of the forest, looking for anything.

His diligence paid off. After weeks of painstakingly searching each grid, he finally found a clue. Clues. Someone had camped here. He could see the holes for the tent stakes and the marks where the poles bit into the dirt. There'd been three tents, from the marks in the dirt the third tent was smaller than the others, and he found marks where he thought a table might have stood. The marks were odd and he finally envisioned a folding table, long with tubular almost squared 'U' shaped legs holding it up. He knew it was long because there were three marks from the legs, each end and the
middle. And the marks were imbedded a full inch into the ground, that table sat there for some time.

Two trees standing close to each other had bits of rope hanging and the trunk of one tree looked almost rotten. As if water had been splashing down on it continually. He wondered if a camp shower and a tarp used as a modesty 'wall' had been set up there.

He looked around, whoever they were, these people hadn't just camped there for a weekend. Far in the back of the site, he spotted a circular area where something was obviously buried, he was guessing waste or garbage – or both. As he explored farther west of the campsite, he found a sunny clearing with a vegetable garden, carefully planted and then apparently abandoned. While there were remnants of other plants dying back, there were also plenty of ripe vegetables and fruits ready to eat. He stopped to pick all the tomatoes, beets, cabbage, 3 different kinds of squash, 4 kinds of beans, peppers, melons, leeks, pomegranates, persimmons and late berries, surprised to see those. He left the Brussels sprouts as he wouldn't eat them anyway, couldn't stand the smell or taste of them, let the animals eat them!

Laughing to himself, he dug up several garlic bulbs and red onions. Eyeing the larger squashes and pumpkins, he re-arranged his pack to fit them in. Chuck needn't have bothered with the fruits and vegetables! When his pack was full, he went back to exploring, finding a well-worn clothesline with a few stray clothespins still clipped to it. He took them, hadn't thought of bringing any and they might come in handy.

Surprised to find an apple tree, he wondered if this was a known camping spot where successive campers planted trees and gardens, he picked as many apples as he could fit into his nearly full pack. There were marks in the dirt from another table nearby, this one smaller and tucked under a large shade tree. Spotting an object in the tree, he reached up to retrieve it. A children's book, something by Judy Blume, a name he recognized from Kelly's childhood, it was inscribed "To Brittany on your 4th birthday, with much love, G&G." Unfortunately, the inscription was not dated. Although the book was dusty, it didn't look old or worn. He fished out a plastic bag and slid it in, making a note on his notepad of the place, date, time. He had a few adhesive labels in his pack, he'd write one when he returned to the truck.

When he found a shoeprint, he first took a photo of it, then as Mike Franks taught him years ago, got down on the ground and measured it, length and width. Tim had been wearing sneakers that night but the print was too small to be his, he thought it might be a woman's footprint. He also thought it unlikely that after hours or days in the water Tim would still have shoes on his feet.

There were so many things that Gibbs finally set up a grid pattern to more systematically search the site.

He was nearly through when he spotted a sock in a patch of weeds. Not just any sock but one for which the wearer had taken some teasing. A joke gift from his sister last Christmas, the bright blue sock had green turtles on it. She'd bought them because, as she said Christmas Day, the turtles reminded her of her brother and the story from Aesop's Fables about the slow moving tortoise who ultimately beat a braggart hare to the finish line. Only Sarah thought that was funny although Tony later gently teased him about the socks. Not the reason for the gift but the socks themselves.

Now he remembered that Tim had only worn them the day he disappeared because they were his last clean socks and they'd only been in his go bag because, other than gym socks, he'd said they were also the last clean socks at home. During the weeks previous to landing the Stoneridge case, they'd had back to back cases and little time for chores. And once in Wyoming, they hadn't had much time for mundane things like laundry. The motel they'd stayed in only provided one washer
and one dryer for their guests. Gibbs smiled at the memory. He wasn't as finicky with his clothes as his boys, he'd thrown shirts, skivvies, socks and pants into his one wash load. The boys managed to get their lighter colored shirts and skivvies clean but that was it.

The enormity of his find finally hitting him, his knees buckled and his butt hit the dirt. He clutched the sock to him, bawling like a baby. His boy was alive. He and at least one of his socks had been here in this campsite. When he finally calmed, he examined the item. It was torn in several places, looked almost like puncture holes, only the torn threads were pulled in one direction. Or, Gibbs thought, like a sock caught on obstacles as its wearer was pushed through rushing water. While it didn't look too dirty, it smelled and Gibbs smiled at the additional proof this was Tim's: it smelled like something left in water for too long. Not quite moldy but a sort of musty smell. He turned it inside out, frowning at the dark stains inside. Looked like Tim's foot or leg had bled heavily. He had to think about that before he concluded that if Tim had been found dead wearing the sock, it would have been buried with him.

The question was, where was Tim now? Forcing himself to complete the search, he found a few other things including another one that made his heart pound – a sketchbook. And not a new one. For one thing, the book was no longer flat, the corners of the back and front bindings were curled up and the color on the front design had water spots on it. Opening it in the middle, Gibbs hoped to find a sketch of Tim. Leafing forward through the pages, he found sketches done in colored pencil or black and white. Finding no Tim in the front, he reversed course, going through the book from where he left off to the back. A sketch of the campsite in the autumn, with the trees showing their vivid colors and the creek looking about the same as it did now, no hint of the rampage that was to come. The camp being set up under those trees, with a fire pit halfway dug, a camp stove on the long folding table. He thought there were probably 2 artists, one an adult, the second likely a child.

The next sketches showed the same trees, denuded of leaves, set starkly amongst piles of what must be snow on the ground, the creek iced over with more snow on the rocks and leafless trees. The next few pages must be spring as the trees were beginning to bud. The garden bed blanketed in snow, then another with tiny flowers poking out. And then the campsite, in three seasons, autumn, winter and spring. And a page had been torn out. When he looked at the little bits of paper left in the binding, he thought two pages had been torn out. Remembering something from an old case, he looked closely at the sketches before and after but couldn't see any traces of what might have been sketched. Ordinary paper might have shown something but sketching paper was heavier and wouldn't bleed through.

There were several blank pages at the back. He wondered if the campers left after they found Tim or Tim found them and why. Maybe they'd taken him to a doctor? But then there would have been some word. Why were pages torn from the sketchbook and why was it left behind when nearly a third of the pages were blank? Worried about the seemingly abandoned campsite, he looked again over the ground he'd already covered, making sure he wasn't missing a gravesite.

Within another hour, he was satisfied that he'd found everything there was to find or not find. He tucked the sketchbook, the colored pencils he'd found scattered under the shade tree and a small bottle of herbs or spices he found near the creek into another plastic bag, again marking the date and time in his notepad. Then he made one last round before deciding to return to his own camp. He'd already noted the water marks here; the campsite had been situated about 60 feet west of the flood line, a good walk from the creek. Which made sense with a young child.

Curious about the distance from the creek, he moved back slowly towards the water, noticing drag marks in the dirt about 20 feet west of the high-water mark. As if something heavy had been dragged through mud, something heavy enough that the marks remained after the water receded. Or maybe that something had laid there for some time. He walked it again, moving to where the
edge of the flood waters had been.

Someone must have seen or heard Tim in the water. He looked closer and then walked carefully around the marks. There were two long deep marks, wider at one end, narrow at the other, as if someone was standing in the mud. About 3 ½ - 4 feet up, were two deeper and rounder marks, as if that someone had fallen on his or her knees. About the right height for Tim although it could also be a very tall woman. He looked at the marks but where he thought the midsection of the body would have been, the marks were too faint to decipher. He was certain this was where Tim had come ashore.

At the point where the drag marks began, he thought the flood waters would have been less than 2 feet deep, almost puddles with no current. Now he could picture someone checking the flood waters and noticing Tim struggling in the water. Maybe he'd managed to work his way to the edges where the current wouldn't be as strong. An adult, probably the man, maybe both adults, managed to reach him by wading out, maybe extending something to grab, a tree branch, a shovel or pole. Guiding him to shallower waters where they could help him up. Except he couldn't stand for long and ended on his knees. And then they dragged him out of the water and somehow got him back to their camp.

Or maybe…he walked around, finally finding evidence of a campfire near the marks and a large log. Now he theorized that they built a fire, maybe fed him and provided blankets and whatever first aid they could give until he was strong enough to get to the campsite. He took photos of the drag marks from different angles and then of the fire pit. He shook his head, he had the sock, conjecturing how Tim had reached land was not likely to help find him. Except to know that other people were involved, that he had help. And there was no gravesite, no signs of a large dig or pile of rocks, to indicate Tim lost his battle to survive.

He headed back to his camp, taking a different route, hoping to find some evidence of a car or other means of transportation. When he found no tire tracks, no sign of a motor vehicle, he returned to the creek, walking south along the banks until he saw them. Not a car, a boat. He could see where the grass on the edge of the creek had been flattened, torn with faint marks in the dirt. There were two places where that occurred and the patterns were different, leading him to think there might have been two boats. Examining the grass, he noticed the broken and torn parts were brown and brittle; the marks in the dirt were so faint that in another few weeks they'd be gone. That told him that despite the items he'd found, Tim and the campers had been gone for a while, several weeks at least. And there'd been no rain since they left or the marks would be distorted or gone.

He looked at the creek. In some places, it might be called a river but here in Wyoming it was a creek. Nearly 20 feet across and 8 -12 feet deep in places. Yes, two adults, one child - no, three adults if Tim was with them. And a smaller boat carrying the camping gear? And they'd been here for 3 seasons, nearly a year, perhaps they'd meant to stay, to live there.

Why did they leave? Had finding Tim or something about Tim led them to fleeing their camp? Was he safe with them? He knew his agent well, over the years he'd proved he could handle himself in gun battles and knife fights as well as hand to hand combat, even brawling. He was great at planning strategy and executing it. He decided not to worry about that. Whatever had happened, he couldn't do anything about it now. He was more concerned about Tim in the cold. Satisfied with his findings and the story he was building, he hurried back to his camp. With the first snow now only days away, he needed to move into the mountains.

Packing the truck carefully, the big cooler went into the truck well, underneath the cover, with the containers of diesel fuel, Jethro's lighter weight clothes and anything else he could get in there that wouldn't be ruined if the diesel leaked. Then he restacked the wood on top of the hard shell,
covering it with his tarps and another large tarp from Chuck, tying them down securely. The wood wouldn't do him much good if it got wet. His weapons, tent, lantern, heater, food, the packs, all the blankets and winter clothes, boots, snowshoes, poles, his little cooler and the solar chargers were carefully packed and loaded into the cab with him. Although the truck didn't have a backseat, there was some room behind the bench seat for storage. The snowshoes, poles and a few other things fit back there while the bulkier items were in the foot well and passenger seat.

While he desperately wanted to head farther into the rockier mountains, out of the trees, he stopped at the next grid to ensure he wouldn't miss any clues. He didn't think it was far enough from the abandoned campsite to have stopped but with a young child, who knew. He hiked to the creek but looking down the steep 20-foot embankment, didn't bother searching any further. Without rock climbing equipment, there was little chance Tim and his rescuers had landed here.

Maneuvering the truck closer to the creek, he drove slowly along, looking for more signs of humans. When he felt the ground becoming unstable, he managed to move a little farther west, away from the creek. When he thought he was on firm ground, he stopped and got out, belatedly remembering Chuck's warning to backpack in to Grid 19 because of the unstable ground and sinkholes. Noticing the back of the truck was no longer level with the front and was slowly sinking as he watched, he ran back. When he accelerated, the wheels spun, they had no traction, he was stuck and he could feel the back of the truck sinking even more.

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Ducky nearly flew into work the morning after he'd received Jethro's letter. He'd decided to surprise everyone and read it to them at once, then they'd make copies if they wanted. He'd already relayed Chuck's update to them when the man called after his delivery of supplies to Jethro. Now he hoped for a quiet day, at least long enough to gather everyone, read the letter and let them all feel good for a few hours. He also hoped Jethro's words would give everyone the kick of adrenaline they needed.

He admitted that on some levels he found it amusing that Tony had become their little family's expert on all things Wyoming. He'd studied everything from the tectonic history to the settlers, the animals, the push for statehood, the geography, the all-important weather, the history of its weather patterns, the earliest and latest onsets of winter and spring. He knew the length and depth of the creek that took Tim, places he could have surfaced. Which they knew were the same places Gibbs was now searching.

When he spoke of having bumper stickers and online posts made asking the state of Wyoming to release their brother Tim, the group started to worry. Luckily, Vance never heard of it or if he did, decided to let Ducky handle it. After a few nights of solid sleep, DiNozzo gave up the button/bumper sticker idea, claiming it was a joke, that he'd been trying to lighten the atmosphere. The others gladly accepted his explanation, knowing Ducky was keeping an eye on him.

Jimmy looked up as Ducky bustled into the Autopsy suite and then smiled at the man's upbeat mood. Something good had happened! Quickly gathering the troops, including the Director, Ducky read the letter to them. There was a second page that had been just for him, Jethro letting his heart out; he'd left that page at home, knowing it wasn't meant for sharing.

After reading both sides of the page, Ducky looked up to find smiles, tears and Ellie's hand raised. "Ducky, he sounds convinced he's getting closer to Tim or am I reading too much into it?"

"No, my dear, I don't think you are. He's been adamant that each grid needed to be thoroughly searched for clues about Timothy but as we've said before he didn't anticipate finding Tim in the
areas he's searched so far. While they are remote, he felt and our new friend Chuck Payton concurs, that Tim or evidence of Tim would have been found by now. The area is known for a variety of trout and Kokanee salmon, so we can expect there to have been fisherman there in the months since the flood. Now, as we know from Anthony's map, the roadway curves away from the creek in several areas, particularly at the higher elevations, where Jethro is likely heading now and thus the creek and its surrounding become more remote and inaccessible."

She nodded in thanks, her shoulders relaxing. Although her demeanor had lightened, she hadn't smiled and Ducky reflected that he didn't remember her smiling at all during the last months Tim had now been absent. Over time, he'd begun to believe what Jethro told him shortly after Tim's disappearance, that the two agents were more than colleagues.

On the other hand, Abby was grinning like a fool, "You know Gibbs, he can find or do anything. I bet he's already found McGee and as soon as he can, they'll call." She rambled on at length until Vance loudly interrupted, telling her to take a breath. She was puzzled until Ducky called her Abigail, then she knew she'd overstepped some boundary line.

The rest of them looked downward or away, having learned to accept Abby's sometimes irritating optimism. While they were all fond of her, 'living' with her high maintenance personality and mood swings could be difficult. And there was no Gibbs to quiet her, to help her focus on her work.

Trying to deal with a friend and colleague's disappearance, probable injuries or death wasn't made any easier by her occasional pronouncements. After her emotional meltdowns the first 4 months, she was now determined to be optimistic. Which was a good thing, a wonderful thing! It was her method of delivery - unsolicited hugs and frequent interruptions of the agents' work - that threatened to cause additional problems.

The pendulum of her emotions had swung from one extreme to the other. The MCRT or other field teams could be hip deep investigating a serious crime and Abby would arrive, interrupt them with messages of cheer and then depart again, leaving them to start over or try to figure out where they'd been in the investigation, sometimes wasting precious time.

Vance spoke with her privately, keeping the conversation as casual and upbeat as possible. He didn't want to add to the stress of his employees by coming down any harder on her. Abby had a good heart and meant to spread joy and optimism, but didn't seem to understand that her methods needed to include respect for the work of the agency. Along with thanking her for her optimism, that was the message Leon gave her. Saying any more than that seemed cruel, she'd made a big effort to control her negative emotions and should be praised for that and her optimism.

If she could just find a way to express that optimism without interrupting anyone's work, that would be great. Leon did not want to disturb the very delicate balance in the office. While there was optimism for Gibbs' mission, everyone who knew Tim McGee missed him greatly and not knowing if he was dead or alive made it even worse.
Without commenting on the increasing frequency and necessity of these sad notes, my prayers and love go out to the Las Vegas victims, their families and friends. Natural disasters are difficult enough but these cruel attacks are beyond comprehension. RIP - Requiescant in pace.

Chapter 8

Cursing his forgetfulness, Jethro climbed out of the truck and walked off to the side, standing on rocky ground, furiously thinking. It would take time but he hoped he could get out of this without losing the truck. If this did turn into a sinkhole then the best he could do would be to salvage his supplies and belongings. He'd been stuck in the mud a few times but never with the threat of a sinkhole.

First, he removed the tarps covering the wood, laying them flat on the ground about 600 yards, over a third of a mile, northwest of the truck. Then he carefully unloaded the wood, trying to keep the load still in the truck balanced. Laying the wood on the tarp, he kept unloading until it was all out of the truck, reducing the weight in the back. After that, he carefully moved the 5-gallon cans of diesel fuel, placing them two hundred yards farther northwest than the wood, half a mile from the sinkhole. He used the travois with a rope harness to haul everything else from the truck bed some distance away.

After everything was out of the back of the truck, he gathered buckets of small and medium-sized rocks, placing them in the front and back of the rear tires, digging carefully to place them underneath the wheels. When he found pieces of wood, he maneuvered those over the rocks. His hope was that the rocks would provide a counterbalance to the unstable soil long enough to give the tires enough traction to go forward or backward. The pieces of wood were to provide more solidity.

Thinking about what could happen, he also moved everything out of the cab the same distance as the diesel fuel. If this proved to be a sinkhole deep enough to 'eat' the truck, he'd need to live in the tent until he could get help. He found the harness for tree-climbing and pulled it on before measuring lengths of rope. One end of each rope was then knotted around the sturdiest trees he could find, the other ends were knotted onto the harness and around his waist. Two additional lines were knotted around the steering wheel and attached to the trees, other lines went on the door handles to the trees. He laughed to himself, he felt like one of those two fireman-paramedics he used to watch on TV, with the safety harnesses and coils of rope.

Having protected himself and the truck as best he could, he turned the ignition, gently pressing the accelerator to go forward. If this failed, the next thing he'd try would be reversing out of the hole. If that too failed, he'd attach additional ropes to the front bumper and the trees, hoping to keep the front end out of the sinkhole.
To his joy, the truck moved forward. Driving no faster than 1 mile an hour, he drove the truck in a northwesterly direction, away from the creek, untying the ropes and his safety harness as he drove. He stopped after moving two miles, remembering more of Chuck's advice.

Moving everything back into the truck was a pain but his adrenaline was still pumping. He divided the wood, the heaviest item, in quarters onto the tarps and then pulled them to the truck. He moved some of the diesel cans by hand, carrying four at a time, and then put the rest, along with some of his other gear, on the travois and pulled that to the new location. Those were the heaviest items; the rest was much easier.

When he was done, he was exhausted. Feeling the symptoms of an impending adrenaline crash, he grabbed a plate of smoked meat and his thermos of filtered water. Remembering Ducky's words about the virtues of fruit and vegetables, he also grabbed an apple, a handful of snap peas and then ate it all sitting in the cab. Too tired to move to the next grid as he'd planned, he dug a fire pit, built a fire and huddled over it, feeling more alone than he'd ever felt in his life. He slept in the cab that night.

He left at first light, only stopping to retrieve the cooler and bear bags and to nail a sign written on a piece of cardboard on a tree a full mile west of the unstable soil. The sign had big red letters reading, "CAUTION, SINKHOLES". He made a mental note to thank Ellie for persuading him to bring a few marking pens and other assorted items along. He didn't even stop to make coffee. While he breathed easier when he reached the paved road and drove farther south into the mountains, his mind was focused on locating Tim as soon as possible.

While that had always been his goal, knowing that he was alive and traveling farther south with his rescuers gave him a renewed sense of urgency. He didn't know how far they planned to travel or if they planned to find a new spot and re-establish camp. Or even if Tim would stay with them, although his gut told him his agent would stay with them only until he had the resources – or need - to strike out on his own.

His next stop was Grid 20 and he grinned as he pulled off the pavement onto a gently sloping grassy hill with enough trees to hang the bear bags but not enough to block the sunlight. Because he'd driven most of the way on pavement, he'd made good time, it was just coming up on 0900. He'd hard-boiled a few eggs and now he took a couple of those, some fruit and using his solar-charged stove, made a pot of coffee. Pulling his log chair off the truck, he gave himself 30 minutes to eat, enjoy his drink and plan his search. As he had in the last grid, he'd head to the creek first, see what the embankments looked like. If they were as steep as the last stop, he'd move on.

Slinging his knapsack and rifle over his shoulder, having also remembered Chuck's comments about bears looking for food before winter, he set out due east toward the creek. He nodded when he got there, as he suspected might happen, the embankment was just as steep as the last one. Just to be sure, he walked south a couple hundred yards, several feet back from the edge as the banks were so steep he felt like he was walking on the edge of a cliff. Aside from the birds chirping and the docile-appearing creek gurgling, there was no noise. Taking out his binoculars, he viewed the opposite side, satisfied that there was nothing he needed to see. Then he glanced down into the water and saw something that caught his breath.

There was a large boulder near the opposite shore, the eastern side of the creek, it appeared that boaters would almost have to squeeze by. On that boulder, in what he supposed was chalk, was a large ‘G’. It wasn't fresh, with the binoculars he could see the details, that it was chipping and fading, like the boat marks days ago but it could be Tim. He squatted on his heels, letting himself fantasize that Tim had faith that they would come for him and left a sign. But why not put his initials or the date? And while he professed not to believe in coincidences, he was enough of a
realist to know they did exist. That 'G' could have been left by anyone.

Except it probably hadn't. Other than Chuck and the abandoned camp, he hadn't seen, heard or smelled evidence of any humans since he started his search. The 'G' wasn't new but it was still there. And Wyoming had had a dry summer, there'd been no rain since...he didn't remember. Pulling out his notepad, he found the date, July 7th. The 'G' was written on this boulder after July 7th as that rain had been heavy. That worked with his theory that the marks in the dirt from moving the boats into the water had been made since the last time it'd rained.

He took several photos, captioning the first one with the Grid# and today's date, astounded to discover it was September 13th. Chuck told him the first snow was expected within 10 days and that conversation happened on the 6th or 7th. He'd better keep moving and make sure he was ready!

Back in the truck, he carefully studied his maps. He had a decision to make. If he chose to follow the creek, he'd have to leave the truck and backpack down to it, following along the creek bed where he could. He had a map that showed details of the two trails down to the creek and a path that would take him alongside it. That would be tough and his gut told him that would not have been Tim's choice, that he would choose or had chosen to leave the creek behind.

His other option was to continue driving into the mountains where there were several valleys and according to his maps, Chuck and others he'd spoken to, cave systems. While he wasn't sure the people with Tim would pick those, he thought Tim might, if he had what he'd need to survive.

He closed his eyes, resting for a few minutes, letting his mind sift through the various scenarios. When he opened them again, he'd decided; he was going into the mountains to find Tim, leaving the creek behind. He looked at the map again, deciding where he thought he'd find his surrogate son. Finding an obvious landmark, he nodded.

Driving back to the paved road, he drove southeast for another three hours before spotting the cutoff Chuck had described in detail. According to the sat phone, the elevation was now 7800, it'd been a steady climb. As he drove up and around the dirt road, he knew the climb would continue.

When he pulled into a meadow, with only a few trees for the coolers and bear bags, he stopped for the night. Although it was only 1400, the skies were darkening and he needed to prepare for the storm. Pulling out two cans of winterized diesel, he fed the truck's fuel tank and then covered the hood, windshield, the passenger side window and part of the roof of the cab with his tarp, using bungee cords and large rocks to secure it. Then he pulled out Chuck's metal fire bowl, dug a shallow spot in the ground, placed the fire bowl in the hole and got a fire going. His weapons, clothes, snowshoes, etc. were once again in the cab so he didn't worry about them, although he did pull out his parka, knit cap, gloves, wool socks, snow pants, water-proof boots and kept his weapons and ammo near him. The water jug was full and he still had several gallons of drinking water in the back of the truck. He was good for a few weeks if he used the wipes, no water, to clean up, although he could melt and heat snow in his buckets and use that to bathe. With enough wood in the fire bowl to cook his dinner and make coffee, he used one of Chuck's big tarps to cover the wood still in the back of his truck, securing it so it wouldn't blow off. He'd sleep in the cab tonight. He set out the solar charger, might as well let it soak up as much sun as possible.

As he sat by the fire, he realized he was out of the woods, he could see plenty of sky! Digging the phone out of his pocket, he sent a text to Ducky. "No trees here. Gather in 10?"

He smiled happily at the quick response from his friend. "YES!"

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When Jimmy heard Ducky's cell phone buzz, he stopped what he was doing. Studying Tony's map, they'd decided Gibbs must be nearly out of the deep woods that blocked the sky and to a spot where the sat phone would have open sky and access to the satellite. The smile on Ducky's face told him they'd been right and he prepared a text to send to the others. Ducky looked at him, "Tell them 8 minutes and they must be quiet so we can hear him! I'll call Vance."

Jimmy sent his text while Ducky had the pleasure of calling the director to tell him they were about to have a call from Gibbs. Both MEs laughed when the MCRT, Vance and Abby arrived within 3 minutes. Shaking his head, he sent a text to Gibbs that they were all together.

Then they waited. When the phone finally rang, they'd waited four minutes. Ducky put the call on speaker as he answered the phone, "Hello, Jethro!"

"Hi Duck, how are you? How's everyone?"

They grinned at each other as they answered, mostly in unison, "Hi Gibbs, we're fine."

"I have good news. I haven't found Tim yet but I have found proof he's alive."

When Ellie's knees buckled, Chalmers grabbed her, holding her up. The others were concentrating on what Gibbs was saying and didn't notice. Bob held onto her for a couple of minutes until she straightened. He kept a hand on her arm, ready to grab her again, as she nodded her thanks.

"You remember those socks his sister gave him for Christmas last year? The bright blue ones with the green turtles?"

DiNozzo answered for all of them, "Sure Boss, they were uniquely turtle-y and...he was wearing them that day!"

"Yeah, they were his last clean pair of socks. I found one, in Grid 18. There were holes in it but it was a turtle on that sock – and his size too. Duck, I didn't think, will you pass the word to Penny and Sarah?"

"Yes, of course, Jethro."

"That's not all. I found the sock in the only place where there's been any hint of humans, an abandoned campsite." Quickly he told them about the drag marks and his theory of what happened. As the others started to ask questions, Vance shut them down, "Let him finish!"

"Thanks, Leon. The last thing I found was in Grid 20. The embankments were too steep for them to have come ashore but there's a huge boulder on the eastern side of the creek, in the water, and someone wrote a large 'G' in chalk on it. The people Tim is with have a young girl who sketches and colors, I'm sure the chalk belongs to her. It's crumbling, be gone in another few days. I figure it was written between July 7th, the last rain here and today, when I was there. And as I said, I've seen no other indication of humans anywhere around."

"That's wonderful! Where to next?"

"I reached the open mountains this afternoon and might have to hole up here for a day or so, there's a storm about to hit, a snowstorm from what Chuck said. Duck, will you let him know too please? Don't know if I'm gonna have time before it hits and it costs a lot to call. I've already covered everything, the bear bags and the coolers are in the trees and I've cooked my dinner for later, hot coffee in my thermos. When the weather clears or I can at least see where I'm going, I'm heading for a series of valleys that are bordered by mountains with cave systems. My gut tells me Tim would have had enough of the water and being crammed into a small boat and he's in one of those
valleys or caves. You should have my coordinates now, I'll call again when the skies clear.

"I'm battened down, have plenty of food, water, warm stuff with nearly a half cord of wood for fires. I've been sleeping in the cab of my truck, plenty comfortable and much warmer. If someone will quickly guide me, I'll send the photos I've got."

Ellie nodded, stepping forward, "I'll do that, Gibbs."

"Hey Bishop, good to hear your voice."

She quickly gave him the instructions, he wrote them down and then said a very brief hello to each of them. "I also want to thank all of you for your support and for believing in Tim. That means a lot and I can't wait to tell him in person. That 'G' tells me he trusted us to look for him and that makes me feel good too. I have a lot more to tell you but it's starting to snow and I need to get the fire bowl and my chair under cover."

After disconnecting, the MCRT was still in Autopsy, discussing the news and the call with the MEs and Vance when Ellie exclaimed, "His photos are here."

Abby had returned to her lab, working on a case for another team, so it was the MCRT, Leon, Ducky and Jimmy who crowded around Ellie's phone. She laughed, for the first time in 6 months, "Wait, I'll upload them to Jimmy's laptop."

They waited impatiently and then smiled as they saw Gibbs standing with another man that must be Chuck Payton. They were in front of the truck Gibbs had purchased in Wyoming, with the box containing the canoe, the paddles, his pack and rifle waiting to be loaded. The next shots were of the first few grids and their campsites, complete with the bear bags. Skimming through those, stopping to smile at the photo of the motor for the canoe, they came upon the pictures taken by Chuck when Jethro drove down to get the metal fire bowl, laughing at his beard and shaggy hair. Tony quipped that he was starting to look like a mountain man and even Ducky agreed. Chuck had captioned some of the photos and they grinned, glad to see Jethro, usually a minimalist, smiling at the stacks of wood, the gas cans, the bags of fruit and vegetables and the large cooler, which was open to show all the frozen meat and ice.

The best photos showed the abandoned campsite in Grid 18. There were several of the sock, inside and out, and of the drag marks in the dirt. Ellie inadvertently gasped when she noticed the knee marks. "Oh! He stood up in the mud but couldn't stay standing, fell on his knees?"

Ducky patted her shoulder, "Whatever injuries he's suffered will be properly taken care of when they return, Eleanor. And that may have simply been because he'd been in the water for too long."

He and Jimmy later agreed the reason for his inability to remain on his feet was more likely the foot injury that bled into the sock.

She nodded, embarrassed. But at least one of her teammates knew and apparently Ducky did too which made it likely Gibbs also knew. She smiled to herself, if he didn't she was sure Tim would tell him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm also sad today (Oct. 4, 2017), albeit a different kind of sad, with the news that
Pauley Perrette, aka Abby Sciuto, is leaving the show after this season, season 15. She announced it last night on Twitter and it's since been confirmed. While I haven't always been a fan of the way the writers wrote Abby (stop laughing!), I have always been a fan of Pauley's. As with the departure of Cote and then Michael, I wish her all the best. And I want to thank Pauley for her hard work and all the love she's brought to the production. As a friend posted on Facebook, this feels like the beginning of the end. If it is and they continue the awesomeness of the first 2 episodes of season 15, at least the show will go out back on top and leave us with smiles and tears instead of sighs of relief that they've finally pulled the plug. Love to all of you too.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Someone commented that the satellite phone should have worked before Gibbs used it in the last chapter. When I researched sat phones, I noticed they need access to the sky (ergo the satellites), and signals may be blocked in areas with large tall trees whose tops overlap and block the sky. I saw individual reports of that online and I've seen woods like that here in California, in the redwoods. The trees in the 'deep woods' Gibbs was in are so thick, tall with canopies (thank you Gina Callen and Suse B!) that block the sky, thus no service for the phone. It might have worked at the campsite where he found the sock, but he was so happy, relieved and anxious, he was only thinking of hurrying through the rest of the grids to find Tim.

Oh, also? Hold on.

Chapter 9

After the call, Jethro grabbed his chair and coffee mug, still smiling. That sure felt good! And now Tim's family, both families, knew he was alive. It was just a matter of time before he found his surrogate son.

The metal fire bowl was still too hot to touch with his bare hands. He grabbed a sweatshirt to pick it up, scattering the ashes on the ground, pouring water over them, making sure there were no sparks and then put the bowl in the back of the truck to finish cooling off. Climbing into the cab, he pulled a blanket, sleeping bag, and pillow from the storage space behind the bench seat. Setting up the lantern and heater, he opened one of the windows a couple of inches for air, grabbed one of the books he'd brought with him and read for a few hours.

He'd stop every so often to watch the storm. Although there wasn't much wind, the snow was really coming down. He frowned when he had to relieve himself, remembering that it didn't matter where he went and he still needed to move the fire bowl under the tarp in the back. Pulling on his snow boots, he shrugged into his parka, ignored the gloves and pulled his knit cap down over his ears. Quickly opening the door, he hurried through the accumulating snow to the back of the truck, grabbed the fire bowl, shoved it under the tarp, did his thing and jumped back inside as quickly as possible.

He really should have bought a camper to go on this thing. But that would have weighed a lot more, cut down on the maneuverability and been a lot more expensive. He was just experiencing the first snow of the season, that's all.

Turning the heater up for a few minutes, he stuffed his parka and boots behind the seat, dug in his pack for the radio and found a couple of stations with music he could stand to listen to while he resumed reading. He woke up about 2300 when the clouds parted for a few minutes and the moon was visible. Even better, the meadow surrounding him was covered in snow and now lit in moonlight. Having no idea whether anything would show, he took a couple of photos, sent them to Bishop and then changed into his sweats, put the book away, turned the lantern and heater off,
brought the window up so that only a fraction was still open and hunkered down into his sleeping bag. Another day closer to Tim.

When he woke in the morning, he was very happy he had the heater, his clothes and the snowshoes inside with him. After warming up the cab, he pulled on his thermal long johns (tops and bottoms), long-sleeved t-shirt, sweatshirt, insulated snow pants and heavy socks, managed to get his snow boots on, shrugged into his parka, grabbed gloves and again made sure his knit cap was pulled over his ears. It was 18 degrees outside. Cold but at least it wasn't snowing.

Glad that Chuck had persuaded him to have snow-tread tires put on the truck and had provided the gallons of winterized diesel to keep the fuel from 'gelling' in the cold, he'd try driving it after he'd eaten and checked everything else. Focusing on making himself a hot breakfast, he clipped his snowshoes on, hiking to the trees and retrieving the bear bags, leaving the big cooler in its rope net in the trees for now. Back in the truck, he debated a few minutes before pulling out his homemade Sterno™ stove, placing it on a silicon pad which rested on a flat board. His dad taught him how to make a little stove for the Sterno™ cans; the one he had now was one he and Kelly made together in a steel coffee can. He always kept a few cans of the flammable cooking gel at home for power outages.

Reaching into his solar cooler, he pulled out the egg container, removing two eggs. They were followed by the box of processed cheese. He'd prefer cheddar or other 'real' cheese but parmesan or processed was all he had. A little seasoning and the eggs were ready to cook. Unless he also fired up his one burner solar charged stove, he'd have to do this in stages, hot food first, then he'd make the coffee. Remembering he had part of a baked potato in the cooler, he found that and cut bite-sized pieces into the skillet. Now he'd have eggs with cheese and potatoes. Add in bacon, which he didn't have, and it'd be perfect. With the window still open a crack for ventilation, he lit the gel and put the skillet on the little stove to cook.

While he ate his eggs and potatoes, he poured a cup of coffee from his thermos into his mug and put it on the skillet on top of the little stove to reheat. He'd prefer fresh but that would take more time than he wanted to spend right now.

After eating and drinking, he extinguished the flame in the Sterno can, letting it cool before snapping the lid back on. Even with the slight window opening, the cab was toasty warm and he stashed his sleeping bag and pillow away while the stove cooled. After putting it and the rest of the gel fuel away, he tidied the cab as much as he could. When he was satisfied, he started the engine. Leaving it to warm up, he zipped his extra keys into his parka, he was not going to risk locking himself out, put on his boots, knit cap and gloves and grabbed the snowshoes. He opened the door of the truck before he could think too much about going back out into 18 degree temperatures. Lowering one of the trek poles, he was happy to see the snow was less than two feet deep; he'd been concerned it would be much deeper.

Behind the truck, the exhaust was melting the snow. Sitting sideways on the bench seat, his legs hanging in the cold and letting most of the heat out of the cab, he clipped the snowshoes on again, slung his rifle over his shoulder, shut the door, climbed out and clumped over to the trees holding the bear bags. His eyebrows raised when he got close and saw paw prints, big paw prints. Something had tried to get his food! He realized when he'd been here earlier, he'd been so intent on getting the bags down for his hot breakfast, he'd failed to check for prints or any animals. He gave himself a slap upside his head. He could not afford to get sloppy! It wasn't just his life, it could mean Tim's too.

Stepping several feet away, he relieved himself before tackling the tree and food. Quickly taking a photo of the bear bags, cooler and the paw prints, he used his pulley to bring the bags, cooler, rope
and the pulley itself down from the tree. Then he fast-walked, as well as he could, back to the truck with everything, wondering why he just hadn't moved the truck over. He was clearly not focusing well and wondered if he should take a few hours off to get his head together. The answer to that was a quick no, he needed to find Tim! He didn't come this far to fall apart like this. Before he left, he sent those photos too.

With only snow-covered boulders and trees as his guides, he used his compass and easing the truck forward, found driving in the snow wasn't much worse than driving off road in loose and sometimes muddy dirt, pine needles, rocks, dead branches and leaves. Unless the snow started falling again.

He drove for five hours, through the first valley on his map and then up a tricky mountain that took some doing and then maneuvering carefully down the rocky terrain, making several tight zigzags, into the next valley. When he came to a singular grove of trees there, he thought about stopping but kept going. He'd driven about 20 minutes farther south when the snow started falling, this time in large heavy clumps. Shaking his head, he carefully turned around, returning to the stand of trees. In that short time, conditions became abysmal, the storm creating a 'white out' situation.

He waited for two hours in the cab, running his little solar charged heater, before the snow eased up a little, enough that he could see where he was going. Removing what he wanted from the bear bags and then gathering his snowshoes and putting on his gear, slinging the rifle over his shoulder and tucking his handgun into the pocket of his parka, he clipped on the snowshoes, grabbed the bear bags, coolers, pulley and rope and headed for the trees. He got the food into the trees and hurried back to the truck.

When it stopped snowing and cleared a bit, he dug the fire bowl out, built a fire in it on top of the snow and made a pot of coffee, enough to drink now and keep warm in his thermos. He also heated a can of chili in a saucepan, wishing he had something to go with it. Remembering he'd seen a mix of some kind in the bags from Chuck, he hauled the bear bags down again to find it. Cornbread, the kind that only needed water and an egg. Pulling an egg out of the solar cooler, he dug out Chuck's cast iron skillet. Adding more wood to the fire, he prepared the mix right in the skillet and set it on the grill, pulling the chili aside so it wouldn't burn.

In a few minutes, he had a tasty meal, with freshly perked coffee and an apple for dessert. Shoveling newly fallen snow into his buckets, he set them on the grill to heat. He'd wash the pans, mug and utensils and decided to take a 'camp bath', that is use hot water, soap and a wash cloth to wash up without an actual shower or bath. With nobody around, he decided to wash up in his truck bed, that way his feet wouldn't freeze. He put a tarp down and towel down and with the wash cloth, soap and hot water, he managed a full body clean in just under 4 minutes. That excluded his hair, for that he'd been using a dry shampoo Breena recommended. Briskly drying himself, he dressed, heating more fresh snow to wash socks and underwear. After they were washed and rinsed, he rolled them in towels to absorb the moisture and then hung them on sticks around the fire to dry, hanging the damp towels from the 4 trek poles. By the time he finished all that, it was late afternoon and he decided to stay the night, hoping the storm would be over by morning. Rather than spend time searching here, he would honk the truck horn several times and maybe set off the truck's security alarm. He'd do that while he drove, using the binoculars to see if there was any response.

He'd just gathered his mostly dry clothes and towels, let the fire die, put the solar chargers back in the truck and was putting the fire bowl away when the snow started again. The bear bags and cooler were up in the trees, he'd removed the trek poles with the clothes, he'd placed the other sticks he'd used in the back of the truck. The buckets and everything else were put away. Not bothering with his snowshoes, he hurried to the nearest tree for a preemptive pit stop and then
When he crawled into the cab, he smiled, it was much warmer in comparison. With his heater on, the cab stayed warm, even with the window cracked open for oxygen. Over the next few hours, his clothes dried but the towels he’d used were still damp. Nothing he could do about that. He'd hang them near the fire again the next time he had one. He spent the rest of the day reading, playing solitaire and catching up on his notes. He'd noticed that they were more of an ongoing letter to Tim with some facts and figures thrown in. Liking the idea, he continued using the same style.

He woke the next morning to sunny skies and a slightly warmer temperature. This morning it was 21 degrees Fahrenheit, 3 degrees warmer. He ate the last of the chili and cornbread for breakfast, added an orange, his multi-vitamin and a cup of re-heated coffee, changed from sweats to jeans with shell, that is uninsulated, pants over them, flannel shirt and heavy sweatshirt, retrieved the bear bags and cooler and made sure everything was secured. Then he warmed up the truck, stripped off the outer layers of parka, sweatshirt and shell pants so he could drive without feeling like a stuffed sausage and was on his way by a late-ish 0730. He laid on the truck horn every few miles, alternating that with setting off the truck’s security alarm, slowing to a stop to look for a response.

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Four days later he entered yet another valley, noting trees and a lake. His adrenaline pumping, he drove close to the lake and the outer edge of a forest. The lake was the landmark he’d seen on the map, the one he thought the most likely spot to find Tim. It had snowed several times in the last few days and now when he tested the depth with the trek pole, it sank to a depth of five feet. After going through his routine, warm clothes, snowshoes, food in the trees, pit stop, he climbed up on the roof of the cab to get a better look. Putting his goggles on against the blinding sun glaring off the snow, he looked east, seeing granite cliffs and what he hoped were caves. The binoculars confirmed that hope.

He wanted to move the truck closer to the caves but there were no trees between here and the base of the granite mountain. He knew that the hike to the base would probably be about triple the length it seemed, even with the binoculars. Distances could be deceiving, especially in a snowy landscape. And unless he found a path to gain access to the caves, he’d need his rock climbing equipment. He thought about hanging the food and then moving the truck closer to the caves but he had no idea how far the lake extended under the snow or whether it was frozen under the snow. He did not want another 'stuck in the muck' experience.

Besides, he figured sooner or later Tim would come to the lake and see the truck. Thinking of that, he left a note that said he was going to the caves to look for him. Not wanting to sign it Boss or Gibbs, he used his initials, LJG.

Packing everything he’d need for several days of outdoor living, including his tent, tarps, sleeping bag, blankets, weapons, ammo, dry rations, thermos, coffee pot, buckets, rope, climbing gear, ice ax, first aid kit, fire bowl and as many pieces of wood as would fit in or could be attached to the pack, he got that into the larger pack from Chuck. Stuffing in warm clothes, additional thermals and socks, he closed the pack, shrugging it onto his shoulders.

He slipped the sat phone into his pants pocket and his handgun into the right-hand pocket of his parka, zipping it partially closed. Clipping the snow shoes on, he made sure he had both keys to the truck before locking it and then slung his rifle onto his left shoulder, over the strap for the backpack. He was ready. Setting off across the snow field, he was glad for the larger pack. His sleeping bag was strapped on the outside in its weather-proof stuff bag, along with some of the
wood and the fire bowl. Everything else fit inside and he figured the weight was somewhere between 35 and 40 pounds. A lot lighter than those he'd carried in the Marines!

He stopped three hours later for a snack and sip of coffee. He was putting the thermos away when he heard a deep growl alarmingly close to him. Grabbing his handgun from his pocket, he slipped off the safety, trying to get a bead on the bear that sounded like it was less than a couple of feet away from him. As he did so, the bear stood to its full height, roaring as it moved forward, charging him.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thought I'd better post this tonight. We're under a wind (and fire) advisory through tomorrow evening (it's howling so loudly right now I'm sure you can hear it through cyber space!!) and as our internet access is through equipment secured in a very tall fir tree, don't know if I'll have access tomorrow. Besides, I left you with a cliffhanger!

Chapter 10

Previously:

Grabbing his handgun from his pocket, he slipped off the safety, trying to get a bead on the bear that sounded less than a couple of feet away. As he did so, the bear stood to its full height, roaring as it moved forward, charging him.

As he pulled the trigger, the bear slashed one huge paw at him. He cried out in shock and pain as the claws bit right through the layers of clothing into his skin, tearing along his right shoulder and chest, catching his arm, knocking him down and the gun out of his hand.

He was scrabbling for the rifle when a voice said softly, "Don't move, I've got him."

There was a hiss and the bear roared again although this time it sounded like it was in pain. Batting at its face, it rumbled away, growling and stopping to wipe its snout in the snow, rolling around in it, leaving traces of blood behind from Gibbs' bullet.

Still on the ground, Gibbs also rolled – screaming in agony - feeling like his entire right side was torn open. He felt hands on his pack and screamed louder as it and what was left of his parka were moved off him.

"Sorry but I need to see how bad it is, need to get the bleeding stopped."

In the middle of the worst pain he'd ever felt, Jethro recognized the voice. He'd found Tim – or rather Tim found him. Gritting his teeth, he worked to stay still and breathe while the other man carefully sliced through the parka, flannel shirt and thermal undershirt, ripping the clothing apart to see his chest, arm and shoulder.

"I'll pack this with snow to stop the bleeding and then make bandages."

Gibbs moaned, finally finding the breath to speak, "Pack. First aid, shirts."

"Ok, good. I'm called Fish."

Fish? Through the brutal haze of pain, he wondered what kind of name that was and why Tim didn't seem to recognize him. Didn't he know him? Rather than say Gibbs or Jethro, the injured man groaned, "Leroy."

"All right, Leroy. I'm packing this with snow, then I'll find your first aid kit, clean the wounds, bandage you up and then I'll make a fire with your fire pit and wood to keep you warm. Once the
bleeding's stopped, and you feel up to it, I'll take you up to my cave. There's a path that's easy and I'll help you. It's not far."

Gibbs screamed again when the fresh and icy cold snow was packed against his open wounds but somewhere in his mind he knew it was for the best, he could bleed out quickly if it wasn't stopped.

He rested, grateful for the numbness that was seeping through his right side. When he smelled fire, he carefully turned his head, hearing himself whimper with the pain, to see Chuck's fire bowl with three of the logs, a good amount of kindling and the grill over the top. Tim or Fish was digging through his pack. At least he thought it was Tim, he was almost unrecognizable. The scraggly-looking man pulled out the large first aid kit, courtesy of Dr. Palmer, and one of the long-sleeved thermal shirts.

"If there's enough gauze, then the thermal can cover it. If not, I'll have to cut up the thermal to use."

Gibbs grunted his agreement. He blinked in surprise when his feet and legs were gently raised and put down on two sets of stacked logs and folded shirts. There was movement through the snow to his other side and he heard the whoosh of a match as a second fire was lit, near his left side.

Jethro heard Tim/Fish muttering, "Feet and legs are elevated and the fires are burning, need to keep you warm." Then a rustling as the large first aid bag was opened. "Good, lots of gauze, should be enough. We're going to need lots of antibiotic ointment and...yep, got it." The other man turned toward his patient, "You have a doctor pack this for you?"

Gibbs again grunted. He made more noise when a tarp was maneuvered under him so that he wasn't lying in the snow, blankets covering his uninjured parts. He groaned again when his rescuer carefully checked to see if the bleeding had stopped. It was down to a slow seep. Finding instructions for cleaning wounds in the medical kit, Fish heated a bucket of snow until it was cool and then squeezed in some of the mild soap he found in the medical kit.

"Ok, according to the notes I found in this kit, I need to clean the wounds by pouring cool water and soap over them for at least 5 minutes. We have plenty of water, I've got enough fresh snow water heated to a cool temperature to last through a few minutes of cleansing and I'll get the second bucket going. I think it's best if you remain in the same position, I'll put more blankets and towels over the rest of you so your clothes won't get any wetter."

Finding a thermos of water and a coffee pot, he poured the water in the pot, leaving out the coffee basket, and put it on the side of the grill, away from the heat. "No liquids for hypovolemic shock, don't think it's what you need right now. We'll wait a couple of hours, check your pulse again. Keep you warm, feet and legs elevated."

Fish kept up a steady narrative of what he was doing, keeping Gibbs awake and concentrating on listening to the man he thought, hoped, was his surrogate son. Towels were draped over him, not too close to his wounds. Something else was folded and put under his head. His knit cap now covered a wool scarf that was wrapped around his head and ears while another wool scarf was threaded behind his head to keep his neck and chin warmer. Hand and foot warmers were placed on his hands and feet.

He howled in pain as the water was poured over his wounds and then lay panting to catch his breath. The next bucket wasn't quite as bad but at the end of the 8 minutes, he felt like he'd been tortured.

Fish added 3 additional minutes of washing the wounds because Leroy's body was torn by a bear and he wanted to make sure all the dirt and bacteria were removed. He had nothing sterile with
which to dry the wounds but the fires were close and did the job well enough. When he judged they were dry enough, he applied generous amounts of antibiotic ointment and then Leroy's right shoulder, upper chest and arm were wrapped in gauze, the sleeve of the clean thermal shirt gently slipped over it and fastened so it would stay. After he'd been allowed to rest for nearly an hour, his pulse was taken again and Fish said it was getting stronger every time he checked it.

"I found a pouch with tea bags and sugar packets in your pack. In a few minutes, I'll give you some hot tea with extra sugar and I'll check your injuries to make sure they're not bleeding again. Not supposed to give you liquids but don't want you to get dehydrated or go any deeper into shock."

Leroy grunted, "Blood?"

"A lot and pretty fast, but if it was too much, you wouldn't be conscious. I'd say more than a pint, which is the amount they take in a blood donation, but less than three pints which would be close to 30% of the total amount of blood in your body. I think you'd be dead already if you'd lost that much. You're going to need plenty of iron. Good thing I killed a deer this morning and I saw raisins in your pack. For now, just rest. We've got another three hours before we need to move."

"Vitamins in pack, meat in cooler, truck."

"Truck, where is it?" Fish looked around.

"Three hours walk, by lake. Trees, food hung."

"Ok, we'll figure that out later." Fish held the cup of hot tea to his lips and he sipped at it, making a face at the sweetness. The other man chuckled, "Yeah, I feel the same way. I'm not much of a regular tea drinker in the first place. But I believe this is good to help you get through the shock."

He dutifully finished the tea, feeling a little more like himself and then looked at Fish. "How long you been here?"

"Since mid-July. Long enough to learn how to hunt and trap, find shelter, wood, water, you know, survival stuff. How about you?"

Gibbs had his story ready, he wasn't sure about letting Tim know who he was just yet. "Heard about the caves, didn't realize winter would be so early."

Fish nodded, "Me neither. I was planning to make snowshoes but ended up with makeshift skis and poles. They're okay but I'd still like snowshoes."

"Can help you with that."

"Great! But first you need to rest and let your body start to heal."

Gibbs lay back, closing his eyes while Tim checked his right side. When he woke again, he felt more himself. He still hurt like hell but his brain wasn't as foggy with the pain and shock. The sun was shining and Tim/Fish was cooking something on the fire. It smelled good, like a meaty stew or soup. Gibbs decided if he wasn't going to tell Tim his name and history, then he needed to start thinking of him as Fish.

Fish smiled, "Good, you're awake, the soup is ready. Hope you don't mind, found it in your pack."

Gibbs huffed, "Not a problem, help yourself."

The other man helped him sit up, tucking the pack behind him to lean on and making sure he still
had the tarp underneath him and was covered with the blankets. "Ok, here you go!"

He'd put Gibbs' soup in his coffee mug and now put it between his legs on the blanket and tarp.

"With one hand, I thought it might be easier for you to drink it."

Gibbs nodded but his hand shook so much when he tried to pick up the mug that Fish took it. "All right, you're still suffering some shock and maybe that's also from the blood loss. I'll hold, you drink."

Gibbs made a noise and bit by bit managed to drink the entire mug. Hot felt good and the soup, more of a stew, filled his belly. When he was done, Fish put the pan back on the grill to re-heat and then ate and drank it right from the pan.

"Ok. Two more things. I found extra strength Tylenol in the pack, so I'm going to give you two of those now, you can have 6 every 24 hours. I also found your multi-vitamins and there's a decent amount of iron in them, so you can take one with the Tylenol."

"Okay. Gonna have to pee."

"I had an idea about that. Let's get the meds and vitamin into you first."

Fish helped him with those and then rummaged through his own rucksack, pulling out an empty, wide mouth jar.

"Here, I think this will work. I'll hold the jar like this…"

Jethro wasn't thrilled but didn't see any way around it. He managed a rusty chuckle when Fish closed his eyes.

When he was through, the other man put the bottle aside and handed him 2 squares of toilet tissue. "Glad you brought this with you."

After, he held out a plastic bag with other trash in it, passed a wipe to his patient that also went into the trash and then took the bottle several feet away to empty it. He rinsed it with melted snow and then re-attached the lid, putting it in a plastic bag. "I'll wash it thoroughly when we get to the cave."

Putting everything neatly back in the pack, he tucked it behind Leroy's back once again before giving a sharp whistle. When Gibbs heard a bark in return, his first thought was to hope that Fish hadn't adopted a wolf. But this was still Tim McGee, no matter what he currently thought his name was.

A chocolate Labrador Retriever bounded over the snow; at a command it stopped near Fish, looking curiously at Gibbs. The dog wasn't displaying any signs of aggressiveness and Gibbs relaxed.

Fish looked at the dog, "Boss, this is Leroy." The dog barked once in acknowledgement and approached Gibbs.

Fish smiled, "Leroy, this is Boss. If you don't mind, he'll lick your hand and that's all it will take."

Gibbs was still trying not to laugh at the dog's name, it hurt too much. Tim may have some sort of memory loss but obviously things were still somewhere in his brain. First the 'G' and now "Boss".
Boss licked his hand and then went to sniff around, spending a lot of time sniffing the bear's trail. Tim wiped Gibbs' hand with a wipe. As susceptible as he would be to infection over the next few days, there was no need to add to the risk, who knew what his dog had been up to in the last few hours?

Fish smiled, "He was 8 months old when I was pulled out of the water, one of the puppies born to my rescuers' dog, Jane. They didn't know she was pregnant when they took her from a shelter and then 3 puppies appeared after they were settled in the camp."

"At least three stories in there."

Fish nodded, "When we get to the cave. All right, let's get you settled." Walking away a few steps, he returned pulling a travois.

"I made this to haul my kills to the cave. Boss is pretty good about pulling it. I'm going to put a blanket on it, then your sleeping bag and use some of your rope to make sure you're secure. I saw a harness but I don't want to touch your upper right side. Once you're inside your sleeping bag, rope will go around the sleeping bag where your legs and waist are, and the sled."

He got it ready and then pulled it closer to Leroy. "I think the easiest thing for you is to stay in a sitting position and I'll help you scoot onto the travois and lie down. I'll put the pack on the other side to keep it stable while we're getting you moved."

He looked at the ends of the sled, "Up or down?"

Leroy smiled tiredly, "Head looking east, please. Rather see where we're going."

"Ok."

The travois was a little different than his as the surface of the sled was made from sturdy tree limbs covering the whole length, instead of the strong netting on Chuck's. The pull handles were at the outer edges of the bar across the top end, rather than close together, and they had deerskin wrapped around them. Fish saw him looking and explained. "I put the ropes on that way so Boss can wear it like a harness without it choking him. It goes behind his front legs, around his chest and then I clip it together on his back. Less strain and he uses more of his back and chest muscles. The deerskin is for both of us, to avoid rope burn."

He looked at Leroy, "I think I'd better slip that other parka on you before we get moving. Although it's not far, it is cold."

He mumbled, "Okay." He wasn't looking forward to the parka being put on his painful right arm.

He should have known better. Fish got his left arm in, got the jacket around him, carefully draped it over his right side and zipped it up.

As Fish got everything together, Leroy took a better look at him.

Although he knew this was his missing surrogate son, he bore little resemblance to the man he'd last seen. This man was thinner than Tim had ever been, although not gaunt. From what little he could see, his muscle tone was impressive. His beard was scraggily and full, covering the lower half of his face and hanging just below his collarbone. His hair was even longer than his beard, although it was neatly tied back with a shoelace. He wore what looked like jeans although they had lengths of fur around the legs, maybe glued or sewn on, boots with leather and fur patches, a worn flannel shirt with a t-shirt peeking out from underneath and an outer covering of more fur, Gibbs decided it was bear. But his height was the same and his expressive eyes the same green-blue
"Fish, why don't you wear my snowshoes? And bring the parka you cut, we can fix it with my sewing kit. There's a heavy sweatshirt, socks and boots in the pack, you should wear them now."

"All right, if you don't mind, thanks." The other man opened the pack again, putting the sweatshirt on, zipping it up and flipping the hood up over his cold ears. Normally he wore a hat in the cold but went off without it this morning. Then, sitting on the travois, he pulled what was left of his boots off and sighed in happiness as the socks went on followed by the boots. He was surprised they fit but thought that was probably the cold, his feet must have shriveled a bit. Bundling his furs and boots, he slipped them into his deerskin rucksack, tied the fire bowl, his homemade skis and poles onto the back of Leroy's pack, clipped the snowshoes on and stood. Before he did anything else, he tied his rucksack onto the travois, there was no need to carry both Leroy's pack and his own.

"Wow, that feels great, Leroy, thanks!"

The tarp and blankets were secured on the travois with ropes, his pillow was inflated and tied on over the rucksack. Fish opened the sleeping bag, laying it out on the sled, "Ok, time to move. Boss and I will help from your left side."

It wasn't fun but with the Tylenol kicking in, it wasn't as painful as Leroy feared. Once he was lying on the sled in his sleeping bag, Fish carefully zipped it up, making sure the wool scarves weren't going to flap around or blow off. He left both arms in the bag; if Leroy wanted to move his left arm out, he'd help him but for now, Fish preferred everything tucked in. He looped rope around the sleeping bag, carefully avoiding his patient's injuries, tying it around the sled and then stepped back, feeling the injured man was as secure as possible under present circumstances.

Slipping the harness over Boss and knotting it over his back, Fish got Leroy's pack situated on his shoulders, fastened the waist strap and looked at Boss. "Ok Boss, home."

Boss moved ahead, not having any problem at all with the sled and its human passenger. Fish turned to Leroy, "He's used to hauling 200 lb. bucks and once we hauled a brown bear that had to weigh at least 500 lbs. Had to lose some of him to get home and it took both of us but for Boss, you're a lightweight!"

That amused the hell out of Leroy; he had to turn his head to hide his laughter and that hurt. Along with his astonishment at the dog's name, no one had ever accused him of being a lightweight, except maybe his ex-wives in the communication department.

They moved faster than he thought possible and although he did his best to look ahead, he was worn out, soon falling asleep.

Seeing his head rolling on the pillow, Fish motioned Boss forward while he walked back to check his pulse. Satisfied, he tucked a towel around Leroy's neck so his head wouldn't bounce around and walked beside the sled as they resumed their journey.

As he'd hoped, Boss pulled the sled all the way up the path to their cave home. They stopped a couple of times for dog and master to have a drink of water but their new friend continued sleeping and Fish was greatly relieved. He'd been afraid the trek would be very painful for his patient.

Once inside the cave, Fish removed the snowshoes and then led Boss, still harnessed to the sled, into what he thought of as the 'warm room'. It was the warmest area of the cave, with a hot spring in the rear of the 'room'. When the sled was where Fish wanted Leroy to be, he told Boss to stop.
He'd leave Leroy on the sled until he woke. In the meantime, he removed the harness from his dog, untwisting and removing the ropes, bungee cords and towel from around the sleeping man.

Taking the pack into the other room, he quickly lit the solar lantern, happy to have light, other than sunlight or the light of a fire, inside the place. He set the heater and coffee can stove along the rock wall, on a low shelf of a flattish piece of wood supported by 3 large rocks. Filling a handmade clay bowl with water for his canine companion, he then dug out 2 pieces of deer jerky he'd made, tearing it up into bits for the dog.

Fish wasn't hungry yet, the soup had been more than he usually had during the day and although Leroy seemed to have a good supply of food, Fish didn't feel right in helping himself. He hoped it wouldn't snow for a few days so he could find the truck, get the rest of Leroy's food out of the trees and drive over here. Then he realized the search would have to wait until he was sure the danger of infection was past, he thought that would be close to a week. He had no idea if he knew how to drive. He probably did, the Andersons, his rescuers, told him most people did. Idly, he wondered where his rescuers were now and then blinked, he'd made the right decision to leave them. They were wanderers and that hadn't felt right for him.

He hoped, now that Leroy was here, that the other man could help him, they could help each other. While he didn't know his name or have any personal memories, he had retained some general knowledge and thought that if he could get to a town, he could have fingerprints and maybe his DNA checked. He hoped he could at least find out where he came from, even if he didn't have any family. And he was sure he could find some sort of work. The calluses on his fingers led him to believe he worked with his hands, he might even be a handyman or something useful like that.

While he didn't have a wedding ring on when he was pulled out of the water, he hoped there was someone who cared about him. There was someone he frequently dreamed about. He supposed it was possible the ring came off in the water, everything else had, except for one sock. Margaret said his body was shriveled from whatever amount of time he'd been in the water, so it could have happened.

He was happy to have human company, too. Boss was a wonderful dog, a great guardian and loved to help him hunt but he couldn't hold a conversation or play cards with him. When he'd been ready to leave Jim, Margaret, Kathy and their dogs, he hadn't considered that he'd feel so alone. He supposed not having any memories made that worse.

He smiled, he'd seen books in Leroy's pack and hoped he'd share. Fish had two books, one called "Survival in the Wild" that the Andersons gave him when he left them and the other one a bible he asked for when Jim wanted to leave it behind. Fish had already read it cover to cover and while he decided he wasn't a particularly religious person, at least not up to biblical standards, it was certainly interesting.

He'd spent more time with the Survival book; that's where he'd learned how to survive out here. He'd learned some from Jim and Margaret but this was rougher country and there was no one else to slip down to the creek to catch a fish for dinner or plant fruits and vegetables. While still at the camp, Jim had helped him make a bow and arrows once his hands healed and then taught him to track and shoot game. It hadn't been hard to learn and Jim said he bet Fish already knew how to track and to shoot. He'd killed several deer, the bear he'd mentioned and smaller game with his arrows. And the bear-pepper spray he'd used today, another gift from the Andersons, had come in handy more than once.

When he and Boss first arrived at the cave, it was empty and they happily moved in, glad for the hot spring and the double 'room'. It seemed, however, that they were not the only ones who liked
the place. One day they returned home from an overnight hunting trip to find a bear asleep in the entrance room. Fish had his bear-pepper spray, knife, bow and arrows with him but he hesitated to kill a sleeping animal. Although he really could use the meat, fat, sinew and furs. And the claws, he remembered reading about ancient people using parts of bear claws as needles for sewing.

When Boss barked, the decision was taken out of Fish's hands as the bear woke and immediately charged the dog who was quick to move but stayed to guard his master. Fish used the bear-pepper spray, ordering the dog behind him. When the bear dropped to the floor, trying to claw its eyes out, he notched an arrow and shot it close enough to the bear's heart to kill him.

He cooked the meat right away. Most of it was made into jerky, marinated in a slew of spices and sauces given him by Margaret. She'd taught him how to make it; he let it marinade for 24 hours in a few of his clay bowls resting in larger bowls of cool lake water. Then he baked it on a low fire for several hours.

The rest of the meat was eaten in a few days, keeping cool in more of his bowls cooled in his only pan, full of lake water. The fur he removed from the carcass provided warmth for him at night and now during the day as winter arrived. Using his knife, he'd cut lengths and sewn them onto his only pants, jeans formerly worn by Jim Anderson, and used a homemade glue to patch his boots, also worn by Jim Anderson before they were given to Fish. He even had a bear fur hat although he hated wearing it. He'd made another one out of deerskin and that didn't bother him.

Deciding to move his furs to the warm room and sleep there where he could keep an eye on Leroy, Fish first built a fire in his raised rock fire pit in the entrance room, hanging several layers of deerskin across the opening to help keep the heat in and the cold out. There was still enough air coming in for them to breathe. Once the fire was going, he took Leroy's metal bowl into the warm room and laid a fire in that.

Lighting the lantern, he sat down on his fur, getting comfortable and took out his deck of cards, another parting gift from the Andersons. Margaret and Kathy taught him to play 'Go Fish', '4 Corners', 'Hearts', 'Rummy' and 'Gin Rummy' while Jim taught him to play different kinds of poker. That didn't last long though as once Fish knew the rules, he won every time. Luckily, Margaret also taught him to play several types of solitaire and he thought that's probably what was keeping him sane. Cards, the books and the scribbling he did. When Kathy gave him three of her prized blank notebooks, he decided to keep a journal that was turning into an open letter to 'G', whoever that might be. It was a way to explore his feelings, what he was learning, the things he liked and disliked about this life.

Tonight, he wrote of the bear attack on Leroy and everything else that had happened that afternoon. He wrote of his fear that the man would die and his relief when the wounds, although bloody and painful, weren't life-threatening. Unless infection set in.

Finishing the entry, he realized hours had passed and he was now hungry. Taking more of the jerky he'd given Boss, he tore it up into another bowl, adding a little water, mashing pieces of wild green onion into the mix. Covering the bowl with a well-worn piece of aluminum foil, he set it at the edge of his fire and then pushed it in with a long animal bone. While he knew there was a grill in Leroy's pack, he was again hesitant to use anything from there without the knowledge of the other man.

When the liquid had boiled for a few minutes, he used the same long bone to push the bowl back from the flames, letting it simmer for another 15 minutes before he decided it probably had all the flavor it was going to get. Carefully removing the foil, he set it aside to wash. He'd fold and put it away later; with precious little foil and many needs for it, he took good care of it.
He had a stash of wild berries he'd picked before the snow started and kept them cool and dry so they were still good - blueberry and blackberry. While he waited for his jerky soup to cool a little, he chopped blackberries into another of the bowls he'd made, adding hot water. After his soup, he'd have blackberry tea. He'd like to dry the rest of the berries, he'd have to check his Survival book for ways to do that. Or maybe Leroy would know.

Tomorrow he'd give Leroy blueberries as they had all kinds of good stuff in them. He was sure blackberries did too but he didn't know what they would be. He wished he had milk for them but he hadn't seen the wild goats or bison for a few weeks before the snow started and guessed they'd moved on. That reminded him to wash the pee jar, formerly the goat milk jar and he added another bowl of water to the fire.

He sat back, drinking his deer jerky soup, enjoying the onion flavor. A couple of weeks before the first snow, he'd found a patch of wild vegetables and brought them home. There wasn't much left now and the onions were his only seasoning. He smiled, maybe Leroy had some other seasonings. Garlic would be great as well as salt and pepper. He just had to be careful that Boss didn't get anything with either onion or garlic in it as both were toxic to him.

His tea was ready so he drank that before retrieving the pee jar from the plastic bag he'd put it in. He scraped a few shavings off his lone bar of soap into the jar with his knife, pouring the hot water in and putting it aside to soak. He figured two hot washes would be enough but wished he had some bleach. He frowned but shrugged, he was always having thoughts like this, wishing he had some specific thing although he had no idea what the thing was or would do. Kind of like having half a mind. Part of his brain evidently still knew what things were while the rest of it was blank, except for the new things he'd learned.

Hearing noises, he went to check on his patient.
Thank you to those who have expressed concern for my safety with the fires in California. I am safe and have learned to keep a bag packed for a quick exit. For everyone out there - stay safe!

Chapter 11

When Gibbs woke, he didn't know where he was or why he hurt so much. He quickly figured out he shouldn't move his right side but he could turn his head if he was very careful and he looked at his surroundings. He thought he was in a cave, in his sleeping bag and he felt a hard surface under him. Gingerly pulling his left arm out of his sleeping bag, he found the surface to be wood. When he sniffed, he could smell fire, something with onions, dog and another human.

Tim! Then it all came back to him and he laid his head back with a groan. What an idiot, how could he have missed that bear? It certainly hadn't appeared out of nowhere! He was immensely grateful McGee was there at the right time and tried not to think of the irony. Here he was, determined to rescue his surrogate son and agent who instead rescued him.

Fish suddenly appeared through an opening in the cave wall. "How are you feeling, Leroy?"

The older man shook his head, "Like a jackass. How did I miss that bear coming at me?"

Fish thought about that, "You were about three-quarters up a rise there but with the snowshoes and the snow, you may not have noticed the incline. When I first saw you, you were stopped, putting something in your pack. I started toward you but didn't see the bear until a few seconds before you did. I didn't want to shout or distract you, thought I could get there in time, beat the bear. I was wrong about that, the snow and those skis slowed me down. He was coming up the other side, on all fours so he wouldn't have been tall enough for you to see. Must just be steep enough that you couldn't see him. And the snow changes things, distorts them. At least that's how it was for me the first few times it snowed. I couldn't find the path back to the caves, probably still be looking if it weren't for Boss."

Leroy gave what Fish thought was a half-smile, "Good thinking, that makes sense and now I don't feel like such an idiot."

Fish snorted, "You're not an idiot, could have happened to anyone out here, even someone as cautious as you."

"How do you know I'm cautious?"

"Gun, rifle, medical kit, wood…"

"Huh, I guess so. I think of that as being prepared for everything but cautious works. Although I have friends who would laugh themselves silly at that."

"Why?"
Gibbs decided to start giving Tim some of their history, hoping it would stir up memories. "I'm in law enforcement and used to be known as a lone wolf. I'd leave my team and go off on my own if I thought it was too risky to involve them."

Fish frowned, "You didn't care if it was too risky for you?"

"Guess I did on some level because I'm still here but at the time, no, I didn't consciously care."

"Something change?"

Gibbs snorted, "My team let me know how much they hated me doing that and eventually I realized it was because they cared. Took me even longer to figure out that I was hurting them every time I did something stupid."

Fish nodded, "Are they...is it like a family?"

"Yes. Started out as co-workers, teammates. In law enforcement, you need to rely on your partner and he or she on you. If you don't have that trust between you, it could mean lives, yours, theirs, other peoples. Usually teams like ours, people move on, get promoted, burn out. And we lost a couple of people over the years, but the core team, four of us worked together for 8 years, then one left and it was the three of us. We've worked together for more than a decade now. You get close, even if there was never any conscious intention of doing so. We went from teammates to a work family and now we're family outside of work too."

Fish swallowed hard, wondering why he felt like crying. He just nodded, finally able to say, "Sounds good to me."

"What about you? You said a couple things out there that made me curious."

Fish huffed, "I don't suppose you're sleepy or want another dose of Tylenol."

"Yes, but not for a few minutes. You've been here since mid-July, where were you before that?"

"I was living in a campsite north of here, on the creek. Did you see that on your way here?"

"The creek that runs east of the road?"

"Uh yes, I remember them mentioning a road. I was living there with some people and they decided they wanted to move along. They're wanderers. They had two boats they traveled in; one was a canoe they found and their tents and poles went in that. It was tied onto the river boat we were in with the rest of the equipment, folding tables, chairs, camp stove, pots, pans, dishes, sleeping bags. I went with them because I didn't know what else to do but after a couple of weeks of just floating down the creek, I knew I couldn't keep going. I don't know who I am but I do know I'm not a wanderer! I told them and they understood, they weren't surprised. They gave me what they could spare and at the next place where there was a way to get from the creek to solid land, Boss and I left them. We climbed up to the plateau and then found the caves."

"Huh, sound like interesting people. What do you mean, you don't know who you are?"

"Just that - I don't know. The Andersons saved my life. The creek flooded last spring and they kept watch for anything salvageable that came by. That's when they got the canoe and some other stuff. Anyway, one day the dogs started barking close to where they'd moved their boat, out of the flooded area, and they found me, floating half on and half off a log. Jim told me later they thought I was dead and Margaret said they should bring me in to give me a decent burial. The water wasn't as deep or the current as fast by then and Jim and Margaret waded out as far as they could and then
pushed the log so it would float in with me still on it.

"Then they discovered I was alive, although unconscious. I have vague memories of being in the water, all of them bad, but I have no idea how long I was out there. I was naked except for a sock and Margaret said there were many cuts, bruises, deep scratches and blood. I had a deep bruise on one hip and my hands looked like they'd been shredded. I don't remember any of this but they were able to revive me and helped me stand. I guess it was too much because they said I fell onto my knees and then full out into the mud. They covered me up, warmed me up, did what they could for my injuries, took a few hours to make a sled like mine, got me on it and with help from the dogs, dragged me to their campsite."

"Wow! When was that?"

"April 21st. I'm going to celebrate that day as my birthday."

"You should certainly celebrate!" Gibbs barely refrained from shuddering. Tim went in the water April 15th; he'd been in for 6 days, traveling close to 200 miles.

"What's the first thing you remember?"

"Kathy, their daughter, asking her mom when I was going to wake up. I opened one eye and said hello, scared her. Which scared me. That was a week after they'd pulled me out of the water."

"You must have been pretty sick then."

"Delirious for days. Had some sort of infection. Margaret knows a lot about herbs and had a supply of those she'd grown or found in the woods."

"And those saved you?"

Fish smiled, "Something did, might as well be the herbs."

"You're right, whatever it was, I'm glad." He breathed deeply and found it hurt but not too badly. He was thankful to those people and then realized something.

"Fish, what are those people's names?"

"Jim and Margaret Anderson, their daughter Kathy and dogs Jane, Betty and Bud– and Boss of course. Except he was called Lassie."

"Lassie? She was a female Rough Collie."

"Huh?"

"Lassie was a dog on a TV show when I was a kid, she was a Rough Collie who was owned first by a teenage boy named Jeff and then a little boy named Timmy." Gibbs swallowed after he said Fish's real name but it didn't seem to spark anything.

"Was the show popular?"

"Yes, for years and there were movies and people still refer to Timmy having fallen down a well and Lassie rescuing him."

"I guess I can see where they got the name even if they applied it to the wrong breed of dog. As I recovered, he started following me around and he'd get pushy about things. Wake me up in the morning, bark at me to do something, stare at me or push his snout into me to do this or that. That's
when I started calling him Boss."

He thought it mildly amusing and didn't understand the almost hysterical laughter from Leroy. Deciding it was related to the man's injuries, maybe some lingering shock, he ignored it.

Deciding that was also enough talk for the evening, he did a wound check, removing the gauze, running more cool water and soap over all the torn and lacerated tissue, then gently adding antibiotic ointment, finishing by wrapping new lengths of gauze and helping his patient sit up so he could remove the remnants of the first thermal shirt and slide the other one over the rest of his torso. He sat behind him on the sled, supporting him while the wrecked clothing was removed and the other shirt gently pulled over his head and onto his left arm.

When he finished he looked at the older man, clearly in pain. "If there's no blood or redness by tomorrow, I'll put some of those steri strips on. There's also a big roll of adhesive tape with directions to make butterfly bandages. I think we'll do a combination of those. I could do stitches, I have a sewing kit but I don't know if the thread could cause an infection. I could boil it first, have to sterilize the needle anyway."

Leroy visibly shuddered. "Let's try the strips and butterfly things first."

Fish nodded, "I'd rather do that, it'll be easier on you and I think with that roll of adhesive tape I can get everything taped together. Now, are you hungry?"

"A little bit."

"Think you could stand to chew some deer jerky or would you like me to make a soup with it?"

"Mm, chewing please. Maybe soup tomorrow. And Fish, help yourself to anything in my pack, there's plenty of everything. Got enough for two people." Deliberately enough for two people, Gibbs thought to himself.

"Thanks, I will. Felt kind of weird to go scrounging through while you were asleep."

"Nah, don't worry about it, rather have you warm and comfortable. I'm comfortable on this platform thing. I don't remember if the inflatable mattress is under me."

"I don't know what that is, so no, it isn't."

"If you bring the pack, I'll show you. It's very comfortable and you'll be warm with your furs or…is that the same fur you wear outside?"

Fish nodded and Leroy smiled, "Soon as we get my truck moved closer, there are extra sleeping bags in there and more winter jackets. More of everything."

"I'm okay without a sleeping bag. Boss usually sleeps with me, helps keep me warm."

"Then you'll be warm enough until we can get to the truck. Guess we'll figure it out as we go, huh?"

"Yeah. I'll get the pack."

Fish reappeared with the pack and Leroy's jerky. Carefully pulling the sled around so the injured man could sit leaning against the cave wall, he folded a blanket for him to lean on and then further padded his right side with two folded shirts on top of the blanket. Turning his attention to the pack, he found the self-inflating mattress. When it inflated he smiled, "Wow, that's great!"
"Put a blanket under it and one on the top, with your fur over you, you'll be toasty warm."

"Is it all right if Boss sleeps on it with me?"

"Sure. It's plenty sturdy."

"Thanks! I'll get your meds now. You need to pee?"

"Probably another couple of hours."

"Ok, if I'm asleep, wake me. We'll do the jar thing again."

"Ok."

"Uh, Leroy, what's bleach?"

The older man told him and Fish nodded, "Makes sense. When I started to wash the jar, I wished I had some bleach but I didn't know what that was."

"Some information is trying to get through."

"Yeah."

"I have bleach wipes we can use to clean the jar. Uh, when I can get up and down on my own, what do you usually do about restroom facilities? Go outside?"

"No. There's a hole in the cave floor in the corner of the entrance cave, in the back. Don't know where it goes but I use that as a privy. I'll show you when you're up and around. Boss usually goes outside before we go to bed but if he needs to do anything during the night, he goes off to the side of the privy and I clean it up."

"He's okay with the snow?"

"Now he is. I guess he didn't remember snow from last winter when he was a puppy. " Fish laughed, "Wish I had a recording of his first look here! I had the deerskins closed over the entrance because it was cold but he kept poking his nose out and looking, then running to the warm room. When it stopped snowing, I took him outside, almost had to carry him. Once he put a paw into it and felt the ground, he was all right. Although he did some whining about having to squat in it to poop."

Leroy smiled "When I was a kid, my mom had a cat named Harry, who was mostly an outdoor cat. I remember one winter when we'd just had a big storm and the snow was about 5 ft. deep where it hadn't been shoveled. Harry was inside during the storm and afterward was insistent on going out. I let him out the kitchen door, he ran and jumped, landing in snow up to his belly. He gave a pitiful meow and turned to look at me. Of course, I was laughing and then I got a glare and a hiss. I didn't have my snow boots on, so I went to get them and when I came back, he was sitting on a garbage can lid my dad pushed out to him with a broom handle. He spent the rest of the day inside, hissing at us."

Fish chuckled, "An embarrassed cat, that's great! You should get some more sleep now. I think we'll have plenty of time for more stories."

After helping him take the pain reliever, Fish helped him lie down again and zipped up the sleeping bag, this time leaving his left arm out. A blanket went over him. After leaving a thermos of water and the semi-clean jar where Leroy could reach them, the younger man turned to his new
Wanting to be close enough to hear the other man, he put one of the tarps down with the Anderson's spare blanket on top of it, adding the mattress as the third layer. He topped the mattress with another blanket and his fur and then climbed on, gesturing to Boss who joined him, both snuggling under the fur.

As predicted, Leroy woke a couple of hours later, needing help with the jar. He carefully sat up, glad he could do that on his own but trying to relieve himself into an unsteady jar with an unsteady hand was not happening. He sighed and heard a chuckle from the mound of fur across from him.

"Be right there."

Fish squatted next to him, holding the jar, once again closing his eyes. His patient laughed, "You don't need to do that for my sake."

"Ok. I'm just gonna go dump this and see to the fires."

"You have more than one going?"

"Yeah, since the snow started I always have one in the entrance room, even with the deerskins it gets pretty cold in there. I built a campfire circle, 3 layers of rocks, so I can build a decent fire, keep it going all night. I don't often have one in here but you need the extra warmth so your fire bowl is in here and my fire circle is out there."

"You're not burning all your wood?"

"No, using a mix of yours and mine. I have a huge pile of fallen wood in here that Boss and I gathered, used the travois to get it to the cave. When it's dry enough for me to break it, I burn it. Boss and I gather smaller stuff for kindling and the smoker every time we go out."

"I gotta see the smoker."

"I'll still be there when you're up and around. I've only been able to use it once, need the snow and ice for refrigeration. For now, rest up, get some more sleep."

With a pat on Leroy's good shoulder, Fish rose, taking the jar to the other room. Gibbs half-expected to hear a toilet flush and rolled his eyes. He heard the hiss of the fire as more wood was added and then Fish re-entered the warm room, doing the same with the fire bowl. He had a little bottle of sanitizer and used it before he lay down again. He'd been saving it but until the danger of infection passed for Leroy, he'd use it often.

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Leroy woke the next morning to the smell of potatoes cooking and some sort of herbal smell, he bet it was a tea. Then he heard the splash of eggs being poured into a pan, yum, potatoes and eggs again!

Taking stock, he found his right side stiff and painful but the pain was throbbing, no longer stabbing. That was an improvement. Carefully guarding his right side, he maneuvered his body into a sitting position and then found he had to lean to the left as he couldn't get the blanket/pad placed behind his right shoulder. He'd get it in place, put his left arm down and it would fall. And he was nowhere near ready to tolerate any pressure on his wounds.

Fish came in with a cup of herbal tea, carefully putting the mug down away from Leroy's bed, pulled the folded blanket up and held it in place until Leroy gingerly leaned against it. "That
enough padding? We can add more."
"Maybe one more."

The blanket from the top of the inflatable mattress was quickly folded and added to the cushion. "Ah…that's better."

"If I can figure out a way to keep these in place, I'll add your pillow."
"Rope?"
"Maybe, no place to tie it. I might try some of my sticky stuff."
"What's that?"
"My version of glue. Tell you about it later. Now, food before wound check or after?"
"Won't it get cold?"

"Nope, I'll cover it, keep it near the fire."
Leroy sniffed, "Smells so good, I vote for now."

When Fish's stomach audibly growled, they both chuckled. Leroy said, "Don't need to plan your meals around me, kiddo!"

He got a head tilt for that along with an answer, "Nice to have someone to eat with."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Breakfast was delivered in one of Fish's clay bowls with a carved wooden utensil that looked like a cross between a fork and a spoon. The potatoes were cut into bite-sized wedges and nicely browned. The eggs had chopped green onions and more green stuff that Fish said was wild spinach.

"The eggs and spinach both have iron. Onions hide the bitterness of the spinach and there's a pinch of your salt and pepper too. The tea is spruce with a little sugar. Don't think it has iron but it does have vitamin C and other good stuff."

"Smells great!"
Fish nodded, "Eat up!" He drank from his own mug of spruce tea before digging into the hearty breakfast.

When they'd both finished, Fish licked his fork, "There are blueberries and blackberries for snacks later. They're also full of good stuff."

Leroy chuckled at him licking his fork, "Sounds good to me."

"Time for Tylenol and your vitamin. Followed by wound check and steri strips. I practiced making butterfly bandages before you woke up this morning, seems like that's the way to go."

His patient just nodded, quietly swallowing the Tylenol and vitamin, urging Fish to also take a vitamin. He remained sitting up as Fish gathered everything he'd need, including the scissors he'd found in the med kit. Leroy looked at them and grinned, "When I can use my right arm, how about I help you trim your beard and hair?"
Fish was startled but nodded, "Didn't realize they were that bad. Haven't seen a mirror since I left the boat."

"There are three on the truck and I think I left my shaving mirror in the glove box."

"How long since you shaved?"

"The day I got to Wyoming, close to 2 months. Why, is it scraggly?"

Fish nodded, "Guess we both look like mountain men. Ok, let's get going. The fire is blazing to keep you warm as I want your shirts completely off. And I need to check your right hip."

"Why?"

"Because I found a smashed satellite phone in your pants pocket and I'm pretty sure that happened when the bear knocked you down. You must have hit a rock under the snow. With 5 feet of snow, that tells me how hard that bear smacked you! I expect to find a bruise, should have checked there yesterday."

"You were busy saving my life."

Fish gave him a head tilt and Gibbs relaxed, yep, Tim was in there somewhere. His gestures, his sense of humor, his sense of responsibility, they were all present and accounted for. He was disturbed about the sat phone but Duck and the others knew Tim was alive and they had maps, knew where he was headed.

The next hour wasn't a lot of fun but both patient and caregiver survived. Fish was pleased there was no sign of infection, although he cleaned the wounds once again. He found the expected bruise on Leroy's hip and applied a bag of icy snow to it for periods of 20 minutes while he handled the more serious wounds.

The most traumatic part was keeping Leroy's lacerated skin together while Fish applied more antibiotic ointment, then steri strips to the small wounds and butterfly bandages to the bigger ones. When he finished, he removed the blankets and sleeping bag from under Leroy, leaving the tarp and pushing a towel under him. He delivered a bucket of warm water and a wash cloth, then hung out at the fire, his back turned, ready to help if needed.

Leroy had to admit, the ice on his hip, the new bandages and the camp bath made him feel better. The Tylenol had already kicked in so by the time he finished bathing and had another 20 minutes of ice, he didn't protest as Fish redid his bed and zipped up the sleeping bag. He was out.

Fish sighed in relief as he heated more snow for his own bath, glad there was no infection, although he knew they weren't yet out of danger, and that he'd managed to close the wounds without having to use needle and thread. His patient had done well but then Fish already expected that from the man. He liked Leroy and hoped they'd become good friends.

He smiled, thinking how nice it was to have a whole bucket of water to wash with. He'd been using his largest bowl, which worked but this was even better. And he didn't have to worry about soap anymore, Leroy said he had plenty. Sure, they'd still be conservative in their use but it was good to know. He thought he could make some from spruce leaves but hadn't yet figured it out. Soap was just one of the things that had re-entered Fish's life yesterday. Although he wished they hadn't appeared because of a bear attack, he was still happy to have them.

The snow was coming down heavily this morning so after washing the dishes and himself, he sat on his new bed, reading one of Jethro's books, a crime procedural by an author who seemed
familiar but the details just weren't coming to mind. He laughed at some of the interactions of the characters, was surprised by others and frowned as a chapter ended on a cliffhanger.

The book inspired him and he put it down for a few minutes while he continued the writing he'd begun the night before.

Boss wandered in and out of the cave. He would come in, cold and shivering, warm up by the fire and then decide to go out again. Fish was fine as long as the dog returned and didn't bring any new 'friends' with him. Better that he explore rather than become bored and create havoc inside the cave. Despite his intelligence, he was still very young.
Chapter 12

By late morning, Leroy was beginning to stir again; Fish made more spruce tea and put berries in a bowl.

After their snack, the two men decided to inventory their supplies. Boss was trained to stay away from Fish's food but he needed a few reminders that day. When he finally left the cave again, the men stopped counting undershirts and took stock of the packets of food and dry rations Leroy had with him. Then Fish listed what he had, "About a quarter of a deer I smoked a few days ago, the deer I killed yesterday, which needs to be dressed, and enough deer and bear jerky to last a few weeks."

"Bear jerky?"

Fish told him about killing the old bear he and Boss found in the cave. "That's where I got the first of my furs too. The other one was the one we hauled home on the travois."

"So, bear and deer."

"And rabbit, Boss brought me 1 and I shot 2 with my bow and arrow. He's also caught 2 chickens and I killed a turkey."

"Wow, you've done well."

"Found potatoes, but they're done for the season, under the snow. I was harvesting wild sweet potatoes, pumpkins, onions and beans, brought in as many as I could but they're buried now too. Won't have any more vegetables until Spring."

Leroy grinned at him, "Oh yes we will. I've got potatoes, sweet potatoes and those packets, not to mention there are more fresh veggies in the bear bags. They might be a little old by the time we get to them but we can make soup and stew, right?"

Fish grinned back at him, "Oh yeah."

"How'd you know how to build the smoker?"

"Read about it in the Survival book and then built one. I don't know if it looks like other smokers, but it cooked the meat just fine and neither of us got sick. But then I stopped because I didn't realize smoked meat still needs to be kept cool."

When Leroy hooked an eyebrow, Fish continued, "I figured I was probably going to use the smoker as much as the fire circle so I made it fairly large. I built up 6 layers of rock in a...well, it's a narrow, slightly rounded rectangular shape. I looked for rocks for the top and front, but couldn't find any I could carry up here. Then when I was making more bowls, I realized I could make my own top and front for the smoker with clay and fill in the spaces between the rocks, like mortar. I did that first and then found two rocks to use as templates for the rest of it. I spread animal fat on the rocks so I'd be able to remove the clay form after, mixed up the clay a little denser than the bowls and cups and then let them dry in the sun before I fired them. And it works!"
"I'm impressed! You need to write a book about your adventures here."

Fish huffed, "I'm sure there are dozens already written."

"Not with what happened to you and how you've survived here in your cave. Using a bow, arrows, pepper spray and a knife."

"Don't forget Boss, he's a retriever!"

"True but that doesn't diminish your own hard work and imagination. Besides, you trained him!"

"Thanks. What else do you have in those bags?"

Leroy laughed, shrugging with his good shoulder. "Not sure I even know. Probably more than I think I have. How much of the valley here have you explored?"

"Pretty much all of it. Once I had enough deerskin to make a pack and a water bag, had the sled and the fur to roll up in for sleeping, we spent 2-3 days at a time, hunting and exploring. We made a circle, starting north and working our way west, then south, east and north again. I've got notes if you're interested." He looked at Leroy quizzically, "You drove over from the valley north of us, right?"

"Yep, in the snow. And that was a hellish few hours, driving up what felt like a sheer rock face, it wasn't but it sure felt like it, and then zigzagging down in the snow."

"Which snow?"

"Uh, I think that was the fourth storm to roll through. The meadow I was in for the first snow only got about 2 feet. The second one was worse and I drove down into this valley during the fourth."

"How would you assess the conditions of driving back up, heading north, now?"

"Not for the faint of heart. I need to be healed and back in good shape because it's going to take a lot of careful observation, twisting and turning, shared between us. And we'll have to be prepared to live in the truck. I've been sleeping in the cab but there's no backseat, no room for both of us and the dog to stretch out."

"No shell on the back?"

"The truck bed has a hard-shell top and there's a storage well underneath there. It's big but if there was too much snow on top of the hard-shell, we could be stuck and I don't know about ventilation." Leroy thought for a minute. "The truck bed is rectangular, so are the tarps. I suppose we could find logs or tree limbs that we could make into a vertical frame around the bed, maybe even add horizontal pieces at the top and midway. Fasten the tarps to them to make a cover around and over? The sides of the bed are high enough that we'd have some protection from the wind. We could find a rock flat enough to put under the fire bowl so we could have fires back there. We could also put the tent up under the tarps, that would give us more insulation. I have a heater that we can use to heat the tent but it's not safe to leave on overnight."

Fish thought about it, finally nodding, "Sounds like a plan. I'd rather try to figure a way to get out while there is still snow on the ground than wait until Spring. With this much snow so early, I imagine these valleys will be mostly mud."

"And water and yeah, you don't want to go through another flood, neither do I! All right, let's work toward that and finesse our plans along the way." He paused, "This is gonna sound kind of wimpy,
but would you wait to go to the truck until I can go with you? I don't like the thought of being here alone and Boss and my rifle should go with you."

Fish smiled, "Not wimpy, sensible and I'd feel better too. We can take the sled and the pack and then put everything in your truck for the trip back."

"What about food up here? I've been hanging the bear bags every night."

"Hasn't been a problem so far. I was surprised to see your bear yesterday, thought they'd be hibernating by now."

"Take the weapons, do a little hunting?"

"Yes, bow and arrows are quieter, there's little sound to spook the animals and arrows are pretty easy to make." He looked at Leroy, "It'll be at least a month, more likely 2 before you'll have full strength back in that arm and shoulder. At least enough to notch an arrow."

"I can shoot my weapons with either hand. I was a Marine sniper and found that was a handy skill. Whenever I requalify for weapons, I double up the tests, both hands."

Fish nodded, "That's good to know!"

"That's firearms, though, don't know about bow and arrow."

The other man shook his head, "That requires muscles of the shoulders and upper back: rhomboids, levator scapulae, trapezius, deltoids, latissimus dorsi, and the rotator cuff muscle group."

"Yeah. Well, my firearms will work for now. You know, I thought I pulled the trigger on the bear yesterday."

"You did, I heard and saw it. I was watching his claws and you; didn't see where the bullet hit him. We may find a frozen bear carcass."

"Huh. More meat and fur. Did you use the binoculars to see?"

"I didn't. They look expensive, thought I'd wait until you could use them too. Do you like to play cards? Oh shoot, can't do that with one hand."

Leroy had to bite back a grin, the binoculars were Tim's. They'd found his pack near the abandoned dirt bike and Ducky insisted Tim would want someone to put the binoculars to good use. "Not today, anyway. Any idea how long it will be until I can use both hands – at least to eat and play cards?"

Fish thought about that, finally saying, "When the skin is starting to heal, new skin growing, we'll have to figure out some low impact exercises for you to do to avoid scar tissue as much as possible and regain full function. Your hand isn't injured and your forearm isn't too bad, more scrapes, you were in the snow by the time he got down that far. Your shoulder, your chest below it, over the collarbone, your upper arm down to about your elbow are the worst. It's already started healing, but I'd say maybe two more days before we see what some light movement does." He shook his head, "Both hands in 3-4 days? Let's say 5 days to be safe, although it won't be for much."

"You like to play rummy?"

"And gin rummy, oh yeah."
"Ok, you're on! How many decks do you have?"

Fish looked surprised, "One. How about you?"

"Two. I know a few double-deck and one triple-deck games."

"Cool! What book have you been reading? I thought maybe I could read what you've already read, catch up to you and then read it aloud for both of us."

"Great idea. It's called "Rock Hollow" and I've been rereading it. I know the author pretty well."

"Wow, I'm impressed. I started that yesterday. Saw the bookmark, left it there, wasn't sure if it was just randomly placed, you know if you hadn't started it yet or if you'd really left off there."

"That's where I left off."

"Ok, next time you're asleep, I'll try to catch up to where you left off. It's a great book, funny, scary and interesting. I stopped reading at the end of a chapter with a cliffhanger. The characters are great, I can envision them as real people."

Leroy grinned, "Me too! I have more of Gemcity's books with me. I have all of them in hardback at home but brought paperback versions with me."

"Are they autographed – the hardbacks?"

"Yep, every single one. The same author has several other books under a different pen name and I have some of those in paperback with me, too. The author's name is Zubin Cai."

Fish smiled, "Saw one of those, couldn't decide which one to read first."

"It keeps snowing the way it has been, you'll have plenty of time to read them all while we wait. You ever swim in the lake?"

"Yes, swam in it until that first snow. As the weather got cooler, I started building a fire before I went in, was great to dry off by when I got out. Fished in there too. It's spring fed, guessing there's always water."

"Animals didn't bother you?"

"I watched for a few days before our first swim. The animals tend to show up first thing in the morning or in the late afternoon. Boss and I swam midday. We occasionally had company but we weren't bothered. When I was observing the animals at the lake, I noticed it seemed to be neutral territory. Or maybe they'd all eaten before they went for a drink or swim. I was nervous the first few times but after that we ignored each other. Of course, having Boss with me probably helped immensely."

"If I hadn't been attacked by a bear, I'd think this was Shangri-La."

Fish huffed, "I never said there was no violence. I've witnessed bears, coyotes, mountain lions and wolves stalking, attacking, killing and eating their prey. I hope yesterday is the worst thing that happens."

Leroy raised his eyebrows, "Copy that."

When his stomach growled, Fish smiled, "A sure sign of recovery. Jerky and onion soup?"
"Sounds good."

"All right, let me get that going and then I'll bring a bag of snow for your hip."

"Yeah ok, that felt good before."

Fish made the soup and while it was heating to a boil, he went outside to scoop clean snow into the plastic bag they'd used yesterday. After helping Leroy apply it to the bruise on his hip, he returned to the fire circle and soup.

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Their happiness with Gibbs' news that Tim was alive kept the NCIS group going for several days before someone noticed they hadn't heard any more from Gibbs. They'd received the additional photos, of the first snow, the bear bags in the trees with the giant paw prints and the late night photo of the snow covered meadow with the moon shining brightly over it. All Gibbs' photos were printed and put up in the break room to share with everyone.

When Abby heard the news, she too rejoiced, poring over the photos and adding them to the case file, the case that led to the disappearance of Timothy McGee. It hadn't yet gone to trial; the prosecutors were waiting to find out if they would add another murder charge for Tim's death. In the meantime, the criminals were locked up, having been declared flight risks and denied bail. Vance and the NCIS legal department had decided to withhold Gibbs' news until he presented a living, breathing McGee. They also wanted to add Tim's testimony.

Each member of the group watched the weather in southeastern Wyoming and when they saw the snowy forecasts, relaxed. Obviously, Gibbs was working his way through the snow, didn't want to waste time (and money) with calls and/or was too exhausted, both theories were discussed, or had decided to hold off on any more calls until he had Tim with him. That was the most popular theory.

Ducky spoke with Tim's family who were ecstatic at the news that Gibbs had proof he was alive. Penny and Sarah agreed they could wait; they could be patient now that they knew Tim would be coming home to them.

When Penny told Ducky she'd tell the rest of the family, he didn't know what to say. She chuckled, "Yes, there are more than 2 of us. Although, not on the McGee side. Tim's maternal grandmother lives with her son and his wife, Tim's uncle and aunt and their two children. His godparents are also family."

"And Linda?"

"She's Sarah's mother, my former daughter-in-law and technically Tim's former stepmother but they've never been close. Maisie and Drew, Tim's maternal grandparents the Hubbards, raised him after his mother died; he never lived with John and Linda. John visited him whenever he could but I'm afraid his visits were more about trying to force Timothy into being a good little sailor than getting to know his son. Whenever he'd seen or talked with Tim, he'd be on the warpath, threatening to remove Tim from the Hubbards' home. He thought they were far too soft with him. My son's first wife, Lily, was Tim's mother and the love of John's life. His heart never recovered from her death followed by the death of their younger son, Patrick. Pat was born a few months before Lily died, a year or so younger than Tim and the two babies were best friends, oh Ducky, they were the sweetest little boys. Patrick had a heart problem that could be managed now but in 1979 when he was born, it was a death sentence.

"John married Linda on his father's advice. The Brass was starting to wonder if he was ever going
to bring Tim home, remarry and have other children. He and Linda liked each other well enough at the time and she wanted children, so they married. Tim was 7 by then and he didn't want to leave his grandparents, he was already scared and starting to be defiant of his father. He never lived with Linda and John for any length of time.

"It wasn't until John started the climb from Commander to Captain that he forced Tim to stay with them, until he made rank. I think Tim flew home, to the Hubbards, the day after John received the promotion. John did it again when he was making his bid for Admiral. Linda and the poor kids had to be paraded around. John and Linda had already separated but she agreed to play the dutiful Navy wife until he made rank – and she did. She moved out a week after his ceremony. Tim didn't wait that long to leave."

"I had no idea that Sarah and Timothy weren't raised together and all that happened. And Timothy has never mentioned a younger brother."

"No, he wouldn't, you know how private he is. Although he was only 5 when Patrick died, he still misses him and has a few memories of his brother. I have many photos of the two of them."

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The prediction of 5 days for Leroy to have the use of both hands was close. On the 3rd day, Fish sat behind Leroy on the sled and moved the man's right arm an infinitesimal amount. When asked, Leroy said it hurt a little but there wasn't any bleeding nor did the healing wounds seem stretched or torn again. That was good news!

For the next few days, the two men worked on strengthening Leroy's right hand and forearm and gradually building up movement of his lacerated arm and shoulder. When Leroy wasn't ready to try moving his arm himself, Fish moved it for him. By the fifth day, Leroy could do an exercise Fish had been doing for him, bending his arm so that his hand was at his shoulder and then gradually moving so that his elbow pointed out and gently raising his arm from the shoulder. And he could use both hands if the movement could be done without moving his elbow more than an inch or so. Progress!

There'd been no infection, although Fish was still applying antibiotic ointment. The gauze and bandages were changed, the wounds cleaned, every day for the first 10 days. After that, a clean thermal shirt, changed daily, took the place of the gauze and only the larger wounds continued to be bandaged.

Leroy was now up and about, had seen the entire cave and once he could move his forearm without pain, could take care of himself. And he could play cards, managing a few rounds of rummy or gin rummy, their favorite games, a day.

In between snowstorms, the trio, Fish, Boss and Leroy, walked down the path to the plateau. They didn't go far but all three of them needed fresh air, exercise and what sunshine there was. When it was too snowy, they walked in place and did any other exercises they could think of.

Five weeks after the bear attack, Fish finally agreed that Leroy's right side was healed well enough for the hike to the truck. Leroy would be armed with the rifle and handgun while Fish would carry his bow and arrows. Boss would pull the travois with Leroy's pack and a few other things.

They left shortly after first light, glad to have a sunny albeit frigid morning. Fish wore his skis, using the trek poles while Leroy, wondering why he hadn't brought the other snowshoes and poles when he left the truck, wore the snowshoes, using Fish's tree limb poles. Together, they'd refined Fish's skis by cutting horizontal slots underneath each one where the rope fastening each foot to the
ski crossed under, making for a smoother and more stable stride. Although they should reach the truck in late morning, they were prepared to spend the night in the open if they had to. In that case, they'd sleep in shifts and keep the fire going all night.

They reached the truck in early afternoon. The hike took more out of Leroy than either man anticipated and they stopped a few times to allow him to rest. Fish offered the travois and Boss's services but Leroy declined. They persevered and Leroy sighed in relief when he spotted the truck-size snow 'hill' through the binoculars. "There it is! We'll have to dig it out of the snow."

Fish looked before giving the other man a head tilt, "Might not be as bad as it looks."

"Good thought, hold onto it."

While Gibbs still hadn't told the other man his name or history, the two had become good friends. Leroy felt he was getting to know the younger man in ways that otherwise might never be possible.

With help from Boss, it took them about an hour to clear the doors so they could open the cab. Digging out the wheels and undercarriage took another 90 minutes and was accomplished by Boss and Fish with the folding shovel. Not wanting to endanger Leroy's recovery, Fish ordered him to rest in the cab. He didn't complain when Leroy handed him a cup of hot tea and a protein bar along with a big piece of jerky for Boss.

By that time, they'd decided to stay the night. If they could get the truck bed clear, they'd put the tent up and stay there. If not, they'd hole up in the cab. They'd be crowded, the men would have to sleep sitting up, but they'd be warm.

That was apparently enough of an incentive as, with Boss's help, the truck bed was clear in no time. When Leroy finally saw the tarp that covered the wood, he cheered.

"Yay! Let's get that rock off the travois and get the fire going, dry this off some. Then we can put the tent up."

"With tarps underneath!"

"I'm thinking underneath and a big one over us, see if we can fasten it to the back of the cab and then bring it over to the tailgate, raise it some at that end. My friend Chuck told me to do that if I needed a fire in rain or snow."

"Great. Ok, fire first, then tarp?"

"Yeah, while the fire's drying things out, we can decide if we want anything from the bear bags for dinner." He looked at Fish, "Or do you want to wait until we get it back to the cave?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking get it down once."

"Ok, jerky soup it is!"

Both men grinned, enthusiastic about the green onions that flavored the soup.

Two hours later, the sun had set and dusk was quickly turning to full dark. The truck bed was as dry as it would be that day. Dousing the fire with snow, they'd use the coffee can stove for the soup and the heater for the tent, they moved the fire bowl off the bed of the truck. First lighting the lantern, their flashlights in hand, they raised the tent. The side walls were tied to the cleats on the outside of the truck bed and the top jury-rigged with Fish's tree limb ski poles and tied at either end of the truck. It wasn't pretty but it meant the three of them would be able to sleep comfortably.
Once the tent was secure, they took another of the large tarps and stretched it over the tent and the entire truck bed. Bungee cords attached the grommets to attachments on the roof of the cab where a camper might go while Fish attached the two end grommets to cleats on either side of the handle and lock of the hard-shell at the back of the truck. When they were finished, they had a decent shelter for that night. Not what they’d eventually have but they’d finesse the arrangement later.

Fish chuckled when Leroy dragged the travois inside the tent with him. "You sure you don't want your mattress back?"

"Nah. This is better for my back."

"Ok."

While Leroy got his bed set up, Fish found Leroy's log chair, set it up several feet from the truck and put the little stove on it. They'd agreed no food smells should emanate from the truck tonight. After he had the soup on the flame, Leroy traded with him and he set up his and Boss's bed.

Because they had the travois with them, they'd brought a chair Fish had crafted over the summer, using tree limbs as the frame, another piece, lashed between the frame as the cross piece with more tree limbs lashed to the cross piece and frame to make the seat. Other pieces of wood were lashed higher up between the pieces of the frame for the seat back. Fish used braided vines since he'd had very little rope. Jim Anderson had made several and taught Fish to make them, including how to lash, the ancient art of attaching two or more things together by tying knots and roping the lashing medium, e.g., rope or strong vines, around the objects.

Once the soup was ready, the gel fuel was extinguished and both it and the stove were moved off Leroy's log chair onto the snow. That way they both had chairs while they ate. Boss joined them, eating more of his favorite jerky.

The clay bowls were washed, stashed in a bag and hauled up into the trees along with the stove, the can of fuel, all the food and any scented items they had with them. Taking the chairs and the lantern into the tent, they played cards for a couple of hours, read their books and were sound asleep before moonrise.

The next morning was overcast but dry. Boss slipped out of the truck to tend to his business while his human companions stashed their bedding and took down their tarp room. Deciding to do a little hunting before they drove east to the cave, they had a cold breakfast, promising themselves tea and coffee later. When Boss returned, they strapped on snowshoes, Leroy's rifle hanging from his left shoulder while Fish carried his bow with several arrows sticking out of his deerskin rucksack. The sled and a few large bags went with them, to hold their kill. Fish pulled the sled with the rope harness around his waist.

Nearing the stand of trees behind the lake, they heard the gobble of a turkey and Fish stepped out of the sled harness, notching an arrow. He took the bird down with one shot and Boss raced to retrieve it. Quickly bringing it to them, he raced away again. Leroy raised an eyebrow at Fish.

"What's that about?"

"He's spotted chickens or rabbits."

Boss quickly returned, dumping a rabbit on the sled and taking off again. Leroy and Fish maneuvered both carcasses into a bag. The next time Boss returned, he was carrying the bodies of two chickens and they tucked them in with the rest. The two men agreed that was plenty and Boss was given a command to stand down.
Boss hauled the sled back to the truck where it and the bag were put in the truck bed. As they turned from that task, Boss growled with a low bark, Leroy thought it sounded like a warning. Fish grabbed the binoculars and shook his head at what he saw. "Leroy, you and Boss get in the cab, keep the windows closed, leave the rifle and ammo with me but keep your handgun ready. We've got company, a wolf pack. I'll stay back here. You drive us to the trees, I'll pull the food down, you cover me while I get in the cab and then we get the heck out of here. I don't know how far they'll follow us, better keep the pack and my bag in the cab. Don't let Boss out for any reason."

Leroy wanted to argue but there wasn't time. He turned the ignition on and when everything was in the cab, including Boss, he drove through the snow toward the trees.

Fish's height and standing in the truck bed helped. If he'd been on the ground… he shook his head at the thought. They had only one or two minutes, tops as the wolves were nearly on them. That timeframe shortened when Fish remembered wolves' ability to climb.

Pulling all the bags down was quick, the cooler was a little trickier but he had it in his hands, dropped it onto the hard shell, yelled "GO!" and felt the truck move. There was no time to get in the cab, the wolves were less than 10 feet away.

As Leroy drove, the wolves followed, moving up so that they were only a few seconds behind. Fish watched them carefully. Before he killed any of them, he wanted to try other measures. Reaching for the bag with the dead animals, he grabbed the rabbit and threw it into the midst of the wolves. That stopped some of them but those in the front of the pack kept coming. Next came one of the chickens and he threw that at the leader. Ignoring it, the animal kept coming.

Now that he knew who the leader was, he sighted him with the rifle, firing into the air over the alpha. He hoped to scare them off, if not, the next shot would be to kill.

The noise surprised them but the leader and those around him didn't stop. Fish sighted again, this time for the head of the alpha. With deadly precision, he fired and the wolf fell mid-step, taking the wolf nearest him down with him as he fell.

That was finally enough, the pack scattered. Fish watched through the binoculars as they regrouped under the trees.

Leroy drove another 5 miles before Fish let him know the coast was clear. They quickly secured the bags and cooler in the back, covering it all with a tarp, not that that would reduce the smell of food for other animals, including Boss.

Three minutes later they were on their way again, Fish silent as they drove.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I hate killing. Although that was a matter of survival."

"Yep. You did good, in my book. You only killed one of them, I was afraid we'd have to kill several. It's a good thing you hate killing, I'd worry if you didn't. That second shot you took was amazing – a kill shot from a moving vehicle hitting a moving target dead on."

Fish nodded, "Apparently I can shoot a rifle."

"More than that, you're a sharpshooter! Not just with the rifle, I saw that arrow shot with the bow into the turkey."

The younger man frowned, "You think I'm military or was military?"
"Law enforcement."

Fish gave him a look but didn't pursue the topic. Gibbs kept driving, feeling an urgency to tell him his history.

Another 2 hours found them approaching the granite cliffs and Fish directed Leroy northeast. "I'd like to have the truck situated at the bottom of the path and turned around to face the valley. The trail head to the caves is hidden behind the rock face from the rest of the plateau."

They used the travois, with Boss pulling, to move the food and the cooler to the cave. Next came the packs, the tarps and the bags of clothes for Fish.

When Leroy realized he had no idea how to explain the clothes that just happened to be the right size and length for the younger man 2 inches taller than he was, he shook his head.

"Fish, I'll make some tea and then let's talk."

"Ok but we need to clean the turkey and chicken."

"All right, we'll do that first."

According to the survival book, the turkey had to first lose its head. Leroy did that, taking it outside, down the path and away from the caves. First digging a hole in the snow, he grabbed a piece of wood to put under the carcass and then used his hatchet, filling the hole with snow afterward. That wouldn't fool any hungry animal for long but it might be confusing enough to keep that animal away from the cave.

While he was gone, Fish had a hot fire going, with both buckets on the grill, boiling water. Their next step was to scald the carcass.

Having decided to do the turkey and chicken at the same time, the process took the rest of the day and into the evening. By the time they turned in, both birds were in the cooler, ready for roasting.

Both men worried about bears or wolves finding their way into the cave and hung tarps over the entrance, draping them over Fish's tree limb ski poles, which were proving to be very handy. They backed the tarps and poles up with the largest pieces of rock and wood they could find, placed in a large 'X' across the cave entrance and hoped it would snow heavily that night. When Fish wished they had a door, Leroy grinned at him, pointing to the various tools they'd brought up from the truck, the chair Fish had lashed together and his bowl of homemade glue. They had the tools and Fish had built with far less.

Before they went to sleep, they had a plan. They'd measure the opening, then cut tree limbs or with any luck, fallen trees or logs, into planks if possible, drill a hole on each side of the plank, use Fish's glue to hold the boards together and then lash them together on the back or interior side of the door, using a combination of rope and vines, fashion some sort of handle for the inside and…

Leroy shook his head, "Door needs to open and close. We need a door frame on the rock."

"Ok, we can do that. You have any bolts that can go into rock?"

Leroy laughed and then stopped. "Yeah, I have bolts for climbing, I bought a kit rather than separate pieces. And I've got the right drill bits for rock, so we can fasten the frame to the rock and then fit the door in."

"What about hinges?"
"We'll make lash hinges. Too bad we don't have a big mirror. We could glue it on the outside and scare the animals away."

"They'd probably attack it."

"Good point."

Fish yawned while he was trying to say that they needed a handle or opening device on the outside and Leroy shook his head. "We need sleep; we can figure it out tomorrow."

Although Leroy's still healing arm and shoulder were sore the day after their close encounter with the wolf pack, over the next few days they were busy with their door. And roasting the turkey and chicken while also making turkey jerky. Leroy was amused that food tasted better when roasted or cooked on an open flame in a cave, as opposed to an open flame in his fireplace at home. They'd eaten more than half of the third left of the deer Fish killed the morning of the bear attack, freezing the rest. Fish showed Leroy how he prepared the deerskin for other uses, impressing his friend.

For their first turkey meal, they roasted a mix of potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, onions, snap peas and green beans with a little bit of olive oil and a fair amount of garlic, salt and pepper. Fish grinned when he spotted the large roll of aluminum foil. "Great, now I don't have to worry about my little pieces of foil!"

One of the finds in the bear bags was a jar of blackstrap molasses, with a note from Chuck that it had great health benefits. When Fish saw that it had lots of iron, he insisted Leroy have a spoonful daily. Leroy said that he would if Fish would. They shook on that, laughing at each other. They tried different things with the molasses, Leroy settling on taking it straight while Fish put it in his spruce tea.

Finding the wood for the door and its frame wasn't difficult, there were plenty of trees and fallen wood on the back side of the mountain. The wood for the frame came from one log. They used the saw blades to slice the log into narrow rough planks and then inflated the canoe, joking about filling it with warm water for a bath. Instead, they filled it with melted snow water and set the frame pieces in to loosen the bark and make the wood pliable.

Once the boards were ready, they put them in place, joining the corners with pegs, whittled by both men, and then using pre-drilled holes, attached the frame on three sides. Although attached in several places, the frame didn't conform exactly to the shape of the rock. They got as close as they could and then Fish filled the gaps with clay, mixed with rocks and twigs.

That made the door easier because it only had to match the frame, not the rock. Thick planks from another log were pegged and glued together, holes drilled in one plank for the material to pass through for the connecting vine and rope lashing. The end piece fit into the frame and they made hinges from a combination of rope, Fish's braided vines and a few bits of wire Leroy had in his toolbox. When the door was secure in the frame, the hinges done, they glued and pegged three additional crosspieces on the interior to strengthen the door. They liked that so much they did the same thing to the exterior. Now they had a heavy door they believed would withstand the force of hungry animals.

The interior had a sturdy latch, drilled to fit in the granite, that fit into a large bolt screwed into the door. Fish came up with a unique way to open the door from the outside. Finding a cracked spot in the granite just outside the door, they started there and painstakingly chiseled a tiny hole into the cave. That took them two days, eventually working from both sides, and they carefully saved the pieces they cut out. Then they attached and glued a rope to the latch and left the other end in the hollow left by the cut piece of granite. Again using Fish's clay and adding the bits of granite, they
made a piece that fit into the hollow on the exterior, glued a granite face onto the outside of the clay and glued the rope, already attached to the interior wooden latch, onto the backside of the granite and clay piece. When they wanted to enter, they would remove the 'plug' of granite and clay, which pulled the rope attached to the latch, causing it to lift out of the bolt and 'unlocking' the door. Then they could easily pull it open. They tested it several times without problems. No animal was going to figure that out!

Pleased with their work, they laughed at leaving it behind when they left, trying to think of ways they could use it in the truck. That reminded them that they hadn't yet found the posts they'd need for their tarp room in the back of the truck.

Chapter End Notes

Found the information about spruce tea, lashed together chairs (and just about any other object) on YouTube when I went looking for information about building shelters in the wild. While the shelter never made it into the story, the chairs, spruce tea and the information about leaving the end of a tarp or other sheltering material higher above a fire were bonuses!

Also, thanks for all your good thoughts and prayers. I'm home and what we all hope was our last fire warning in this county expired Sunday morning. Our heroic firefighters have made great progress toward containment of most of the fires. And blessedly, we have rain forecast later this week. I hope rain shows up every week as California's fire season runs through the end of October and sometimes into November. And I really hope that all of us, wherever we are, can have a good long while without more natural disasters or people-made ones. Stay safe, be healthy. Hugs.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Reaching out to those in Portugal and Spain affected by the horrible fires and to those in Ireland and the UK affected by Hurricane Ophelia. Best thoughts to all of you.

Chapter 13

With the work on the door, meat smoking and jerky making, the days passed quickly. After discussing their options, they decided to leave the valley when there'd been at least three days without snow, with rising temperatures. They'd drive the 200 miles back to West Boston, where Leroy started from in August and their base back in April when they'd been chasing bad guys, to return Chuck Payton's belongings and contact Leroy's friends on the east coast. The decision made, they hunkered down to wait through the frequent storms.

In between snowflakes, they found posts for their truck-tarp room and using the same ingenuity they'd used on the door, put everything securely in place. And they trimmed their hair and beards. Fish requested that neither his hair nor beard be cut short as they helped him stay warm.

One day when it was Leroy's turn to make dinner, he placed their bowls on their new table and motioned to Fish and Boss. "C'mon, the food will get cold!"

He smiled a bit nervously as Fish sat in his chair, looking curiously at their meal. Today was November 15th, Tim McGee's birthday and Leroy had decided it was time to tell Fish who he was. While gestures and words continued to slip through whatever block was caused by Fish's injuries, he hadn't recovered any personal memories. He continued to dream of the blonde with the soft brown eyes but had no idea who she was.

There was a dessert on the table that Leroy made, following a recipe from his Gibbs grandmother. When Gibbs and Shannon married, his grandmother's recipes were given to his bride and having heard more than once how much he loved the almond-orange cake, Shannon made it for him frequently. Between his grandmother and wife, he'd seen it made so often that he was sure he could make it from memory.

He had a large bag of shelled almonds he'd brought from home and they had a few oranges from Chuck that were still edible. They had what had surely been an entire box of sugar packets that someone, perhaps DiNozzo, stuffed in Ducky's tea pouch. While he was looking for those, he found a box of baking soda with a note from Jimmy that said, "Good for bee stings, brushing your teeth, upset stomach and many other things."

Among the surprises they'd found in Chuck's offerings was a bottle of maple syrup. Gibbs still wondered why that was there as there wasn't any pancake mix, but now it would come in handy. His recipe called for vanilla extract which he didn't have; he'd use the maple syrup instead and see how it tasted. Earlier in the week they'd found several hens roosting and helped themselves to more
than a dozen eggs, leaving plenty for the broody hens. They'd considered bringing one or two of the hens to the cave but ultimately decided against it.

He made the almond flour first, hoping it would store all right. He had to take things in steps, processing or cooking when Fish was out of the cave. Reducing the almonds to flour required a lot of chopping and then tying the pieces into a clean, lightweight shirt he wouldn't need until spring and crushing them with a rock, but eventually it was done. He spooned it into a sealable plastic bag and hid it in his rarely opened shaving kit.

Still working from memory, he cooked and processed the oranges the way he remembered his grandmother and Shannon doing. Eventually, he added his almond flour, Jimmy's baking soda, Chuck's maple syrup and Tony's sugar to the mix. With a smile, he realized the cake would be from all of them. He cut back on the sugar, not sure if the maple syrup and the amount of sugar called for would be too much. When he tasted the batter, it needed a little more and he put 2 more packets in, mixing it up and tasting it again. That was better.

The batter went into the Dutch Oven, which sat on the grill over the fire where he tried not to check it every minute. Eventually it was firm but not burned and smelled delicious, a success! Leaving the lid on the Dutch Oven, he set it on top of the fire circle where it would remain warm but away from the flame and prepared the rest of dinner. They'd have tender slices of beef, finally released from Chuck's cooler and thawed, along with sweet potatoes seasoned with garlic, onions and a little olive oil. He'd also sautéed a mix of vegetables with seasoning and a little more olive oil.

He'd wished for butter but there were no dairy or bison cows and the wild goats Fish mentioned being around during the summer had disappeared.

Watching as his kid sat at the table, Leroy thought that one of the silver linings in all this was that he'd been able to form a closer bond with Fish than he ever had with Tim. While he and Tim were close, their work relationship was always between them. No matter how close they were, Gibbs was always Tim's boss.

Leroy and Fish didn't have that problem, they were equals and Leroy counted that as a blessing. Fish readily expressed his own opinion, without any worry of Leroy's reaction. He asked questions when he had them, again without worry or equivocation. If he didn't like something or felt Leroy was making a mistake, he had no qualms about saying so. They discussed, sometimes vigorously, just about anything, neither feeling any restraint in standing firm on an opinion or agreeing to disagree. They laughed, together, at Boss, at each other and teased with affection, never coming close to approaching that line that separates teasing from mocking. Fish also had no social constraints about expressing his emotions, which Leroy mostly found refreshing and enlightening. Sometimes he'd find Fish humming a familiar tune although the younger man never knew the words or name of the song and Leroy, if he knew, didn't volunteer the information. But he hummed when he was content or when he was focused on something. Leroy hoped neither Fish nor their relationship would change once he told him about his identity – both their identities.

Now Fish looked at him, "I smell something orangey and sweet. Is this a special occasion?"

"Yes. I'll tell you after we eat." Leroy was afraid his surrogate son would be too upset to eat if he was told his identity before their meal.

As they ate, Fish mentioned Thanksgiving, coming up in 2 weeks, something Leroy had told him about after he'd explained Halloween. They still had turkey meat, which had been frozen in icy snow since the day they were chased by wolves. And they had sweet potatoes, green vegetables and corn. That would be enough. Fish said they could try making a pumpkin pie without the crust but Leroy shook his head, "We're out of brown sugar, won't work. If we had butter, we could use
that and cinnamon but I don't think it'd be good with just cinnamon."

"Bummer!" A minute later, Fish smiled, "We can make brown sugar using some of the blackstrap molasses and the sugar packets."

"Great!"

When they'd finished their meals, Leroy cut the orange cake. Fish's face lit up, "A cake! Is it my birthday or something?" Then he laughed at his own joke as Fish's self-declared birthday was April 21st, the day he'd been pulled out of the water.

Leroy waited until he stopped. "Yes, it is your birthday. You were born to Lt. Commander John McGee and his wife 38 years ago today, November 15th, 1977 and named Timothy Farragut McGee."

"McGee…my name is Timothy McGee? Timothy Farragut McGee? I'm 38? That's old! How do you know all that?"

"I've never told you my last name, it's Gibbs. Leroy Jethro Gibbs."

Fish looked at him, his eyes suddenly moist, "You're 'G'?"

"I believe so. I've known you, as Tim McGee and Fish for 12 years. We met in 2003 and you joined my team as an investigator in 2004. I'm your boss, Fish, or I used to be. When we lost you, I promised you and your family that I would find you. The man who's been my second in command for years was injured that same night and then I reinjured my knee searching for you, right after you disappeared. I couldn't come back until my knee was strong enough. Until then, we did as much research as we could to figure out where you might be. A friend put me in touch with another Marine here in Wyoming, that's Chuck Payton and he's been a big help. By the time I finally got back here, I'd planned where I would search – in a grid pattern along the creek that flooded so badly. I wasn't sure if I'd find you there or up here. It wasn't until I reached the 18th grid that I found the Andersons' campsite and your sock. I fell on my butt on the ground with that sock and bawled like a baby, finally had proof you were alive. I saw the drag marks too. Two grids later, I saw the 'G' you wrote in chalk on that huge boulder. Then I knew for certain that you were alive and believed we would find you.

"Best of all, when I was in the snow after the bear attack and you told me that you had him, to stay still, I knew your voice. You may not know your name or your history but you're still the same man, the same personality, the same heart and soul. I didn't tell you then because I wasn't sure what would be right for you. But now it's been too long, you need to know, I hate keeping the truth from you and I want you to know what we are to each other."

"What are we?"

"We don't share DNA but you're my son, Fish - Timothy, same as if we did." He took a breath and then smiled as Fish leaned across the table to hug him and to ask, "So am I the movie guy, the rifle guy who learned to shoot playing paintball or the nervous guy in medical school?"

Gibbs chuckled, "You're my pride and joy, the rifle guy. The one who can shoot a moving target from a moving vehicle, who can figure out vectors and angles faster than anyone I've ever met."

"You taught me?"

"The rifle and scope, yes. You learned to shoot in FLETC, that's law enforcement training for Feds and improved upon that training with paintball. And then I taught you the art of being a
sharpshooter."

"Wow! I just…wow. Do I have family, I mean, besides you and the others?"

Gibbs smiled, loving his reference to the team as his family. "Yes. Your father died two years ago; that was rough as the two of you hadn't been close since you were a preschooler. I met his former wife when you disappeared but I don't think she's your mother. You have a younger sister, Sarah, and your paternal grandmother, Penny Langston. And they know you're alive too, I asked someone to tell them after I found the sock and the 'G'."

He grinned at Tim. "The pretty blond woman with the soft brown eyes that you dream about is Eleanor Bishop, Ellie. She's also a field agent on my team."

"I think we're dating or at least we were dating. I dream of her almost every night. But if you're the head of the team, who's running it while you've been here? Your second in command? You said you started searching in August - you've been away for 4 months."

Gibbs nodded, "I retired before I left; told my boss I wasn't coming back until I found you. Tony DiNozzo is the team leader of the MCRT now." He leaned forward, "He's the movie guy." The two smiled at each other.

"You did that for me, to find me?"

"Of course. I didn't believe you were dead, never have. You're a strong man and very clever, creative and you have experience in the outdoors. When we didn't hear from you, I knew you needed help. I regret it took me so long to get here but I spent the time preparing. Survival, tracking, getting my knee and the rest of me into shape, not to mention finding the right maps, planning where to search, finding people to help and putting together what to bring for the two of us."

Fish laughed, "I knew there was something strange about all the clothes that fit me and things you had! Some investigator!"

"Nah, you're a great investigator! I brought you two changes of clothes, boots, a sleeping bag, blankets, winter stuff, the rest came from Chuck. For another, you've been working to survive on your own for 5 months now, takes a lot out of you, especially considering your memory problems. And you had great observations about the Andersons. Underneath your gratitude to them for saving your life, you didn't feel that you could wholly trust them. Which reminds me, the names they gave you are from another 50's TV show, "Father Knows Best". The characters were Jim and Margaret Anderson and their children: Betty, Bud and Kathy. And the character of Margaret Anderson was played by an actress named Jane Wyatt – she also played Spock's mother Amanda in Star Trek, which is one of your favorite shows. Wasn't one of the dogs named Jane? And I'm sure you saw the book inscribed to 'Brittany from her G & G.'"

"Yeah, the mama dog was Jane and I did see that book. And twice I heard Jim slip and call Kathy 'Brit'."

"There you go! Look at it this way, your instincts told you to trust me and you've been living on your instincts out here, trusted them, so you allowed a couple of odd things slide. Despite them having saved your life, your instincts told you not to fully trust or stay with the Andersons and you struck out on your own."

"Thanks for the save. So…oh my gosh, you're my boss! Did I name my dog after you?"
Gibbs laughed, "You did and after you told me that I had to laugh no matter how much it hurt. The description you gave of the dog bossing you sounded so much like me, I couldn't believe you weren't pulling my leg!"

"You'd wake me in the morning?"

"Yep, when we had a call-out – a new crime to handle."

"Oh. I'll continue calling you Leroy. Be pretty confusing for Boss if I also started calling you Boss."

Gibbs laughed, "Yes, call me Leroy! I'm not your boss now anyway, I'm retired."

"This is a lot to process. Do you know my sister?"

"Sarah, yes. She was involved in a murder case a few years ago and we had to bring her in. We cleared her. She's also a writer."

"Also?"

"Forgot that part. Those books we've been reading, the Gemcity and Zubin Cai books?"

Fish nodded, puzzled.

"You wrote them. All of them. You are Thom E Gemcity, that's an anagram for Timothy McGee. Your first pen name was Zubin Cai."

His jaw dropped and he sat there staring for so long that Leroy wanted to laugh again, knowing he was thinking – processing everything he'd been told. That was pure Tim!

Fish's next comment surprised him as he'd expected more questions. "Timothy means to honor God. Zubin is a Hebrew name that means to honor and Cai is a god. Although not the Judaic or Christian god."

"Yes."

"Wow, I wrote all those?" He shook his head, "The Deep Six characters - are they your team? Gibbs – then Tibbs is you, Tommy is movie guy, McGee…am I McGregor? After that I'm lost."

"Our team. Lisa is Ziva David who worked with us for 8 years. Amy is Abby, our forensic scientist. You two dated in your early days."

"Me and Amy or McGregor and Amy?"

"You and Abby, Amy's doppelganger."

"No, no, no, no, no, bad idea. Very bad idea."

"Didn't last long. And Thea, have you met Thea in the books yet?"

"Yes, she's smokin' hot. Oh, is she Ellie?"

"Yep."

"Awesome! And…?"
"Fowler is Ducky, Donald Mallard. He's our Medical Examiner and his assistant and medical school student is Jimmy Palmer or Pimmy Jalmer."

"The nervous guy. Oh man, I bet he hates me for what I did to him in that first book. And geez, sucky names!"

"It's been interesting. And that reminds me, I have something else for you, from Jimmy."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a little bag and handed it to Fish, "Jimmy's birthday is the day before yours, November 14, same year. This is your birthstone – yours and Jimmy's. He told me that when he was 6, he got lost on a family hike in Colorado. He picked up this stone, wishing his dad would find him and he did. He says there are other good things that have happened with it and that both times you and I went to Afghanistan, he gave it to you - to Tim - to carry. He told me it was now my turn and to bring you home. I'm giving this to you now because you found me and we are going home."

Fish blinked back the moisture in his eyes as he opened the bag and tipped the stone into the palm of his hand. "Connections…from Jimmy to Tim to me, from Jimmy to you to me. Tell me about our trips to Afghanistan?"

Gibbs told him and Fish sat there looking at him, "OH my gosh! I've been, we've been there twice…amazing. And scary as hell."

He thought for a minute before asking, "What happened to Lisa?"

Gibbs told him, watching his face. "Wow…Mossad. That's also scary!"

"Yes. Our director, Leon Vance, lost his wife in the same attack that killed Ziva's father."

"Bad times."

"Uh huh. You can see why I wasn't about to let anyone declare you dead and move on. We're family."

"I'm glad although it's strange. To go from a guy whose life started 7 months ago to someone with an identity, 2 families, friends and a background."

"There's more. You got your Bachelor's in Science in biomedical engineering from Johns Hopkins and your Master's in Computer Forensics at MIT."

"I…seriously? Cool, I'm smarter than I thought! Do I use any of that at work?"

"Oh yeah, especially the computer forensics. You pretty much pioneered that at NCIS. And you've used your biomedical engineering knowledge too. Heck, you used some of that knowledge when I was hurt."

"Huh. You said my father was in the Navy and we didn't get along."

"Yes."

"Not going to tell me?"

Gibbs sighed, "I don't know much except that nothing you wanted or did was acceptable to him. He wanted you to follow him into the Navy and nothing else would please him. You thought working at NCIS would appease him, be a suitable compromise but the McGees are Navy and he wouldn't
accept anything less than a ranking officer. You have a problem with seasickness so he decided you should work at the Pentagon. The two of you didn't speak for almost a decade. Then he was involved in a case and you found out, through my interrogation of him, that he had stage 4 cancer. You reached out to him and somehow broke through. The two of you at least had an understanding between you by the time he died."

Fish huffed before saying, "And you don't know who my mother is or was?"

"Not sure. The ex-wife I met when you went missing was a little casual about your status. Sarah looks like her while you look like your father. I'd say she's probably your stepmother. Or former stepmother. Penny can tell you more."

"That's my paternal grandmother?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what I call her? And is there other family?"

"You call her Penny, she doesn't like being called any grandmotherly name. She and Sarah are the only family I know about."

"And you don't know anything about Ellie and me."

Leroy shook his head. "I have a set of rules that we follow on my team. One of them is no dating co-workers so I would not have been told and hadn't noticed anything until you went missing."

"And then?"

"Bishop's usually a positive person, she's had some tough times but she's normally upbeat. After we lost you, it was like she deflated - although her work was fine. Otherwise I would have had to say something."

"She didn't believe I was alive?"

Leroy shook his head, "I don't think it was that. As I said, she's had some tough times. Caught her husband cheating on her, divorced him and started dating a guy we brought in from the Middle East. He was murdered in front of her while helping us on a case. Hard to know how she'd feel after all that. And she wasn't with us on the case that brought us to Wyoming. She'd combined some additional training with time off. She may feel something about not being with you, with us."

"Ouch. And we were dating, both field agents. If the books reflect reality, they put their lives in the line of duty every day."

"The books are right and there's no 'they', you've been a field agent for 11, almost 12 years. And you did nearly lose your life in the line."

"So you really have no idea how long we've been dating."

"If I had to guess, I'd say it happened after Qasim's death and a break-up you went through."

"Do I need know about that?"

Leroy shook his head.

"Ookay. I need more cake." Fish split the remaining cake between the two of them. As he ate he looked at Leroy, "I'd like to be Fish as long as possible. Not sure I'm ready to be Tim McGee, not
when I don't remember being him."

"Fine with me. As I said earlier, you may not remember being Tim McGee, but the only
differences between McGee and you are your hair, beard and being here."

"And no baggage, which is important. I'm not ready to take all that on."

"Ok, Fish it is." He smiled affectionately at the younger man and Fish smiled back, glad he was all
right with it. In the weeks they'd shared the cave, he'd come to value Leroy's friendship and he
trusted him implicitly. He really liked that the older man felt paternal toward him. As far as Fish
was concerned, he'd never had parents and was enjoying having a dad and learning how to be a
son. Plus, the man was fun, they could talk about anything, saying what they wanted. He briefly
wondered if he should feel awkward with Leroy having been his boss. He decided it didn't matter,
he hadn't been the boss in his, Fish's, life and that's all he cared about. As he'd said, he didn't want
the baggage that went with being Tim McGee.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Once Fish knew he'd written the books, he became hypercritical of his writing until Leroy told him
to knock it off. That was such a boss thing that Fish started laughing. And then stopped, staring at
the man.

"Are you going to head slap me?"

Leroy's eyebrows rose, "That's what you remember?"

"Yes…no. When you told me to knock it off, I thought that was such a boss thing to say and that
was funny. Then I remembered head slaps from the book."

"To refocus you."

"Okay. Movie guy," he scrunched one side of his face, trying to remember names, "Tommy gets
them more frequently than McGregor does."

"You're right, he does. Tony sometimes has trouble focusing and he's usually the one responsible
for creating distractions in the bullpen, although you have your moments – or Tim does. And I
know that Tony wasn't physically abused as a child. Once I learned about Admiral McGee's verbal
and emotional abuse, I was afraid he'd hit you as a child so no head slaps for you."

"Thank you for that. Bullpen - that's cop talk, isn't it?"

Leroy shrugged and Fish grinned at him. Then he frowned, "The sat phone is beyond repair with
what tools we have. They don't know where you are or that you found me."

"They have a decent idea of where I am, they helped me plan the search grids and I'm sure Abby
or Ellie was tracking the sat phone coordinates until the bear attack. And they'll also be following
the weather here and know there are endless storms."

"They won't worry?"

Leroy waggled his hand, which Fish took to mean they'd worry some.

"You still good with no snow, higher temps for 3 days and we go?"

"I am if you are. If we can make it north into the next valley, we'll be okay even if we have to
hunker down there for a while."

Fish nodded, "And live in the truck. If we get stuck there for any length of time, we'll need more wood."

Leroy nodded, "I've been thinking that too. When we get a break in this storm, let's cut some. We can use the hatchet, ax and saw blade."

"Ok. And fill the water jugs."

"Yep. Going to miss your fireplace."

"Yeah, me too. Need to make sure both solar chargers are charged."

When Leroy grinned at him, Fish frowned, "What?"

"You built those. They're patented."

"Patented? Do I sell them?"

"Yes. Not directly, the patent is under an LLC that you formed. The LLC sells to the Department of Defense and other entities. Abby says they're sold on the internet at something called Amazon."

"I do that?"

"Yep. You've told me that it brings in some nice coin every year; they pay your LLC a licensing fee for the software and other electronic stuff of yours that they use."

"Software? I wrote software used by the Department of Defense?" Fish's voice was rising and he had a wild look in his eyes. Leroy patted his shoulder.

"Relax, kiddo, it isn't missile launch codes. It's used by federal agencies to coordinate all the different databases we use. Vance told me it's saved the government over $20 million in resources over the past 3 years."

"Leroy, that's…wow."

"Yes. You are an enterprising and financially fit government employee."

"Huh and yet here I sit in clothes your friend Chuck bought for me. Unbelievable. Did McGee Sr. know about all that?"

"The Admiral? I doubt it. I'd think you'd rather chew glass than tell him something like that."

"Because he would have taken credit for it and then used it to his advantage?"

Leroy nodded.

"Know what the LLC is named?"

"No but I do know the name is meaningless, nothing that could be connected to you. Something like SheepDip LLC."

Fish looked at him and both started laughing. That felt good. Afterward, Fish summed up his situation. He was a homeless, near-drowning victim, an amnesiac, living in a cave in a remote location with his dog and his former boss, wearing clothes purchased by other people although he
was apparently a wealthy man. He might have enough money to pay for a helicopter ride out of here – or maybe he already owned a helicopter or private jet – except there was no way to contact anyone.

Yep, that about summed it up. He must have said it aloud because Leroy was glaring at him and he remembered that was how this conversation started.

"Knock it off! You're a smart, big-hearted, hard-working man. You earn every penny you make, whether it's chasing down terrorists, pedophiles and serial killers or writing code that allows us Feds to spend more time chasing down terrorists and less time mired in bureaucratic crap. A guy who invents things and then donates the proceeds to charities."

"No private helicopter or jet?"

Leroy shook his head, "I wish! If it helps, you drove a Porsche for a few years."

"A Porsche?"

"Yeah, a Boxster."

"Well...it wouldn't do us any good up here, would it? Are we flying back to Virginia? I'm not enthusiastic about putting Boss in a crate to go in the cargo hold of a jet."

"Yeah, thought about that. Driving is fine with me."

"Staying in buildings, though. No camping."

Leroy snorted, "Think we'll have had our fill by then."

"I'll pay."

"The agency will pay, you're an employee injured and missing in the line of duty. Reminds me, I have your wallet. You locked it in the rental that night, standard procedure. Local LEOs found your badge, id and driver's license, sent them to the agency."

"Local LEOs – local law enforcement?"

"Yes."

Fish nodded and then frowned again, replaying Leroy's words. "I'm still employed?"

"Yes. Federal agencies have several months before they're required to report missing agents. Helps accommodate the operations of deep undercover agents if they're out of touch for weeks or months."

Fish tilted his head, "Huh, guess that makes sense. Do I have an apartment or house, car?"

"You had an apartment. Penny decided to move your things to her property. She has a large home on several acres, with outbuildings and plenty of storage. Your car is also there, under cover. I had it washed, took the wheels off, put it up on blocks, changed the oil, filled up the tank, disconnected the negative battery cable, plugged up the exhaust pipe and air intake with steel wool and put mint all around the vehicle to discourage rodents. Once we put it back together, it'll be good as new. And you can live with me."

The younger man nodded, "Thanks. You've told me you consider me your son, your child by choice, and from everything you've done, everything you've taken on, you're a wonderful father."
No matter what happened in the past with my birth parents, I'm a lucky guy to have you. And it sounds like Penny has stepped up as my mom. I'm 38, don't know if other people still need parents at this age but I sure need you, both of you, and I'm grateful." He hugged Leroy who pulled him closer.

"This isn't my first shot at fatherhood. My first wife, Shannon, and I had a daughter named Kelly, a year younger than your sister. I was gone too much, deployed, but I did my best when I was home and kept in touch when away. Shannon and Kelly died in a car crash when Kelly was 8. I married after that but I couldn't bear the thought of loving other children and then losing them. Until I met you and Tony. You two fill a place in my heart that's been empty for two decades. When you disappeared, I did the only thing I could do, came after you. You're mine whether you're Fish, Tim, Thom or Zubin. Whether I'm your boss or the guy you spend holidays with. When you have children, I hope to be their honorary grandfather."

"You will be and you'll never be the holiday guy or an honorary grandfather. I mean, yeah, you'll be Grandpa or Poppy but no calling yourself 'honorary' and we'll spend holidays together but a lot more than that. I want to be your son."

Fish paused, "I've been thinking about something since you told me about my identity. I don't want to be a field agent any more. I'm sure I'd qualify with weapons but I think I'm done with that. If I can find something else at the agency that won't put my life on the line every day, then I'll stay. Otherwise, I'll look for something else or maybe I'll write full-time."

Leroy nodded, "I thought that might be how you feel. Whatever you do, if it makes you happy, I'm happy."

"Who replaced me on the team?"

Leroy shook his head, "We're all expendable but no one could fill your shoes. However, a young man named Bob Chalmers was already assigned to the team before we caught that case. He was TAD while Ellie was away. I like him and I know DiNozzo does too."

"He's still there? He's been on temporary assignment duty for 7 months?"

Leroy nodded, hiding his amusement that Fish knew what a TAD was. Although he supposed that could be considered general knowledge.

"Man, that's rough! Can't even get a place to live."

"He's all right. DiNozzo is staying in my house while I'm gone and Chalmers is staying at his apartment. Before that he was in a residential hotel on the agency's dime."

Fish huffed, "You really do take care of your own."

"We do, Elf Lord."

"You've never explained that name."

With a grin, Leroy explained his adoption of Tim McGee's gamer name as an affectionate nickname.

"I'm a gamer?"

"Not so much anymore. You said it got too weird busting people for killing during the day and then going home and killing online at night."
"Good! I like the nickname though." He thought again. "What if I never return to being Timothy McGee? What if I decide to stay Fish?"

"In what way?"

"We've already talked about the job. Whoever I was before, I'm not now, I'll never be again."

"That's a given, especially after this experience and the memory loss."

"What if I never remember?"

"Then you decide who you want to be, what you want to do. It's your life." Leroy leaned forward. "You see McGee as another person, don't you?"

"Yeah. I know he's not, that he's me and I'm him. But his life and experiences are foreign to me, even as much as I've learned about him. He's not me."

"And I have trouble understanding that because to me, you're still him. Yes, there have been changes, but your personality, what makes you you hasn't changed."

"But I can't know that, can't feel it. I don't know him. I have no personal knowledge of being him, no frame of reference except what you've said and the things that you say pop up. Hearing about someone is different than actually being that someone. And the dreams about Ellie."

Fish took a deep breath, "Will you be able to deal with that, accept me as Fish and not try to retro-form me into someone I can't be?"

Leroy swallowed hard. "You're saying there is no more Tim McGee."

"Not for me. And I don't want to try to be him. If the memories come back, that's different."

Leroy nodded but didn't say anything for several minutes. Finally, he reached out to Fish, taking a hand. "At the risk of sounding even mushier than we have been, I know you, Fish, and I feel the same about you as I do Tim. Yes, I can deal with that. I can't speak for anyone else though, it'll be more difficult for them. They haven't had this time with you."

"Because it'll mean he's gone and they have no frame of reference for me, Fish."

Leroy nodded before saying, "I'm starting to get it now. I think it's going to be tough but again, I'm with you, I'll support you."

Fish exhaled a sigh of relief that sounded more like a groan. Shaking his head, Leroy pulled him close again.

"We'll get through it. Probably a good idea to get professional help. And if the others have problems with you being Fish, we'll go for some group or family counseling."

Fish smiled into his shoulder, happy to hear Leroy making plans to help him succeed as either Fish or Tim.

He thought about that later while trying to sleep, how much he was asking of Leroy and the others. To accept that Tim McGee was gone. Although Leroy said numerous times that he was the same guy, just lacking memories. Frame of reference.

As he tried to get comfortable, Boss tired of his wiggling and moved off the mattress, curling up by the fire. Across from him, Leroy said, "Want to play cards? I can't sleep either."
"Yeah, that sounds good. Sorry, I didn't mean to drag us down."

"I know you didn't. And we needed to talk about it, now we're absorbing it."

They sat at their table. Measuring 2 feet by 3 feet, it had two planks of wood, giving them room to play the double and triple deck card games they loved. The legs were longer than standard tables, the measurements adjusted to match their heights and long legs. Crafting it was Fish's second experience, after the door and frame, making and using pegs and notching joints and he still loved the way it turned out. Although they had no sandpaper, when they soaked the bark off Leroy taught him to use the knives to scrape off any imperfections and it was smooth enough to prepare their meals, eat, play cards, work on projects and write, all they needed.

Fish watched Leroy sit in his new chair, one patterned after Fish's. The log chair was placed by the fire circle; Leroy preferred the height of this chair, accommodating his long legs, the deep seat, he'd used three small logs for the actual seat whereas Fish had used four, and the higher back, all lashed together. When he'd learned about pegs, Fish added those to the seat of his chair and Leroy built his that way. Fish was surprised at how proud he was that Leroy chose to make a chair just like his. Like a little kid, he thought. Then he shrugged, in some ways he was a little kid, born for the second time as he was pulled from the creek. And there he was, back at the same place again, was he Fish or McGee? Did he have a right to remain Fish, effectively doing away with McGee?

On April 21st, he became Fish. From April 15th to April 21st, as far as he knew there was no one, only limbo; the previous 37 years he'd been Tim McGee.

He shook his head, realizing he had a headache and Leroy looked at him steadily. "Done torturing yourself?"

"Hope so. For now, anyway. Would it matter if I used the name Tim McGee without trying to be the 'old' him?"

Leroy thought about it. "Be easier in practical ways, people remembering your name, not having to re-establish yourself as Fish. I think it would be the same problem for family and friends, though. Tim but not Tim or not the Tim they knew." He stopped before he said what he always said and believed…that he was the same person, still Tim, with different experiences. He knew Fish was going to have to reconcile this for himself. As he'd said before, all he could do was love and support him, get him the help he'd need.

Getting up from his chair, he returned with a bottle of ibuprofen and handed it to Fish. "For your headache; take three."

"Thanks. How'd you know? I just realized."

Leroy twisted his lips, "Worked with you long enough; the tell is the way you hold your head straight, you don't move it around - like it's about to explode. Must be how it feels."

"It does."

"Tension headache. You get those every so often on a bad case or one where we can't seem to get any traction. Your sinus headaches are different, your eyes are puffy and you crack your jaw a lot, rub the back of your skull."

"Why do I have sinus headaches?"

"Usually weather related. Although you've lived on the East Coast most of your life, the humidity lays you out almost every summer when it starts to heat up. You're usually miserable for about 3
weeks before your body starts to adjust. And I'm doing it again, relating you to McGee."

Fish huffed, "I'm beginning to see how difficult it is to separate us. Same body."

Leroy was silent.

They played cards for an hour before Fish started yawning. They finished their game and then returned to their beds, Boss re-joining his master.
Chapter 14

Although overcast, there was no snow falling the next morning. After their morning routine, the two men took the ax, hatchet and saw blade down the path to the woods. They spent several hours chopping up dead wood, sawing off dead limbs and cutting them into fire bowl sized pieces. Taking a break, Leroy moved the truck closer and they stacked the wood behind the tent in the back of the truck before returning the truck to its spot near the foot of the path.

Admitting it felt good to be outside, Fish took a load of wood up to the cave, grabbing snacks and returning. Leroy was sitting in the truck, keeping warm. They sat in there eating their snacks, glad for the change in scenery.

"The temperature's up today, almost 30."

While assessing the damage to the sat phone after the bear attack, Fish discovered that while it wasn't usable as a communication device, some of its other features were sometimes available, he figured something was loose but he didn't think he knew enough to mess with it. They kept it charged via the solar charger and occasionally the temperature and elevation would display. Leroy confirmed from his maps and planning that these mountains were between 11,000 and 14,000 feet in elevation, so when the sat phone displayed an elevation of 11,000 in the cave, they figured that was accurate. And the temperature, when it displayed, seemed about right. When Fish asked Leroy if he thought the phone was still traceable, providing their coordinates, the older man shrugged his shoulders.

Now they looked at each other, "This is Day One?"

"Sure! Take a day to pack."

Leroy shook his head and they laughed. Fish said, "I mean, it will take a day to organize and cook a few things so we won't have to stop to do that."

"Nah, you were right the first time."

"Do we leave the tent and tarps up or take them down while we're moving?"

"Let's leave them up. They're secure, hate to have to do it all over again in the middle of a blizzard."

"On top of a mountain, yeah, I see your point."
They spent another couple of hours outside, playing with Boss, getting some exercise and soaking up fresh air. Clipping on their snow shoes and carrying the weapons, they walked for nearly two hours. When the first spit of snow hit them, they shrugged, so much for Day One.

That was the last of their 'no snow' days for the next three weeks. Roasting the turkey meat for Thanksgiving, they also made mashed potatoes with salt, pepper, garlic, onions and olive oil, roasted green beans and made a concoction out of the last of the pumpkin Leroy brought from the garden at Grid 18. They saved the seeds from each pumpkin, later roasting them. They were great for snacks, full of protein, iron and magnesium.

Fish made the brown sugar the day before Thanksgiving. They baked the pumpkin enough to mash it before adding the brown sugar, cinnamon, a little oil, an egg and a pinch of salt. Then they smoothed it into Fish's pan, a gift from the Andersons, and baked it again. When they pulled it out of the fire circle, they added a syrup they'd made with the molasses and small pieces of orange rind. It was delicious, their entire meal was delicious, although there was a lot left. Leroy laughed, "Typical Thanksgiving, we made enough for 10 people even though there are only 2 of us within 200 miles!"

Fish smiled, "Leftovers!"

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Two thousand miles to the east, their family, minus Ellie who'd gone to her parents in Oklahoma and plus Bob Chalmers, sat down to Thanksgiving dinner without Tim and Jethro.

Gathering at Ducky's, they asked Penny, Sarah and the Vances to join them. The food was good. Ducky cooked the turkey, the regulars brought their usual offerings while Penny brought roasted vegetables, Sarah appetizers and the Vances dessert: apple crisp, pumpkin pie, a French silk pie and real whipped cream.

Tony groaned as he finished his 'sampling' of the three desserts. "That was so delicious!"

The Palmers also joined them this year. They usually spent the day with Breena's family but this year wanted to be with their NCIS family.

Breena smiled at DiNozzo, "We should go for a walk."

There was dead silence at that and she looked around the table. Abby gave her a wan smile, "McGee always says that."

Jimmy shook his head, "Guys, they're fine. Gibbs found Tim during those first few storms and now they're together waiting out the storms, they'll be back when they can drive out."

Penny nodded, "I read about the caves in the mountains, I'll bet that's where they are. A big cave, safe from the elements and high enough to discourage any wild animals."

Ducky smiled, "They leave it to chop wood for the fire they keep going all day. Hunting when they need to. We know that Chuck Payton sent a cooler with Jethro, with the snow they have a means of safely refrigerating meat. Timothy must have done a fair bit of hunting before Jethro arrived, I'm imagining deerskin blankets."

Abby twisted her lips, "Hunting with what, Ducky? Gibbs said he thought Timmy was naked when he was found, except for that sock."

Sarah tilted her head, "Tim took archery in school. Maybe he made a bow and arrows."
"Wonderful idea, my dear!"

Tony frowned, "The sat phone…?"

Leon had a mischievous look in his eyes, "A bear ate it."

Kayla smiled, "They made a chess and checkers set and rotate playing those games all the time."

Breena smiled, "I gave Gibbs a deck of cards. They play all kinds of card games – and a lot of poker."

Bob jumped in, "When they were working on the chess and checker game pieces, they also carved poker chips and engraved them with the amount."

Tony snorted, "Boss is too smart to play with Tim. Probie studied at MIT, there's no way he's ever lost a game of poker – unless it was on purpose."

Sarah and Penny chuckled, knowing that was true.

Jared had been thinking about it. "I bet they made traps and check them whenever it's not snowing. And they ice fish in the river."

"What do they cook in?"

Abby grinned, "Gibbs made a rotisserie."

Tony shook his head, "No, Tim did, before Boss found him. But not a rotisserie, a spit. Two sticks with a third one connecting them. He puts the meat on the one hanging over the fire."

Jimmy nodded, "McGee was a scout, he could have lashed those sticks together."

Breena grinned, "Tim knows how to make clay pots. He fires them in their campfires. And maybe they carve plates and bowls from wood. Oh, he and Gibbs whittle things."

Penny relaxed a little more. "Timothy was by himself in the cave for weeks before Jethro arrived. I imagine he had it all set up."

Ducky agreed, "Jethro brought blankets, a lantern and heater, books, playing cards and food. Before that Timothy slept on a pile of deerskins with a fur blanket."

"Fur, like from a bear?" That was Sarah and Bob Chalmers quickly stepped in. "He found the bear hibernating and shot him with the bow and arrow. He has a knife he made and skinned the fur off, that's how he keeps warm."

Ducky nodded, "Indeed, he also made moccasins for himself. Deerskin and bear fur."

Abby giggled, "Fur pants, jacket and hat."

Jared grinned, "That was a big bear!"

Having cheered themselves up and imagined the doings of their missing family members, the group cleared the table before going for a walk.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Leroy sighed as he marked off another day on his pocket calendar. Thanksgiving was weeks in the
past, they were now in December and Christmas was a week away, Fish's first Christmas. Taking out his notepad, he checked his list.

Cut down tree - stand?
Decorations?
Finish presents!
Plan dinner

He figured the tree would be easy, they'd need a small one and they could cut it down together. That was a father-son thing to do. He'd already made a few decorations for their tree, including something for the top.

He was almost through with Fish's gifts and couldn't wait to give them to him. He knew his kid was making him something too, they'd tried sneaking around each other and finally agreed to work separately in each room for a few hours a day, no questions asked and no peeking. They shook on it. The only problem was light and they'd settled on putting the lantern on top of the log chair in the opening between the rooms. They took turns with the flashlights and their singular headband light.

Christmas dinner wouldn't be a problem, they had venison in the cooler. With plenty of seasonings along with onions, garlic, packets of vegetables, potatoes and sweet potatoes, they'd have a feast. They still had some of the molasses syrup from the pumpkin dish and he had an idea to use it in a dessert.

In the other room, Fish smiled to himself as he did up the last bit on one of Leroy's gifts. He just had a little more to do on the other one.

When Boss came bounding inside the cave, Fish noticed he had no snow on his back. "Leroy, it's not snowing. Time for the Christmas tree!"

He'd thought it was sweet when the day after Thanksgiving, Leroy sat him down to tell him about Christmas and the traditions the Gibbs family followed. He was excited about what he'd made his surrogate dad and although he couldn't imagine keeping a tree indoors, he was excited about that too. While he'd been working on Leroy's gifts, he'd made something for Boss and a few things for the tree.

"Yeah, I'll be right out. Shouldn't need the ax, just the hatchet and saw."

"Ok."

"And Fish, wear a pair of the work gloves. Tree will be sappy; we'll need to wash the gloves afterward."

"I'll bring a knife and the glue bowl then too; yay, sap!" Both men chuckled as tree sap was a main ingredient in the glue Fish made.

Ten minutes later they were on their way down the path, carrying the tools and their weapons.

Leroy warned that he was picky about Christmas trees and Fish was prepared to do a fair bit of wandering until the older man found the perfect tree.

As often as they visited these woods, it didn't take them long to zero in on "The Tree". Fish spotted it first, smiling with pride when Leroy nodded in approval. "Yeah, that's perfect!"
Quickly cutting it down, they carried it between them, each careful to keep a hand on his weapon. As they walked up the path, Leroy said, "We'll need flat boards and pegs to make a stand."

Fish chuckled, "Maybe. I've been working on something, should work."

When they had the tree inside, he disappeared into the back, returning with a 5-gallon plastic water jug they'd quit using because it leaked. He'd cut the neck and the leaky part off, luckily at the top just below the neck and then filled the rest of the jug with rocks. Now, putting the rocks onto the ground, they placed the tree trunk in the jug, placing the biggest rocks around the bottom. Then they kept adding rocks until the tree had enough support to stand straight. They added water to keep the tree from drying out.

When they were done, the two men stood back, grinning at each other. "We have a tree!"

Fish nodded, "My first Christmas tree! Thanks, Dad!" It was the first time he'd ever called the other man 'Dad' and Leroy smiled happily. "You're welcome, Son! Thanks for thinking of using the jug like this, it's a lot easier than making a stand and getting it straight."

Leaving the tree for a minute, each surprised the other on his return. Fish tapped his pockets, "I made a couple things for the tree."

Leroy chuckled, "Me too."

When they put their treasures on the tree, it wore a beautifully carved star on its top while brightly colored double braids of thread were again braided and knotted into garlands looped around the branches. Tiny pinecones, an abandoned bird's nest and more wood carvings completed the décor. Both had picked stems of holly leaves with the bright red berries attached. Before putting them on the tree, they dipped the stems, berries and leaves in melted candle wax so that Boss wouldn't be tempted to eat them as holly berries are poisonous to dogs.

Leroy looked at the garlands, "That's a lot of thread!"

Fish chuckled, "We have 3 sewing kits and a lot more thread. I made the knots big enough to untie easily; I'll unravel all of it, save it."

"Looks great, wish we could take a photo."

Fish thought about it, "I'll sketch it."

"Good idea! And I have just the thing for you."

Digging through his pack, Leroy brought out the sketchbook he'd found in Grid 18 along with the colored pencils he'd found on the ground there. Fish shook his head, "Did you crawl around on the ground looking for things?"

"Just about. I was prepared to do that to find anything of yours."

Fish gave him a hug and then got busy sketching, glad to have the large sketchbook and the colored pencils. He'd been using the notebook and a regular pencil for his sketches. It took him a couple of hours but finally he showed Leroy who approved. "That's our tree!"

Christmas morning was exceptionally cold and icy and the two men postponed the hike they'd planned. Instead, they had eggs and sliced potatoes for breakfast with rare cups of coffee for each. While Leroy had coffee left, he'd noticed he no longer needed the caffeine and weaned himself off, opting instead for the healthier spruce tea he'd gotten used to while recovering from the bear
attack. Besides, they'd probably need the coffee on the drive out. Fish had only had coffee a couple of times and although he liked it, decided to stick with his spruce tea and was happy to share with Leroy. There were plenty of spruce trees around!

After breakfast, they sat in their chairs in front of the tree, Boss on a fur between them. Leroy gave Fish his first gift, watching his mouth open and eyes light up with excitement and pleasure.

He was proud of his work on the 12-inch tall carved wooden figurine of Fish, with full beard, hair tied back, wearing his furs and aiming his bow, arrow notched, arms stretched, eyes, face and body intent on his target. More arrows peeked over his shoulder, tucked in his deerskin pack. Boss stood next to him, his posture just as intent with one leg bent, ready to retrieve whatever bounty they were after.

"This is so cool! Did you sign it?" Fish turned it over, nodding at the initials LJG and the date carved in the bottom of the base on which the two figures stood. Above that, he'd carved, "Fish and Boss, WY, 2015". Fish smiled, betting this was the best gift he or McGee had ever been given. "Thanks, I love it!"

Still smiling, he handed Leroy his first gift and watched as his eyes and face lit up. It was a deerskin shirt with long sleeves and was collarless with a small 'v' in the neckline to assist in the fit and pulling it on as there were no buttons. Leroy slipped it on over his thermal top and beamed at the fit. "This is perfect, how did you make this?"

"I borrowed one of your flannel shirts, the red one you don't wear as much as the others. Measured the whole thing bit by bit. Then I took it apart so I could see how it was made. Traced the collar, neckline and armholes onto paper. At first I was going to use the same pattern with a collar and buttons but in the end I decided to go without a collar and make it a pullover. I cut the deerskin using your shirt as a pattern. Then I sewed your shirt back together so I could see what pieces needed to go first, etc."

"I wore that shirt yesterday!"

Fish smiled smugly. "I finished it a week ago. I washed your shirt with my stuff, hung it to dry near the fire in here whenever I was working on my projects. Took three days to dry because I kept having to take it down. Then I put it back in your pack."

"Wow, you're good! This is beautiful, thank you!" Leroy grinned as he looked inside, "And you put a label in it, what's that...oh adhesive tape!" He chuckled, "Good thinking."

"That should last until we get to Virginia and then I'll figure out a permanent label."

"I like your signature, a fish riding a log."

"Knew you'd appreciate that! I've got something else for you, too." Reaching inside his furs, Fish brought out a folded pile of deerskin, handing it to Leroy.

Leroy smiled as he opened the pile and then his eyes widened in shock. "Gloves, you made me deerskin gloves? And not mittens, gloves! How?"

"Same method. Took a pair of gloves apart, traced the material for each finger, noted how many rows of stitching, made an overall pattern, cut and sewed. And sewed and sewed. Those things are never coming apart!"

Leroy shook his head, "I've always wanted a pair of deerskin gloves and these are handmade just for me! Thank you so much!"
"You're welcome!"

"I've got a couple more things for you. One's practical and isn't really meant as a Christmas present but I just finished it last night."

Chuckling, Fish took the odd shaped piece of padded wood from Leroy. "What is it?"

"It's an orthotic for your bad foot. It's made of wood but I've padded it pretty well." At the look on Fish's face, Leroy shrugged, "I have that sock, I know how much your foot bled into it. And you still have a limp. It's not that noticeable unless you're tired. But I've also noticed lately that you're soaking it more often."

"Yeah, the cold really hurts. Most of the time it's just achy. Thanks!"

Fish removed his boot and angled the padded wooden piece in. Putting the boot back on, he adjusted the laces, then stood, sighing in relief, "That does feel better, thanks! I never would have thought of this. So...how did you do it?"

"Glad it works! I tried tracing your footprint but decided that wasn't clear enough. I made a mold of your foot one night when you were asleep. You'd had a headache and taken Ibuprofen so I knew you were out for a few hours. I pushed you to one side of your bed and then pulled your leg onto the floor. Boss must have thought it was a game because he helped nudge you over. Then I placed your feet in softened candle wax on foil so I could get your arch too. I let the wax harden in a plastic bag in the cooler and then used it for the wood form. Now...here's the gift."

Fish protested, "They're both gifts!" Looking at what Leroy handed him, he grinned, "I bet I know what these are!"

His face lit in surprise as he held them up, "No I don't, oh my gosh, they're boots!" He looked at Leroy, "They're long enough to reach my knees! Again – how?"

"I used the soles from the boots you were wearing when I got here. Used my knife to cut them to the right shape using that same mold and your snow boots as templates. Then I cannibalized the old boots, cut them apart. Used the leather on the shoe parts and used deerskin for the boot parts, they match pretty well and the deerskin will darken more as it ages. Used your glue to hold things together until I had it all sewed." He chuckled, "Like the gloves, I sewed and sewed and sewed. That leather's plenty good, I had to use pliers to pull the needle through. The orthotic fits in there too."

Fish listened as he pulled his boots off, removed the orthotic, put it in the new boot and pulled them on, tying the deerskin laces now looped through the eyelets. He looked at the laces, "You even made aglets for the ends of the laces!"

"I cheated, I cut off the ones on the old laces and glued them onto the deerskin laces."

Smiling, Fish stood and walked around the cave, "These are great and yep, that orthotic helps a lot. My foot doesn't hurt at all."

"Great, they should be good to wear outside. Deer live outside so their skin should be weatherproof, right?"

"Sounds right to me! I have a couple more things for you." Fish reached into his pocket, bringing out a leather holster.

"A holster?"
"When I went through your pack after the bear attack and again when we took inventory, I didn't see one and noticed you carry your handgun in your jacket pocket, which seems kind of an inconvenient way to carry it. I figured you must be used to a belt holster so I made it to slip onto a belt. I made it from a piece of either bear or cow hide, might even be bison, that I found by the lake last summer. It's tough, thicker and less flexible than deer hide. I traced the gun, then traced a holster around it, had to cut the leather with my knife, applied three layers of glue before I sewed it," Fish chuckled, "with your pliers pulling the needle, that's a popular tool! Sewed it four times, using triple thread each time. The loop for your belt is an old piece of deer skin so it's not as supple as your gloves and shirt. It's also glued and sewn on. I punched your initials into the holster. Used the tip of my knife and the Phillips head screwdriver. The only berries I could find to stain it were the holly berries and I didn't think you'd want a red holster."

"Maybe, might be a dark red on the dark leather."

"I have a few scraps of the leather left, we could test it on them."

"Sounds good." He grinned, "I do have one more thing. I made templates for your feet – for the boots – and then decided to make the templates into moccasins."

"Wow! Boots and moccasins, thanks Dad!" Fish nearly grabbed the slippers from Leroy and removing the boots, slid them on. He sighed in happiness, they were perfect for moving around inside the cave and, he pulled one off, "You lined them in rabbit fur, warm and soft." He reached into a boot, removed the orthotic and popped it into the moccasin. "Oh yeah." He leaned over to kiss the top of Leroy's head. "Thanks so much, you're the best!"

Leroy grabbed him and held on. When they parted, Fish grinned, "Got two more things." Handing Leroy a coil of leather, he watched anxiously as the other man took a look.

"A belt! Wow, what is that?"

"Bear hide. Measured your belt one laundry day, while you were wearing your sweat pants. And I punched the holes the same way as I did your initials on the holster. I had an old belt from Jim Anderson that was too big for me, I planned to adjust it but hadn't gotten around to it when you showed up with clothes for me, including a belt. So, like you and the old boots, I cannibalized Jim's old belt. Used the old buckle, covered it in the bear hide, and that meant I didn't have to worry about the tongue either."

"That's great and I can slip the holster right on." Leroy did that while they were still sitting in front of the tree. They were both wearing thermals and sweats, he'd use the belt when he changed to his flannel-lined jeans.

Fish grinned, "One more thing…" He handed the older man a wooden rectangle about 8 by 11 inches with a thick paper insert. When Leroy turned it over, he found a sketch of himself. He stood in the snow next to a boulder, grinning and wearing his winter gear, his rifle broken open over his arm. Boss stood next to him, a large bird in his mouth.

"Hey, this is great! That's the goose, right?"

"Oh yeah!"

It was shortly after they decided Leroy's shoulder and arm were strong enough for him to use the rifle. They'd gone hunting and spotting the flight of geese, Leroy brought one down. Boss happily retrieved it for them. Of all the meat they'd hunted, that was one of their favorites and they still had some of the goose fat which they used for several things.
"And you made a frame, great job on the sketch and the frame, Elf Lord! Uh, how did you do this so quickly? This is on sketch book paper but I only gave you the sketch book a couple of days ago."

"I'd already done the sketch on my notebook paper, but hadn't done the frame yet." He chuckled, "So I sketched the sketch onto the heavier paper and made the frame."

"Wonderful! I love this, I love everything, thank you!"

"Me too and thank you! I made something for Boss, too, for days like today."

Fish gestured to the dog who stood, wagging his tail, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. "Come here, boy, I have a present for you."

Boss went even though the magic word treat had not been said. He was a little confused about the thing that Fish wrapped around him but it was soft and felt good so he didn't fuss or try to get it off him.

Leroy grinned, "A blanket jacket for the dog, that's great!"

"I used the rest of the blanket we used for the door sill."

When the weather was as cold as it was today, they had a thick braided strip of blanket that lay across the door sill to stop the cold. They'd used about a third of the oldest blanket Leroy had with him and now Boss was wearing the rest. A dark green jacket that slipped on over his feet, covering his chest and back with a flap at the neck and along the back, ending a couple of inches above his tail. It fastened along the back with thin rope ties.

"That's clever, what did you use for the paw holes instead of elastic?"

"Thread interwoven with vines, glued inside a wide seam. It should hold for the winter. If we put his harness over the top of this, then he can't get it off and the flap on his upper back covers his neck and the back part of his head."

When Fish and Boss first moved into the cave, Fish made a woven vine harness and leash for the dog. Using some of the many lengths of rope Leroy brought, he'd since replaced the vine with rope for both harness and leash.

"Wonderful!"

"I wanted to make leggings to add on but didn't get that far. And I figured they'd always be wet from the snow or him."

"Good point. I think this is great!"

In mid-afternoon, when the temperature climbed to a balmy 18 degrees Fahrenheit and the snowfall was light, they went for a walk, Fish wearing his new orthotic and boots, Leroy his new shirt, belt, holster and gloves and Boss his new blanket jacket. They stopped at the truck to look in the mirrors, laughing at themselves. They couldn't see much but agreed they loved their gifts.

The fresh air, as cold as it was, felt good and Boss enjoyed running through the snow. He had fun chasing a rabbit but Fish called him back before he caught it. The cooler was full, they didn't need any meat, no need to kill today. After nearly an hour outside, they headed back to the cave.

Stopping at the truck again, they took a few minutes to brush the snow off the tarps in the back of the truck. Leroy chuckled to himself as he watched Fish survey the truck bed, no doubt still
looking for some way to use their cave door.

Fish turned to him, "You know, it's the right size… we could use it for a roof."

"Have to be secured very well. We'd need four additional posts to take the weight."

"Huh, and we can't remove it until we're ready to leave so that's not practical."

"We can take it whether we have a use for it or not. Figure the door will fit underneath the hard-shell."

"Good! I hate the thought of leaving it behind. Although, it would be helpful for anyone else stuck here. We could leave a note on the outside about the hidden latch."

"We could do that."

"Save some weight in the truck."

Leroy chuckled, "Why don't we wait until we're ready to leave, see how we feel about it then?"

"Good idea."

With the snowfall so light that afternoon and the temperature having risen a good 10 degrees, they called it Day One. They'd used the term four times now and twice had even gotten as far as Day Two but each time a storm rolled in. On their second Day Two they'd been almost giddy with hope and had everything packed except what had to go last. When the snow hit, they slumped down into their chairs, disappointed.

Today being Christmas Day, Fish hoped it was a harbinger of good weather. Alas, it was not to be. A storm rolled in that evening and by morning they estimated there were several more inches of fresh snow.

When it stopped for a few hours, they took the skis they'd made, the trek poles and tried them on the shorter slopes, trading off so that one of them was always ready with a weapon. The skis were all right but as there was no way to sand them, they weren't uniformly smooth. Luckily, they thought of using their sleds and had a wonderful time with them, putting Boss on with each man and holding on as they jetted down the hills. Both the skis and the sleds were a lot of fun and Fish furiously sketched that evening. Leroy stopped him, "How about doing one with you in it?"

"I could try."

"Atta boy!"

Handing Fish the shaving mirror, Leroy watched, helping when he could. The first sketch with Fish was a sled run with Boss and that was easy as the dog's body blocked much of the man. He just had to make his body taller than Leroy's and his head bent over the dog so that much of it couldn't be seen. Leroy shook his head when he saw the preliminary sketch, "Your hair and beard were in the air. Your hair was flying from under the cap and although you had your beard tied, the whole thing was flying off to the right. And your mouth was open the whole time, in a big grin. Lit up your face. Here…"

It'd been years since Leroy sketched anything but he'd once been the probationary agent on Mike Franks' team and spent more than his probie year sketching crime scenes where fine details mattered. It took him five tries but finally he was satisfied with his rendering of Fish's face and head on his first sled ride.
He shook his head at the sketch. Fish's beard, although neatly trimmed, nearly reached his abdomen. He kept it tied most of the time but didn't want to cut it. Leroy snorted, his own beard was about an inch below his collarbone but he kept it trimmed to that length as it kept his face and neck warm and that's all he wanted. He was glad Fish's Survival book showed them how to make soap from the spruce trees as the last of the dry shampoo was used over a month ago.

Fish smiled when he saw it. "Wow, I knew I had a great time but this is awesome! That's what I look like, huh?"

"C'mon, you've seen yourself in the mirror."

"I know but this is different, this is how you see me."

"Oh, well, yeah." Leroy ruffled his hair, which always brought a bright smile.

"Tell you what, from now on when you do a sketch of me or Boss, you do one of yourself too and I'll help."

"Deal!"

They laughed as Leroy poked at Fish's travois, the one he'd used as his bed since the bear attack. When they decided to use it as a sled on the snow, neither had worried about the wood getting wet. They'd brought another tarp and Chuck's travois, normally stored in the truck, back with them. If the sled was too damp to sleep on and the extra tarp didn't block the damp, Leroy would instead sleep on the travois that Chuck loaned him.

The sled wasn't dry enough by bed time, even with the tarp, so Leroy toughed it out on the other travois despite Fish's repeated offers to swap beds or share the mattress. The older man slept although he wasn't as comfortable as usual.

Two days later when they were out foraging for wood, Fish brought pieces up to make a second sled. There was no way his surrogate father was going through that again!

One morning a couple of weeks later, they were eating breakfast, sweet potatoes and the last of a chicken when they heard growling and roaring outside the cave door. With no snow and temps in the mid-20s the day before, they'd had the door open part of the day so Boss could go in and out without driving them crazy. They hadn't gotten that far this morning, the door was still closed with the braided blanket spread across the gap at the bottom. They sat still, Fish holding Boss, the bear-pepper spray in a jacket pocket, bow over his shoulder and pack full of arrows next to him. Leroy had his rifle and gun in his lap, both loaded. The door rattled and shook with blows from what they were sure was a bear. They hadn't seen any since late November but knew that not all bears truly hibernated.

As with the bear Fish killed in the cave, they went into a deep sleep or torpor but could be wakened by loud noises or warmer temperatures. Apparently, this one woke up hungry and smelled the food cooking as well as live prey waiting for him. Quietly the men wondered where his den was, if it was one of the caves and if they'd been close to it since winter set in.

A very long 47 minutes later, they heard growls that seemed to be moving away. Not trusting that the bear would not return or lay in wait for them, they waited another hour before carefully opening the door, the two men standing side by side, Leroy with his handgun in his hand, the safety off, Fish with an arrow notched, ready for battle. Although the door showed signs of being abused, there were no cracks, loose boards or holes. And no bear.
There was bear scat on the path but there was no sign of the bear in the vicinity. Using the binoculars, Fish spotted a large dark object moving across the plateau toward the lake and showed Leroy. Hoping that was their unwelcome visitor, they ventured as far as the truck. When Fish looked through the binoculars again, he paled, "He's changed direction, heading slightly north of the lake – toward the bear bag trees. Could he somehow be associating the smells?"

"He tracked the smells here or he's tracking our path from there? That's a lot of miles, Fish, that has to be a different bear."

"I hope so. Even so, if he goes to those trees, there's definitely an association. Do we go after him, hope for a blizzard to send him back to his den or what?"

In unspoken agreement, the two men moved behind the truck where they knew they couldn't be seen. Smelled, that was another matter. Boss was restrained and not happy about it. He was wearing his harness and leash, the blanket jacket underneath. He wasn't barking but he was whining, something he rarely did. Fish gave him a command they used when hunting, where the dog understood he had to be quiet or lose the prey and now he obeyed.

Fish scrunched his face in thought, "They can smell 20 miles, maybe more."

Leroy nodded, "That's more than 20 miles but yeah, I agree."

"As I recall from moving the truck, it's about 35 miles from the lake to where it's parked now. If a bear can smell 20 miles, then there's overlap, if there's still a smell in the trees. But it's been weeks since we moved everything."

"Son, I don't think that can be the same bear, it's only been 2 ½ hours."

Fish frowned, "That might even be worse. We need to get back to the cave; Boss is having a tough time obeying and I feel like a sitting duck out here."

Leroy nodded, feeling the same way. Walking back up the path, he wondered how far bears could see. Hopefully not as far as they could smell!

The men were relieved when they were hit by a blizzard the next day. It snowed four days straight, the wind howling under the door and the temperature plummeting. When snow was blown in under the door and their blanket draft-stopper, they pulled the blanket back, adding a tarp between the cave floor and the edge of the door and then rolled the draft-stopper in front of the tarp. Then they stuffed bits of fur in the holes made for the lashed hinging. That helped although they still felt the wind. Boss wore his new jacket and didn't try to get it off him even though he wasn't wearing his harness. Even with a full blanket strung up across the door and the rock opening, they could still hear and feel the wind. Not as much but enough to keep them in the warm room, fires in both rooms along with the heater in the warm room. They had enough blankets and warm clothing so that they weren't physically chilled but the constant howl of the wind made them feel cold and irritable.

One afternoon when the wind had died down, Fish opened the door to peek out shook his head and quickly closed it. "If this were Virginia, what would be happening?"

"By now the power would be out wherever the storm was hitting. If people were at work when the worst of it hit, they'd still be there. Aboard the Navy Yard, there would be plenty of MREs, potable water, blankets and Marines. Mostly people sleep at their desks or on the floor by their desks. With no power, not much to do, although there are still paper files when there's enough light to read. Some people keep flashlights, books and playing cards at their workstations. Helps to pass the time..."
when you can't work. Natalie, an Intel analyst who sits on the other side of the partition from our bullpen, keeps a solar lantern and heater in her desk. Takes them out every November and charges them up, keeps batteries for back-up. Her old lantern was battery operated but once solar was available, she went that route. She's also got a locked drawer full of supplies, like my dry rations.” He chuckled, "She's worked there since she was a kid, 19 when she started; her youngest is in college now. Anyway, she has towels, soap and extra clothes in that drawer.

"Autopsy has its own generator, need to keep the bodies cold or all kinds of nasty stuff happens. Director Morrow, he was 2 directors ago, bought a big generator several years ago after more than 100 of us got stuck at work for 4 days. That gives us heat and usually a few hours of light. Lucky for us, the year so many of us were stuck the USS Barry had just been moved into the Yard estuary and there were still mattresses, blankets and pillows in the crew's quarters. Since then, the DoD has distributed enough blankets and emergency supplies for the staff of each of their agencies and offices in case of storm or lockdown.

"At home, I'd have fires in the fire place, cook in it too and I always have Sterno fuel handy. I buy or chop at least 3 cords of wood every winter and stock up on jugs of water. By the end of the second day, I would have cleaned out my refrigerator, cooked it all and stored it in my coolers, using snow. If we had enough warning, McGee, DiNozzo and possibly Abby would be there, although she usually goes to stay with her friends, the bowling nuns. Ellie might come too, don't think there's been that bad a storm since her divorce. The Palmers usually end up at Ducky's. He also has a wood burning fireplace and plenty of wood. Of course, they have a baby now so that might have changed.

"You – Tim - have solar everything so we have light to read, play cards and games while the power is out. Tony's the one who's easily bored. He really is the movie guy and being without is a pain for him and everyone around him. I'm half convinced that's why Tim started producing solar products, so Tony could still watch his DVDs when the power's out. He gave DiNozzo one of those portable players for Christmas one year. Tony still talks about that, best present ever. Of course, that was before they could watch TV, movies and God help me, YouTube on their phones."

Fish burst out laughing and Leroy sat back with a smile, enjoying the sound.

After the storm finally passed, they returned to their routine. While they were still wary when outdoors or when the door was open for any length of time, with the snow keeping everything cold they wouldn't have to hunt for weeks, longer if necessary. The day after the storm moved on, the trio marched down their path in the early afternoon. They'd been watching through the binoculars as animals emerged from their lairs, heading for the lake. Unfortunately for the deer and smaller animals, there was no 'truce' that day, the wolves were hungry too. The men put the binoculars away while the predators stalked and brought down prey.

The next day was a Day Two, no snow and the temps were less frigid. Using Leroy's pocket sized 2015 calendar, they'd plotted out several months of the new year and by now had crossed off all of January, February and the first ten days of March, marking 8 months in the cave for Fish and Boss and a week shy of 6 months for Leroy. They gathered, packed, re-visited what to take, what to leave behind and made a trip or two to the truck. Chuck's travois had been returned to the truck well before the last storm. They thought to go sledding again but decided against it, not wanting to start out with wet clothes in the cab on their trip over the mountains.

They were loading more items into the truck that afternoon when every hair on the back of Leroy's neck stood up straight. Remembering he and Fish had swapped weapons, he had the bow and arrows, he turned, bow up, arrow notched. He was right, it was a bear but it was focused on Boss who squealed, throwing himself heavily into the powdery snow as the animal swiped a huge paw
at him. With a roar worthy of a bear, Fish let loose with the rifle. At close range, his shot left very little of the bear's head on its shoulders and the corpse dropped sideways into the snow. Boss was on the ground whimpering as, breaking open the rifle, Fish handed it to Leroy and ran to his dog.

Leroy knelt beside him. "Let me see, son. Your hands are shaking."

Fish was almost incoherent, "Boss, Boss! Hang on, puppy, we're here, we'll help you."

He lifted the dog while Leroy scrambled for weapons, following Fish's long legs up the path. Neither man gave a second thought to the bear although Leroy did hit the remote to lock the truck.

Chapter End Notes

According to my research on rifles, 'breaking' or 'breaking open' a rifle is a safety measure consistent with responsible firearms handling. A rifle carried otherwise could accidentally fire if loaded and whenever a rifle is handed from one person to another, it should be done so. I was curious about why rifles are seen open and hanging over people's arms in photos and movies, now I know.

Also, bear vision is now thought to be about the same as humans although they also have excellent night vision. Studies show that bears trust their sense of smell more than their eyesight, while humans do the opposite. And yes, bears can smell as far as 20 miles and wolves can travel 50 miles in a day.

Total trivia here but while out shopping at our local K-Mart the other day (we have one of the few surviving stores), I found a stove for Sterno made by a popular outdoor brand. Stands to reason they'd be made and sold commercially, I just thought it was amusing. When I was researching Sterno, I saw mentions of the homemade stoves but nothing commercial. And no, I didn't buy it. Thought about it though. Would come in handy when the electricity's been out for over 12 hours and it's time to cook everything in the freezer or refrigerator. Which is what happened here 2 nights ago. I had withdrawal pangs from no internet (cells didn't work either) and then thought about poor Puerto Rico. No power, all this time.

Also, on fanfiction.net, Momcat asked if I had experience in the wild. No, I'm happy to say (as coyotes yip outside my window…for real). I live in a rural pocket of what I'd guess I'll call a rural-ish small town in the foothills, only minutes from a busy interstate. There are deer around (thus the coyotes), bunnies and I've seen a jack rabbit hop down the driveway (at my old house, there was one who used to wait for me to back out of my driveway in the mornings, not kidding, and then get to work on my garden). I've lived in country/rural settings a few times in my life as I like lots of peace and quiet. My family camped a lot when I was growing up but always in established campgrounds. We hiked but never into anything like the wilds of Wyoming! I backpacked with the Girl Scouts and later with friends but never got stuck or ran into any scary animals (just snakes, see below). And there were no hunters or gun owners in the family. There are now, they've married in, taught their kids to hunt and are wonderful people but weren't around decades ago. My only real experience with camping in the 'wild' was outside Yosemite while in college. With a bunch of friends. In the 70's. My 'wild' experience ended when I found myself swimming below a waterfall, almost on top of a 20 foot long snake. Ok, it was probably 4 foot and a
garter snake but it was a SNAKE, in the water, NEXT to me! When I was about 13, I was camping with my Girl Scout troop at a Boy Scout camp and started to take a shortcut across a hill. Woke a rattler on the path, luckily we were far enough away to get the heck away from it. So no, no wild, thank you very much. And I HATE snakes.

One more funny, during the last of the fires around here (had an inch of rain the night with no power), people were looking for their animals and posting on Facebook for dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, goats, sheep, etc. they'd found or were in shelters or at the fairgrounds. One local posted on FB that she'd found a stray dog, no chip, no collar and it had been pretty aggressive at first but she'd been able to get it inside, bathed it and got the ashes and debris out of its coat. She posted a photo on FB. Guess what it was? Yep, a coyote, a fairly young looking specimen. I laughed so hard. Kind of her although I bet she freaked when she found out what it was. Yikes!
Once inside the cave, Fish laid Boss on the table so they could better see his injuries. Leroy hurried for the lantern and the medical bag, hoping the dog would live, would recover; glad he hadn't been wearing his jacket. Blanket fibers in his wounds would not help with the bacteria from the bear. Boss was only a few months past his first birthday and a wonderful animal, far more than a pet. As fond of Leroy was of the dog, he shuddered to think about Fish's reaction if they lost Boss.

Back at the table, Fish was stroking the dog, murmuring to him. When Boss licked his hand, his knees buckled but he caught himself. His dog, his trusty friend and companion, needed him.

With the lantern on and Fish wearing the headband light, the two men carefully examined their friend. They found claw marks on his side; however, the bear had been so quickly interrupted by Fish's shot and Boss's self-propelled plunge into the snow that the claw had lightly scored the skin but hadn't gone any deeper and the wounds were no longer bleeding. They were sure Boss was scared and hurting but they'd clean him up, keep an eye out for any problems and give him lots of love and whatever extra treats they had. He'd be fine in a few days.

Knowing they couldn't give him the pain relievers they used, they decided to do what Fish did for Leroy, pack the area with ice to numb the pain. Leroy took a handful of icy snow from the cooler, put it in a bag and placed it on the bear score. Fish didn't budge from his side, stroking his head and talking softly to him.

They gave him cool spruce tea to drink, a favorite Boss treat and a piece of bear jerky to chew, giving the humans a vicious pleasure. Then Fish sat in his chair with a warm towel and Leroy gently placed Boss on his lap.

They left the ice on for 10 minutes, half the time usual for a human hurt and watched his eyes. He looked sleepy now and soon dozed off. Satisfied the pain was numbed enough so their friend could sleep, they followed the same regime Fish had with Leroy in cleaning the wound, cool water and mild soap for 8 minutes. He slept through it and the men spent the rest of the day keeping an eye on him. When he woke in the late afternoon, Fish carried him outside for a few minutes while Leroy stood guard over his family.

While Boss was quiet all evening, except when he was gnawing on his favorite bone, Leroy thought he was probably more scared than hurt. The score marks weren't hot or warm to the touch. He wasn't whimpering, he wasn't lethargic, he was just quiet, which wasn't that unusual for him in the evenings. He had two additional cleanings before Leroy carried him to bed and Fish climbed in with him. Leroy gave dog and son a kiss on the head and Fish gave him a wan smile. "Thank you – for everything."

"He'll be all right. And he'll have bragging rights if there's a scar."

Fish just nodded and lay down, holding his dog.

Both were relieved when Boss was his usual exuberant self the next morning. Fish was too quiet and Leroy hoped his kid would let him help, he knew yesterday had been a horrible ordeal for him. Mid-morning, Leroy made up an excuse to go to the truck and Fish looked up, fear in his eyes. "Take my bow and arrows with you. And the handgun."
Leaving the rifle with Fish, Leroy walked down the path, belatedly noticing it was not snowing. He had no idea if it had snowed yesterday after the attack, although it hadn't been later when they took Boss outside. Shaking his head, he came to a sudden stop at the truck, nodding to himself.

As he'd expected, there wasn't much left of the bear's bloody carcass. Most of it had been eaten or chewed off and carried away. Paws and legs were gone as well as the entrails. What little was left lay in a tangled mess of bloody fur and there were bloody paw prints of varying sizes in every direction but toward the cave. Leroy turned away, that was one fur he didn't want. He was tempted to burn it but decided to just leave it.

He didn't say anything to Fish about the lack of snow, just told him it looked like the bear had fed several hungry critters. Fish nodded, that seemed right.

That evening, Fish looked at him. "Did it snow today?"

"Not while I was out there and not later when I took Boss out."

"Good, let's get the hell out of here."

"Yeah, I'm ready too. If we leave early enough tomorrow, we'll be into the next valley, maybe all the way through it before dark. The twisty mountain isn't until we head from valley 5 into valley 6, the last valley. The last part is more of a flat meadow. From there, we'll hit the paved road."

"Let's call it 7 valleys, even though one isn't. Be less confusing that way. This valley, with the lake, is #1 and we have 6 more to get through before we get to the road."

Leroy agreed and they got busy sorting. With all the false alarms they'd had for no snow days, they were pretty well organized and they'd already taken about a third of the load to the truck before the bear attack.

They packed everything but what they'd need in the morning, boiling the rest of their eggs to take with them. They'd make hot tea and fill the thermoses in the morning, make sure a water jug and Boss's water bottle were accessible in the cab. The cooler would be stowed under the hard shell, the rest of the food would be in Leroy's old pack and stashed behind the seat as would the sleeping bags, blankets, Fish's furs and their clothes. Boss would be fine eating jerky unless they stopped to cook.

With the cave door shut, it was hard to tell first light; however, both men were up before dawn. Fish lit the fire and put the water on to boil for tea, then stacked the rest of the wood by the door to take with them. Thinking about that, he removed enough for about 3 days of fires, more if used conservatively and stacked it close to the fire circle along with kindling. Then he added a small box of matches, one of Leroy's lighters, the animal bone spit, a couple of his bone fire tools, several pieces of deerskin, one of their 5 gallon water jugs of filtered water, 3 of his clay bowls, a wooden spoon, an extra shiv he'd made, a flashlight, Leroy's log chair, the extra sled, 2 pairs of warm socks, Leroy's red flannel shirt, his fur embellished jeans, a pair of thermal long johns, the 'extra' sleeping bag Leroy brought and one of his furs for whoever might seek refuge after them. He thought about leaving his bow and arrows behind but felt naked without them and they still had over a week until they'd reach civilization. Maybe he'd give them to Chuck Payton and he could get them back up here. They'd drawn a big black arrow on the door, pointing to the granite piece that hid the latch. On the granite piece, they'd put a big X and a smiley face, hoping the ink from the marking pen wouldn't wash off or fade too badly.

Within 30 minutes, they were loading the truck with their packs and chairs. Ten minutes after that, they searched the cave for the last time, using the marking pen to write the dates Fish and Boss
took possession, when Leroy joined them and today's date. Everyone had a potty break and then they were on their way.

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Fish drove the first leg as he wanted experience while on familiar territory. He smiled as they drove north over the ridge separating their valley from the next. "One down, 6 to go."

He drove for five hours before Leroy noticed Boss starting to squirm. "Think it's time for a pit stop for our boy here."

"Ok, see any signs for gas stations or fast food?"

Leroy chuckled, glad to see Fish regaining his equilibrium after the bear attack. As the skies were still clear, they slipped the harness and leash on Boss, making sure nothing rubbed against the bear scores and stopped to stretch, take their own breaks and get some fresh air.

Twenty minutes later, they were back in the truck. Leroy was driving now, he wanted to give Fish a break and a chance to look at the scenery as they drove away from it. To his astonishment, in another three hours the truck was climbing up another ridge, the one that separated Valley #6 from #5. And it was only 1500!

Valley #5 proved to be more of a challenge as they wove through trees, boulders and large unidentified snow-covered objects they assumed were larger boulders. They dipped and climbed and at one point felt the truck sinking only to have the wheels gain traction and move them onto stable ground, or snow.

Fish opened the map for that area. "There's no lake noted for this valley, ah there is an old coal mine, though."

Leroy made a derisive noise, "Coal mine, that figures!"

Remembering the stories he'd been told about Stillwater, Pennsylvania, Fish chuckled, "And yet once again you climbed out of it!"

He directed Leroy to a spot a mile due west, that would take them out of the way of the old mine. And he made a note to let someone know that Coal Mine #291 might now be open to daylight instead of underground.

By 1630, it was dark and spotting a grove of trees with the headlights, they decided to stop for the night. Leroy looked at the trees and then at the map, yep, there was his 'x'. He pointed it out to Fish, "I stayed here on my way in."

"Great!"

They quickly had a fire going in the snow, made sure the tarps and tent were still in place and were eating a hot dinner before 1800. When they'd washed up and brushed their teeth, they hauled all the foodstuffs, including the cooler back in its rope net, up into the trees. With no snow having fallen for a few days, they didn't want to run the risk of a repeat performance with a hungry bear or wolf pack.

When that was done, they snuffed the fire, now down to embers, and moved to the back of the truck, placing the flat rock they'd found to hold the fire bowl and starting another fire there, under the raised edge of the tarp. Setting their chairs and lantern up, the men read for a couple of hours before extinguishing the fire, making sure the first fire was out and retreating into the tent with the
dog, lantern, heater, books and chairs. Their table sat in the middle of the tent and they played cards for another hour with the heater on before the three of them climbed out of the truck for their final potty break and then turned in, switching off the heater, zipping the tent door closed and snuggling into sleeping bags and furs, the end of the first day of their journey out of the mountains.

Up at first light, they retrieved the bear bags and cooler, made hot oatmeal with walnuts, raisins, a spoonful of molasses and a little of their homemade brown sugar. Making more spruce tea, they filled their thermoses, checked the water jug, turned the table over inside the tent so it wouldn't topple, made sure everything was packed away either under the hard shell or in the cab and hit the road, or rather the snow.

Fish took the wheel while Leroy realized why it took him 4 days to get to Fish's valley on the way in. This valley was huge! Looking at the map, he saw they were about a quarter of the way through it. He nodded, he'd been searching for Tim as he drove. When Fish reached over to pat his shoulder he realized he'd said that aloud. "I was pretty sure you'd be near the lake, just made sense. I'm glad it didn't occur to me that from the creek embankment you wouldn't have known about the lake."

Fish grinned, "Are you psychic?"

Leroy shook his head, "You sure your memory isn't returning? That's a very Abby – and Tony – thing to say. Abby swears I am and Tony half-believes her."

"Because you hear him and come up behind him without him knowing?"

"Yeah, that's part of it."

Fish chuckled, "Is the other part the fact that you know him so well you can tell what he's thinking?"

"Yep, big part. And he's never figured it out."

"Or he just lets you think that."

"Geez, when did you turn into a mind reader?"

"After living in a cave with you for 6 months. And maybe there's stuff getting through the fog."

"You really think that?"

Fish shook his head, "No. Sorry, I was joking; didn't mean to get your hopes up."

Leroy grumbled, he was fine with Fish being Fish.

Although they drove another 5 hours before stopping again, the drive didn't seem as long today as it had yesterday. Perhaps because they knew they were making headway.

They stopped for a break before tackling what they estimated was another hour's drive to the edge of the valley. They looked ahead at the mountains they'd cross to reach Valley #4. They took their time, stretching, walking around a bit, weapons in hand and Boss still in his jacket, harness and leash. His claw scrapes were healing well and he seemed fine although reluctant to get too far from either of his humans, which was fine with them.

Locking the truck, they walked for about 30 minutes before returning to the truck for a cold lunch, a final break and on they went. Before they left, Leroy noticed signs of a headache in Fish. "You ok, want some Ibuprofen?"
"Yeah, I think so but not 3, I don't want to sleep."

"Cut one in half, take 1 ½? That should take the edge off."

"Good idea."

Once Fish had the medication in him, they continued, slowly beginning their climb over the mountain to #4. That was exciting, they were making progress! With the weather holding, the climb wasn't bad although the flip side, the drive down, was challenging. The rocks were slippery and Leroy handled the wheel accordingly, slowly zigzagging his way down.

When they reached the bottom of the rocks, he stopped as Fish was looking green. He was right as the younger man jumped out of the truck and vomited into snow-covered shrubs. Leroy took the truck out of gear, set the parking brake and walked around to his kid with a thermos of water. "Your stomach any better now?"

Fish shrugged, taking the thermos and rinsing his mouth before sitting on a rock. "I think so, thanks. Man, that really hit me hard!"

"Yeah, it did. Take it easy, get some air. We're out of the longest valley, we can relax here overnight, tackle the next bit tomorrow."

Leroy stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders, trying not to read too much into this.

Fish half turned toward him, "You mean camp in the valley, though, right? We're still up pretty high."

"Yes, but it should only be a couple hours' drive to the center. And we're off the rocks. Still in the snow; can't guarantee it'll be smooth but it won't be as bad as coming down the rocks."

Finally, the younger man nodded, "Ok, I'm ready."

"Good, how's your head?"

"Better. Headache's receded. I can still feel it but it's not throbbing."

Frowning, Leroy helped him up and into the truck. Then he climbed in behind the wheel and they drove on into Valley #4.

That night, the end of their second day, they had a hot dinner, washed up, handled the food and cooler and were in their tarp room by 1900. Fish decided to lay down to read and 15 minutes later, Leroy removed his book and tucked him into the sleeping bag and furs. He and Boss sat out, partially under the stars, partially under the tarp, for another 2 hours before taking a quick walk and then heading to their respective beds.

Hours later, Leroy woke suddenly. It wasn't light out, what…then he heard Fish, "Leroy, I need to go out."

They had a rule about that, neither of them went outside after dark without letting the other know and certainly not without weapons. With the privy hole inside the cave, it hadn't mattered but now it did. Leroy cleared his throat, "Ok, I'm awake. I'm coming with you."

"'K." He heard Fish trying to get out of the sleeping bag and the tangle of furs on top and quickly reached over to help him. Shoes and jackets on, they stood on the bumper of the truck.
Back in the tent, Fish was asleep again as soon as his head hit the mattress. Leroy pursed his lips. He hadn't been keeping track but he'd swear his headaches were happening more frequently. And the vomiting today, well, that could very well be from the rocky ride. He guessed it was easier to be the driver, then you were focused and not thinking about the next twist, turn or bump.

Tomorrow's drive would take them out of #4 and into #3 and as he remembered, that was the one with only one visible stand of trees, where he'd had to turn back because of the snow. Driving from there over into #2 was going to be another rough ride. He hoped the transition tomorrow would be easier. It should be, as he remembered, although it had been nearly 6 months, the elevation hadn't changed much. Which probably meant that this valley was more likely another prairie or plain.

He hadn't thought he would but he did fall back to sleep, waking when he heard Boss moving around the tent. He started to move, knowing the dog needed to go out, when he heard Fish. "Leroy, I'm taking Boss for a quick walk. I have the handgun, my bow and arrows. We'll be back in 5 and then I'll make breakfast. You stay cozy, it's pretty chilly this morning. I'm putting the rifle on your right side here."

Leroy sank back into his comfy warm bed, deciding to take his kid's advice. He must have fallen back to sleep, unusual for him, as the next thing he knew, Fish was passing a cup of coffee under his nose. "Hey, wake up! Thought we could both use some coffee this morning."

He smiled, Fish sounded better. "That smells great! All right, let me get some clothes on." He called out as Fish turned to leave, "Oh no, you don't, come back with my coffee."

Over his shoulder Fish smirked, "It's mine, not yours. Still in the pot. Don't be long, the oatmeal is almost ready."
They made good time that day, day three, and to the relief of both men, the climb from one valley to the next wasn't bad. Leroy did the driving. Noticing Fish squinting, he handed him a pair of sunglasses. "No wonder you had a headache, the glare from the sun shining on all that white snow is nearly blinding!"

Fish made a face, "Duh, guess I should have known."

"Really? You've frequently driven in the mountains in 10 feet of snow on sunny days?"

"Point."

"We blue-and-green-eyed people are more susceptible to glare. Gotta take care of our eyes, wear those until dark or it starts to snow."

"Will do, thanks."

"Don't thank me, I should have thought of it weeks ago."

It took most of the day but they finally reached the only trees they'd seen close to their path. It was only 1600 but they stopped for the day. They were both tired and in need of fresh air and exercise before tackling the rest of their journey. After a snack and a long drink of water for each of them, including Boss, they moved the food and cooler into the trees, locked the truck, each man zipping a set of keys into his jacket, and taking their weapons, compass, knapsack with water, gloves, caps and scarves, clipping on their snowshoes, picking up their trek poles and, led by a blanketed, harnessed Boss, they set out to explore a little of Valley #3.

They trekked for an hour, letting Boss run off leash for a few minutes. He returned as soon as Fish whistled and they slipped the leash back on him. Back at the camp, they decided to cook in the truck bed, setting up the coffee can stove and lighting a can of Sterno a safe distance from the crackling fire in the fire bowl. Tonight, they'd have some of their venison, slices of sweet potatoes and a packet of vegetables, probably green beans. Working together, they wrapped the sweet potatoes in foil and set them in the fire bowl. When Fish could easily stick a fork in them, they seasoned the venison and stirred the green beans into the skillet with onion, garlic, a few bits of almond and other seasonings. As Leroy was the acknowledged grill master, he cooked the venison, putting it on the grill over the fire first to get flavors sealed in and some of the fat out and then moving the grill, meat and all, over the Sterno stove. When they pulled the sweet potatoes out of the fire, Fish opened the foil and put some of their brown sugar mixture in them. He shook his head, "Sure wish we had some of that syrup! Mixing it with the snow as you did at Christmas - that was so good, tasted like ice cream."

"Shaved ice. There's a variation I had once where there's ice cream in the middle, that's what it reminded me of."

"Yum! Huh, no time to make more syrup."

"We have maple syrup, could try that. And I've been thinking about time. What would you think of taking a day off, staying over here for another day?"

Fish stopped to think about it before nodding, "I'd like that. We could do some more walking and
I'd like a bath."

Leroy huffed, "Maybe it's time we finally see how the inflatable canoe does with warm water!"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, it's obvious we don't need to use it in the water, so why not? We'll have to put it up at the end here and make sure water doesn't run under the tarps to the tent or wood, but yeah, that sounds good to me. Build a fire in the snow to heat water in both buckets, then have you get in and I'll pour the water over you. Even if the canoe melts, you'll have a warm water rinse!"

"It won't melt, the water won't be that hot!"

After enjoying their dinner, they extinguished the Sterno, leaving it and the little stove to cool down while they heated water and washed the skillet, bowls, utensils, their thermoses and Boss's water bottle and lastly, the grill. They walked away from the truck to dump the wash and rinse water, Boss adding to it.

It was a beautiful night, if very cold, and the three of them sat over the fire bowl for a few hours, watching the stars.

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The next morning, they had both buckets on the grill, heating while they had breakfast. Scouring the dirty breakfast dishes with snow, they tucked them away to wash after both had bathed.

First, they tucked the tarp covering the wood underneath it, then rolled another tarp across the truck bed at the edge of the tent so that both tarps would block any spillage. Next, another tarp was placed where the bathtub/canoe would go, the back end of it rolled up with several large rocks in it to act as an additional barrier for any stray water. After that, the canoe was inflated and placed on its tarp. Keeping a blanket wrapped around him, he didn't want hyperthermia because he wanted to be clean, Fish stripped and sat in the canoe, the blanket around his shoulders while Leroy brought both buckets of nicely steaming water over and carefully poured it over.

Fish sighed in pleasure, "Feels so good!" Putting the blanket on the tarp, he slumped down so he was under water up to his elbows. He quickly washed, rinsed and then grabbed the towel he'd left on the tarp.

"Uh, this is where it's going to get tricky."

"Here, use a second towel, we have enough. One for your top, one for your bottom. Then scoot into the tent to get dressed, the heater's on in there."

"Thanks!" Following Leroy's directions, Fish was quickly dressed and they carefully moved the canoe to the edge of the truck bed, pouring out the water, angling it away from the back of the truck.

"Was it worth it?"

"Yes! I finally feel clean after all these months, since the last swim in the lake."

"Ok, then I'll go for it too. More water's heating."

They traded places, Fish hanging the damp towels to dry on two of the trek poles close to the fire. When Leroy's bathwater was ready, they did the same thing. Leroy undressed, got in the canoe,
smiling happily when the nicely warm water was poured in. He too slumped down and got more of his body wet. Soaping up and rinsing, he was out in minutes, grabbing the towels, drying off and heading for the tent where the heater was still going.

When he returned they again moved the canoe and poured the water out, again angling it away from the truck. Fish shook his head, "We'll need to be careful tonight, that's going to freeze. Don't want any of us to be inadvertently ice skating at midnight!"

"Good point. We'll have to climb down in the middle and walk around the ice. Let's mark it before it gets dark tonight."

Fish nodded and after Leroy hung his towels to dry, they looked at each other, laughing. "Baths in a canoe. There's a story!"

"Hope the thing will still float! Be fun to take it out on the smaller waterways at home."

"Is it crowded everywhere back there?"

"In and around DC, yes. Crowded and noisy, busy. I'm so used to it I don't think about it, but yes, it is a world capital and there is always someone - a Prime Minister or heir to a throne visiting. Or big legislation, brings out the lobbyists, protesters exercising their 1st Amendment rights, people who visit hoping to see their government in action. As I said, it's always a beehive of activity.

"As for the surrounding states, Maryland is good, there are a lot of smaller towns and Baltimore is a great city. Anywhere along Chesapeake Bay or the Atlantic beaches is crowded during the summer and on weekends when the weather's good.

"Once you get away from the metro areas, Virginia has many wooded areas and smaller towns. There are several waterways for boating, fishing and swimming…well, there are lakes, guessing you won't be interested in any activities on waterways with currents and tides. Lot of family activities but plenty for couples, singles and older folk. Art, theater, music, history, military, any interest or hobby you can think of. The area seems jammed together when you first get there, over time you become familiar with your favorite parts and then it's easier. I will say the traffic is horrible most of the time. Sane people take public transportation whenever possible."

"North is southern Pennsylvania and it's nice, get out of the cities and again there are smaller towns, even very small towns like Stillwater although that's farther north. From my place in Alexandria, it's a 2 ½ hour drive to the Delaware coast where things are pretty laid back. My wife's family used to have a little cottage on the beach there, we'd take Kelly as often as possible."

Fish smiled, "I can't wait to see the ocean! How far can you see from that beach?"

"A few miles, not as far as the shipping lines, which suited me fine. We'd see sailboats, an occasional yacht, sometimes fishing boats."

"When we get back, that's one of the places I want to go."

"Great, make a list! With me or Ellie, huh?"

The younger man smiled, blushing a little at the same time. "I should be worried about her and the whole Tim McGee issue but I'm not."

Leroy shot him a questioning look and Fish shrugged "You've been telling me I'm the same guy although with different experiences. If she loves Tim, there's a big chance she'll love me too."
Leroy ruffled his hair and gave him a big hug. "I think she's going to feel the same way I do, although not the father-son part!"

Both chuckled as Fish put more wood on the fire. "Felt good to get the laundry done and me washed."

"Yeah, me too."

They were quiet for a minute and then Fish squinted, "Eat lunch, go for a walk and then pack up? Take off between 1330 and 1400? That'll give us 2 to 2 ½ hours of daylight to get over into #2."

Leroy looked at him and laughed, "You hungry?"

"No, are you?"

"No. How about we pack up, go for a walk and then take off. We can snack on the way or eat when we get over the rocks. Would rather you not be sick again."

Fish grinned, holding up two odd looking bracelets. "Found these in the med kit when I went looking for something for motion sickness. And something called ginger root."

"Wow, Jimmy and Ducky thought of everything! McGee doesn't normally get carsick but does get seasick, on any kind of boat on any kind of water. Sea Bands are acupressure bands that have helped with that – along with the ginger. I bet they added them when they heard about the canoe."

"Good, so I won't be sick but I agree about waiting to eat. We're only two ridges, a valley and a meadow away from paved road! How long from there?"

"At least 3 days solid driving, more if we run into storms or deep snow on the road. I doubt it gets plowed often, if at all. We'll have to pull off somewhere to sleep but we don't need to get into the deep woods."

Fish looked at him quizzically before nodding, "The woods got to you. For me it's the creek, for you it's the woods."

"Damn creek did its best to kill you. Damn woods tried to eat my truck. And they're too dark, no sunlight, creepy. Easier living in a cave than amongst all those trees."

"Because there was clear space in the cave – and sunlight in the mornings. Before the door, anyway."

"Yeah. You asked me about being crowded at home. Crowded, surrounded, almost smothered is how I felt in the deep woods."

"You ever felt that way before?"

Leroy shook his head. "No. And maybe it's the circumstances but we're not driving far off the road to sleep."

"Ok. With the snow on the ground there should be sunlight – you know, reflecting off it."

The older man huffed, "Aw, I'll be all right, you're the one I should worry about, not me."

"Why? I was rescued and saved in the deep woods. Although the camp was in a clearing."

"Yeah, it was nice. About the only place I saw that made a good campsite."
Fish's eyes twinkled, "You're still pissed off at the sinkhole trying to get you." He grinned, "Might show up in a story sometime."

"One of yours?"

Fish nodded and smiled when the other man chuckled and ruffled his hair, glad he'd managed to banish his dad's feelings about the woods. It reminded him of something with talking trees but he couldn't pin down the memory.

He was frustrated with his brain. It would throw bits of things at him, like part of a memory about a story he'd read or maybe it was a movie, but he never got anything further. He didn't know how to push for more or if that was the cause of his headaches. They were coming more frequently although he hadn't mentioned it to Leroy, figuring he already knew. Worried about running out of the only thing that helped, the Ibuprofen, Fish dialed down the number he took from 3 to 1 ½. That at least knocked the pain back so he could function. And those sunglasses had really helped his eyes.

Idly he wondered if the acupressure from the sea bands would help stave off the headaches too. He'd try wearing them continually for a couple of days, see what happened. Or it could have been something with the altitude, the cave was at 11,000 feet after all. And some people couldn't handle high altitudes, maybe he was one of them. Maybe he had headaches from that and now he was having them from the reduction in altitude. Unfortunately, he thought it had more to do with his days in the water. His rescuer Margaret told him he had had a vicious looking cut on his skull that was now a scar covered by his hair. He'd sort of forgotten about that. Just as well, there was nothing either he or Leroy could have done about it.

Boss already had his jacket, harness and leash on; after packing the truck, securing the table, stowing the canoe away, making sure the fire was out, they clipped their snowshoes on, grabbed the trek poles, weapons, Leroy's knapsack, checked for extra truck keys, put sunglasses on and set out on their walk.

As if reading his earlier thoughts, Leroy looked at him. "First thing when we get into town, I'm taking you to a doctor. I remember seeing a clinic."

Fish tilted his head, "I believe the headaches are due in part to the altitude, we were up pretty high and a lot of people can't handle that and now we're changing altitude every day. Plus, you said humidity makes McGee sick, maybe this is another side of that. The other part was probably the glare off the snow, not wearing sunglasses. I'd rather get to Virginia and let your doctors fuss over me. If I see a doctor here, he's going to want to do whatever to me and then I'll be stuck here rather than in the cave or being on my way home. I decided to wear the sea bands for a few days, see if that makes a difference."

There was silence for several minutes before Leroy made a noise, "We'll wait and see how you do on the road back to town. Doesn't matter if you don't mention them; as I said before, the tells are the same as McGee's."

Their walk was shorter today as both were eager to resume their journey. Boss had a few minutes off leash, returning after a scant 15 minutes of running on his own. He did have fun getting as much snow as possible on his humans.

Back at the truck, they had everything secured and Boss was in the cab when they spotted three wolves enter the snow field, stopping to look at the strange object, the truck.

The two men looked at each other, shook their heads at the timing, grateful they weren't still
walking, and slammed the doors. They couldn't burn rubber as they left so driver Fish laid on the horn and watched as the wolves ran from the strange noise and object.

Leroy shrugged, "Wish we'd thought of that before. Maybe turned the truck around and drove toward them, honking the horn."

Fish shook his head, "That was a larger pack and a lot hungrier than these guys. If a flying rabbit and chicken didn't stop them, I doubt the horn would have."

The other man nodded in agreement.

Climbing up and over the ridge wasn't half as bad as the previous day's experience and Leroy wondered if he'd gotten his valleys mixed up. Fish huffed, "Probably more snow on that last one when you came over, might have made it easier than it was yesterday. And maybe this ridge has more snow now which makes it easier. Depends on the terrain I guess. Or something like that."

"Sounds good to me! We're over, that's what counts. Welcome to #2!"

"We made it, yay! Attaboys to both of us! Do you remember how long this is? It's only…1455."

"According to my notes, it took me 5 hours to cross this, what I called Valley 1, our Valley #2. That would put us on the ridge in full dark, at 2000. How about we drive until it's almost dark, then stop for the night?"

Fish nodded his agreement. By 1800 it was almost dark and they decided to stop for the night, it was too dangerous to attempt to drive over an unknown, snow covered mountain ridge in the dark. They soon saw a copse of trees tall enough for the cooler and bear bags and pulled close.

Parking the truck under the trees, the men took out what they wanted for dinner, cold jerky was fine, they'd had a hot breakfast, snacked on the way and weren't very hungry, and then climbed in the back of the truck to hang the cooler and bear bags. With the extra advantage of the truck height, they moved the food up as high as they could without risk of having to climb the trees to get the bags or cooler down.

That done, they moved the truck away several feet, deciding to have a fire in the snow between the vehicle and the trees, a detractor for any curious, hungry animals. After that was burning cheerily, they retired to the back of the truck, setting up the fire bowl, their chairs and relaxed. Throughout the evening, they saw a few animals but the fire in the snow kept them away from the trees and the truck. Twice, Boss gave one of his low warning growls before relaxing.

They left the fire in the snow to burn all night. Fish's Survival book stated that it was commonly done among hunters and winter backpackers, that if there wasn't any wind, the fire was not burning directly under a tree or within sparking range of a tree, it was safe.

Enjoying the clear night, they watched the stars for several minutes before turning the heater on in the tent and extinguishing the fire bowl. Boss jumped down for a pit stop and then returned, making sure the snow he shook off flew everywhere. Luckily, his humans were familiar with his sense of humor and kept him outside the tent, the zipper closed, until he finished. The end of a successful day three.

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When Tony reached the Navy Yard, he hurried down to Autopsy, finding Ducky and Jimmy standing over a laptop with smiles on their faces. "Good morning! Anything special causing those smiles?"
Jimmy grinned at him, "No snow in the mountains! They've had three days without snow. They've gotta be on their way." Tony returned the grin, he'd viewed the Wyoming weather news online before he left for work.

Ellie and Bob came in, carrying a tray of hot drinks. "We saw that too. The drinks are from the director. He's on his way to the Pentagon for a meeting but wants us to celebrate."

Abby came bouncing in with a CafPow, "Hey guys, no snow, day 3! How long do you think they'd wait before leaving?"

Ducky chuckled when they all looked at him. "What makes you think I'd know?"

Tony smiled, "You know Gibbs better than most of us."

"Yes, well, I'm sure there would be a mutual decision as to when to leave. However, if it were me I would have packed the truck yesterday and be on my way this morning." He looked at his watch. "Dawn should be arriving in Wyoming in just a few minutes."

Now Tony made a face, "We don't know how long it took Gibbs to drive from that meadow he was in when he called, to wherever he found Tim."

Ellie looked at him, "The valley with a lake, that's where Tim is - was."

Bob wanted to point out that with what they knew, the lake and the caves couldn't be seen from the creek but then they didn't know where Tim and his rescuers had gone once they passed the 'G' rock. And he didn't feel like being the guy that always burst the bubble, saw the downside of everything.

He scrunched his face in thought, "You know I hadn't thought about this before, but if Tim's rescuers are still with him, there's going to be a crowd in the truck. Gibbs said they left Grid 18 via boat."

That invoked several thoughtful looks but Jimmy shrugged it off, "So they're crowded. We've seen photos of the truck, the back of it is plenty big and we know from Chuck that Gibbs had plenty of tarps."

"And the fire bowl and Gibbs' heater." This from Abby.

Ducky shook his head, "A good observation, Bob. However, we won't know the answer until we hear from them. If not in the next few days, then we agree something's happened to the sat phone and they'll call when they reach Chuck in West Boston."

Nodding, they raised their cups in a little toast to their friends, finished their beverages and returned to work.

With no bodies or profiles to work on, Ducky called Penny Langston to talk with her about the weather in Wyoming.
Chapter 17

It was still dark when Leroy woke. Tapping his watch, he grimaced when he saw the time.
"Fish! It's 0630 and still dark."

A sleepy voice answered, "Crap! We pushed our luck too far."
"Might just be overcast. I gotta pee, I'll go look."
"Hang on, I do too and we may as well let Boss out."

They got the lantern and heater going, glad the solar charger had been charged yesterday. Boss wasn't crazy about his jacket and harness being slipped on but a word from Fish had him standing still.

Suited up for the cold, the trio left the tent, stepping onto the hard-shell. Opening the tailgate, they climbed down with Boss. Looking up, the men were relieved to see dark clouds but no snow falling nor did they notice fresh snow on the ground.

Extinguishing the last of the snow fire, they decided to make a run for it, hoping to get over the ridge, across the meadow/valley, find the dirt road that led to the pavement before the storm hit. While they warmed the engine, they quickly secured everything, moving their blankets and sleeping bags to the cab in case the storm broke before they stopped for the day. Then they drove to the trees and Fish once again climbed in the truck bed and brought everything down. The bear bags were put in the cab behind the bench seat, while the cooler was secured in the back.

They were a little crowded in the cab today, with their weapons, food, sleeping bags, blankets, heater, lantern, stove, snowshoes, poles and water jugs tucked either behind the seat or in the floor well. Neither man cared and Boss wasn't complaining. One last potty break and they were on their way.

They were on the ridge in ninety minutes. Fish drove and found the trip down into valley/meadow #1 a lot easier on his stomach then the one two days ago. Driving another two hours, across the meadow, they made a pit stop by the trees where Leroy camped on the way in. Boss waited long enough for his harness to be fastened over his jacket and then nearly pulled Leroy out of the truck in his hurry. They stayed there long enough to stretch their legs before climbing back in the truck, switching drivers. They knew they were close to the cutoff and were anxious to get out of the mountains before the storm broke.

The dirt road was hard to find, buried as it was under several feet of snow. After driving west to east and back again twice, looking for the huge boulders that bordered each side, they finally decided, by process of elimination, that the small white lumps about 10 feet apart were probably them.

They decided it was a matter of perspective. Driving south, the end of the path climbed a hill so Leroy would have been driving up and the rocks would look larger from his perspective below them. Then too, the road now had several feet of snow, bringing it closer to level with the rocks. Both men were amused but satisfied with their rationalizations.

When they later told Chuck, he groaned, "My fault, I'm the one that told you about the huge
boulders as a landmark. I've never driven all the way there in the snow and the road's easy to see coming back when there isn't 10 feet of snow covering everything!"

As they finally drove onto the road that would take them to the paved road, the storm broke and the windshield wipers had a hard time keeping up with the snowfall.

Three hours later, after a very slow trip through the blizzard, they were happily surprised to find the road ending at a "T" intersection.

Leroy grinned, "We're out! Turn right for town or left for parts unknown."

Fish rolled his eyes, "No thanks, had enough unknowns for two lifetimes!"

It'd taken them longer to get down to the road than it took Leroy to drive up it but they were out of the mountains and could relax. Even if it snowed for days, they had shelter, food and water – and a paved road.

Fish thought it amusing that Leroy claimed this was a paved road when the truth was they were still driving in thick snow. They drove about 10 miles before the blizzard turned into a white-out. Leroy, who was driving, pulled over.

"We'll be fine here."

Fish made a face, "Easy for you to say! Boss is squirming and I need to go, too. And we haven't had anything substantial to eat today."

"Ok, let's get a little farther off the road and get situated in the back."

Moving off the road several more feet, the men put their jackets, scarves and caps on. They were both wearing flannel-lined jeans, now they took turns sliding their uninsulated shell pants on over them. With Boss and all their stuff there was no way they could both dress at the same time. The dog sat in Fish's lap while Leroy got ready and then they switched. When they were ready, the two of them got Boss's jacket and harness on.

Leroy laughed, "I remember putting Kelly's snowsuit on her when she was little, took forever. We'd get her outside and guaranteed in a few minutes she'd need to potty."

Fish grinned, "I can relate to that. If you'll excuse me…"

Holding Boss, he patted his pocket, yep he had the handgun, he carefully threw his snowshoes out onto the snow and then slipped out, still holding the dog, landing on them and clipping them to his feet. He sank a little but successfully grabbed the trek poles Leroy handed him.

Leroy stayed in the truck, covering them. Not that he expected any other animals out in this but he wasn't taking any chances. Fish carried Boss to a tree that didn't have as much snow under it. "Ok bud, there you go."

When Boss was finished, he waited patiently for Fish, although the pup whined a little when he was picked up again. He really preferred to walk. Remembering Leroy's story about the cat who insisted on being let out into the snow, Fish held on.

He and Boss stood under the tarp shelter while Leroy found his own tree and then the men got busy moving their gear from the cab to the tent. Fish grinned when he noticed the truck was conveniently parked under a tree. Not only would it provide some shelter, they could get the food and cooler into it that night. After all, if they were out in this storm, other hungry animals might be
In a few minutes, they'd removed the snow from the tarp and had a fire going in the fire bowl. The snow had let up a bit. It was still falling but it was no longer a white-out. They decided to have a big meal now and then snack later before putting the food up.

As Leroy dug through his pack, looking for his wool glove liners, he found a plastic object, hard to the touch. Taking it out of the pack, he grinned, "Look, kiddo! My radio! Shall we try for some music or would you prefer a talk station?"

Fish looked at him, "Uh, I don't know. Maybe music first?"

"Sorry, I forgot. All right, your first taste of civilization."

He hit the power button but nothing happened. He made a face, "The last time I listened to it was that first night on the meadow. Battery's dead and I don't want to waste a charge on this, we could need it for the heater or lantern, even the truck."

Fish nodded in agreement as he poked through the cooler. "I wish we had some eggs. And bread. Mm, toast."

"Eggs and toast will have to wait. How about double cooking potatoes, sweet potatoes and venison?"

"That sounds good too – and a packet of green beans. I'll start washing and cutting the potatoes and sweet potatoes if you want to get the foil, onions, garlic and oil out." He stopped, "Do you remember if either of us has taken a vitamin since we left?"

Leroy shook his head, "I haven't and I don't remember you doing so either."

"We've eaten pretty well but we'd better start again. Don't want to let your friends know we have any left!"

The other man snorted and moved to the bag with the vegetables, herbs, spices and one of their many cleaned and folded saved pieces of foil. Grabbing everything for Fish, he tucked the salt and pepper in one pocket and the pieces of foil in the other.

Once the potatoes were sliced and packaged with the onion, garlic and a few dabs of olive oil with a separate packet for Boss with no seasonings, both were tucked in the fire bowl. Leroy prepped the meat for grilling. After using his favorite seasonings, he let it sit for a few minutes, putting a little olive oil on the grill. Finally, he put the meat on the grill. That was Fish's cue to stand guard at the back of the truck, Boss kept firmly on a short leash away from the grill. Once the meat was seared, it was covered in foil and put back on the grill, further away from the flames where it would cook slowly.

The potatoes came out of the fire when the meat was almost done. The olive oil in the skillet was the right temperature as Fish popped the slices of potatoes and sweet potatoes in, putting Boss' special packet aside. While he browned those, adding the roasted onion and garlic, the meat was removed from the heat and allowed to rest for a few minutes. In the last couple of minutes, Fish emptied the packet of green beans into the skillet with the potatoes.

While Fish was finishing that, Leroy took out two of their flatter bowls and forks. They'd use their knives for the venison steaks.

Having spotted a spruce tree, the men had tea with their feast and cut extra spruce for later. Boss
had some cooled spruce tea along with a piece of venison and his potato mixture. Cooked sweet potatoes were a great source of nutrition for him, one of his favorite foods, and plain cooked potatoes were ok for him to eat.

After their meal, both men wanted to read but quickly decided to do that inside the tent. The fire was extinguished, both were now adept at building a fire with the right amount of wood so there was little waste, and the men relaxed at the table, reading by the light of the lantern, the heater keeping them warm. After an hour of reading, both felt like naps but resisted. Instead, they made coffee and played Leroy's favorite triple deck card game which required a great deal of strategy. Fish loved the game and once he figured it out, could almost always beat Leroy.

That afternoon they played two games, taking them nearly two hours. Then they played rummy and gin rummy for another hour, laughing at themselves for being bored. Now that they were out of the mountains, they wanted to keep moving. When the snow started to lighten up, they made yet another pot of coffee and watched impatiently.

Finally, it stopped and they looked at each other, grinning. "Let's go. Even if we only go a few miles, we'll be farther along."

This time Leroy carried Boss to the tree while Fish started moving things back to the cab. When the pair returned, he made his visit and then they were ready. Glad they hadn't yet put the bear bags in the tree, they dipped the fire bowl in the snow several times to make sure it was cool enough, tied it down, turned the table over, zipped the tent, made sure the tarp and tent were still secure, climbed into the cab and off they went.

With all the new snow, it was slow going but when they pulled over again 4 hours later, they'd managed to travel another 30 miles. This time when they parked the truck, they moved a couple of feet of snow out from under the wheels and undercarriage, hoping to make traction easier in the morning. They went through their routine, although they didn't bother lighting a fire, opting to spend the evening in the tent with the heater, lantern, books and warm beds. By 2300, the heater and lantern were off, the two men and Boss sound asleep, the end of day four.

Fish was relieved when he woke to daylight. Boss and Leroy were still asleep so he turned the heater on and found the Sterno stove and a can of the jelled fuel. Then he realized the coffee was in the tree. Pulling his gear on and taking the handgun, he turned the heater off, Rule #2- no heater on in the tent or cab when one guy left and the other was asleep, especially not if the dog was also there.

Walking onto the hard shell, he first checked for any sign of visitors before retrieving the bags with the coffee, oatmeal, all the goodies they put in the hot cereal and the bowls, utensils, coffee pot and mugs. Leaving the cooler and the other bags, he carefully walked back to the tent. The hard-shell was slippery this morning and he made a mental note to check that the wood wasn't wet. If it was, they'd bring several pieces into the cab with them to dry out. Felt silly but it worked. After putting the coffee pot on the stove and lighting the fuel, he put one of the chargers on the flat rock to soak up the weak sunshine. It'd only been a couple of days but wouldn't hurt.

Leroy was up before the coffee was ready, waking Boss to take him to his tree de jour. When they returned, he smiled at the mug of coffee he was handed, "Thanks kiddo! You were up early this morning."

"The light woke me up, wonderful sight!"

"And you got the bags down, made coffee and breakfast, great!"
"Oatmeal will be ready in two minutes. Want raisins or blueberries this morning?" They'd finished their supply of walnuts the last time they'd had oatmeal.

"Mm, some of both please!"

Fish was quite proud of the blueberries and other fruit he'd figured out how to dry. While his Survival book had been helpful, Fish had been the one to work out what exactly needed to happen.

Relaxing over their meal and enjoying a second cup of coffee each, the men nearly jumped when Boss let out a loud bark. It wasn't a warning or a plea for a walk, so they let it go. When Boss barked again, Fish chuckled, "I think someone wants us back on the road."

Leroy rolled his eyes but within a few minutes he had the dishes washed and was pulling the rest of the bags and cooler from the tree while Fish and Boss took a walk. After securing the table and everything else, leaving the sleeping bags and furs in the tent while moving the heater, lantern and blankets to the cab, he had his own walk. When he returned he found Fish pouring diesel into the fuel tank.

"I don't know how much the truck holds."

"We're just under a half tank, so 2 cans is good, if it'll take all of the 2nd can."

Rolling through the snow this morning, the 5th day of their journey, was easier than previous days and they were soon back on the road to town. With no new snow, and using 4-wheel drive, their speed under 20 miles per hour, they made better time that day, driving nearly 120 miles in 10 hours. That meant they'd covered 160 of the 203 miles to town. That wasn't bad considering the road was two lanes the entire way with several tight turns and generally twisty with speed limits ranging from 10 mph to 35 mph; add in the snow and it could be deadly – at the very least challenging. Fish was glad he'd stuck with the ginger root and acupressure bands. Although their speed was low enough not to cause nausea on the turns, the frequency of those turns could have played havoc with his system.

Last night Leroy told Fish they'd be passing the infamous bridge on their way into town and asked if he wanted to stop and look. He added that he thought it might give Fish more of a visual of what he'd been through, as well as some perspective. Fish replied that he'd think about it.

Now, as the weak sunlight gave way to dusk, they pulled over for the night, the end of the driving for day five. Both were tired and hoped that by leaving the last leg for the next day, they'd arrive in town while it was still light.

With this their last night on the road, the end of their escape from the mountains was in sight and the two discussed their plans for the rest of the journey. As they sat in their homemade chairs around the warm fire, they talked.

Fish was happy to know that West Boston was a small town of about 4500 permanent residents. Leroy smiled, "Chuck says the population triples in the summer with fishermen and campers and then again during hunting seasons. People have vacation homes and hunting cabins here. They have a great home center, locally owned, with all the outdoor and indoor equipment you can imagine. He bought a lot of our equipment there. Decent sized grocery store, lot of variety. There are a few places to eat out: Chinese, Mexican, McDonald's and a diner. I thought we could try the diner – or any of them you'd like." He paused, "When you disappeared, most of the town – and folks from neighboring communities - turned out to look for you. Up until the day I stepped off the plane last August, local law enforcement, park service and a couple of scout troops kept up the search and they may have kept going even after I started. No one was willing to give up. Chuck
told me the creek takes people almost every year and many aren't ever found. But none of them were you! I'm telling you this because there may be people shaking your hand, welcoming you back and I don't want to blindside you. They're strangers, they didn't know you as McGee; their only experience with you was that you were a good guy who got a raw deal when you went off that bridge."

Fish nodded, swallowing hard. He thought he'd just disappeared and then Leroy showed up. He'd never imagined anyone else continuing to look for him past the usual few weeks, certainly not complete strangers. Of course, until Leroy told him back in November, he'd had no idea how he'd ended up in the water.

"Thanks for telling me. And yeah, I think it's important that I see that damn bridge, now that I know it was the dirt bags who caused the whole thing. Would you be able to walk me through what happened? What I mean is, would that be too hard on you?"

Leroy nodded, "Appreciate that, son. Maybe it's important for both of us. I think if we're together I can walk you through what happened. You don't mind if I skip a lot of the details?"

Fish huffed, "I don't mind at all. What happened with them?"

"Awaiting trial when I left. The DA's office had them up on 8 murder charges, the last 2 were sailors, and attempted murder of 2 federal officers. Still trying to find out how they knew we were there. Either it was someone in town or in the Bureau."

Fish nodded, nearly whispering. "They're waiting to find out whether to change one of the attempted murders to murder of a fed, make it 9 murders?"

"Yeah and killing a federal officer is an automatic death penalty."

When Fish shuddered, Leroy wrapped his arms around him. "You're alive and we'll be home soon. Tony's alive, back at work. We'll work through this."

Eventually, they got around to talking about the rest of the drive to Virginia and Leroy said, "Don't know about you but I'm done with this much snow. What do you think of us driving south through Colorado to New Mexico and then heading east from there? That'll take us straight across through the Texas panhandle, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina and then up into Virginia. It's about a 4-hour drive to Denver from town, little more in the snow. From Denver to Albuquerque is 6 hours. Depending on the weather, we could get from here to Albuquerque in one day. From there it's about 1900 miles to my place in Alexandria." Leroy paused, "That's driving on interstates. I'm sure there are ways to cut off miles and time from Denver to I-40 in Texas but this time of year I'd rather stick to the interstates, unless someone confirms those roads are good. Think that's where we'll find the KOAs too – those are campgrounds near the interstates and major roadways."

Fish nodded, "Sounds good. I'm excited about seeing more of the country. We're still renting a trailer, right?"

"Yes. We may have to wait until we get to a bigger city to find one but it'll happen. I also thought of taking a trip through Yellowstone but figure we've experienced enough wildlife and big mountains. And that would be more deep snow."

Fish shook his head, "Maybe some day but not anytime soon!"

After playing cards for another hour, they turned in. Fish was so excited and nervous he didn't
think he'd sleep but when Boss woke him at dawn, he knew he'd been wrong.

Leroy was already up, putting together their oatmeal and tea. They were parked near a spruce tree and he'd grabbed enough to make tea for the three of them. When they pulled the bear bags and cooler down, Fish grinned, "Last time for that!"

Leroy grunted, "Sure hope so! It's effective but what a pain!"

As they ate their breakfasts, he asked Fish what he'd want to eat the next morning. "Scrambled eggs, toast, pancakes, potatoes and bacon, I can't wait to try bacon. Real cheese in the eggs." They'd had their last bit of the boxed processed cheese the other day.

"Wow, that's a lot of food."

"Maybe eggs, bacon and pancakes – or toast – the first morning. Hasn't been that long since we had potatoes. But I haven't had pancakes or toast since the Andersons."

"And you've never had bacon."

"Nope."

"We haven't had any pork…no wild pigs up there."

"I never saw any. I did see bison but they moved on before you got there."

"I would love to see a bison in the wild."

"I have a sketch…"

"Cool!"

"And maybe we'll see some on our way to Albuquerque."

Leroy shrugged, "Anything's possible."

They were back on the road within an hour of rising and Leroy kept an eye out for the bridge. He remembered that it was two hours out of town and that Chalmers had the mileage written down but with the snow the drive times were considerably altered and the mileage, even if he had a way to get it, wouldn't do any good. He was pleased and relieved when he recognized the area and directed Fish to pull over. "The bridge is just…there." He pointed through the trees.

Grabbing jackets, caps, gloves, pulling Boss's jacket and harness on, they clipped their snowshoes on, grabbed the poles and carefully walked through the trees. Fish stood back, staring at the bridge while Leroy quietly took Boss's leash.

"Is that the same bridge? I thought you said they had to rebuild it?"

"The top part, the roadway. The support structure had to be bolstered but the water didn't take it down. It survived, same as you."

Fish walked onto the wooden span, swallowing hard. "You're right, I'm alive. I survived this damn bridge, this damn creek, those damn murderers!"

Looking at Leroy, he smiled although tears were rolling down his face. Tilting his head back, he yelled. No words, just a cry that Leroy thought contained anger and grief, eventually turning to triumph.
Boss watched him without moving his head, after the yell was done, he tugged Leroy toward Fish and licked his hand, comforting him. Fish smiled at Leroy as he spoke to his dog, "I'm all right now, Boss. I'm good."

With a smile, Leroy embraced him before handing him his pocket knife, tilting his head at the railing of the bridge. Nodding in agreement at the idea, Fish found a clear spot on the railing, carving the words, "I survived!", adding a little fish resting on a log, followed by the initials TM, the date he went into the water and the date that day.

Once Fish crossed the bridge, he walked back, went to the truck, pulled out the binoculars and a long piece of rope. Tying it to the door handle and the other end around his waist, he walked a few steps down the steep embankment to look at the railing. He used the binoculars and, watching him from the top Leroy knew when he saw his bloody handprints, what was left of them, as his shoulders hunched and he drew into himself. Then he straightened his posture, standing still for a minute, finally turning to Leroy. "Thank you for suggesting this. Feels like…not sure, coming full circle? Acknowledging that I am alive, that I made it through? Feels good."

Leroy knew he was crying, he couldn't help it. This was Tim talking to him. Tim and Fish, Fish and Tim. He nodded, holding his arms open. They cried together but it felt good.

Eventually, they got back in the truck and resumed their journey.
Chapter 18

Fish's eyes were wide as they pulled into town. Seeing buildings, other vehicles and a plowed, paved road was a new experience. At first, he didn't see many other people and no one made eye contact but then someone noticed the strange truck rolling down the street and stopped to look. Someone else noticed that person looking and before they knew it, a little knot of people had gathered, staring.

One of the men squinted, saying, "That's the truck Chuck bought for that guy Gibbs, searching for his missing friend, the guy in the flood last spring – I hope that's the missing guy – McGee!"

As the others murmured, the man called out, "Gibbs?" With a chuckle, Gibbs nodded and waved while Fish smiled nervously. A cheer arose and someone was dispatched from the crowd to bring Chuck.

Gibbs just kept rolling along, his goal was Chuck's garage and house, where he'd started this journey 6 months ago, give or take a few days. Or maybe the journey started as soon as he realized Tim McGee had gone in the water. When he saw Chuck appear in the street, a big grin on his face, Leroy stopped, opening the window to say, "You know anyone who wants a slightly used fire bowl and grate?"

Laughing, Chuck stepped to the window, leaning in, "Tim McGee, I presume?"

Fish introduced himself, "I'm going by the name Fish these days, the name my rescuers gave me. I have no memory of being Tim McGee."

Chuck thrust his arm past Gibbs, holding his hand out for a shake, "Chuck Payton, pleased to meet you, Fish! Very pleased!"

Boss, scared by all the people, was sitting in the floor well between Fish's legs and now he gave a half bark, half growl, not sure if this was friend or foe. One of his humans was happy and relaxed but his master was tense and nervous although not upset.

Fish grinned, "Happy to meet you too, Chuck. Thanks for all your help, we enjoyed every bite of the food you sent and the clothes, blankets and the fire bowl were lifesavers. This is my dog, Boss. If you'll hold your hand out, I'll introduce you."

Following Fish's instructions, Chuck smiled at Boss who listened to his master telling him this was Chuck, a friend. Boss relaxed his stance, licking Chuck's hand in greeting.

They didn't stay in the street talking for very long as it was still winter in Wyoming, still very cold. Chuck gave Gibbs the key to his house, saying he'd be there in about an hour, to help themselves to showers, laundry, food, whatever they wanted.

Gibbs smiled, "All right if we use your phone? Sat phone's broken, tell you about that later, and we'd like to let our families know we're safe."

"Of course! My laptop's there, you could do a Skype call if you want so they can see you both. My
2 dogs are here at work with me. Fish, is Boss going to be all right with them?"

Fish nodded, "He should be; he was one of three pups. He lived with them and his mother his first 10 months."

"Good! He can use the backyard when he needs to, there's a clear spot near the door that my dogs use. The yard's fenced."

"Appreciate it, thanks."

As they continued down the street, now waving back at those who saw them, Leroy said, "Can you handle the laptop and call?"

Fish scrunched his face in thought, finally shrugging, "I'm not sure. Guess we'll see when we get there."

"All right, let's call them right away, before we do anything else."

"Pit stop first."

Leroy snorted, "Good point."

A block later, he turned into a cleared double driveway and the three of them tumbled out of the truck, commenting that it was nice not to have to use the snowshoes. Once inside, they smiled at the wood stove and Leroy went back to the truck for wood while Fish found the door to the backyard and let Boss loose. The dog stood there, not used to being out of the cave or truck without his harness and leash, especially not in a strange place. When Fish told him it was all right, that they were safe, he finally turned to sniff and explore.

Closing the door, Fish went to find the bathroom while Leroy returned with wood and built up the fire. When Boss was back inside, Fish powered up the laptop, relieved he knew that much and smiled to himself as he saw the Skype icon on the screen. He pointed out the camera to Leroy. Pulling up chairs, Leroy removed his notebook from a pocket to look up the phone numbers they needed. When Fish opened Skype, he chuckled, pointing to two of the numbers listed: Ducky Mallard and Penelope Langston.

Calling Penny, Leroy first ruffled Fish's hair saying it was to give him even more of a 'mountain man' look. Fish scoffed, "I am a mountain man, so are you!"

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Her heart pounding, Penny answered the ping on her laptop, a call from Chuck Payton, the man in Wyoming that had helped Jethro and kept in touch with Ducky. When she saw her beautifully scraggly, rugged and very much alive grandson, she beamed through her tears. "Timothy, oh sweetheart, I'm so glad to see you! And Jethro, it's wonderful to see you too - and thank you!"

Fish swallowed hard, "Hi, Penny. I uh...I don't have any memories of Tim and the people who rescued me from the creek named me Fish. That's the name I go by. And this is Boss, my dog. We're both glad to meet you, Leroy's told me everything he knows about the family."

Penny tried to absorb the news of her boy's memory loss without visibly flinching. "Darling, the important thing is that you're alive, well and rescued. And I'm happy to meet Boss, I imagine he was a big help to you. Will you tell me what happened?"

"Sure. Is my sister there?"
"No, sweetheart, Sarah left last month for graduate school in London. I'll let her know you're on your way home. You are, aren't you?"

"Yes. We'll be here at Chuck's house for a couple of days while we clean up. Leroy says it's time to find a barber, get our beards shaved and haircuts, then we'll head to Virginia. I don't want Boss to be in a crate in a cargo hold on a plane so we're going to rent a travel trailer for the truck. We've been sleeping in the truck...we can show you our tarp and tent room if you'd like?"

"Yes, I'd love to see it all."

Fish smiled, glad Penny was interested. Putting Boss's jacket back on him, Leroy added his harness and leash while Fish put his parka, cap and gloves back on, then taking the laptop, the three of them went outside to show Penny their truck accommodations. She was suitably impressed, admiring the table and chairs.

When they returned to the house, she asked where they'd been and Leroy answered, "Have you seen the map that has the valley with a lake?"

She nodded with a smile, Ellie and the others had decided that's where they were.

"Fish found me there, saved my life as a bear attacked me. It smashed the sat phone and slashed my right side but your grandson used bear-pepper spray on him, stopping the attack and scaring off the bear. When I was stable enough, he loaded me onto his travois and with Boss pulling, got me into the mountains to the cave they were living in."

"What a horrible experience – I'm proud of you both. Fish, sweetheart, did you make the travois or did your rescuers give it to you? And a cave, that's just what I hoped for and obviously you survived!"

They told her about his injuries, then the cave, Leroy bragging about Fish's sketches of it. They talked for a few more minutes before signing off, first promising to call her when they purchased new cell phones.

Looking at the time, they decided they'd better not wait to call Ducky and the others. Fish sent a message to him, ostensibly from Chuck, asking for an 'all hands' Skype call if possible.

They had a reply from Jimmy within two minutes saying everyone was on their way, to go ahead and ping them. Leroy insisted they wait another minute as he didn't want anyone to miss the surprise. Fish was fine with that - more time would have been better. He was more nervous about this call than the call to Penny.

Finally, the two men and the dog sat in front of the camera and Fish tapped the call button. The first person he saw made him smile happily, it was Ellie. He heard cheers, applause, whistles and people calling out Leroy and McGee's name but while that was going on and while Leroy spoke with them, he kept smiling at Ellie and she smiled back. Both of them had tears rolling down their faces. And they weren't the only ones. Leroy said later that Bob and possibly Vance were the only ones without tears but Fish said 'suit man', his name for Vance, had tears that he blinked away.

When Leroy finished talking, he nudged Fish, who looked at the group. "It's good to meet you in person, Leroy's told me a lot about you. You know me as Tim McGee but I have no memory of him or being him, any of you, my grandmother, sister or the Admiral. My rescuers named me Fish after they fished me out of the flood waters and that's the name I go by. My dog's name is Boss." he paused as the others laughed, continuing with a smile, "That's the same reaction Leroy had. At the time, I thought it was due to his injuries and shock. Dr. Mallard, Dr. Palmer, thank you for
everything you put into Leroy's first aid kit. Between Leroy and Boss being attacked by bears, we used most of the gauze, the adhesive tape, all the steri strips and most of the antibiotic cream. You two thought of everything!"

When he stopped for a breath, one of the men asked, "What happened, where have you been?"

"I'll tell you but first tell me who you are. I know Jimmy and Ducky because they're in Autopsy, I know Director Vance because of the suit but I don't know if you're movie guy or the new guy."

"Movie guy and I love the description."

"Tony DiNutso, right?"

Tony glared at Leroy who was laughing, and shook his head. "Is that what he told you?"

"No, I know it's really DiNozzo. He told me about his friend the bald guy who calls you DiNutso and then dared me to call you that."

"What do you get for saying it?"

"A beef steak dinner. And bacon. I've never had bacon before, can't wait. And we haven't had any beef in weeks. Venison, rabbit, antelope, chicken, turkey and bear, but no beef." He noticed some of them were bothered when he said he'd never had bacon before but he kept talking. He also noticed the dark-haired woman, Amy…no, Abby, was scrunching her face in disgust when he named the meats they'd had. Trying not to roll his eyes, he added, "We only killed and ate what we needed for survival."

Ellie grinned at him and he grinned back. Then he frowned, "Killed for survival anyway. I had to kill the leader of a wolf pack that was after us. We'd been hunting that morning and were in the truck but I was standing in the back, in the bed of the truck. I'd just retrieved our bear bags and Chuck's cooler from the trees. They took us by surprise and there was no time to stop to move into the cab. They were running as fast as the truck could move in the snow but were 6 seconds behind us. I threw our kills at them but that didn't stop them so I killed the leader with Leroy's rifle. That was the only time we killed without needing the meat. Tony, what did you ask me…oh yeah, where we were. Penny told us we were where you thought we were, in the valley with the lake. In a cave. A nice 2 room cave. The second room had a hot spring, more of a drip, in the back of it. I called it the warm room and we slept in there. I built a fire circle and smoker in the main room, we kept Chuck's cooler and Leroy's cooler in there, along with our table and chairs."

"Table? Did you build it out of rock? And what were the chairs made from?"

"They're all made of wood. Leroy brought several of his tools. We had an ax, hatchet, 2 saw blades, hammer, his drill and the bits for it, a few bolts and a chisel. And we have knives. We cut up a log, made and used pegs instead of nails and notched the joints."

"Fish, we used your glue on it too. That, the door frame and the door."

"Homemade glue? And you had a door? To the cave?"

Fish nodded, "Do you know that not all bears hibernate? Those who don't go into a deep sleep, a torpor, but they can be woken by loud noises and warm temperatures. As we've said, we had a few run-ins with bears when there was snow on the ground. We realized they were not hibernating and were hungry and aggressive. When we were traveling in the truck, we hauled the food into trees at night but we didn't want to do that while we were living in the cave. And we worried about the wolves too. So, we built a door to the cave entrance."
Leroy explained the frame, Fish filling the gaps in with his clay mixture (Fish noticed Med Student grinning, exchanging a fist bump with another man who by process of elimination had to be New Guy), using the rock climbing bolts to secure the frame into the granite and then fitting the door to the frame, using pegs and making hinges out of rope and vine lashing.

Suit Guy asked, "And did you have any unwanted visitors?"

The others grimaced when the men nodded and Fish responded, "A bear. It pounded on the door, growled and roared for close to an hour before it went away. We think he's the same one who attacked Boss days later; I killed him. We left the next day."

Leroy added, "Fish is being modest, he blew the head off that bear with a single shot from my rifle. We knew we needed to leave before the snow melted and decided we'd go after 3 days of no snow and warming temperatures. There were at least 6 Day Ones and 3 or 4 Day Twos but it took until last week for a Day 3 and I think we would have left then anyway."

Fish nodded and then looked at Med Student, remembering his name again. He wished things would stay put once he figured them out. "Jimmy, thanks for the topaz, Leroy gave it to me on McGee's birthday and told me the stories about it. I'm still carrying it and obviously it worked again. And what was with the high-five with New Guy?" He made a face, "Sorry! I have trouble with names and when Leroy first came he told me all kinds of stories about each of you but used descriptions rather than names. Guess he wasn't sure what was safe for an amnesiac. I hope it'll be easier now that I know what each of you look like."

Bob smiled, "That's ok, I am the new guy and don't mind. My name's Bob. What happened to the sat phone?"

Both men replied, "Bear got it." They chuckled when several people looked at Vance who grinned, "I had that one!"

Jimmy grinned at the camera, "At Thanksgiving, we were all saying where we thought you guys were and what you were doing, how you were getting by. Breena said you knew how to make clay pots, firing them in your campfire."

Fish grinned back at him and in the autopsy suite, several people relaxed. That was Tim McGee's grin.

"We had turkey, potatoes, sweet potatoes, vegetables and a pumpkin dessert on Thanksgiving. Leroy said it was typical that we made enough for 10 when we were the only 2 humans within a couple hundred miles. The leftovers were great…oh that's another thing I want to try, milk and butter and with mashed potatoes!"

He paused in thought before continuing, "The people who rescued me, Jim and Margaret Anderson, taught me a lot of things. I already know how to shoot a bow and arrow, don't know how or why but I do. Jim taught me how to hunt – I'm good at tracking, too. He helped me make a bow and between us we made two dozen arrows and I’ve made more since then. Margaret showed me how to make clay pots and fire them and that's what we use to cook and eat with, although the Andersons gave me a pan and Leroy brought a skillet and saucepan. And Chuck loaned us a Dutch oven. Leroy baked my McGee birthday cake in that."

Gibbs squeezed the back of his neck, "And I'll make you another one for your Fish birthday."

Ducky was curious, "When's that?"
"April 21st, the day I was rescued and started my life as Fish. Technically I was unconscious for most of the first couple of weeks but it's easier to use the day I was pulled out of the water."

"When are you coming home? One – or maybe all of us – will pick you up at the airport."

Leroy shook his head, "Thanks but we're driving, not flying back. Too hard on Boss to fly. We're renting a travel trailer that we'll tow with the truck; our tarp and tent room has been great but we're both ready for something else. We're driving south to Denver and then Albuquerque, heading straight east from there."

They talked for a few more minutes before signing off as the NCIS folks had to get back to work.

Fish sat back with a sigh of relief. "That was easier than I thought it would be."

Leroy ruffled his hair, "They met you and nobody fainted when you told them your name is Fish. Yay!"

Fish nodded and then grinned, "Hot showers!"

"Need to bring our stuff in then."

They spent the next 20 minutes bringing the food, cooler and everything but the tarp, tent, table and chairs inside the house. Those they took into the garage along with Chuck's fire pit, the Dutch oven, his cooler bag, the big cooler, the sleeping bag he'd loaned them and a few other things.

The unloading complete, Fish found clean clothes and a dry towel for his shower. Leroy smiled to himself when he heard the water go on. He couldn't wait either!

Chuck came home while Fish was still in the bathroom and Gibbs gave him a quick update about Fish vs. McGee and their Skype calls.

"Thanks, helps to know. Poor kid!"

Fish heard as he joined them, trying to towel dry his long hair. "I'm sure I'll be subjected to a battery of tests by our doctors. And I'll probably return to using the McGee name, just without the history."

Chuck looked at him, "We have a great barber in town."

Both men laughed, "How late is he open?"

"Too late for today. I want photos first anyway."

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They were on their way again the morning of their 5th day in West Boston after very busy days. They'd had their photos taken innumerable times by Chuck and other townsfolk, including Sheriff Rohner, Deputy Hawes and the county newspaper, who also interviewed them. That was before their visit to the barber. Fish's hair was now short by his standards, although it still covered the tops of his ears and more importantly, the scar on his skull. His beard had been trimmed into a goatee and looked much better on him; he'd cleared the goatee with Ellie before the barber started cutting. Gibbs' hair was once again Marine high and tight, his beard gone. He said he'd keep his neck and face warm with turtlenecks and the wool scarves they'd worn all winter.

They'd contacted Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality to let them know that
abandoned coal mine #291 had apparently had a cave-in. Both were surprised when a government official, Mr. Burton, arrived to interview them. Fish had marked the spot on the map where the rear wheels started to sink and gave a copy to the man. In turn, Burton was amazed when he heard Fish's story. When he asked if he could take a picture with them, they laughed before agreeing to the photos as they hadn't yet visited the barber and would be unrecognizable to anyone looking for them. They'd already decided to see the barber on their last day, the last thing before they left town.

They purchased an older model Airstream trailer at a rock bottom price from a couple in a neighboring town. It was a simple design, a weight the truck could easily haul, with two beds, a propane heater and oven, sink and refrigerator, overhead lights, a bathroom with commode, sink and enclosed shower, enough storage for their clothes and an interior height of 6'7". The dinette, a fold-down table and benches that could be converted into a 3rd bed, had been damaged and ripped out, part of the reason for the great price. As the travelers had their own table and chairs and didn't care about a third bed, it was perfect.

Although clean and functional, the appliances and flooring were old which had also discouraged previous prospective buyers. There were a few dings and dents but they didn't care about those right now, Leroy planned to renovate it once they got home. It was solid, the right size, met their needs and cost less than renting one. With good brakes, the wheels and other mechanical parts were in great shape. Once it was in their possession, they moved their table in, bolting the legs into the floor. The tires were removed, stowed under the hard-shell of the truck for later use and new snow-tread tires were installed. The propane tank for the stovetop and oven was filled, they'd continue to use their solar charged heater and lantern, and the trailer was ready.

There were a few things they purchased before they left town. Both men now had cell phones. Leroy's was basic while Fish took time to look at what was available and purchased, without Leroy telling him, the same brand and model smart phone McGee had had. He was impressed that the local stores carried them. Leroy didn't say a word but once again thought that Tim and Fish lacked only common memories.

Having returned Chuck's extra sleeping bag, Fish now had a new one, king-sized for his long legs and to fit Boss too, more thermals, flannel shirts and jeans, warm socks and blankets and both men had new pillows. Fish also purchased a warm bed for Boss that he could lounge in while the men were at the table. They'd eaten at the diner a few meals and Fish had bacon for every meal but one when he decided to have dessert instead of dinner. That was a generous slice of berry pie along with a chocolate, caramel and vanilla ice cream sundae. On their drive back to Chuck's house that night, Leroy insisted they stop to buy antacids. Fish was later grateful for that.

Before they left, Chuck made plans to visit during the following summer when, as Leroy said, "It'll be plenty hot and muggy." They thought they'd take him and the trailer to one of the ocean beaches, they'd rig a 3rd bed up somewhere.

As they rolled through town the last time, they waved to the residents they'd met over the past few days. Fish was already planning to include them in a book and had quietly donated funds to help rebuild the town park, destroyed by the same flood that ravaged him.

Although Leroy told him he normally gave his extra earnings to charity and was not wealthy, Fish found that to be only partly true. He had more than one healthy savings account and if he didn't continue at NCIS, he'd be fine for a couple of years.

Once he had his phone set up, he called Ellie. They talked for three hours the first time he called and he was still floating when he told Leroy. The couple spoke every night the men were in town and Leroy figured they'd be talking every night on the way home too. That was all right, Fish could
sit in the cab where he'd have privacy.

Their first night they stopped at a KOA midway between Denver and Albuquerque. They'd had a beef roast the night before and made sandwiches from the leftovers for their meal tonight. Fish grinned as he reached for the salt and pepper, neatly tucked away in a cupboard, "Look, no ropes and pulley!"

"And no standing in the truck bed to put the bags up or take them down!"

Fish nodded and then hesitated. Ever in tune with his kid, Leroy looked at him, "What's up?"

The younger man smiled, "Got something to tell you. Turns out Ellie is far more than my girlfriend. Last night, she showed me the ring I gave her before she left for vacation and training. We're engaged!"

Leroy stared at him, his mouth open, finally curving into a grin. "Congratulations, son!"

"Thanks! She says nobody at NCIS knows, but Penny does and the rest of the family, whoever they might be. And now you know. Ellie says I was planning to talk with you, tell you while she was away."

"Because of Rule 12?"

"No, well I guess a little bit but mostly because I was excited and wanted to tell my dad." He smiled, "I already knew how you felt about me - Tim felt the same way – and so do I."

Leroy blinked back tears, smiling as he wrapped his arms around him. "I'm glad!"

Later, as they ate their sandwiches, Fish scrunched his face and Leroy looked at him, "Headache?"

"Yeah, came on suddenly."

"No altitude here…not like Wyoming anyway."

The other man sighed, "They're gonna poke and prod me anyway, might as well give them a reason."

"Have a giant-sized bottle of Ibuprofen now."

"True. Hadn't planned on opening it so soon."

"If there's no snow or there's at least drivable snow, we'll be in Virginia in 4 days."

Fish smiled at him, "How do we determine drivable snow, less than 10 feet deep? I'll be fine, Dad. Thanks for worrying though."

"You get a headache while you're driving, we'll swap."

He got a face for that and gave his kid a look. Fish started to roll his eyes but that hurt, "All right."

"9-hour days. We stop and swap every 3 hours, which means Boss gets a break then."

"That's good."

He took 1 ½ Ibuprofen with his dinner and if that didn't knock his headache back, he'd take another 1 ½ before he turned in. Ellie was on a case with the team so they wouldn't be able to talk that
night.

The two men played Gin Rummy for a few hours and then Leroy wanted to read. The men had picked up a few new books in West Boston and wanted to get started on them. When Fish picked up his book and opened it, he had to squint to see the words clearly. He looked up, "Dad, does McGee have eye problems – reading glasses?"

"Not that I know of, doesn't use them at work anyway. Wouldn't surprise me though with all the electronic work. I bought a second pair of readers, want to try those?"

"Yeah, thanks." The glasses helped and Fish made it through two long chapters before he started to fade. "Think I'm going to bed. Want to kick the headache and be in good shape for our run to Albuquerque and into Texas tomorrow."

"All right, son. I'll take Boss out before I go to bed."

"Thanks." Fish turned to Boss, "I'm going to bed, you can stay here or come with me. Leroy will take you out later."

Boss was too comfortable to move and put his head down on the warm interior of his new bed. Fish fell asleep right away. They'd moved the mattress that came with this bed to Leroy's bed as it was nearly as firm as the sled he'd been sleeping on for the past 6 months and the other trailer mattress was stored under the hard-shell. Fish's bed was once again the self-inflating mattress Leroy brought with him from home. It was on a slatted platform now, covered by bear fur and the top of the mattress had an additional blanket with the new sleeping bag on top of that. The pillow was a bonus and except for the headache he was more comfortable than he'd ever been. That he remembered.

Leroy read for a couple more hours before rousing Boss for a walk to the campground's designated gravel area for dogs. Five minutes later, they were back in the trailer, having checked the truck and hard-shell to make sure they were locked and now double-locking the trailer. That was new too, they'd purchased a dead bolt lock and then strengthened the door frame so the lock couldn't be easily jimmed. When they were away from the trailer, the rifle and handgun, if not with them, and other valuables would be locked away under the hard-shell. The bow and arrows were left in Chuck's care. He planned to hunt in Fish's valley next fall, after his trip to Virginia, and would leave the bow and arrows in the cave for anyone else seeking refuge.

After making sure Boss knew where Fish was and kissing the top of his kid's head, Leroy turned in, quickly falling asleep.

While they ate breakfast the next morning, they pulled out the atlas they'd purchased and Fish brought Google maps up on his phone. By heading from Pueblo, Colorado, to Amarillo, TX, rather than dropping all the way down to Albuquerque, they'd shave many miles and several hours off their trip. The KOA they were in was a few miles north of Pueblo. They checked with the camp managers who confirmed the roads were good and well-traveled. The weather forecast was for clear skies with a high of 40, a balmy day after the mountains of Wyoming!

They pulled into Amarillo after 4 hours on the road. Fish's phone found a diner for them and they enjoyed Texas style barbecue. As they walked out, Fish patted his stomach, "You know, we're not in the mountains any more, we're not hiking, hunting or getting much of any exercise. My jeans are getting a little tight."

Leroy laughed, "That's ok for you, you needed to put on some weight. But you're right, we need
exercise and to cut back on the food."

"No rabbit food though."

"No need to even say it!"

That night, their second out from West Boston, they stretched their 9 hours to 10, staying at a KOA near Ft. Smith, Arkansas. After they had the truck and trailer situated, they slipped the harness and leash onto Boss and took him for a long walk. They walked nearly 5 miles and felt better when they sat down to their chili and cornbread dinner.

They'd been lucky with the weather so far; while it was cold, there was little precipitation and they hoped that would hold for the rest of the trip. They'd stay near Knoxville, TN, the next night and make the run to Alexandria the day after. They'd already let Tony know.

Leroy had laughed when he got off the phone with DiNozzo. "Ducky already told me what Tony did right after I left, guess they were afraid I'd be upset. Tony went to some estate sale and bought different furniture and appliances for the kitchen. And then he painted the downstairs. It's needed all that for years! He didn't get rid of anything though, the old icebox, couch, oven and other stuff is all stored in the garage. Guess he was planning to confess to the paint and put everything else back."

"And did he?"

"Nah, he blurted it out and I told him I already knew. Don't think he's ever sounded so relieved!"

"There's room for the four of us, right?"

"Sure. He's in the downstairs bedroom, I'm in the master, you and Boss are in the upstairs guest room and each of us has our own bathroom, except for Boss. And he has the entire backyard."

"Great! Uh, what about the agency?"

Leroy shook his head, "I'm sure Ducky's already got appointments set up at Bethesda for both of us. Full physicals. They'll want to run scans on you, see if they can figure out what your injuries were and what's causing the headaches. And I know they'll fuss over my bear scars. They won't find any damage, you did too good a job. They'll do lab work for both of us, make sure we're not dying of scurvy or some other vitamin deficiency." He looked at Fish, "Hurting?"

"Yeah, it's been brewing the last couple of hours. Hoped the fresh air would help."

"We don't have to push. We can add another day or more."

Fish huffed, "Doesn't matter, I'll still have a headache! I'd rather just get there." He frowned, "Do you think Penny is upset I'm not staying with her?"

"No. She and Ducky had a long talk and she's good with you staying with me. For one thing, she travels a lot for her lectures and closes up her house when she's gone. Ducky said she's leaving in a month for 4 months."

Fish didn't quite understand why that meant he shouldn't stay with her, he'd have his own place in a month, wouldn't he? And did Ducky always take care of everyone like this? He shrugged, these were extraordinary circumstances and he didn't know anyone except Leroy well enough to figure out what they normally did or didn't do.
He decided not to worry about it. He felt safe with Leroy and he wasn't yet ready to make any
drastic changes. Unless it was with Ellie but first he needed to figure out how he was going to
handle being Fish/Tim McGee. He'd been on the phone with her while Leroy spoke with Ducky
and Tony.

His headache had receded by the next morning although it was still there, he could feel it. He drove
the first leg and then took more Ibuprofen. Leroy shook his head, "No more driving for you today.
Grab your pillow from the trailer, take a full dose of the pills and get some sleep. I'll wake you
when we get to the KOA."

They had an early lunch and then walked Boss for a few minutes. Afterward, Fish settled in the
passenger seat with Boss in the foot well. The pup liked a little routine; sometimes he sat on the lap
of whoever was riding shotgun, sometimes in between the driver and passenger and sometimes in
the foot well. With their stuff in the back, they weren't crowded in the cab as they had been on their
trek to West Boston.

Before they left the restaurant parking lot, Leroy sent a text to Ducky. He was grateful they only
had another day on this trip, he was very worried about Fish and Ducky was ready to airlift him to
Bethesda.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who've asked or commented about spruce tea, there's more
information at the end of the next chapter.
Ducky heard his phone buzz with a text but as he and Dr. Palmer had their hands full with three guests, it would have to wait. He hoped it wasn't Jethro reporting more headaches for Timothy… Fish, he *must* get used to that! He was worried and although he allowed Jethro to think he'd convinced him otherwise, he'd researched having their friend flown home on a medical flight. However, his symptoms weren't serious enough. He hadn't lost consciousness and was functioning normally. Except that the headaches were occurring more frequently and it seemed from the tidbit Jethro let slip about the reading glasses, his vision was being affected. He took a deep breath as Jimmy said, "They'll be home tomorrow and he'll be at Bethesda the day after."

"I know, but it is troublesome."

Jimmy nodded, "Especially because we don't know what his injuries were."

Ducky closed his eyes for a second, forcing himself to focus on the task at hand. The pair got busy deciphering the mysteries of their guests.

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When they pulled into the KOA near Knoxville, Leroy found a spot and parked. Leaving a sleeping Fish in the truck, he took Boss and checked in before opening the trailer. They were earlier than they'd been other days and it was still light out, a nice change. He gave Boss some water and food and then left him while he went to wake Fish.

Unlocking the passenger door, he was startled at Fish's face, there was a thin trail of blood coming from his nose. That was not good. He grabbed a tissue from the glove box, cleaning up the blood while he spoke softly to his boy.

"Come on, son, wake up. We're in for the night. Fish, wake up kiddo."

Fish finally roused, blinking his eyes and wrinkling his nose. Leroy handed him a few tissues and he bent his head forward for a few minutes to let the blood drain onto the tissue and not down his throat. Finally, he climbed out of the truck, Leroy keeping an arm around him.

Once in the trailer, he sat him on his bed. "Stay here, I'll get your chair set up and some ice."

Fish removed the tissue, "It hasn't started again."

Leroy watched, finally agreeing. "All right. How's your head?"

"Better. It's mostly gone. I'll take more ibuprofen before I go to bed. I'm sorry you're having to do everything."

"It's all right, kiddo. Not like I'm out hunting for dinner!"

He got a chuckle for that and relaxed a little.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I could eat. Did we eat lunch?"
"Yes. You had a BLT on toast with a salad."

"A salad? Must be what caused the nosebleed."

"Funny guy. How about soup and the rest of the cornbread?"

"With butter."

"Of course!"

"I'll get dinner."

"Nope, I'm perfectly capable of adding water to a dry soup mix, letting it heat and heating up the cornbread."

"Wish we could have a fire, I miss those. I don't miss the necessity of them though."

"We could have one here if you want, there's a fire pit. I'm going to buy one of those big ones we saw for the backyard."

"That'll be fun. Does it ever cool down at night?"

"Spring and fall, sure."

"Great! How's Boss?"

"He's fine. I fed him already."

"I'll take him for a walk."

"I don't think so. You sit right here, he's already visited a bush. He can wait until after dinner."

Fish sighed, "All right. I'll go wash my face. Thanks for the offer of a fire but I don't think I'm going to last that long tonight."

Leroy busied himself with dinner, deciding not to tell Ducky about the nosebleed until morning. He'd already made up his mind he was taking his boy straight to Bethesda tomorrow. He felt like this was getting worse by the day.

After dinner, he, Fish and Boss walked for a couple of miles. Fish said walking and the fresh air felt good and they laughed at people they passed who said it was too cold for them. They wondered if they'd ever forget the icy cold of the granite mountains. Fish chuckled, "We'll forget but the temperature will drop every time we talk about it. We know it was in the teens and twenties but by next month, we'll be saying it was in the single digits with a huge wind chill factor."

Back inside the trailer, Fish insisted on washing the dishes but was wincing by the time he had them dried. Swallowing the ibuprofen, he sat with an icepack on his head, something Ducky said to try. That helped while it was on his head. Within two minutes of removing it, his head started pounding again, letting up as the ibuprofen kicked in. He brushed his teeth and got ready for bed. It was only 1800 but he was tired from all the sleeping he'd done today.

Leroy watched in dismay. If he hadn't driven most of the day, he'd drive them home tonight. He knew he could take his kid to a local hospital but Fish had begged to go home, he didn't want to be away from Ellie or his grandmother any longer than he had to be.

To his own surprise, the older man slept that night, waking before dawn and ready to get his ailing
child to Bethesda. For the 2nd time since he left DC, he wished they had a camper; Fish could just stay in bed all day. But they didn't so he couldn't. Before he woke him or started breakfast, he slipped into the cab of the truck to call Ducky.

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Ducky had trouble opening his eyes when his phone rang at 0530. Answering it, he had to clear his throat, "Mallard."

"Duck, it's me. We're on the eastern side of Knoxville. Fish had a nosebleed yesterday. It stopped without any problem but he was asleep when it happened. And his headaches, they're worse. The ice packs only help while they're on his head, once they're off the pain is back in less than 5 minutes. Is there any chance you can change those appointments to this afternoon?"

"Of course, do you have an ETA?"

"It's 0530 now, we can leave by 0700. According to smart boy's smart phone, the drive will be 7 ½ hours. Better say 1530 and I'll call you if we're going to be later than that."

"Then you'll drive straight to the hospital?"

"Yeah, although…Boss."

"Jimmy or I will meet you at the hospital and I imagine Eleanor will also be there. You can introduce us to the dog and one of us will drive him to your house and stay with him. Perhaps we'll drive the truck and trailer."

"I'd sure appreciate that, Duck."

"I'm relieved that you'll be here soon. Now…have a good breakfast, drive carefully and we'll see the 3 of you this afternoon."

Disconnecting, Ducky lay back for a minute before sitting up again to send a series of texts.

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Relieved and scared, Leroy locked the cab, returning to the trailer. This was as frightening as their encounters with the bears and wolves. Maybe more, at least they'd had weapons to defend themselves. This was out of their control.

But they weren't at the hospital yet. He found Boss waiting for him at the door and recognized the squirm. Grabbing his new leash, he snapped it onto the dog's new harness and got him outside as quickly as possible. While they walked, he spotted a spruce tree and guided Boss over to it. Grabbing a handful of spruce needles, he stuffed them in his jacket pocket, also filling his other pocket.

Back inside, he started breakfast, putting a saucepan of water on the burners. Emptying his pockets, he put some of the spruce needles into 2 mugs and the rest into a small paper bag for later use. He hoped this would help Fish get through the day today. He decided to have coffee later.

Hoping Fish would be hungry, he pulled out the toaster and grabbed the skillet, they'd have a big breakfast this morning.

He was almost ready to put the eggs on when Fish arrived in the kitchen, "Morning, Dad."
He smiled, he loved being called Dad.

"Morning, son. How'd you sleep?"

"Like a piece of granite!"

"Good! How's the head this morning?"

"Ok so far. What can I do?"

"Mm, set the table. Want cheese in your eggs?"

"Yes, please."

"Cinnamon or regular toast?"

"Regular. I'll do the toast."

"All right. I found a spruce tree this morning; have our favorite tea steeping for you."

"Great, thanks!"

They worked easily around each other, Fish putting bread in the toaster and pulling out their utensils and bowls while he waited for the toast. He was buttering the toast as Leroy finished the eggs, perfect timing.

Sitting down, they ate in silence. Waiting until they'd finished eating, Fish looked at his surrogate father. "What?"

His former boss shook his head, "And I trained you, nobody to blame but myself! All right, here's the deal. I talked with Ducky and with your headaches as bad as they are and the nosebleed yesterday, he's moved your appointment up to this afternoon. We'll go straight to Bethesda. One of the family will be there to bring Boss, the truck and trailer to the house and stay with him. If you're admitted and Ducky is sure you will be, I'm staying with you."

Fish tilted his head in agreement, that hurt less than nodding, "All right. I suppose I should be grateful he didn't arrange an airlift."

Leroy shook his head, chuckling. His kid continued, "If she's available, I'd like it if Ellie could take Boss. They need to get to know each other and she's used to working dogs from her parents' ranch. No offense to the others but you and Ellie are the only ones I trust with him." He shrugged, "And maybe New Guy. He doesn't seem too urbanized."

He stretched his hand across the table and Leroy took it. "Gonna ask you a big favor. You believed in me, believed I was alive and I know if I had died, you would have believed that I'd done the best I could to stay alive, that I didn't give up until there was no choice. Keep believing in me, okay? No matter what gloom and doom the doctors throw at us, believe in me. I'm not ready to go and I'm certainly not giving up after fighting to survive for the last 10 months."

Leroy got up and moved around the table to him, holding on. Fish continued to talk, "I keep thinking of what you said about losing Kelly, that you couldn't bear to have other children and possibly losing them. I swear I'll do my best, try my hardest to stay with you. I swear it."

Giving up on holding back the tears, Leroy knelt next to his son and took him in his arms. "I trust you and I won't stop believing in you, I promise. But Fish, if it's too bad, let go. I can't stand the
thought of you in constant pain or leading a life of misery. I haven't told you this story but years ago, DiNozzo contracted the plague…” quickly he told him the story, ending it by saying, "I told him he wasn't going to die and he believed me. Now I'm telling you, if you need to let go, don't hang on for me."

"You think it's that bad?"

"I'm afraid it could be. Ducky's been asking me questions about your cognitive functions, enough for me to get that he thinks you have a brain injury."

"Which could be why I have amnesia."

"Maybe. I don't why it's taken this long to get this bad. Not that I'm complaining but…"

Fish sat in thought, "I can think of a few circumstances that would explain what's happened."

Leroy patted his back. "I know you have a lot of knowledge but let the docs figure it out." His son nodded, they parted and Leroy stood. "We need to be on the road by 0630."

"I'll wash the dishes. My head's still good, okay if I drive? Please?"

"Let's see when we're ready to go. I'll walk Boss."

Twenty minutes later they were ready to go. As Fish's head still wasn't hurting, he climbed into the driver's seat. Four hours later, he winced as they pulled off the highway to let Boss out for a few minutes. When Leroy shook 2 tablets out from the bottle of Ibuprofen, Fish made a face. "I'd rather have tea first."

"All right." Leroy grabbed the thermos with the spruce tea, handing it to Fish. "If the pain isn't gone after a cup or two, then take the Ibuprofen."

Fish gave him a wan smile, handing over the keys before he poured tea into a cup. His smile was happier as he took his first drink of the warm, almost hot, tea. "Mm, that tastes so good." He drank two cups before climbing out of the truck and catching up with Leroy and Boss.

"Fresh air feels good. Thanks for the tea, I've missed it."

"I'll see if I can find spruce tea somewhere. And then plant a spruce tree."

Fish grinned, "Great idea. The tea will probably be in a health food store."

The older man shrugged, "Won't kill me to walk into one. Probably." He looked at his watch, "We're doing great on time. Want something to eat? I'm gonna make a sandwich."

"Maybe a half for me? We have any of that roast beef left?"

"Just about enough for a half sandwich. Want horseradish on that?"

Fish remembered not to nod, but smiled as he said, "Yes please!"

They ate in the trailer, relaxing for several minutes. By the time they finished, Fish's headache was receding. He headed for the KOA restrooms while Leroy took Boss for another quick walk. By the time he and the dog returned to the truck, Fish was ready to go. Over the space of the next 20 minutes, the headache disappeared.

A little over three hours later, Leroy pulled over to call Ducky. "We're about 10 minutes out from
Bethesda. Fish is asleep."

"Wonderful timing, we're all set here. Jimmy, Eleanor and Tony are here and the Director will be here soon. Abby is tied up with a case and Bob volunteered to stay and work. We've blocked four parking places for you and will move our vehicles when you enter the lot."

"You want me to drop Fish at the door?"

"No, we'll have a wheelchair, I'm hoping the fresh air will wake him as we'll need his input."

"All right." Beside him, Fish stirred, "I'm awake."

"Good! We're almost there – got a welcoming committee, including Ellie."

Fish sat up, flipping the visor down to look at his face and hair in the attached mirror. Leroy chuckled, teasing now after their serious discussion that morning, "On his deathbed, needs to look good for his fiancée."

Fish smiled, "You'd better believe it, especially as worried as she's been."

They rolled into the hospital parking lot, Boss perched on Fish's lap so he could see his new family. One by one the parked cars were moved and Leroy parked the truck and trailer lengthwise across the four spaces.

Ellie beat everyone to Fish's side of the truck and Boss scrambled off his lap onto the bench seat as she gently took Fish's face, kissing him with all her heart. Leroy laughed, "Come on, Boss, your dad's busy with your new mom. I'll introduce you to the others."

But first Leroy was greeted with hugs from Tony, Ducky, Jimmy and Vance. Then Boss was introduced and by that time, the wheelchair and an orderly arrived for Fish. "Is anyone here Timothy McGee?"

Ellie tapped Fish, "Hon."

"Oh, right." He looked up, "That's my legal name."

"Ok, need to get you into this. Can you walk all right or need help getting out of the truck?"

Fish twirled his mouth, "Eighteen days ago I killed a bear at close range in 10 feet of snow at 11,000 feet. I can damn well climb out on my own."

The orderly let the defiance roll off his back but he was interested in the bear story. "Great, where were you?"

Fish staggered as a wave of dizziness overwhelmed him; Ellie and the orderly supported him and then Jimmy took Ellie's place. "Easy, easy. Let us help you."

They eased him out of the truck and he blinked, "Med Student?"

Jimmy squeezed his arm, "I'm here, Fish."

"Good! Movie guy?"

"I'm here." Tony moved over, giving him a gentle hug. "Story guy and suit man are here too."

Fish wanted to smile but the world was still spinning, "Leroy? Dad?"
"I'm here, Fish, we made it. Try to relax. I'll be as close as they'll let me be."

"Ellie, Boss…"

Ellie already had the leash on Boss and they were doing just fine. "Sweetie, he and I will take the truck to the house." Eyebrows went up on those who'd missed the passionate kiss but nobody said anything. Ellie looked at Gibbs who nodded, handing her the keys. "His food's in the trailer, his bowl is the one with the 'B' on the side. He has a water bottle in the truck, in the back on the passenger side, the red one and his bed is on top of Fish's…the one on the left as you go in."

"All right, I'll get him settled and be back here as soon as I can."

The orderly was pushing Fish away when Boss barked, tugging at his leash. Ellie caught up to the wheelchair and Fish rubbed his dog's head. "Boss, I gotta go in here for a while and Leroy's going to stay with me. I need you to guard Leroy's house, all right? No hunting though, we don't need any more to eat. Do what Ellie says, she's part of our family. I love you." Boss stood on his back legs and licked Fish's face. "I know, I promise we'll be together soon. Ellie and Leroy will take care of you until I can, understand?" When Boss barked one more time, Fish smiled and they moved forward again while Ellie and Boss returned to the truck.

"Quite a dog." Leon had only had one dog in his life, a mutt who was his best friend until hit and killed by a car.

Leroy nodded, "He's an outstanding animal, very intelligent. Fish has him trained to do just about anything. When I was hurt, he helped Fish get me onto the travois and then pulled me all the way up the path to the cave. One of our last hunting trips, he hauled an elk, must have been close to 400 pounds, across the snow field and up the path. We helped push it up the path though. Fish said he killed a brown bear weighing about 500 pounds last summer, they got him onto the travois and all the way across the plateau but had to lose some of the bear to get him up the path."

"How do you lose part of a bear?"

"Gutted it. Fish wanted the meat and fur, left the rest for the critters, rolled the carcass down the slope. Did that with the bear who attacked Boss last month. Fish blew his head off as he attacked the dog. We just left him there, wasn't much left by the next morning but fur and we sure as hell didn't want it."

Vance shook his head, "Don't know if I'd have that in me."

Leroy smiled, "You would if you were hungry enough or needed to stop an attack. Fish killed the first bear, his first 2 bears, with his bow and arrows. I shot the one who attacked me but it only stopped when he sprayed bear-pepper spray at it. He shot the other one with my rifle."

"Wow! Have you two talked about his future?"

"Yes, but let's see what the doctors can do for him."

"Still no memories?"

"I think they're there somewhere but locked up tight – and it's physical, Leon, not emotional or psychological like my memory loss was. He's never forgotten Ellie. Didn't know who she was but dreamed about her every night." He frowned as Ducky motioned to him, "See you later; it looks like they're going to let me go with him."

He walked through the double doors next to his boy, one hand on his shoulder. They were placed
in an exam room and a nurse immediately came in to take Fish's vitals. Leroy stood aside, giving the woman room.

She looked at Fish when she was done. "All right. An aide will be here in a minute to help you undress and get into a hospital gown."

"I'll help him."

"You are?"

Fish spoke softly, "He's my dad."

"That's fine then." She looked at the preliminary paperwork, "I see that you'll be present for most of his examination, Mr. Gibbs. I'll bring you a set of scrubs."

"Appreciate it."

She left and Leroy helped Fish get his shirt, shoes and socks off, slipped the gown on, and then helped him take his jeans off, tying the gown in the back. Then he helped him lie down.

When the nurse returned with the scrubs and bags for their clothes, Ducky came with her and stayed with their boy while Leroy found a men's room.

When the doctor came in, he looked at the chart and then at Fish. "Hello, I'm Dr. Nelson. Let's see what's going on with you…debilitating headaches 10 months after spending too many days in a flood. And amnesia.

"All right. Dr. Mallard told me what happened. Here's what we're going to do. You're going to have a CT scan, and if we can't see the problem with that, we'll do a specialized scan called a SWI MRI. That will more accurately show any tiny hemorrhages known as microhemorrhages, which is what I suspect are the problem. Small white dots will show up on the MRI because of the iron content left behind after blood has flowed. If you've got some torn capillaries, the small amounts of blood can be seen on a SWI-MRI. We may also do an Electroencephalograph or EEG.

"Before we do all that, I'd like you to tell me what you know of your injuries. I understand you were pulled from the water after 6 days and that your rescuers nursed you back to health."

Remembering not to nod, Fish replied, "They found me floating half-on, half-off a log and managed to float the log in. I was unconscious but they were able to rouse me. I don't remember any of this, they told me later. They had me stand up in the mud but then I crashed onto my knees and then full out into the mud. They ended up having to build a sled to pull me to their campsite. I was unconscious for a week, had an infection and was in and out of consciousness for another week. The woman who nursed me through all that knows a lot about herbs and told me she gave me the right ones to get rid of the infection. I think she wrote a list of what she'd given me but I don't remember where I put the list. I know I had a head wound because I have a scar…” He reached back behind his left ear and pulled his hair up.

The doctor used his penlight to examine it and then used a magnifying glass, directing the nurse to hold Fish's hair. The scar was 6 inches long and ranged from ¼ to ¾'s of an inch wide, running from behind the top of his ear to the nape of his neck, curving toward his spine. The doctor measured the scar while the nurse entered the information into a tablet, including some conclusions he made, although Leroy had no idea what the man was saying. Ducky was in the waiting room as there wasn't room for another person in the exam area.

When the doctor finished with the scar, he went back to Fish. "Do you remember how you felt
when you regained consciousness? Did you know who you were?"

"Tired and achy, like I'd had the flu. And no, I had no idea who I was, how long I'd been in the water or anything."

"Did you have headaches?"

"Yes, for a few days. Margaret had me drinking spruce tea several times a day and that helped."

"Spruce tea, interesting. Have you had any recently?"

"Yes, I had two cups this morning. I drank it several times a week when we were living in the cave and we brought some spruce with us but until Dad found a spruce tree this morning, it'd been a few days. Dad?"

Leroy thought about it. "I think before this morning the last we had was about 4 days ago."

The doctor nodded. "You say you drank the tea while you were living in the cave. Did you have headaches then?"

"Sporadically, maybe once or twice a week. The cave is at 11,000 ft. elevation, I thought that was causing the headaches. And then when it started snowing, I didn't have any goggles or sunglasses so there was a lot of glare."

"How long were you at that elevation before the snow started? And just to confirm, you had headaches before it started snowing?"

"Uh, my dog and I found the cave in mid-July and the first snow was in September sometime. And yes, I had headaches before the snow."

Softly Leroy interjected, "September 13th."

"All right so two months at that elevation before the snow. Was your dog also in the water with you?"

"No, my rescuers gave him to me."

"At some point the frequency increased, do you remember when?"

"When it started snowing."

"And were you still drinking the spruce tea?"

"Not as often because I couldn't always get to the spruce trees through the snow. My boots were inadequate and my priority was hunting to survive. I finally made some skis and got around that way."

The doctor nodded and looked at the nurse who nodded, she was recording this on the tablet.

"All right, we're going to get these scans done so we can get you admitted and give you something for the pain. What have you been taking?"

"Ibuprofen. We had that and Tylenol in Leroy's med kit and I knew Tylenol doesn't work so well for me."

"So general knowledge and some personal knowledge stayed with you."
"Very little personal knowledge and it wasn't just there. It has to be something I'm thinking about – like whether to take Ibuprofen or Tylenol."

"All right, thank you." The doctor looked up as there was a perfunctory knock and a man poked his head in the room. "Ready?"

"Almost, Johnny, give me a minute." Nodding, the man pulled back.

The doctor looked at Fish and Leroy, "Johnny's going to take you for your lab work and then your CT scan. I want to talk with your dad for a few minutes and then both of us will join you. Depending on how you do and what the scans show, we may get you right in for the MRI as well."

"Okay."

Leroy kissed the top of his head as Johnny came in, helped Fish move into a wheelchair and then rolled him down the hall.

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After Tim left, the doctor continued speaking with Gibbs.

"My notes from Dr. Mallard say you were with him in the mountains."

"Yes, we left the cave 16 days ago, drove the southern route across country and arrived here an hour ago. I was with him 8 of the 9 months he was in the mountains. He went into the water on April 15th and we searched for weeks. Then I injured my knee, which I'd had replaced a few months before and had to return to DC. Docs didn't clear my knee again until August and I returned right away to Wyoming. I searched the path of the flooded creek for any clues. Finally found the campsite where he'd been rescued and that led me up into the mountains."

"Where you found him."

"Actually, he found me. Bear attacked me while I was hiking to the caves and Fish sprayed him with bear-pepper-spray. When he said his name was Fish and didn't recognize me or my name I knew something was very wrong."

"And he's had no memories return?"

"One memory that never left - his girlfriend. He didn't know her name or who she was but he dreamed of her every night. I found out recently, after we'd connected with our folks here, that they'd become engaged right before we went out to Wyoming."

"Interesting that stayed with him."

"And there were other things. We're in law enforcement and use a lot of non-verbal communications, signals – head and hand gestures, like that. And he was still using those. He'd give me a head tilt or one of our other gestures. He also remembered that I give head slaps to refocus my teammates. I told him to stop something one day and he asked if I was going to give him a head slap. And then proceeded to tell me that one of our teammates was given far more of them than he was."

"He knew that person's name?"

"By then I'd told him about our team, he knew them by my descriptions. That individual he calls 'movie guy' because he's a film nut."
"But you hadn't told him about the head slaps?"

"No. Although he'd read about them in his books – he's an author and writes about our team."

"Still, he associated the head slaps with you, seems that some things are available to him. When did you first notice his headaches?"

"Probably about a week after I got there. I was injured in the bear attack and was a little cloudy for a few days. I remember noticing his head, we've worked together for over a decade and he has a tell for headaches. With tension headaches, he holds his head very straight and doesn't move it, he moves his shoulders or whole body instead. Sinus headaches, his eyes are puffy and he rubs the back of his skull.

"Anyway, I didn't say anything to him about the headaches for…huh, guess it was almost 2 months. I got there Sept. 19th and we had an intense discussion on his birthday - Nov. 15th. Not an argument, just a very serious discussion about being Fish versus Tim McGee. Afterward I noticed he had a headache and got the Ibuprofen out for him."

"How often would you say he was having them before then?"

"Maybe two or three a week. I brought snowshoes for both of us so we could get to the spruce trees more often. I attributed the headaches to his situation, as he put it a 'homeless amnesiac living in a cave with no way to contact anyone.'"

"That certainly would be stressful. When did you notice the headaches increasing?"

"Been thinking about that and I'd say when we left the cave. Two days before we left, his dog was attacked by a bear and we decided to get out. A few days before that we'd had a bear, might have been the same one, trying to get into the cave."

"Yeah, lot of stress. How did you get out?"

"Have a 4-wheel drive truck."

"And the drive out, was that easily accomplished?"

"Wasn't as bad as we thought it would be but it wasn't easy. The caves are in mountains of granite above a valley at the end of a chain of 7 plateaus and valleys. To reach the paved road, we had to drive up and down 6 snow-covered mountain ridges."

"Geez!"

"Yeah. That's when his headaches started getting worse. He thought it was the rough ride and the reduction in altitude but on one of the ridges he got carsick. He gets seasick but I've never seen him carsick before. That day his head just kept getting worse. When we got off the mountain, we had to pull over, I don't remember if it was that night or the next one, anyway, there was a white-out so we pulled over and had a cup of spruce tea. I don't know why we didn't pick more. We could have but when we pulled off the road at night we didn't go far into the woods. Usually we'd eat and then get the food up into the trees, maybe read for a while and sleep."

"All right, this has been a big help. I'm not sure if the original injury didn't heal all the way and is now worsening, if there's been some re-injury, recurrence of the infection he mentioned or if he picked up some nasty bacteria in the water. Whatever the cause, it's seems to have been mostly under control until recently. I know spruce tea has Vitamin C, potassium and magnesium and contains carotenoids but I've never heard of it specifically acting as a pain reliever, an antibiotic or
"helping form blood clots. There could be other causes but unless he's reinjured himself in the last 12 days, I don't see any reason for the headaches to become more frequent and more severe."

"If it's bacteria?"

"Have to see what damage it's caused and how widespread it is -- and then the most effective way to treat it. Come on, let's see how he's doing."

If anything, Leroy was more frightened than before. He hoped that the cause of the headaches was the previous injury and not some horrible slow-acting, brain-eating bacteria.

Fish was having his CT scan; Leroy watched helplessly through a glass wall while Ducky tried to reassure him. "You did the right thing bringing him straight here, Jethro. They'll find the cause and formulate a treatment."

"The doctor said it could be bacteria from the water."

"It could be that or a virus, yes."

"Or the injury that resulted in that scar never healed properly."

Ducky nodded, "That seems the most logical to me although logic isn't always involved. Now, he'll be another 40 minutes here. I've got an appointment set up with Dr. Caldwell to look at your scars."

Leroy shook his head, "Knew it was too good to be true."

"He's a plastic surgeon, Jethro."

"Okay, all right. But not now, I'm not leaving him. I promised."

"Very well, I thought that might be the case. We'll wait until after his scans."

Leroy stayed with Fish while the technician and doctor analyzed his CT scan. Fish was drowsy and still a little dizzy but said he was glad the first of the scans was done.

"Just hoping they can do something fast, Leroy. Tired of hurting and not doing anything."

"Part of that is having been so active for the last 10 months. That was survival. So is this, in a different way. I know it's frustrating, son. At least we're home, don't have to travel anywhere else."

"Yeah, that's good. Thanks for bringing me straight here."

He dozed for a few minutes, waking when the aide returned. "All right, Mr. McGee, you're up for your MRI next. That's great, sometimes people have to wait several hours."

Fish smirked, "Guess I'm special."

"I guess so!"

They gave him an IV full of something for the MRI; that took a couple of minutes. Then the scans started. Leroy paced while the technician ran the SWI and other MRI scans. While he waited, Ellie joined him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, kissing the side of her head, whispering, "Congratulations!"

"Thank you, I'm so thankful you've brought him home."
"I'm thankful he survived and that he saved my life up there!"

"That too." She paused, "Breena's at the house with the baby. I introduced them to Boss and he immediately became her doggy servant. Wait until you see her, she's a year now, starting to walk and totally engrossed in her new toy, Boss doggy."

He chuckled, "That's good, although we'll need him back."

"I'm hoping we can get him in to see Fish once they figure out what's wrong."

"Ducky and Dr. Nelson seem to think it's either bacteria from the water or that the original head injury hasn't totally healed. Has he showed you the scar?"

She nodded, adding, "Whatever it is, I hope they figure it out quickly and get him some relief."

"Is Penny here?"

"No, she's tied up in meetings all day, she was planning to be here tomorrow for the original appointment. I left her a message that you're home and here at Bethesda, that Fish was conscious and undergoing some scans. I didn't know what kind of message Ducky might have left. He can be a little scary sometimes."

Leroy chuckled, "He always wants us to know exactly what's happening, even when we'd rather not know."

Finally, Johnny the aide reappeared which they took as a sign that the MRI technician was finished. He gestured to follow him as he rolled Fish to his hospital room where Ducky pulled Leroy aside, as Tim McGee's medical proxy, to sign papers for Fish's admittance as a patient.

Then, leaving his drowsy son in Ellie's hands, Leroy followed Ducky to Dr. Caldwell's office. He stripped out of his shirts and photos were taken. The doctor poked a little bit, "I thought you were in a cave somewhere. Whoever bandaged your shoulder, chest and arm did a remarkable job."

"That's my boy although it was partly what Dr. Mallard and Dr. Palmer put in my first aid kit. And we were in a cave. He used steri strips on the smaller wounds and made...uh, what do you call them...butterfly bandages out of the adhesive tape they included. Before that, he washed the wounds with cool water and soap. Because I was attacked by a bear, he increased the number of washings. Felt like torture but it worked, no infection."

"Attacked by a bear, good grief! Were you in the cave or outside?"

"Outside on the snow fields. After Fish, that's my boy, got rid of the bear, he got my pack, shirts and parka off my right side and then packed that whole area in fresh snow. Once I was numb, it really helped."

"Creative thinking. How long did he leave it on?"

"Until the bleeding stopped, I have no idea how long that was. Then he did the washing thing, let the fires dry it, wrapped it all in gauze, made me hot tea with sugar and let me rest. When I woke, he made me some soup and helped me sit up, propped me against my pack. Before he washed me, he got a tarp and blankets under me so I wasn't lying in the snow. Blankets went on my left side. And he wrapped a wool scarf around my head, another one around my neck and put chemical hand and feet warmers on me."

"He let the fires dry it?"
"Wood fire in a fire bowl I had with me. He had that going near my injured side and another fire, on top of the snow, on the other side of me. Between the two, my injuries dried from the washings and I was kept warm. He also elevated my feet and legs."

"Was he a field medic in the military?"

"No. He has a degree in biomedical engineering and I guess that helped."

"Something certainly did. All right, what about functionality?"

"100%. He started gently exercising my arm and shoulder about 3 days after the attack."

"Wonderful, I'd like to meet this man!"

"He's in Room 239, they're trying to figure out what's causing his headaches."

"Who's his primary?"

"Dr. Nelson."

"Great, he's the best there is. Now, here's what I'm going to do…"

Half an hour later, Leroy returned to his son's room to find him asleep, still holding Ellie's hand. "Did you know he dreamed of you almost every night? Before he knew who you were?"

She smiled, "He told me he dreamed about me a lot."

"I had some of his books along, in paperback and when I told him he'd written them, he was dumbfounded. We talked about the characters and he said, 'Thea is hot', oh she's Ellie!"

Her cheeks got a little rosy and she blinked back tears. They were still chatting quietly when a nurse came in. "I hoped he'd be awake. Dr. Nelson has the results of the MRI."

Ellie and Leroy both smiled, "For that we'll wake him."

When they woke him, he asked if they were off the mountain yet, before he opened his eyes. Then his eyelids snapped open and he grinned at them. "Good, it wasn't a dream!"

"Mr. McGee, Dr. Nelson will be here in a minute to talk about the results of your MRI."

"That was fast."

She tilted her head with a smile, "Ain't it great?"

She raised the bed so Fish was sitting up. Dr. Nelson came in a minute later with the results of the scan. "Your dad will be happy to know your problem is not caused by bacteria."

Fish nodded, "Something in the water? Yeah, I'm happy about that too."

"What we do have are microhemorrhages. Looks like your head injury caused some internal bleeding that hasn't fully stopped. Your friend who treated you with herbs had the right idea but I believe didn't continue the treatments long enough. It does seem that the spruce tea has been helping ease the pain, whether it's also helping the blood clot is another question."

"So…treatment. Fortunately for you, your caveman diet and I mean that literally, has helped keep you on your feet. The amount of iron in your blood shows me you're not suffering any lack. We can
cross that off the list for now. We do have to repair those torn capillaries in your brain and we'll do that through a surgical procedure.

"I know brain surgery sounds frightening but in your case, it will prevent further damage, eliminate the headaches and allow you to live normally. We'll schedule that for tomorrow morning, it'll take between 5-7 hours to make sure we close them all and I'm going to do a little exploring around that scar. We'll keep you for several days, possibly a week, to make sure there's no infection or pain. After your surgery, once we see how you're doing, you'll also be seeing an orthopedic specialist who'll look at your foot. Might as well get everything working right as long as we have you here."

Looking hopeful, Fish asked, "The amnesia?"

"We believe the location of the bleeding capillaries is what's causing the amnesia. Of course, we won't know for sure until after the surgery and even then if your memories return, it'll likely be more a gradual return rather than waking up with a full recollection. But there are no guarantees with memory loss, we don't have the full story of how those happen yet."

"Will I remember my time now, after the water?"

"Likely but again, no guarantees."

"How interested are you in the benefits of spruce tea?"

"I've only had a few hours to think about it but I would like to research the topic."

"I'd be happy to demonstrate now if I had a cup of the tea."

Ellie chuckled, "That sounds like one of Abby's research topics and experiments."

"Abby?"

They explained who Abby was and he nodded. "Be great to have a civilian research partner. Now, if you'll excuse me?" He left the room.

Leroy turned to Ellie, "You're right, Abby would love this. Is she swamped?"

"She was working on two cases this morning, I don't know how she's doing now."

"How who's doing now?" With a smile and tears on her face, Abby entered the room, hurrying to Fish. "It's so good to see you, I'm so glad you're alive and home!" She gently kissed his cheek and then turning around, greeted Gibbs. "Thank you for bringing my Timmy home. Sorry, I mean Fish."

Fish smiled, "Thanks. The doctor just told us what he found on the SWI-MRI. I have capillaries that haven't healed. They're still bleeding, so they're going in tomorrow morning to fix them."

"Ducky said you've been having horrible headaches." Abby suddenly noticed that Fish was holding Ellie's hand. Fish took a deep breath. "We haven't told anyone at the agency, except for Dad of course, but before Ellie left for training last spring, I asked her to marry me. We're engaged."

"Engaged? Dad?"

Gibbs intervened, "Fish is my surrogate son, Abby, just like Tim. We grew closer during the months we spent together and now he sometimes calls me Dad."

"Oh, that's sweet! And you two…" she turned to Ellie, embraced her and kissed Fish again,
"Congratulations. But Ellie, I can't believe you went all those months, all that stress - and never told us."

"Penny and Sarah knew, that was enough. I didn't think I could work if everyone knew."

"Yeah, I guess that would be tough. Wow, awesome day! Now what did I hear about something I'd love?"

Knowing his son was tiring and that a headache was likely brewing, Leroy quickly explained, smiling as Abby's eyes widened and her smile looked painful. "Wow, I want to see that!"

Dr. Nelson walked back into the room, "Mr. McGee...hello." The last word was addressed to Abby.

Ellie introduced them and he smiled, "Ah, you're the forensic scientist they said would love my newest research topic. And right now, we're going outside for spruce needles and will brew the tea. I'm curious to watch the effects on my patient."

She smiled, "Gibbs explained, it sounds interesting."

Leroy touched her arm, "Come on, let's leave him for a few minutes. He has a headache, see how his forehead is pinched together?"

"Oh. I...I didn't know that, Timmy. I always thought that meant you were mad at me. I mean Fish, darn it!"

The doctor frowned, "How about you wait in the hallway?"

Ellie patted her lover's hand, "Come on, Abby, let's get something to drink. Leroy?"

"No thanks, I'll go with the doc and then have a cup of tea with Fish."

Leroy grabbed his jacket, hat and gloves before leaving with the doctor. Ellie kissed Fish, "Your life has been pretty crazy, doesn't look like that's changing anytime soon."

He gave a pained laugh, "As long as it's good crazy. Tired of fighting off bears and wolves, hanging our food in the trees, carrying my bow and arrows everywhere. And we need to tell movie guy about us – before we tell anyone else. Can Amy, I mean Abby, keep a secret?"

Ellie pursed her lips, "You're right. Abby's good at work secrets, not personal ones. And she wears her emotions on her sleeve."

Kissing him again, Ellie went to find Abby who was waiting at the elevator, and Fish dozed off again. The nurse came in, frowning when she looked at the chart. The patient was clearly in pain but there were no meds prescribed. She looked on the patient's records, her frown deepening when she saw the notation about spruce tea. What kind of treatment was that?

Shaking her head, she returned to the nurse's station. She'd ask Dr. Nelson about this later. Several minutes later, when the patient's father and the doctor emerged from the elevator carrying beverages, she moved toward him. "Doctor, if I may have a word?"

"In a few minutes, Mr. McGee is waiting for this."

"Doctor..."

He and the father went into the patient's room, shutting the door behind them. She was still muttering about that when the two women visitors returned, slipping into the room.
When the doctor entered the room with the spruce tea, Fish smelled it and started to wake up. "Yay."

The bed was once again raised and he blew on it to cool it off a little. "Mm, smells wonderful." He took a sip and then another one, relaxing against the pillow. Ellie's eyes widened. "Oh my gosh, you can practically see the pain going away."

Fifteen minutes later, Fish relaxed against the bed, "The pain's totally gone."

The doctor nodded, "And I bet we'd find the bleeding's stopped." He patted Fish's arm. "We might have just made medical history." He stepped out of the room, Abby following him.

She frowned, "History? With one experiment? Yeah, it worked and that's great but you'll need…" she stopped as she saw a smile from Dr. Nelson. "Ok, step one. I'd love to get in on it."

Back they went to Fish's room, the nurse watching them. "Dr. Nelson, Mr. McGee is in pain and there's nothing prescribed."

"There is now, Carolyn. Spruce tea."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If Mr. McGee experiences another headache, make him a cup of spruce tea. I have the ingredients and Mr. Gibbs knows how to make it or I can show you."

"Spruce…like a tree?"

"Yes."

"You're serious?"

"Yes. We don't yet know why and we have a lot of work to do on it but the facts are Mr. McGee drank spruce tea almost every day after his head injury last April. He was in a remote area and a woman who uses herbs to heal treated him. She stopped her treatments too soon, but she did introduce him to spruce tea. On the days he drank it, he had no headaches. On the days he didn't drink it, he had headaches. When he and his dad left the mountains recently, they stopped picking spruce for various reasons and Mr. McGee's headaches returned, intensified and became more frequent. To the point of becoming debilitating. He was in pain earlier, you saw him?"

"Yes, he was asleep but clearly in pain."

"We picked some spruce off the tree out front, poured boiling water over a handful, let it steep for 5 minutes and then brought it to him to drink. Mr. Gibbs had a cup as well. I'm operating on the patient in the morning to surgically repair those capillaries but in the meantime, he's pain free. For how long, Mr. McGee?"

Fish thought about it, shrugging while Leroy pulled out his notebook. "I was so worried I started recording when I'd see a headache coming on and how long the pain would be gone. Four to five hours."

Surprised, the nurse asked, "On one cup of tea?"

"Yes."

She smiled, "That's good news. Now, Mr. McGee, you're having brain surgery tomorrow morning. 
You need rest – and quiet. One of you may stay."

Abby smiled, leaning down and kissing Fish's cheek. "I'll see you after your surgery, Fish. Love you."

"Thanks Abby, love you too." He looked at Ellie who smiled.

Abby kissed Gibbs and walked out of the room. Looking thoughtful, the nurse followed her out. "Ma'am, will you be visiting Mr. McGee again?"

Shocked at being called 'ma'am', Abby nodded, finally saying, "Yes, he's my best friend."

"Then please don't wear those boots or bracelets – or anything that makes noise. It disturbs our patients who all need peace and quiet."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll bring a change of shoes to work then."

The nurse's eyebrows rose in surprise and before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "You wear those to work? Do you work in a nightclub?"

Just as startled as the nurse had been, Abby shook herself, got in the elevator and left.

Returning to Mr. McGee's room, the nurse sighed, "All right, you may both stay. But no talking, he needs a peaceful night. And I've asked your friend not to wear those boots or bracelets. This is a hospital, not a fun house."

With wide eyes, the doctor said his farewells and left.

Fish and the others were settled in his room when DiNozzo came in. "Hey, I thought I'd wait but then you were gone."

"The doctor wanted to check something. I'm having brain surgery in the morning."

"Yeah, Ducky told me. Oh, he and Jimmy got called back to work."

Leroy nodded, "Heard."

The nurse came in and looked at him. "You haven't been in before."

"No, had to work and then there were too many people in here."

"All right, you can stay for 15 minutes, quietly. Your friend is having surgery early tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, I'll be as quiet as a mouse."

Leroy sat back and watched his boys reconnect. Tony gently teased Fish about being a mountain man and then got serious as he asked what animals they'd seen.

Fish huffed, "Seen or eaten?"

"Uh, both."

"Deer, antelope, elk, brown and black bears, rabbit, geese, chicken, fox, wolf, bobcat, mountain lion oh and last summer there were goats, bighorn sheep and bison. Ducks, turkey, pheasant and some other birds I have no idea what they were."
"Wow! And Boss and the dog were attacked by bears, huh?"

"Boss is the dog. Leroy was attacked first, that's how we met. My dog Boss was attacked our last day there."

Ellie nodded, "I saw the furs and the deerskin in the trailer. And the bowls you made!"

"Bear furs?"

Fish huffed again, "I had 2 blankets, a pair of hand-me-down jeans, a couple of shirts, socks and a pair of hiking boots that didn't fit. There was no way I'd survive winter in that. The first bear I killed, I cut up the fur and before it got cold I sewed lengths of it onto the jeans and boots. Had enough to use as blankets and those were also my outdoor wear when winter set in. Didn't care how it looked."

Tony shook his head, "That's so hard to imagine, being without everything. Robinson Crusoe in the mountains."

"Had a dog, a bow and a bunch of arrows. Made clay bowls, found the cave, killed the bear, killed enough deer to eat and to make a pack, a water bag and a curtain for the cave entrance. Built a fire circle, a smoker and a travois. Figured out how to make glue, which made some things easier. Gathered wood and drank spruce tea, swam in the lake. We might have been all right but then Leroy showed up with his rifle, handgun and his truck full of blankets, clothes, snowshoes, food and equipment. And a way out."

Leroy snorted, "I used the handgun once and as far as we know that bear is still alive. You killed all the animals we ate with your bow and arrows. You shot the wolf and the bear who attacked Boss with my rifle. I did shoot the goose with my rifle, otherwise it was mostly you."

"You brought down at least 2 deer and it took both of us to bring down the elk."

"Sounds like you guys ate a lot of meat. Was the wolf scary?"

Fish nodded, "Yes. The pack was only seconds behind us and I was in the truck bed. While I was trying to distract them, I was counting seconds and trying to figure out if there was enough time for me to scramble onto the roof of the cab and then hope I'd fit through a window."

"Wow!"

Leroy nodded, "I had Boss tied up so if I had to open the door, he wouldn't jump out to confront the wolf pack. I figured once we got Fish into the cab, we'd pick off the leaders of the pack. But Fish knew they'd be able to follow us for at least 50 miles, the cave was about 35 miles and that was before we built the door. So yes, it was scary." He paused, "And we did eat a lot of meat. We had eggs when we could get them but the hens weren't around after heavy snows. Chuck loaded us up with potatoes, oatmeal, packets of vegetables, pasta and other food and we had plenty of dried fruit. But that's two men and a dog, DiNozzo, three meals a day for us and two for Boss, for 8 months."

Fish said, "Before the snow started, I didn't have much refrigeration. I'd kill and cook what I could for Boss and me and I'd cool things overnight in a pan of lake water but I didn't dare eat it any later than the next day. I'd take it down the path, down the mountain and leave it in different places. Doc says my iron levels are excellent, that's from all the meat."

"And spinach, don't forget that wild spinach you made me eat!"

"Oh yeah, after the attack. You lost a lot of blood, you needed iron."
"Wild spinach?"

Fish smiled, telling him all the wild vegetables and fruits he'd found. Then Leroy told him about
the abandoned vegetable garden.

"Did you have any fun, you know, in the snow?"

Grinning, they told DiNozzo and Ellie about their day of sledding. "Just one day though, had to
watch for hungry animals."

"We almost played again before we left but didn't want wet clothes in the cab with us."

"Too bad about the sat phone, would love to see pictures of all this."

The two men grinned at their friend. "We have sketches of just about everything."

"Sketches, great!"

"The sketch book is in the cab of the truck."

Ellie shook her head, "We moved everything into the house. I saw the book, didn't open it. I think
it's on the coffee table."

While Tony was there, Leroy slipped out for a few minutes, to give Fish and Ellie time to tell their
friend of their engagement.

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As the door closed behind Gibbs, Ellie moved closer to Fish, taking his hand. "Tony, we have
something we want to tell you before we tell the others."

He looked at their hands and smiled, "Yes?"

Fish smiled at him, "We're getting married! Tim proposed to Ellie before she left on her leave and
training last spring and she accepted. And now... well, we'll work out the differences between who
I am now and who I was. I dreamed about her almost every night but didn't know who she was
until Leroy told me." He paused, "I haven't told anyone else but Leroy this but I don't want to be a
field agent any more. I'm hoping the suit man has something else I can do. Anyway, that means
you won't have to kick one of us off your team."

DiNozzo blinked back moisture. "Wow, I knew there was something but engaged, that's great!
Congratulations, I'm happy for you two." He stopped to kiss them both, Ellie on the cheek, Fish on
the top of his head. "And I'm grateful you're home safe and will soon be well. But, Fish, I'm
bumped you won't be on my team. We always planned that you'd be my SFA when Gibbs retired,
if you didn't have your own team by then."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Tony smiled, "That's okay, I'd rather have you alive, well and happy. And it would be a problem
because I wouldn't want to lose either of you from the team."

Fish returned the smile, "Thanks, that's nice to hear. What about Bob?"

Tony chuckled, "He's learned a lot. And not just anyone can step in as both he and Ellie did, when
other agents leave suddenly or disappear. Both have more than proved themselves worthy of the
MCRT."
DiNozzo left soon after, happy about the engagement news and still rejoicing that his friend was alive, that he and Gibbs were home. He was reassured that Fish was Tim with different experiences and memories and hopeful that the surgery would be successful. He ran into Penny in the lobby and gave her a hug. "He's going to be fine. He's Tim with a different name and experiences, none of Tim's memories but he's making his own."

She smiled, "Thank you, Tony. I was alarmed when I heard Jethro brought him straight here."

"Yeah, his head was pounding and he was dizzy when they got here but the doc figured out from an MRI what's causing the problems."

"Thank heavens!"

When Penny reached Tim's floor, she went straight to the nurses' station. "Hello, I'm Timothy McGee's grandmother and I'm sorry to be so late. May I please see him for a few minutes?"

Having learned that their patient had been missing for more than 10 months, the nurses were feeling kindlier toward his visitors. "Yes, of course, no more than 15 minutes though."

Penny smiled and hurried to Tim's room, reminding herself to call him Fish. Ellie and Jethro were in there and smiled as she entered. She thought her grandson was asleep but he opened his eyes as he walked in, "Penny!"

Oh, that sounded and felt so good to hear! Gently wrapping her arms around her boy, she kissed his head and cheek. "Oh..." She'd sworn she wouldn't. Her fellow grandmother Maisie said she knew she was going to cry but Penny had been determined to keep her emotions together. That lasted about 5 seconds, the length of time it took to cross the room to her grandson.

Fish held her, thinking about how hard it must have been for her – and everyone else - while he was away. He rocked her, kissing the top of her head. "I'm alive, Penny, I'm home. Just with a different name and experiences."

She nodded against his chest, finally moving her head so she could see him. "You left your hair a bit longer, I'm glad! And I know Ellie must love your goatee."

Ellie and Leroy were on their way out the door to give the two some privacy but now Ellie turned back to say, "Oh, she does!"

Fish turned serious, "The doctor has already figured out what's wrong with me. I'm having surgery in the morning to repair some torn capillaries in my head."

"Brain surgery."

"Yes. They'll go in around my scar so they can clean that up too." He leaned forward, holding his hair back and she looked.

"That's quite a scar. I can't even imagine what it looked like when it happened."

He nodded, "Same here, glad I was unconscious or don't remember."

They talked for several minutes before one of the nurses poked her head in, "Ma'am, I'm sorry but he needs his rest."

She smiled as she kissed her boy again, "That's all right, I'll see him after his surgery tomorrow."
Leaving the room, she found Ellie and Jethro in the hall. Kissing Ellie goodnight, she stopped to look at Jethro, who embraced her. Speaking softly, she thanked him for saving her grandson as well as her heart and possibly her soul. He replied just as softly that he knew they didn't share DNA but that her grandson was his son, blood or not, he would have gone to the ends of the earth to find him.

After his grandmother left, Fish drifted off to sleep reflecting that being home, albeit in a hospital, was a lot better than he'd imagined. He smiled with his eyes closed as first Ellie and then Dad kissed him goodnight.

A/N: A few people have mentioned the spruce tea and this seemed like a good place to give you a little more information about it. First of all, it does exist, not a product of my imagination (no one questioned that but I have been known to conjure up things!). I first heard of it while watching YouTube videos about building fires under tarps and in the snow and building shelters in the wild (which I never used). A bonus, if you will. While it doesn't have all the benefits I've given it, the tea is good for you, has the Vitamin C and macro-minerals Dr. Nelson first mentioned. I believe it can also be found as 'pine' tea.
Chapter 20

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Leroy woke him the next morning when an aide arrived to cut his hair and shave his head around the scar. Ellie was there too and Fish noticed two reclining chairs, both with pillows and blankets. He thanked them for staying.

Next was a visit from the anesthesiologist, who introduced himself as "the 'gas passer'." After that, an IV was set up to administer the anesthesia. While he waited to be taken to surgery, Fish looked at his fiancée and surrogate father. "Take care of each other, please? And Boss. Love you."

Then he was being rolled down the hallway to surgery. As he'd be in a different room afterward, Leroy and Ellie put his belongings in his pack and took it with them.

To their surprise, they were both hungry and headed to the cafeteria where they found Ducky, Jimmy, Bob Chalmers and Rick Carter.

Bob and Rick hadn't seen Gibbs since his return and greeted him, a handshake from Bob and a one-armed hug from Rick.

"Good to see you! How's our boy doing this morning?"

"Glad to be getting this over with. They just took him for more prep; his surgery is scheduled for 0700."

"Ducky's been telling us about the internal bleeding, pretty scary."

Gibbs nodded, "It's even scarier now when I think what could have happened while we were still in the mountains."

Jimmy shook his head, "You can't go there, it didn't happen, you got him here in good time. Abby told us about the spruce tea."

"Yeah, that was a surprise, although if we'd talked about it might not have been."

"She said you drink it, too."

Jethro smiled at Ducky before replying to Chalmers, "I do. Fish first had me drink it when I was recovering from the bear attack and I just kept going. Still had coffee occasionally but didn't mainline it like I do here." He leaned over to Bob, "It's a well-kept secret but I've been drinking tea at home for a few years." He gestured to Ducky, "My old friend persuaded me to try some and I liked it."

Rick laughed, "Jethro, I think that box of assorted teas Ducky gave you for Christmas 3 or 4 years ago pretty much outing you as a tea drinker. We just decided not to tease you about it."

"Thanks for that!"

Finishing their breakfasts, they returned to the surgical waiting room. Carter, Chalmers and Ducky left an hour later for work while Jimmy and Ellie stayed. Ellie worked on something on her laptop and Jimmy was 'on call', he'd join Ducky at a crime scene or in autopsy if needed, otherwise he'd wait with the others. Tomorrow, the two would swap and Ducky would be on call.
Palmer gave him a status report on Boss. "He's curious about everything and loves Victoria. He slept in his bed last night, in our room. Uh, what does he usually eat? We got some dog food that came highly recommended but he didn't eat much. Breena's taking him over to your place today, we thought he might be happier in the backyard, at least during the day. She'll put that blanket jacket on him."

Gibbs nodded, "Fish made him that for Christmas." He sighed, thinking about Boss's life. "Boss has been with Fish since he was 8 months old; he was only 10 months when they found the cave. Until we stayed at Chuck Payton's place, he'd never been inside a building much less a house. I'm sure he misses Fish and me, wonders what's happening, maybe that's why he's not eating.

"Until we got to West Boston he mostly ate whatever he caught if we were outdoors, whatever we had if we fixed meals or pieces of deer or bear jerky that Fish made. Whenever we made hot meals, we'd cook vegetables and meat for him without our seasonings. He's used to venison, bear, rabbit, turkey, chicken - deboned for him - green beans, sweet potatoes…whatever meat and vegetables we had. After Fish is out of surgery I'll head over to the house for a shower and change of clothes and spend some time with Boss…uhh, forgot I don't have a vehicle here."

Ellie tapped him on the shoulder, "We'll get you there and you can bring either of your trucks back. We've been driving your old one."

"Thanks!"

They talked for a bit longer, Jimmy and Ellie updating him on all the agency news. He told some stories and answered their questions. For all that, Fish had only been in surgery for 35 minutes. Gibbs grabbed a magazine and started reading it only to find his eyelids sliding shut. Finally, he gave into that, getting comfortable.

At some point in his sleep he woke enough to hear different voices but was asleep again before he thought about opening his eyes. When he did wake it was to a bit of a crowd in the waiting area. Jimmy was walking in with a beverage, Ellie was still there, working on her laptop. Penny sat next to her and there were several people who he thought might be there for someone else. Although one of them looked remarkably like Fish.

He sat up, blinking his eyes and looking at his watch. Four hours in, good. Penny caught his eye, smiling, "Jethro, I'd like you to meet the rest of our family. This is Maisie Hubbard, Tim's maternal grandmother and her son Jim Hubbard, Captain James Hubbard, Tim's uncle, his wife Claire and next to her are Tim and Sarah's godparents, Dave and Liz Crane. That's Admiral David Crane and his wife Liz. Everyone, this is Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Tim's former boss and the man who rescued him."

Gibbs smiled, "Glad to meet you all. I'm not sure who rescued whom – Fish saved my life while I was on my way to rescue him!" He looked at Capt. Hubbard, grinning, "Now I know who he looks like!"

Jim Hubbard returned the grin, "Believe me, we've come to appreciate that over the years. Lily, his mom and my big sister, died before he was old enough to remember her. He's always said it helps that we look alike."

"Lily…not Linda."

Penny shook her head, "No, Linda is Sarah's mother, John's second wife. Tim never lived with them full time. Maisie and her late husband Andrew raised him and Patrick after their mother died."
Jethro nodded, "As sad as I am that he lost his mother, I'm relieved that Linda isn't her. She seemed detached when I met her. Who is Patrick?"

Admiral Crane answered, "Tim's brother, Lily's younger boy. He was born with a congenital heart problem. We lost him when he was 4 and Tim was 5. I thought we were supposed to call him Fish?"

Gibbs tilted his head. "I think when you're talking about his history, it's fine to refer to him as Tim. I do when I'm talking about his past life although I don't address him as Tim. That's who he was for 37 ½ years. I know it's confusing, took me some time to figure it out. And Fish may resume using the name anyway. He needs a surname and it would be easier to keep McGee. He knows he used to be Tim, really is still Tim but he hasn't been able to get past not knowing anything about him. I've told him what I know and he's talked with Penny and Ellie but think of that as learning history in school as opposed to living it. He hasn't been sure how to assume Tim's history, how to be him or if he wants to." He paused, "I'm glad you're all here; I know Ellie's already found her way and Jimmy and Tony are doing a great job of dealing with it too. As reluctant as our boy is to step into Tim's life, he's very aware of what it seems he's asking. He doesn't want any of us to think of Tim as gone; however, he does want a chance to have his own life and not just become Tim 2.0. If that makes sense. You'll have to experience it for yourself, but he's very much Tim. His personality, his inner self, his soul if you will, it's all Tim."

"Without Tim's memories and experiences."

"Yes." He leaned toward the older Mrs. Hubbard, "Fish - Tim - is a great guy, a good man, good human being. He's one of the strongest individuals I've ever met, smart and kind, a good soul. I know you must have raised him with a great deal of loving care. As someone who's benefitted from that upbringing for over a decade, thank you."

Jimmy had to keep his jaw from dropping. He'd witnessed Gibbs saying more in the last two days than he'd heard him say in the last 12 years. And he was saying nice, even caring things, although he'd said caring things to Jimmy when the adoption fell through. Still, those were some big changes to get used to!

Mrs. Hubbard, Maisie, gave Gibbs a kiss before wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. Crane nodded, "It's a hard concept to grasp but we'll do our best. Penny's told us the basics, but would you tell us about meeting Fish the first time?"

Gibbs nodded and briefly told them what led to the meeting - about his searches in the deep woods, finding the camp site, Tim's sock, the drag marks, moving on to the chalk 'G' on the rock."

Maisie smiled, "So he remembered you!"

"I thought he did. I decided he knew his team was coming after him and he was leaving a hint. And he was, sort of, but he had no idea who we were or who he was. He told me later the letter 'G' kept appearing in his dreams and he decided to put it on the boulder. I think it was an impulse and maybe his subconscious reaching out for help." Gibbs huffed, "I'm no psychologist, that's for sure, I suppose it was wishful thinking on my part and maybe on his. But it worked, I took it to mean that he had faith we'd find him."

"Anyway, the sock, the drag marks and the 'G' told me he was alive. I would have kept going anyway but that...when I found the sock I fell on my butt on the ground, held it like it was Tim himself. And when I finally got out of the trees up onto the mountain, I used the sat phone to call Ducky. That was something, to tell them I had proof he was alive and Penny, to pass the word on to you and Sarah."
"From that first night on the mountain, which was also the first day of snow…” Jethro told them of driving through the string of valleys and plains, honking and setting off the security alarm on the truck to advertise his presence in the middle of several snow storms.

"Took me 4 more days to find him – or for him to find me." He told of preparing to backpack across the valley with the lake, using the bigger pack and how thankful he was that he'd done that. How he hiked on snowshoes for 3 hours only to almost literally run into a bear.

"I had my handgun and I fired at the bear as its claw, which looked like it was a foot wide, slashed at my right side, knocking me down and knocking the gun out of my hand. I can shoot with either hand and was trying to get to my rifle when I heard a very familiar voice say not to move, that he had the bear. I wasn't trying to get up but I was moving, felt like my whole right side had been ripped open. He sprayed the bear with pepper spray and it ran off still growling, both of us roaring in pain. This scraggly bearded guy then bends over me and takes my pack, jacket and everything else off my right side. I'm sure he was gentle but it didn't feel like it. So, our first few minutes together, he saved my life and I howled in pain." Gibbs grinned, "Not quite the reunion I'd anticipated!"

"Your arm, you're all right now?"

"Yes, he did a great job of stopping the bleeding, numbing the pain with fresh snow, keeping me warm, minimizing my shock and then got me onto his travois, which he had Boss - and that made me laugh in the middle of all that - pull up to the cave. I met with a plastic surgeon yesterday and he's impressed with Fish's work."

Claire looked at him, "What was funny about Boss?"

"McGee and DiNozzo have called me that since joining my team. And here's Tim, telling me his name is Fish and that he has no memories of anything before being 'fished' out of the water - but he leaves a sock in the dirt to be found, writes a 'G' on a rock and names his dog Boss. And when he told me why he named him that, I laughed even harder as the things he said about the dog can also be said about me as his boss."

Ellie looked up from the paperwork she was processing, grinning at Gibbs and Jimmy. "Barks to wake him up in the morning, nudges, barks or stares him into doing whatever he wants him to do, usually quiet, an excellent guard dog if overprotective – oh and frequently appears out of nowhere."

Jimmy laughed in surprise, he hadn't heard Fish's description. "Perfect! I can see why you laughed! That's spot-on." He turned to the others, explaining, "If there's a call-out, a new case late at night or early in the morning, Gibbs wakes the team by barking at us over the phone to go wherever we're needed. If you're in the office when a new case gets in, you get barked at directly. If you aren't doing what he wants you to do or aren't doing it fast enough, he'll give you a nudge or sometimes a head slap, he'll bark loud enough for the whole office to hear or he'll glare you into submission and yeah, he takes care of his own even if he is sometimes overprotective. And he does appear out of nowhere, especially if DiNozzo is up to something or someone on the team is talking about him."

Gibbs smirked as the Admiral and Captain laughed in understanding. Then he gave Jimmy the eyebrow, which made them all laugh. Waiting until he could be heard, he said, "Am I usually quiet?"

Ellie snorted and then covered her mouth and nose in embarrassment. The others chuckled as Jimmy said, "One of your nicknames is the functional mute."
Jethro tilted his head in agreement when Ellie looked at him, saying, "I think we can put that one to rest."

Gibbs smiled, "Fine. Just don't expect a lot of yabba yabba outa me."

Liz shook her head, "What's that?"

"Sometimes it's DiNozzo working out a case, that's all right. Other times it's a lot of talk about nothing when people should be working. DiNozzo or McGee babbling about their favorite topics. DiNozzo is usually movies or uh…whatever woman he's seeing, McGee is generally electronic babble."

Maisie laughed, "And when we ask him about work, he tells us it's fine. He will occasionally mention arresting an embezzler or thief but nothing more than that."

Ellie shrugged, "There's so much we can't talk about and none of us like talking about our cases, even if they're not classified, to 'civilians,' not until we've had time to process whatever happened. And obviously we like - liked - working for Gibbs. He hand-picked his agents and we work hard but he doesn't give us anything to do that he won't do."

When Gibbs rolled his eyes at her, they all laughed, changing the subject.

Another grueling two hours passed with no word from the doctor. Admiral Crane and Gibbs went for a long, chilly walk and had a good chat about Tim and Fish. Gibbs was glad that Tim's godfather knew him so well while Crane was glad to see that Tim's affection for his surrogate father was mutual.

They spent several minutes exchanging Tim stories before returning to the waiting room, bringing hot beverages for everyone.

Tony and Bob Chalmers arrived and sat with the group, waiting. Vance came in a few minutes after them, joining the crowd. Quickly approaching hour 7, Jimmy disappeared to find out what was going on. He returned several minutes later with Dr. Nelson in tow.

As the doctors walked into the waiting area, the crowd relaxed when they saw the smiles on their faces.

Dr. Nelson pulled out a chair and sat facing the group. "He did very well, he's in recovery, he'll be there for another hour. We found more damaged tissue than we saw on the MRI and after repairing it all, took another tour inside his skull to be sure we had it all and I'm satisfied that we did. Despite the length of the surgery – and the location - his vitals remained strong throughout. From the length of the scar and the damage we saw inside, looks like his head was smashed with something, I'm guessing probably a falling rock or tree limb. That he survived at all is a miracle. That he survived after the herbal treatment ended is just as much a miracle although I'm convinced the spruce tea helped in some way.

"He'll be in the ICU for 3-5 days, closely monitored for infection or any other problems. That will limit the number of visitors to 5 per day, no more than 15 minutes each with at least an hour in between and we'll start those visits tomorrow. To avoid unnecessary stress for him, I'm going to authorize overnight stays by Ms. Bishop and Mr. Gibbs and they're not part of the 5 visitors, in essence they're part of my team. Once he's out of the ICU, everyone can visit although I expect each of you to respect his need for peace and quiet to recuperate. And when he's in a regular room, we'll talk about bringing Boss in to see him.
"His headaches will be gone and his vision will improve. Once he's started healing, he won't need as much sleep as he has over the past week. I know you'd love to hear that his memory will return, that he'll wake up knowing everything that's happened to him. Unfortunately, we don't know if that will ever happen and if it does, it's highly unlikely to happen all at once. Gibbs reports that some things have 'leaked through' as he put it and we can hope that more information will do so. But again, we can't make any promises or offer any guarantees. We did see signs of his having had encephalitis, likely caused by a virus in the flood waters and it's possible that resulted in his loss of memory. It very well could be a combination of retrograde and dissociative amnesia, brought on by the injury, the viral infection and the trauma of what happened to him. That seems the most likely combination to me but with so much time elapsing between his near drowning and now, we'll probably never know."

The doctor looked around the waiting room, "Any questions?"

Liz raised her hand, "Will there be any repercussions from his surgery?"

"You mean loss of cognitive powers, things like that?"

"Yes, or any further degradation of his memories."

The doctor shook his head, "Aside from his known memory problems, I don't expect any more – or any other problems."

After answering a few more questions, the doctor left and Vance, Palmer and DiNozzo returned to the agency. Maisie already had a schedule made for Fish's ICU visitors and the agency folks, including Abby, the director and the doctors, were penciled in after their 'normal' stop times for the day.

An hour later, one of the volunteers entered the waiting area, "For Timothy McGee?" She looked at the crowd and then at her list, "Gibbs and Bishop."

Ellie and Jethro stood, expecting to be taken to Recovery to see Fish. She smiled, "He's been moved to his room in the ICU, I'll take you there and his nurse will take you to his room." She looked at the others, "You may want to follow so you'll know where to go when it's your turn. However, I can only take Gibbs and Bishop into the unit."

Nodding, they followed her, gathering behind her as she stopped after stepping off the elevator. Pointing left down the hall to a red sign, she said, "That's the ICU. Take the elevator to this floor and then a left into the unit. The waiting room is on this side," she pointed to their right, "the 3rd room on the right. Now, Ms. Bishop, Mr. Gibbs, please follow me." She smiled at the others. "You'll see him soon!"

The trio headed off to the ICU while the others turned right to the waiting room.

Once in the room, Ellie and Leroy quietly approached Fish's bed, each leaning in to kiss him. Opening his eyes a little, he smiled, trying to say something but his voice was still croaky from the anesthetic. Clearing his throat he mumbled something before saying, "Boss?"
Chapter 21

Ellie and Gibbs shared a quick glance before Ellie leaned in to kiss her fiancé's cheek. "Sweetie, he's still with the Palmers. You're in the ICU for a few days; the doctor says he'll be able to visit when you're moved to a regular room."

After frowning, one side of Fish's lips turned up. "Off the mountain, into the hospital. What'd they find in my head?" He huffed and then winced, "Good thing Tony didn't hear that, he'd have a new McNickname for that."

Gibbs chuckled, that was a Tim remark. He hadn't told Fish much about Tony's teasing and hadn't mentioned the McNicknames, nor were they in the books.

"They found small bleeders as they expected, only there were more than they saw on the MRI. They've all been repaired."

"Glad. How long?"

"Your surgery was 7 hours, you've been out of surgery for four hours. How's your head feel?"

"Hurts, inside and out."

The doctor stepped in, "Hello Fish, I'm glad to see you're awake! Time to take you through a few tests to see how you're doing. Gibbs, Ms. Bishop, I'll need him for about 15 minutes. There's fresh coffee in the staff room." He chuckled, "And a thermos of spruce tea."

Smiling at Fish, they left to find the hot beverages. Gibbs wanted coffee, if it was up to his standards, while Ellie thought she'd try the spruce tea.

After Gibbs and Ellie left, the doctor looked at Fish's eyes, tested his reflexes and asked him a few questions. The last one was one Fish expected.

Dr. Nelson sat in one of the chairs. "Your family is going to ask either you or me and I'd rather you tell me and we'll decide what to tell them, if anything. Any Tim-ness coming through? And don't move your head, how about an eyebrow up for yes, no eyebrow is no."

Fish smiled, first thanking him for his thoughtfulness. Then he lay quietly, finally saying, "I was going to say no but I realized I said something to Leroy about Tony and his McNicknames for me – and I didn't know that before. I mean I didn't know it as Fish. And I don't think Leroy told me, you'll have to check with him. So maybe something."

"All right, I'll verify it with him but how about we keep that between us until you're up and around? I don't want anyone stressing you out about this." He shook his head, "The less stress, the better! Your friend with the dog collar won't be wearing those boots or bracelets here anymore."

"Uh Amy - I mean Abby and thanks. I could hear those boots coming and going last night, didn't help my head and I'm sure other patients weren't too happy."

"Anything that stresses you out, let us know. All right, your tests look good, you'll have another SWI-MRI in two days to make sure everything's still good. If there are no problems, we'll probably keep you here for another day and then move you to a regular room. By then you'll be up and
around with supervision and we'll have Gibbs bring Boss in."

That brought a big smile, "Thank you! Poor guy, he went from all day, every day with us to not seeing us at all and being with strangers."

"Will he obey Leroy?"

"Yeah, he's used to orders from both of us although I'm his master."

"Great! All right. If all goes well, you'll be discharged in about 5 days, although I don't want you by yourself. We'll watch how your balance is once you're up and see about you needing balance assistance."

"What's that?"

"A walker or cane and some physical therapy. I don't anticipate that happening but we do need to proceed with caution."

"Ok. Leroy's already offered me a home until I find a place. He told me I had an apartment, or Tim did, but the lease ran out so Penny moved all my stuff to her place. And a car."

"No driving for the foreseeable future."

"That's okay, Doc. I think the driving and traffic around here is going to take time to get used to."

Dr. Nelson smirked, "That it will. Now, any questions for me?"

"Mm, yes. Ellie and I…uh…"

"Two weeks post surgery and let her do the work."

"Two weeks?"

The doctor grinned, "Ah, that's good to see, frustration! You're already healing."

"Doc, it's been 11 months, actually more than that because she left before we got the case. Oh my God!"

"That something new?"

"Yes. That's definitely a Tim thing. Doc, is this how it's going to be? Things just tumbling out of my mouth? Am I going to know whose memory it is?" Then he frowned, "Will that even matter?"

"Ok, first of all, don't get ahead of yourself. Secondly, don't panic. You're not losing who you are, you're regaining some memories and knowledge of who you were before the flood. You're still Fish."

"And I'm still Tim."

"Yes but unless or until you're comfortable with being Tim McGee, you're also Fish. I'm guessing Fish McGee?"

"Yeah, Dad and I talked about it, sounds like it'll be a lot easier, clearer for people. I'll stick with Timothy McGee as my legal name but be called Fish."

"Does that - will it be easier for you?"
"Yeah. When I get out of here or maybe when I move to the other room, I'm going to see a psychologist my dad knows."

"He or she can see you in the ICU if you want."

"I'll think about it. Up until the last couple of days, I've led a pretty active life, surviving in the mountains, hunting, exploring, all that and then driving up and over the mountains and driving here."

"You saying you're going to be bored?"

"Yes, I don't do well in hospitals, same as Tony and Boss. I mean Leroy, not my dog. Oh geez, how do I know that?"

The doctor patted his arm, "Better get that doc in here, huh?"

"Yeah, no kidding."

"I'll get your MRI scheduled and then you can schedule an on-site appointment around that."

"Thanks."

A soft knock on the door revealed the nurse.

"Sorry, Doctor."

"That's all right, we were just finishing, come on in."

Fish sent the doctor a wild-eyed look as he left and he gave him a discreet nod. Finding Gibbs and Ellie in the staff lounge, he looked at them.

"He's doing fine, physically. Little bits of "Tim-ness" are sort of spilling out and he's feeling a little…discombobulated about that. The nurse is in there…Ellie, would you mind joining them? He prefers to keep the news of the returning memories quiet for now."

She nodded and left as the doctor turned to his patient's father.

"He mentioned calling a psychologist you know. I told him he can certainly meet with him or her while he's in the ICU. He's really feeling rocky about McGee's memories starting to return."

"Ok, I'll call her now. And then will you tell me what's returned?"

"Yes, but first let me get his MRI scheduled so we can avoid a conflict."

The doctor did a quick follow up on the order, which he'd sent before the surgery, reporting the day and time to Gibbs.

"All right, here's what happened while I was with him. Something about Tony calling him…McNicknames is what he said."

Gibbs nodded, "I never told him about those and they're not in his books."

"Good, then we've verified that. The other items were…" the doctor told him about referring to Leroy as Boss and that none of the three of them, Tony, Boss or him, did well in hospitals and something about Ellie although Dr. Nelson didn't explain the 'something'.
Gibbs huffed, "That's great except they're all about us work folks."

"Yes but that makes sense in a way. From the hours I understand you people keep, he's been with you, Tony, Ellie and the doctors much more than he's been with his relatives."

"That's true. So you're saying it's logical?"

"Oh no, I'd never cite logic with memory loss – or gain."

"Good to know. When I lost my memory, I lost 15 years but it was emotional – psychological. Took me months before I could get through it."

"Your memories returned?"

"Yes, eventually, about 80% of them and I was able to bluff my way through the rest until I relearned things."

The doctor relaxed with a cup of spruce tea while Gibbs called Dr. Cranston. Surprised as it had been a few years since she'd heard from him, the doctor listened to his explanation and agreed to meet with Fish, she underlined the name in her notes, in his hospital room the next morning.

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After the nurse left, Fish relaxed, holding Ellie's hand. "Thanks, sweetie. I didn't know her and it kind of freaked me out. Still not used to being around a lot of people."

"That's all right, love. You need to rest now, I'll stay with you. I think Leroy is going to the house to spend some time with Boss."

"Good, I'm worried about him."

"I'm sure seeing your dad will help and then we'll bring him in when you're moved to the other unit."

Another knock on the door and his father poked his head in. "Ok to come in?"

"Yes, of course!"

"I called Dr. Cranston, the psychologist I know, and she'll be here at 0800 tomorrow morning for an appointment."

Fish looked relieved, "Thanks for doing that."

"It's all right son, we talked about this months ago."

"We did, on Tim's birthday, I remember."

"If you two are all right for a few hours, I'm going to head over to the house, spend some time with Boss and clean up."

Fish swallowed hard, except for his surgery when he was unconscious, this would be the first time he and Leroy would be separated for more than a few minutes. Seeing his boy's distress, Leroy quickly went to him, holding his hand and reassuring him.

"I know, Dad, I know you'll be back, I just…"
"Just had surgery on your brain, in a strange place with a bunch of people who claim they know you after months of being isolated in the mountains with Boss and then me. Yeah, nothing to worry about there. Son, I'll be back in 4 hours, all right? And I won't be dealing with any bears or wolves."

"Ok."

"Maybe try to get some sleep? Have my daughter-in-law sing you a lullaby?"

Ellie couldn't help it, that made her laugh and Fish smile. As he left the room, he checked his cell phone, old habits were reasserting themselves, and smiled when he saw a text from Fornell. He wrote that he'd heard via Ducky that Jethro had found Tim alive *YAY!* . Adding that he was grateful for his friend's perseverance, aka stubbornness, he would stop by Bethesda to see McGee once he was in a regular room.

Leroy thought about that. He hadn't mentioned his ex-wives to Fish, other than to say he'd married again, but a quick word to Tobias would keep quiet their usual mutual ex-wife comments. And then he realized that Diane was dead, she'd been gone for over a year now, murdered by Sergei Mishnev, the bloody half-brother of Ari Haswari. He swallowed hard, he'd been so focused on their own possible tragedy that he'd neglected his friend and Emily. Diane – and Shannon – would have kicked his butt for that. He promised himself he would make it up to Tobias and his honorary niece.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for reading, following, favoriting and commenting! It's been fun and as with my other favorite stories, I'm sorry this is the end. Writing it has been a labor of love and I am particularly satisfied with it.

Thanks to my intrepid beta, Alix33 for all her help! It's been a pleasure and I look forward to working on more stories together.

I love that in Season 15, canon McGee is growing beyond his past, growing into the character many of us have wanted to see on the screen without losing any of his 'Timness'. I'm still fan-girling over two scenes in particular this season, actions I thought we'd never see outside of fan fiction!

Chapter 22

Walking into the agency the morning of Fish's surgery, Abby wore a big smile, her hair down and pulled back, her favorite tunic and leggings, a spike-less collar and her nicest sneakers, her favorite Chucks. When she went through security, the guard pursed his lips. "I know I've been out on leave, but you look different. Not as tall."

Abby shook her head "I've been this height since I was 16."

"Huh."

She giggled a little to herself as she continued to the lab. She smiled at the director as they crossed paths, "Good morning, Leon. It's a wonderful day, isn't it?"

He nodded and then blinked, he was looking her straight in the eyes instead of up. Before he could stop himself, he looked down at her feet and then up again. "Nice Chucks, Dr. Sciuto."

"Had a wake-up call last night, Leon. A nurse at the hospital told me not to wear my jangly boots or bracelets there, called me ma'am and asked if I worked in a nightclub because I said I wear the boots to work. And yeah, she was younger than I am. I know you've looked the other way on the dress code, so did Jenny and so did Director Morrow. Not necessary any more. I'll save my fun stuff for outside the office."

"A laudable change!"

He went on his way, almost giddy with the news. This was truly a month of miracles. First Gibbs resurfaced with Tim alive if not well and now this! He could hardly wait to find a way to let HR and Legal know. They were always on his case about enforcing the dress code with her, pointing out that everyone else adhered to it and there was no reason she should be treated differently. He stopped in his tracks, realizing her hair wasn't in those pigtails things either. As he walked through the squad room, he had such a bounce in his step that DiNozzo asked him if there was news from the hospital. Leon shook his head, "Too soon, DiNozzo, but he's home, they're home."
Those who worked around the DiNozzo bullpen heard the remark and agreed it was a great reason to be happy. The good mood spread around the building as those who'd worried or even mourned Tim McGee went about with smiles on their faces. It was only later when one of the agents realized Abby's change in height was due to her lack of platform boots, that several people realized that might have had something to do with Vance's rare good mood that morning. That and Tim's return from the dead, of course.

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Breena and baby Victoria had been to Gibbs' house after Jimmy called to say that Tim was out of surgery. In Breena's opinion, it was too cold and damp to leave Boss in the backyard so pushing the stroller, she, Victoria and Boss went for a walk first, assuring the dog that Leroy would be there soon. She also brought a couple of frozen, already cooked homemade meals with them, clearly marking them for Gibbs.

When Leroy walked into the house later, he was joyfully greeted by Boss and the two spent a few minutes together before Boss sped to the back door. It was a close call but he made it in time and Leroy gave him a half piece of jerky and cup of cold spruce tea that he'd brought from the hospital. Then the two of them went back outside where Boss and Leroy played for nearly an hour. When they returned to the warm house, Leroy freezing and wondering how he'd lost his 'mountain man' toughness in just a week, Boss had the other half of his jerky and the shirt Fish wore yesterday was put in his bed.

They sat together on the floor, Leroy not sure what Fish's rules for Boss regarding furniture would be, while he told Boss about Fish's headaches being so bad and how the doctor had helped him. And that he, Boss, would be able to see his Fish in a few days. He got a happy bark and a wagging tail for that and shook his head, wondering if the dog actually understood him.

After that, the two explored the house. Saving the basement for last, Leroy examined the newer appliances in the kitchen. He guessed the dishwasher made sense for DiNozzo, who liked to cook whereas it would take 2 weeks for him to accumulate enough dirty dishes to justify a dishwasher. Still, it would be nice while Fish was here and when they had family dinners. And, he reminded himself, DiNozzo would still be living here for the foreseeable future. He thought about that, finally deciding to run an idea past Fish and then DiNozzo.

Giving a smile and nod of approval of the kitchen, including the new paint and flooring which really livened the room up, he moved toward the dining area, stopping when he noticed the big note on the wall between kitchen and dining area, "Remove if approved – load bearing?" He chuckled at that, he'd been meaning to take that wall out for almost as long as he'd lived here. Shannon had hated it but somehow other projects had first priority. DiNozzo would be happy to know it was not a load bearing wall. Even if it was, Leroy was a skilled enough builder to put in a new beam to carry the load previously supported by the wall. However, it would likely mean more new flooring. He shrugged, it was about time he gave the house more attention than making sure it stood upright and everything worked. The floor was one Diane had installed in the dining area and living room. He wasn't fond of it.

He nodded again at DiNozzo's table, it was nicer than his old one and the chairs were more comfortable. He smiled, thinking of the table he and Fish built, guessing they'd leave it in the trailer for now. And build a couple more chairs. They could use Fish's original tree limb ski poles and the tarp room poles, all of which they'd brought home with them, along with the homemade skis, Fish's rope harness and a few other items.
Upstairs hadn't been touched which almost disappointed him although he knew no one would ever touch Kelly's room. Then he realized that Fish might not be allowed stairs for a few days. He'd talk to the doctor about it before he said anything. Entering the master bedroom, he smiled. He'd moved back in here a couple of years ago and he was happy to return once again. Nothing had been changed here. The guest room would need some serious work before it could be occupied. First of all it needed a new mattress and box springs, although maybe he'd build a platform bed instead.

Wondering how big Tim's bed was, he thought about asking Ellie but settled for texting Penny, asking for the size and whether there was a headboard/footboard. He smiled when his phone rang, "Hello Jethro! Getting the house ready?"

"Hi Penny, yeah, at least Fish's room. Decided it was easier to move his bed over here than to buy a new one for my guest room. I'll do that later."

"The bed is a California King, will there be room?"

"I'll check, pretty sure I can make that work though."

"He does have a headboard attached to the bedframe, but no footboard. It's a beautiful piece of furniture, simple but elegant."

"Do you know what color stain or paint it is? I think what I'll do, with Fish's approval, is build a platform bedframe for his mattress. That way, he can have drawers in the frame because with a Cal King I don't think there will be much room for a dresser. And then he can attach his headboard when he and Ellie move to their own place. Although I could put shelves on the wall...nah, I'd rather do the drawers."

"A platform bed..." She chuckled, "You're getting thumbs up from Dave and Jim. Dave says if you need help, let him know, he's handy with a hammer. The stain is called Red Mahogany."

"Great and thanks for the info about Dave. Are you at the hospital?"

"Yes, we're taking our turns visiting Fish; Maisie and I have been in, he's resting now and then Dave and Liz will go in. The doctor eased the restrictions so the whole family can see him today. And he had a Skype chat with Sarah."

"Oh good, I was worried about both of those. Anyone from the agency there?"

"They've been in and out. Ducky and Tony popped in to say hello to our boy about an hour ago, I believe they sneaked in for a few minutes."

"Ducky can get away with it, not sure about Tony."

"He said he was going to be Jimmy for a few minutes."

He sighed and Penny laughed, "Relax, Ducky was with him and nothing happened."

"First time for everything! All right. I'm gonna figure out measurements and then hit the lumberyard. I'll be back in 2 hours."

"We'll see you then. Oh, we're having dinner at a diner Tim loves, in Silver Spring. You're welcome to join us."

"Thanks, I will. Give our lovebirds some time to themselves. Which reminds me, do you know where Ellie's living?"
"Yes, with me. Her lease ran out the end of May. She and Tim originally planned that she'd move in with him while they looked for a place together, then they'd move when his lease ran out the end of July. Instead, I persuaded her to move everything to my place, most of it is in with Tim's stuff, and stay with me."

"That's wonderful, Penny! Once he knew who she was, Fish worried about where she was living although he didn't know why."

"Bits and pieces, Jethro."

"That's for sure. Better get moving, see you later."

They disconnected and Jethro looked in the catch-all drawer in the kitchen for the keys to either of his trucks. When they weren't there, he remembered seeing something new in the entryway. There he found several sturdy hooks with various keys hanging from them and a small shelf below. Recognizing the new truck keys by the souvenir Grand Tetons key fob Fish bought him as a joke, he grabbed them and then stopped, realizing he didn't know the measurements of a California King. He made a face, this one time he could really use Fish's smart phone. Then he chuckled, first thing was to find a pattern or plan for a platform bed with drawers and that would certainly have the measurements on them for different sized beds.

Once at the yard, he zeroed in on the plans and quickly found one he liked, with two drawers on each side and a drop down panel on the end with a shallow compartment inside for extra pillows or whatever was needed. He looked at the top piece, wondering if it would be the right width and height to attach the headboard.

Shaking his head at his disorganization, he always knew measurements for everything, he looked through the plans for a regular bedframe with headboard hook-ups. Frustrated, he took the book to a counter to look through.

He smiled when one of the guys he knew pretty well approached him, "Gibbs, haven't seen you in months! How are you and where you been?"

"Fine, Johnny, been away for a few months. And apparently I've forgotten everything I ever knew about starting a project! I want to make a platform bed with drawers and I found the plan I want. But there's also an existing headboard that I want to incorporate and I didn't think of measuring anything before I came in."

"Not a problem. What size bed?"

When Jethro told him, they worked it out so the headboard could be attached and have enough support from the usually lighter weight platform frame. Within an hour they had the wood and all the hardware he'd need, along with a hand drawn schematic for the headboard support.

Home again, he hauled the lumber to the basement and then took Boss for a walk before putting him in the backyard for a few minutes. Looking at the door from the kitchen to his backyard, he thought he'd also install a doggie door. Good thing he was retired!

After that he took a long hot shower, dried off, found some clean clothes in his dresser and thought how strange it felt not to be rummaging through his pack for a pair of clean socks.

Back downstairs, he brought the dog in. Telling Boss he'd be back in a few hours, Ellie would stay with Fish tonight, he drove back to the hospital, thinking it was too bad they couldn't bring the trailer and leave it in the parking lot. Boss could sleep in there, they could take turns taking him
out during the day and he could sleep there with him at night. But hospitals aren't campgrounds and generally don't want patients to have visitors 24/7. And Fish would be home in 4 more days.

Sticking his head into the waiting room, he smiled at the crowd. Evidently the family had all visited now as Tony and Abby were in with Fish while Leon and Rick Carter were waiting for their turn. Ellie was tucked in between Penny and Maisie, sound asleep. He smiled at that, glad to see her so well taken care of by Fish's family. Or maybe she was taking care of them.

He found an empty spot and sat down. He'd sit with his boy during the mandated rest time between visitors. Then he thought about Tony and Abby being in there at the same time and shaking his head, stood up again. Leon looked up at him, "Dr. Sciuto wore sneakers today. Said she was done with the boots at work."

Gibbs stared at him, finally blinking, "Abby Sciuto?"

Rick laughed out loud while the others looked interested. Leon gave Agent Carter a look but he continued laughing.

"Leon...that's a pretty good joke."

"Thank you. But it's not."

"Wow. She's...ever since I've known her, right, Rick?"

Rick Carter nodded, wiping his eyes. "Yeah. And her hair, Gibbs."

"Her hair?"

"No pigtails."

He sat back down to contemplate that. Then he shook his head, "She started wearing those all the time when Kate died. The day after, her hair was down. I remember that, no music and her hair was down."

Rick nodded. "The second day, before you went to Indiana for the funeral, she wore the pigtails. And she's worn them every day since."

From her corner, Ellie suddenly spoke, her eyes still closed, "Not every day. She sometimes wears a top knot or braids. And the pigtails are because Kate talked her into them in the first place, said they looked cute."

"You know that?"

Ellie opened her eyes and sat up, looking like she was making a decision. Finally she straightened her shoulders. "When I came in from the other agency, I was accepted because I was consulting. After we caught Pa...the bad guy, you brought me onto the team and everything changed. I was now sitting at a desk with this massive history and I didn't know what it was. And Kate - it was like she'd died the day before, a sensitive subject and I didn't want to put my foot in my mouth. So I asked Abby. After she stopped crying, she told me about Kate and Ziva and the roles they played on the team. Ducky and Tim have since told me more. Anyway, Abby showed me the team photo albums and told me everything she could about Caitlyn Todd. She and Kate were best friends. She's kept in touch with her family. Director Vance, when you brought Rachel Cranston in, Abby pretended she didn't know her although I'm seeing now that you knew that. Good!"

"Dr. Cranston made full disclosure before her first visit."
Jethro sat in thought before looking at Rick, "Before Kate died, Abby was different."

Rick thought about it and then nodded in agreement. He turned to Vance, "She was eccentric, brilliant, warm and funny but I don't ever remember her being over the top."

Jethro nodded, "Same here."

"You think the trauma of what happened affected her."

"Yeah. Affected all of us. And then Shepard brought David in and forc…put her on my team, that was tough to swallow. The assassin's handler and half-sister. Tim was the only one who could look her in the eye."

Vance's eyebrows rose, "You didn't select her?"

"No, only four people I didn't handpick for my team. Brent Langer, Daniel Keating, Michele Lee and Ziva David."

Ellie looked puzzled, "I thought Lee was on DiNozzo's team when you were uh…?"

"On my margarita safari, as Tony calls it?" He turned to the others, "During a case I was in an explosion and lost 15 years worth of memories, the most recent 15 years. Took me months to recuperate and I chose to do it at my former boss's home in Mexico."

He turned back to Ellie, "She was but she was also briefly assigned to my team." He gave her a look and she nodded, he'd tell her later.

Leon shook his head, "What he's not saying is that I assigned Lee to his team when I sent the others away. I had reasons but didn't share them right away."

Dave frowned, "Is that when Tim got kicked downstairs to the basement? Demoted?"

Leon tensed, this was not his favorite topic. He'd made some serious tactical errors during that time and it was only Gibbs' and McGee's dogged persistence and refusal to let grudges get in the way of their work that got them through it. A good man, a good agent, Langer, was killed and initially blamed for the security leak. It was weeks before they finally caught Lee, a traitor and the murderer of Agent Langer. The debacle that followed ended with the deaths of her and her blackmailer-traitor but not before a public firefight that injured Gibbs and more than one civilian.

Gibbs nodded, "Not our finest hour, Admiral. Unfortunately, the Secretary of the Navy decided he needed us to work in the dark, blind if you will. And McGee came through with flying colors, didn't he, Leon?"

"He did at that. And then gave me 2 pages of bullet points arguing to put him back on Gibbs' team." He chuckled, "I had Gibbs in one ear and McGee in the other and I'd already approved his transfer. And he recouped his pay and rank, the demotion never made it as far as the DoD."

Crane was still glowering, "Was that Davenport?"

"Yes."

He muttered to himself but sat back, apparently satisfied while Gibbs, Carter and Vance thought about the miserable months afterward, with no trust for the director from the field teams or many other employees aboard the Yard. The agents worried they'd been stuck with yet another director with a personal agenda. Or that their teams would be similarly torn apart. McGee's record may
have been cleaned up, his pay and rank restored, but despite his refusal to talk about it, people knew and were angry that it had happened. By that time Vance knew he'd made a huge mistake and it was done, he couldn't change history. While he eventually did earn their trust, he learned hard lessons through his failure to communicate even a fabricated reason for what he'd done to Gibbs' team, specifically to Agent McGee.

Gibbs left the room, admitting to himself that he was escaping. During the short walk to his son's room, he concentrated on the fun he'd had with Boss earlier, how happy the dog was to see him and how he seemed to understand that he and Fish could see each other in a few days.

By the time he walked in the door, he was relaxed and smiling, greeting Abby with a kiss, and Tony with a hug, another kiss for Fish who smiled at him. "Thought I'd invite myself to the party."

Tony looked at him with some trepidation, "You were at the house?"

"Yeah, looks great; I like the new furniture and the paint. Did a good job, Anthony!"

"Wow, that's...I'm glad."

"Let me know how much it was, I'll pay you back. And I'll get that stuff out of the garage, call the thrift stores."

Abby fidgeted before saying, "Uh, Gibbs, we already called around, sent photos of the couch, table, chairs and icebox. There's a jun...antique dealer who wants the icebox and maybe the table and chairs. But nobody wants the couch."

Gibbs shrugged, "All right, it goes to the dump then. Bought it at a thrift store, geez, DiNozzo, about the time you started with me. It's time."

Both visitors visibly relaxed and he chuckled, shaking his head, "You weren't worried?"

Fish answered, "None of them knew if the couch had any meaning for you. Ducky, Fornell, even one of your neighbors tried to remember when you'd gotten it but couldn't."

At the puzzled look from his dad, he smiled, "Apparently amnesiacs are good people to confide in. Or at least I am."

Leroy laughed while Abby and Tony cringed. When Tony's phone buzzed, they gave Fish gentle hugs, saying goodnight.

Fish moved his eyes to the other man. "How's Boss and is Ellie asleep?"

"He's fine and Ellie's dozing, she's staying with you tonight and I'll stay tomorrow night. Boss seemed a little lonely but we took a walk and he scoped out the neighborhood. Then we played in the backyard, the fresh air felt good and the snow's less than 2 feet deep here. We cuddled for a bit on the floor in the living room, wasn't sure what your rules would be for furniture so we opted for the floor. I told him that the doctor had helped get rid of your headaches and that he'd be able to see you in a few days and I swear he understood me. He wagged his tail and gave his happy bark."

"He probably did and I'm glad." He opened his mouth to say something else but a yawn escaped.

"Come on, I'll recline your bed, you need to rest! You had brain surgery today, 7 hours worth!"

"Oh yeah, forgot...not!" He was asleep in less than a minute. Leroy sat beside him and took his hand in his, smiling when he got a squeeze. "Sleep!"
He was still asleep when his rest hour was up and Leon and Rick poked their heads in the door. Leroy motioned them in and they looked curiously at Fish's turban-wrapped head with what looked like bean bags on each side of his neck. Glad both men knew ASL, Leroy told them it was to keep him from moving his head for the first 24 hours after surgery. Leaving get-well and welcome home cards, the two men left as quietly as they'd come in.

Half an hour later, Ellie came in, smiled at finding Fish still asleep and signed that Penny and the others were ready for dinner if he wanted to join them. He nodded, replying he'd stop in after dinner.

Dave and Jim rode with him to the diner, while Penny, Liz and Maisie followed. Jim's wife Claire was home with their two children and Leon and Rick had declined the invitation for dinner.

Jim looked around the big truck as they rode. "This is pretty comfortable. Did you ever sleep in here?"

"Yes, on the way into the mountains after the first snow fall and one other night when I was too tired and depressed to put the tent up. That was the day I nearly lost the truck in a sinkhole. When it was cold out, the cab was easier and warmer and the bench seat is long enough for me to stretch out. I had my sleeping bag and all my clothes, weapons, food, cooking things in here. On the way out, with Fish and Boss, we thought we were going to have to a couple of times, but we'd made a framework in the back, put a tarp up and over and the tent went underneath so we were plenty warm. We had a fire bowl so we'd have a campfire near the tail gate, sit and read for a couple of hours in the evenings before putting the fire out and going inside the tent. Our table was in there and a heater we'd leave on until we went to sleep. We'd play cards for a few hours, take Boss out for our last pit stop and then we'd turn in. Worked out well, except it was a pain to put the food up in the trees every night, take them down every morning, make sure you got out or put in everything."

"To keep the bears away?"

"Yeah."

"Besides the bear at the door and the ones you killed, did you see any around the food?"

Leroy nodded, telling them about the smoker, that was another night he'd forgotten about, sleeping in the cab, the paw prints after the second snow and the bear they saw going for the trees after the door incident.

"Wow, that's frightening."

"Oh yeah. Although I think the wolves scared us more. Bears are one at a time and Fish always had the pepper spray with him. The wolves we saw were never alone and they're a fierce adversary. They can run and they can climb. Beautiful animals though."

Jim shuddered, "And I thought sharks were bad!"

Leroy nodded, "They scared me plenty when I was active duty."

Dave's response was that he wanted to hear about the sinkhole and would it scare the women? Leroy laughed, "No more than it scared me! I was so mad at myself, I'd been warned to backpack in, leave the truck a couple miles west of the creek. But that was before I found the sock and the 'G' and I guess I was so excited and relieved afterward that I forgot all about Chuck's cautions."

They'd reached the diner and followed the ladies in. Penny and Maisie smiled at the hostess,
"Hello, Nancy!"

"Dr. Langston, Mrs. Hubbard, how are you?"

Maisie answered with a big smile, "We're wonderful, our Tim is safely home."

Nancy's jaw dropped and her lips curved into a smile as she blinked back tears. "Oh my Lord, that's wonderful. I'm so relieved and happy! Where is he?"

"In Bethesda Hospital, he had surgery today. He had a head injury that didn't heal all the way so the doctors went in and fixed it."

"Oh dear, can he have visitors yet?"

Penny shook her head, "Just family for now. He has amnesia and he's just met all of us for the first time. Except for Jethro…do you know Tim's boss Jethro Gibbs?"

She smiled at Gibbs, shaking his hand, "We've never met but I've heard many good things about you! So Tim remembered you?"

"No. I went to Wyoming to find him, he rescued me and then winter hit and we lived in a cave for 6 months until we could get out."

"Oh my word! Thank you for going after him, he's such a good man. And he found you, I'm guessing there are some stories there."

He smiled, "A few."

She shook her head as the door behind them opened again, "And I'll have to wait to hear them. Come on, let's get you seated and fed."

Once seated and their beverage orders taken, Jim leaned over, "Time for the sinkhole story, unless it's gory."

Gibbs chuckled, "It's not gory. How about after we get our orders in?"

"Ok."

Their server quickly brought their drinks and took their orders. Leroy chuckled as he ordered scrambled eggs, potatoes and bacon.

When he looked up after handing over his menu, the others were staring at him. He smiled, "That's Fish's favorite breakfast. Before we reached West Boston, he'd never had bacon and he went a little overboard. In fact, he did that with a lot of food. One night he just had dessert, no dinner, and we bought some antacids on the way home. Good thing too!"

Maisie smiled, "He does love to eat! But since he became a field agent, he's careful about his weight."

Leroy smiled and nodded, "Does a good job with that. Sometimes he puts DiNozzo and me to shame."

"What's this about a sinkhole?"

"Well, I was in Grid 19, the one after I found the sock and…" He told the story of the truck starting to sink, getting out and seeing it sink further. Removing the wood, placing it on the tarps and then
carefully moving the containers of diesel fuel even farther from the truck. Clearing everything else out from the back of the truck and then, worried about the sinkhole 'eating' the truck, clearing out the cab too.

"It wasn't snowing yet, it was cold but I had my tent, three sleeping bags – I brought two and Chuck loaned me another one – plenty of blankets, wood, food and water. I'd be all right if I lost the truck." He told them about the buckets of rocks and carefully placing them under the back wheels, finding pieces of wood to give the wheels more to grab onto.

"Have to admit, I was pretty worried and scared that I'd have to give up the search for Tim or at least cause another delay and I'd already had to wait 4 months because I hurt my knee! The last thing I did was tie rope around my waist and the sturdiest tree I could find. Then I tied another piece to the steering wheel and to a couple of other trees. That was about all I could think to do. Finally, I turned the ignition and eased the truck forward. And it moved forward. Thank God! I moved it, as slowly as I could stand, about 2 miles west of the sinkhole and then spent a few hours moving the wood, fuel and everything else back into the truck. I was in bad shape that night, tired, still upset with myself, and just plain lonely. Don't think I've ever felt so alone. I think I slept in the cab and I got the hell out of there as soon as I could. But not before I put up a warning sign."

He smiled, "The next day I found the 'G' on the rock in the creek. And then I was out of the woods onto a meadow and from there I drove on a dirt road over a ridge straight onto another meadow. Where I called home to tell them Tim was alive. That was a wonderful day! It was also the first snow day."

He answered their questions until their meals arrived. After that, he held up his hand, he wanted to eat while the food was hot. While he was enjoying a cup of chamomile tea, he answered a few more questions, told them about cutting down a Christmas tree and the surprise decorations each had made. He grinned, "I'll bring the sketchbook tomorrow. Fish is great at sketching and I did a few of him so you can see him in all his hairy glory."

Penny laughed, telling them again about his scraggly beard and hair. Leroy huffed, "I trimmed both as much as he'd let me. Fish is a very independent man, he had his own ideas and that was that."

"Was it...are they different?"

"Fish and Tim?"

Jim nodded and Leroy tilted his head in thought. "They're different for me. I've been Tim's boss ever since we've known each other and although we've become closer over the years, there was always that line, that barrier and it's the same with DiNozzo, even now. But that didn't and doesn't exist between Fish and me. And I like that a lot. He's his own man, he had no problems telling me when he did or didn't like something and we talked about everything under the sun. He's as curious, kind and smart as Tim but more assertive and confident. He doesn't have 37 years of Tim's experiences, what he calls baggage. And before I got there, he'd had several weeks with just Boss for company, in the mountains. The people who rescued him taught him how to hunt and he's clever in thinking of ways to trap and carry his kills. Sorry, Penny." She smiled, shaking her head.

"He developed plenty of confidence in those weeks. He and Boss killed their first bear to claim the cave, which gave them food and the furs he'd need for winter. He made more arrows and killed deer, had a knife to prepare them. Had some matches but also knew how to start a fire without them. Built a 3 layer fire circle and then a smoker! His rescuers also taught him how to make bowls and things from clay and fire them so when he found clay, he made bowls, big and little and spoons. He used animal bones as cooking tools and to create a three piece spit to roast meat. When
he was building his smoker, he needed to fill in the gaps and again used clay. When we built the frame for the door to the cave, he filled in the gaps with his clay.

"Before I got there, when he had enough deerskin, he made a back pack, a water bag, bedding to go with the furs and deerskin 'curtains' across the opening to the cave. He figured out how to make a sled so he and Boss could bring in larger kills. Did you know he made me a deerskin shirt for Christmas? I'll show you, when he's feeling up to a party, we'll have one at my place, maybe he and I will wear our mountain finery. And that's been great to experience."

He paused for breath before smiling, "My first day in his valley, I was slashed and knocked down by a bear and this very calm and very familiar voice says, while the bear is growling and roaring over me, 'don't move, I've got him' and then carefully sprays bear-pepper spray in the animal's face. I've seen Tim in action many times, I know how he reacts to threats and violence but that was amazing. Then the day the wolves were after us, he was in the back of the truck, managed to get our food bags down and stood there, trying to distract them. He'd bagged a turkey and Boss caught a rabbit and two chickens. Fish stood there and calmly threw the rabbit to the wolves. No change, they never hesitated. He threw one of the chickens and when that didn't work he shot the rifle over their heads, he was trying his best not to kill. That didn't work either. Now the truck is moving at about 10 miles an hour, I'm pushing it through several feet of snow, hoping we don't hit anything. And Fish keeps his balance, tracks the leader, who's moving about 5 seconds behind us now, aims and fires. He hits his target, the leader's head, which takes him and another wolf down and that does it. But he did it from a moving vehicle, firing at a moving, unpredictable target. I'll never forget that."

He paused again before shaking his head, "That was incredible but what happened the day before we left…wow. I've never seen or heard Tim the way Fish was that day – when that bear, and both of us wonder if it was the same bear who beat on the door, attacked Boss. Bear reached out to slash at Boss and as his claws made contact, Boss threw himself down hard into the snow. Fish roared as loudly as the bear, fired, blew the bear's head off in one shot from my rifle. And then broke the rifle open, handed it to me while he ran to his dog. That was…I'll never forget that. Thank God Boss had powdery snow to fall into, that and Fish's quick shot saved him from serious injury."

He took a sip of tea, "He killed everything else, the other bears, the deer, the turkey, rabbits, chickens, the antelope - with his bow and arrows. We brought down an elk together. Didn't kill too many chickens as he collected eggs whenever he could find them."

Dave and Jim beamed proudly while Liz, Penny and Maisie sat there absorbing everything. Maisie shook her head, "He was always a gentle boy, like his mother and grandfather. But he loved archery and he and Drew had a running competition about how accurately they could shoot."

Liz smiled, "He went camping with us whenever Dave was home and always wanted to know what was what and why. Dave taught him what he knew about tracking and what to watch for. We taught him how to make a fire pit and build fires."

Maisie was lost in memory, "I remember the first overnight he had with the Webelos, his scout troop. He came home so excited because they'd learned how to make a fire by rubbing sticks together over a tinder pile. He insisted on showing us so he and Drew built a tinder pile and then Tim rubbed the sticks together and sure enough, got a spark out of them that lit the tinder pile. I think he was prouder that day than when he graduated from MIT!"

Penny chuckled, "Nelson and I didn't get to see him as often and my husband was not a camper. When Tim was with us, we went bowling, swimming, saw movies. Nelson always thought it was strange that swimming in water didn't bother Tim in the slightest but put him on an air mattress or a
tube and sure enough, he'd start to get sick. His father never understood that it wasn't psychological, it's physical."

Leroy looked a little embarrassed, "Took me awhile to understand that too. And nothing worked until he tried ginger root and sea bands."

Liz and Maisie smiled proudly and he raised his eyebrows. Liz said, "I had a stomach ailment and someone suggested I try ginger root. Not tea or cookies but the pure root. So I did and it worked. I wrote Tim to tell him but never heard anything about it."

Maisie added, "In the meantime, I saw sea bands in a magazine and how the acupressure buttons might help avoid seasickness. I called Tim, I was so excited. He told me about Liz's letter and that he'd already tried the ginger root. He said it helped a little but in the end he was still sick. So I ordered a few sets of the sea bands and sent them to him – now you can buy them anywhere. He tried them by themselves and like the ginger, they helped some but not enough. Then he decided to try them together and that did the trick."

Leroy tilted his head, "When I bought a canoe in Wyoming, Jimmy put ginger root and sea bands in the medical bag I took with me. Fish got carsick on one of the rougher ridges, it was snowy, steep, slippery and I was driving. He made it over the ridge but then I stopped because I recognized the symptoms and sure enough he got sick. That night he found the ginger root and sea bands in the bag and used them and that was it, no more carsick."

He looked around, "Who taught him first aid?"

Jim grinned, "Claire did, she's a nurse and I'm sure Mum taught him the same things she taught me as a kid and whatever he learned in Scouts. But one time he was at our place and mentioned being worried about someone who'd been hurt...might have been you...and the doctors weren't with you. You were bleeding pretty badly and other than putting pressure on, they didn't have anything else useful in the first aid kit. So Claire taught him what she called First Aid 102."

"Yeah, that was me. They had pressure on my leg but couldn't do anything else - luckily the EMTs got there quickly. I remember Tim putting medical things in his gear bag one day soon after. I asked him what they were; he looked at me and said, 'Things so we can take care of you next time. You lost too much blood, we're not doing that again.' We all took a Red Cross First Aid class after that, too, McGee's suggestion."

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Over the next few days, it became evident that Fish's injury was finally healing. He was moved to a regular room the day after his second MRI. He was happy about that as Leroy, Ellie and other members of the family began bringing him 'regular' food. He approved of the breakfast specials, was wild about sweet potato fries and fell in love with Grammie's Butterscotch Scotties, cookies. He'd been so busy with his love of bacon on the drive across country that he'd neglected to try cookies. And as much as Leroy loved his grandmother's Almond-Orange cake, he really didn't have much of a sweet tooth and thus hadn't mentioned the deliciousness of cookies.

Fish forgave him for the missed cookie opportunities when his surrogate father brought Boss for a visit. By that time Fish was mobile, needed no help to balance, thank you very much, and met Boss and his dad in the hospital atrium. Several minutes early, Fish sat on a comfortable couch, waiting for his visitors and people watching. When Boss saw him, he was so happy he jumped into Fish's lap, licked both sides of his face and then put his head on his master's shoulder, turning his snout into Fish's neck where he closed his eyes and rested with his master holding him tightly. Fish was so happy, he cried. Leroy waited as long as he could stand it, at least 7 seconds, before joining his
companions, holding onto both of them and shedding his own tears.

Eventually they talked, telling Boss about the hospital and showing him Fish's new 'hat', his bandages. Then Fish turned to Leroy, "You got us home, you got me to the hospital in time, you did good, Dad. Thank you…we love you!"

Boss apparently agreed as he licked Leroy's face. Hearing applause and laughter, they looked up to see their extended family gathered around. Ellie joined them, laughing when Boss licked her face. Fish grinned and stuck his tongue out as if to imitate Boss but kissed her instead. The people and companion he loved the most were with him. No matter who he'd been, who he was now or whoever he'd be in the future, he was safe, he loved and was loved, he was home.

Thanks for coming along!

The End

End Notes

Yes, Bob Chalmers is the same OC from the Serendipity universe. No, he's not married in this story. Alix33 asked me what Bob looks like. He is 6'3", in his late 20's, with dark hair and eyes. He's the son of an American sailor and his Filipina wife. He looks like a younger, taller version of actor Danny Pino. You can look him up on IMDb . com (Danny, not Bob!). Among many other roles, he played Scotty Valens on Cold Case and Nick Amaro on Law & Order: SVU.

REI is a chain of stores selling outdoor equipment and clothing. The full name is Recreational Equipment, Inc.

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