The Long Way Home

by bgharison

Summary

The fourth (and final regular serial) installment of the Jersey Shore to North Shore series. Original characters. Please see series notes for complete warnings. Un-beta'd, largely unedited . . . this entire installment was written mostly in response to reader feedback and requests on ffnet. It's a hot mess, was riotously fun to write, and it seemed to make people happy.

"Shelburne is on the way to Pearl Hickam," Steve said.

Danny grabbed Steve by the shoulders and held him at arms' length, staring at him.

"What have I told you about burying the lead, Steven?" he demanded.

Notes

This installment of the series deals less specifically with the original character's past, but there may still be mild references to past sexual assault or thoughts of suicide.
I'm detached enough from this entire series now that concrit is welcome. However, please keep in mind that some of the characterization and many of the plot points and events were based on reader requests, especially in this fourth installment. So, feedback on writing technique is welcome, but please don't rain on the ideas of my fantastic, enthusiastic readers.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Steve glanced in the rear view mirror on the drive from Tripler to the palace, and shook his head.

"What?" Jax asked, sitting cross legged on the seat of the Silverado next to him.

"No criminal would take me seriously right now," Steve said, grinning over at her. "Do you see this goofy grin on my face?"

"I've been seeing it since the ultrasound," Jax said. "It is goofy. Danny will have a name for it by the end of the day. And this is precisely why we planned to just drop the genders on the team immediately after the ultrasound. You have a shit poker face, McGarrett."

"Yeah? I don't care," Steve declared. "Do you have any idea how happy I am right now?"

"Pretty good idea," Jax said. Her voice was quiet over the engine of the truck.

He stopped at a red light and looked over at her. "You're happy, too, right?" he asked anxiously.

"I'm happy," she said. "It's just a little surreal, you know? Light's green, go, don't be that jerk that sits at a green light."

He held her hand as they walked into the building, the sunlight glinting off her hair tumbling in sun-streaked curls around her face. On her days off, she still reached for the comfortable and practical military issue maternity cargo pants that Kono had discovered, but soft leather ankle boots had replaced her customary SWAT issue.

"Those are nice," he said, nodding his head at her feet as they got on the elevator.

She glanced down self-consciously. "After a few days of running shoes for work, my other boots seemed really heavy. Plus, there's not a big need for steel toe reinforcement on my day off."

The entire team was clustered around the smart table, waiting for them when the elevator doors opened.

"Well?" Kono demanded. "What are you having?"

"You know, some couples like to have a moment, revealing the gender of their baby," Danny pointed out. "Make it special, create some drama. Photograph and video the reveal."

"Steve and Jax aren't some couple," Kono said. "Boy? Girl?"

"Yes," Steve said, feeling his cheeks stretch with that same goofy grin.

"Oh, look - New Daddy face," Danny chortled.

"Told you," Jax muttered, before she was engulfed in hugs.

Kono whooped in delight, spinning around the room. "This is gonna be the best baby shower ever . . ."

#*#*#*#*#

Caviness' team took over the weekend shift sifting through surveillance and records for Malia's case.
"You need an extra set of hands?" Kono asked, as Brian collected files and drives from the Five-O office.

"You've been at it all week," Brian said. "Take a break."

Kono shrugged. "Maybe I wanna hang out with you."

"Wouldn't turn down the offer from Hawaii's finest," he said. "You bringing take-out?"

"Pizza or Chinese?" Kono asked.

"Yes," Brian said, laughing. "I know you."

"I do like my cold pizza about midnight," Kono admitted. She looked at the mass of files. "And we'll be at it until at least then. Your office, six o'clock?"

He kissed her forehead. "Perfect. And thank you."

Mary squealed as the video chat opened.

"You guys are the worst," she said. "I've been waiting for hours."

"We wanted to call you from the hardware store," Steve said. "You helped us pick the paint for our room, and we loved it. We thought you could help us pick a color for the babies' room. See, we're having trouble deciding, now that we have the results of the ultrasound."

"What colors are we talking about?" Mary demanded. "Pink? Blue?"

"Yes!" Jax said, holding up a paint chip in each color as Steve turned to focus his phone on her.

"Oh my God this is the best," Mary said. "Seriously? A boy and a girl?"

"Yes," Jax said, "and also, seriously, what color do you think? Rachel is making curtains for the room like the ones in the Airstream."

"The white gauzy looking ones? That will be perfect," Mary said. "What about furniture?"

"Looks like teak," Steve said. "Like Mamo's counter, when we were kids."

"What about a simple grey?" Mary suggested. "I know it's not babyish, but it would be really peaceful. And if you want to do color coded stuff for the twins, you could do aqua for the boy and, I don't know, maybe that orange color you like for the girl. Wait, names! Have you picked names!"

"We're just picking paint at the moment," Steve said firmly. "I like your ideas."

"I do too," Jax said. "We won't get tired of the grey. And I love using something other than blue and pink. Thanks, Mary, it's perfect."

"You won't need to repaint when they get old enough to split them up, either," Mary said. "You can keep the boy in that room, and the girl will move into my room, and maybe she'll want it purple or something by then."

"That's stereotypical," Jax laughed, "and Mary, no, this is your house, you -"
"I know that you'll need two bedrooms for the kids," Mary said, smiling. "I'll . . . well, I'm thinking I'll have my own place, anyway."

Steve grabbed the phone back from Jax. "Mare? What do you mean?"

"I graduated from my program," Mary said. They could see her cheeks tinge pink, even over the video chat. "I did really well, Stevie. I must have picked up legal stuff from Dad, and apparently all the grammar and spelling and research stuff from Mom, and . . . well, I think I'm going to be really good at this. I was thinking . . . I'm ready to look for a job, and maybe it's a good time for me to look in Honolulu. There's a lot of international business, and finance, and -"

She was interrupted by Steve's shout which reverberated through the paint department. A few customers glanced at them, irritated, before seeing the curve of Jax's stomach under her HPD t-shirt. Their scowls softened immediately.

"Sorry," Jax offered to a couple passing by. "Lots of stuff happening."

"You enjoy it, dear," the woman said. "Every minute of it. Let that handsome husband of yours have his moment. Before you know it, you'll be repainting the room after he or she has moved to college."

"Yes, ma'am," Jax said.

"Okay, we gotta go, Mare, before we get kicked out of the store," Steve said. "Tell me when you're coming to start job hunting. You know you can stay with us as long as you need to, and we'll help you get set up."

"I thought . . . I thought maybe I'd try to come around the holidays?" Mary said. "I don't want to intrude . . . but if I can get settled before the babies come, then I could help? With the babies. And Aunt Deb will want to come, of course, and then she can stay with me. But, I don't want to be in the way, it's not like you needed."

"Mary, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing," Jax said. "I don't even know enough to know what I need. It would be great to have you here. The babies will love having Aunt Mary."

"I'll start making plans, then, if you're sure . . ." Mary said.

"Mare," Steve said. "Mary, this is your home. I miss you. Yeah, we're sure. I came back for the funeral and I stayed, and I haven't regretted it, not for a moment. It's time, Mary. Come home."

"It looks great," Steve said, as they stood admiring the babies' room. He bent and kissed the top of Jax's head, pulling at a streak of grey paint smudged in one of her curls.

She sighed contentedly and leaned against him. "I love it," she said. "You think the babies will like sleeping in here?"

"Hmm," he mumbled. He wrapped his arms around her. "Yes, I think they'll like sleeping in here. I've been doing some research, McGarrett."

"Of course you have, Commander," Jax said. "Share with the class?"

"So, the trick will be getting them to both sleep at the same time," Steve said. "It will require planning. Coordination. Team effort."
"Wow, you have put some thought into this already," she said.

"Well, yes, because if we get them both to sleep at the same time, then we can move on to other things," he said. He trailed the backs of his fingers up her arm, making her shiver.

"Other things?" she asked. "Like . . . doing our taxes?"

He chuckled and unfastened one of the clasps of her overalls. "Maybe . . . or maybe something more like -" he bent and whispered in her ear, then kissed down the side of her neck.

She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Hmmm, so if we can get them both to sleep, at the same time . . ."

"Ummhmm," he said. He fumbled for the other clasp on her overalls and released it. They fell to the floor with a muffled thud. "So we'll have to get them nice and tired."

"We can take them outside," Jax suggested, her breath hitching.

"Lots of fresh air," Steve agreed, wrapping his hands around her hips and lifting her. "And then we give them a bath."

She wrapped her legs around his waist. "Nice clean diapers, nice soft jammies . . ."

"Then we give them their bottles," he said. "You see how important it will be to coordinate. Synchronize."

"Hmm," she agreed.

He kicked her overalls out of the way and started toward the stairs.

"But there's one problem we'll need to work on," he said. "Possibly another home improvement project."

"Really?" she asked. He stopped and placed her gently on the second stair and kissed her, threading his hands into her hair.

"We might need to look into soundproofing our bedroom," he said. "Or all that work putting them to sleep will be for nothing."

"What are you saying, Commander?" Jax asked, her lips brushing against the soft skin behind his ear.

"I'm saying you're gonna have to tone it down, McGarrett," he said. "You're a - shit - you're a bit of a screamer."

"Yeah?" she whispered. "Prove it."

###

Steve opted for a long run on Sunday morning, pushing himself past the last of the lingering pain from his exterior building exit. The sweat stung his still-healing injuries, but he dismissed the sensation and focused on keeping his pace and breathing steady.

He slipped quietly in the kitchen door, but the sound of the shower upstairs meant Jax was already up and moving. The coffee maker beeped as it finished its timed brew, and he smiled and poured two cups, adding a heaping spoonful of butter to each.
The bedroom door was ajar, and a disheveled Pupule raised his head from the middle of the bed.

"Did she abandon you, buddy?" Steve asked. "I'm sorry. Take it up with her boss."

The sound of running water stopped, and Jax emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in an oversized towel.

"I smell coffee," she said, padding into the bedroom. She smiled as Steve handed her a mug. "And testosterone, and endorphins. I smell those, too."

"Guilty as charged," Steve said. He wiped at his face with the hem of his tshirt.

"And butter," Jax continued, her face buried in her mug. "You put butter in my coffee."

"Healthy fat and calories," Steve argued. "The doc said you were still a little on the light side, and with your new aversion to meat -"

"Just because I don't want to eat things that bleed doesn't mean I have a new aversion," Jax said. "I ate shrimp the other night, too, and that's meat."

"Shrimp is shellfish," Steve said.

"Danny was right, you are incorrigible," Jax said, gesturing, her towel slipping precariously.

Steve smirked at her.

"No," she said firmly, as she hitched her towel back up. "I have to be on time for work. What are you going to do today?"

She pulled on her clothes as he answered her from the bathroom.

"I thought I'd go in to the office," he said, his voice muffled by the shower. "Caviness and his team offered to take the weekend, but we got the babies' room done yesterday, and you have to work today so . . ."

As usual, he was finished in moments, coming out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped scandalously low around his hips. Jax tilted her head and admired him shamelessly.

"And now you smell good, too," she said absently.

"You need to be on time for work," he pointed out. "Is this still a second trimester thing?"

"Twenty-six weeks," she said. "Almost to the third trimester. So it might just be a thing. You're still -" she gestured helplessly with her hand - "with the muscle and the ink and the . . . but I'm all -"

"You're all curvy and glowy and sexy as hell," Steve said. He cupped one hand around her face and pressed the other gently against the curve of her belly. "Anything exciting going on this morning?"

"Give it a minute," Jax said, grinning up at him. "They like the coffee."

He stood still, smiling down at her, until he felt the flutter under his hand. "Holy shit," he said. "I will never get over that. It's the butter. I bet they like the butter."

"Are you serious right now?" Jax demanded.

"Hey, it's a SEAL thing," he said.
"So?"

"Baby seals," he said triumphantly.

###

WoFat stood in front of the closet - such as it was - and examined the contents by the harsh light of the exposed overhead lightbulb. This time, he was leaving nothing to chance. He turned off the light and made his way down the narrow underground corridor to the communications room.

"They're still monitoring this frequency?" he asked.

"Yes," the young man said. "The false cell phone transmission you had me send this morning was definitely intercepted by Pearl Hickam. What next?"

"Prepare the video equipment," WoFat said. "When we send the message, let there be no mistake as to who they are dealing with."
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"No, I'm absolutely sure," Brian said. "I'm not interested. Honored that you'd consider me, but not interested. Keep me posted on the husband situation, yeah?"

Brian hung up the phone and then stood in the doorway of his bedroom, watching Kono sleep. They'd worked for hours at a time, only stopping to rest briefly when their fatigue put them at risk for missing something important. He'd only slept for three hours when the San Francisco office called, and it was evidence of Kono's deep exhaustion that the phone had not woken her.

She stirred, tossing a long, slim leg over the covers and mumbling something about swells and Sandy's. He smiled, crossing his arms and leaning against the frame of the door. She mumbled again, soft phrases of pidgin that he didn't understand yet.

"You're creepy," she complained half-heartedly, not bothering to open her eyes. "What time'zit?"

"I have no idea," he admitted. "I've lost track. Go back to sleep."

"Only if you are," she said. She sat up, running her hands through her hair. "Otherwise, I'm going to shower and hook up a coffee IV."

"I'll make a food run," he offered.

"Or you could join me in the shower, and we could eat leftover pizza," Kono suggested. She stood up, stretching, the hem of her shirt slipping up to reveal her perfectly bronzed navel.
Brian laughed and reached an arm to the back of his shirt, pulling it up and over his head in one smooth motion. "If they think I'd give this up to go to the main headquarters, they're crazy."

"Damn straight," Kono said, kicking her tiny sleep shorts toward the hamper and sauntering toward the bathroom. "Wait. What?"

Danny sat in the rocker, holding Charlie in one arm and his cell phone in the other. Rachel could hear him, laughing softly as he chatted with his sister. She listened as he recounted some lively tale of their childhood.

"Maybe Easter," he said. "But nah, we can't make it for Thanksgiving or Christmas, not this year... well, yeah, it's a lot less complicated now that we're back together, but the baby is really little for flying. For Ma and Pop? Yeah, that's a great idea. Count me in. Okay, bye sis."

He looked up, noticing Rachel in the doorway.

"Hi, beautiful," he said softly. "Charlie's almost asleep."

Rachel came into the room and curled into the corner of the sofa. "You miss them," she said. "Your family."

"Sure," he said. "Of course I do."

"With the task force on your resume... the department would jump at the chance to get you back," she said. "NYPD... any of the big cities."

Danny felt his heart stutter. "Babe, what are you saying? Do you - you want to go back to Jersey?"

"Do you?" she countered. "You only moved here because I forced your hand. You're free to do as you like, now."

"No," Danny said slowly, "I'm free to do what we decide, together, is best for our family. Do you think we should go back to Jersey?"

"Your family is there," she pointed out. "And you've said you miss them."

"You're not answering me," Danny said softly. "Tell me, Rach. This isn't a trick question, but you brought it up. Do you want to go back to Jersey? Stay here? Hell, move to the west coast? What do you want, Rachel?"

"I... this was about what you want, Danny," Rachel said. "You hate it here - or, you did. I thought... I thought you would want to leave. Do you want to leave, Danny?"

Chin heard a crash from the kitchen and hurried to check.

"Malia?" he asked softly.

She stood in front of the sink, her hands over her face, and her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Broken shards of ceramic surrounded her.

"Don't move," he said kindly, as he crossed the kitchen in a few strides and swept her into his arms. "I have on shoes, you don't."
She pressed her face into the crook of his neck. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just . . . I want this to be over."

"We all do, sweetheart," he said. He carried her out onto the private lanai, automatically scanning for any suspicious looking passersby. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he sat down, still cradling her in his arms.

"This is so unfair to you," she said, wiping her face.

"Let me be the judge of that," he said. "I wouldn't change a thing."

"What if they make me move?" she asked.

"Well, we cross that bridge when we get to it," he said. "I could petition to go with you."

"But your family . . . your friends . . . " she protested.

"Would understand," Chin said. "And it would only be until your situation is resolved. I believe Caviness will get to the bottom of this sooner, rather than later. And you've got Five-O to protect you and back up the marshals."

"And I've got you," Malia said. "Somehow, beyond all reason, I've got you."

#*#*#*#*#

The Five-O offices were dark and quiet when Steve stepped off the elevator. He went into the conference room and stood at parade rest, letting his eyes drift over the pictures and maps, not focusing on any one in particular.

A long time passed, before he pulled a photo of his father out of his wallet and hung it on the wall. He returned to standing, motionless, his muscles relaxed.

"What did you want to tell me, dad?" he murmured. "And what the hell does WoFat want with our family?"

#*#*#*#*#

Jax grinned at the sight of Danny's Camaro in the driveway, parked behind Steve's Silverado. She slid the driver's seat back to accommodate her exit - a new development, and one that she found incredibly frustrating.

Her running shoes were abandoned by the hall table, along with her hospital ID and stethoscope, nestled next to Steve's badge. She padded silently through the kitchen and toward the sound of Steve and Danny's voices, in the chairs by the water.

"So, she's saying . . . we could go back to Jersey now," Danny said. "I hadn't thought about it, but the kids . . . they could grow up, you know, with their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, their cousins . . ."

Jax froze, then turned and tiptoed quietly back into the house.

"Shit, Danny," Steve said quietly. "Are you going to do it?"

"Do - move? Back to Jersey?" Danny said. "I hadn't thought of it. When Rachel asked, I was surprised. Surprised that she would consider it . . . and surprised that . . . I'm no longer interested. My parents - my siblings - yeah, they're great. And loud, and overbearing, and . . . best loved from a
distance, you know?"

Steve laughed. "I've met them," he said.

"And . . . our family here," Danny said. "It's . . . okay, wiseass, this ohana thing you have going on here, it grows on you."

"It grows on you," Steve repeated, grinning.

"Like a fungus," Danny groused. "Hey, we heard Jax's car, where the hell is she?"

"Eating, maybe, or changing clothes," Steve said. "Or cleaning something . . . ."

"It's gets weirder the closer you get to the end," Danny said ominously. "Welcome to the third trimester. Let's go find her before she does any damage."

They entered the house to find it strangely quiet. Pupule was pacing at the bottom of the stairs. He raised a huge paw and rested it on Steve's knee, meowing anxiously.

"Hey, buddy," Steve said. He bent and pick up the cat, snuggling it against his chest. Pupule butted his head against Steve's chin. "She upstairs?"

"Steve, you think she's okay?" Danny asked quietly. "I'll wait down here in case . . . maybe you need a ride or -"

"Yeah, thanks, Danno," Steve said. "Hold on, I'll be right back." He took the stairs two at a time, calling Jax's name softly.

He found her in their bedroom, trying to untangle herself from her scrub pants, wrapped around her ankles.

"Hey, whoa," Steve said, trying to get to her before she tripped completely. His strong hands wrapped around her elbows, holding her steady. He guided her to sit down on the edge of the bed. "What the hell is going on, Jax? Is everything okay?" He carefully untangled the fabric and slipped the pants off, tossing them toward the hamper.

"Danny's leaving, isn't he?" Jax whispered. "I mean, it's great, right, for Gracie and Charles Nolan. Danny . . . he misses New Jersey, I know he does, and -"

"No," Steve said, cupping his hand around Jax's face.

"And, you know, his family really has missed out on the kids, and -"

"Danny's not leaving, ku'uipo," Steve repeated. "Danny, Rachel, the kids - they're staying here."

"They are?" Jax asked. Her eyes filled with tears of relief and she brushed them away impatiently. "You're sure?"

"He's staying," Steve said.

Jax threw her arms around Steve's neck and pressed her face into the crook of his neck. "I just didn't - with the babies coming, I wanted him - I'm being selfish . . . ."

"Then I am too," Steve said, "because I about had a stroke when he first said it. Did you -"

"I guess I didn't hear the whole thing," Jax said sheepishly. "You're sure he's staying?"
"Ask him yourself, he's still downstairs," Steve said. "We were worried about you."

Jax kissed Steve quickly and rushed toward the bedroom door. Steve cleared his throat sharply.

"Pants, seriously," he said, with a pained grimace. "I mean, I know you and Danny are close, but really."
"And what are you going to do with your day off, Mrs. McGarrett?" Steve teased, kissing Jax goodbye on the front porch.

"I'm going to get groceries," Jax said. "With a list. Like a . . . housewife."

She looked lost and confused, standing on the porch in his hoodie, her hand wrapped around a cup of coffee. He wrapped his arms around her, his hands resting on her belly.

"Okay, so tell me again what you did yesterday," he prompted. "Your most interesting case."

"I helped Dr. Marks with a tracheotomy on a patient who came in with blunt force trauma to throat," she said. "Airway was completely compromised, their SATs were falling fast . . . they have trays, sealed, sterilized trays, with all the equipment laid out, it's amazing -"

"Yeah," he murmured, "so, yesterday you were a badass medic. You're not going to get the same rush from buying groceries, I get it. But there's always tomorrow. And today, the babies need a break from all that adrenaline."

"That's probably true," she said. "They were pretty jacked up last night. I think there was some actual kicking. What are you doing today?"

"Caviness is briefing us on the latest with Malia's situation," Steve said. "In an official capacity."

"That doesn't sound good," Jax said quietly. "An official briefing, from the US Marshal Service?"

"You wanna join us?" Steve asked. "Two o'clock."

"Yeah," Jax said. "Yeah, thanks, I'll be there."

"Okay," Steve said, kissing the top of her head again. "Now, go do some kickass grocery shopping."

"Hey, it's one of Hawaii's finest," Kamekona said, beaming at Jax as she stood at the window of his food truck. "How are you enjoying life as a civilian?"

"It's fine, I guess," Jax sighed. "I wish the hospital would let me work every day, but they won't. I've already done laundry and groceries this morning. I'm going in to see the guys at two, but . . ."

"In the meantime you are at loose ends," Kamekona nodded. "But, you have plenty of time for an early lunch. Lemon pepper?"

Jax wrinkled her nose in thought. "I think tofu. I'm not feeling shrimp today."

"Coming right up," Kamekona said. "Hey, you should check out the new baby shop. Just over there, on the corner. Maybe you see something for McGarrett's little baby seals."

"So now I'm resorting to retail therapy?" Jax wailed. "Kame, I don't even know how to shop for normal stuff, much less baby stuff."

"That's why you shop downtown, shop locals," Kamekona said, nodding.
"They’ll think I'm a tourist," Jax groused.

"You come here for lunch every day off, I'll give you lessons in pidgin," Kamekona promised. "Here you go, extra tofu on the house - some for you, some for the babies."

They gathered around the main conference room table. Jax noticed that Caviness was wearing a tie. It felt serious, if Caviness was wearing a tie.

"Shit," she whispered under her breath, and reached out under the table and grabbed Kono's hand.

Malia sat next to Chin, looking tired but serene. She glanced over at Jax and Kono and smiled.

"As you know, we've been combing over current surveillance, as well as pulling bank records, phone records, travel records - everything, going back a calendar year," Caviness said. "So far, we've not found anything that indicates that the organized crime family Malia testified against in San Francisco overlaps or connects to The Company here in Honolulu. So far, there's no evidence. Obviously, the concern is that this is a brand new development, and that contact is yet to be made, but forthcoming. There's one - and thankfully, only one - development that still gives us pause."

He stopped and took a sip of water, and pulled a photo out of a file.

"I've been in constant contact with the San Francisco office," he continued. "They've been monitoring David Pellosi. Alanna's husband. There was a lot of activity in a short period of time - they're still analyzing his movements - and then he got in his private jet and . . . well -"

"They've lost track of him," Grover guessed, shaking his head.

"That's the current situation," Caviness said.

"So he could be coming to the island," Steve said. He leaned forward in his chair, and Danny couldn't help the smile that tugged at his mouth. Typical Steve - ready to go strap on a rifle and simply find Pellosi and deal with him.

"He could be going anywhere," Caviness said. "He travels constantly. His flight plan said New York, but his plane didn't land there. These small jets, they're . . . "

"Easy to lose track of," Grover said again. "Lot of that going around."

"You're suggesting he has help," Caviness said. "At the highest levels."

"My experience, in Chicago . . . these people always have help," Grover said.

"It's possible," Caviness admitted. "So the Marshal service has given us options. One, of course, was an immediate relocation to Arlington, Virginia, to the international headquarters of the service. The idea was that Malia could be relocated under a new identity into one of the military hospitals there. The marshals have a few key personnel embedded into those facilities, and it's one of the most secure options we can offer a witness."

Danny glanced anxiously at Chin and Malia.

"I turned it down," Malia said. "And I wasn't the only one who turned down Arlington."

Caviness ducked his head. "I was offered a position in Arlington," he said, shrugging. "I wasn't interested, either."
Jax kicked Kono discreetly under the table, and Danny looked back and forth between Kono and Caviness, grinning.

"Lot of staying put going around, too," Grover said, with a nod.

"Well, Malia has the right to decline a WITSEC relocation," Caviness said, "but in doing so runs the risk of being officially dismissed from the program. Which we don't want, not yet. The program still has a lot to offer, and worst case scenario . . . relocation may need to be an option in the future. So, since Five-O was already approved as a protection detail, we made a case for something of a protective custody situation. It's not ideal, but it was approved. It keeps Malia in the program, and more importantly - it keeps her safe. Provided that Five-O agrees to take on the responsibility."

"Absolutely," Steve said, without hesitation. "Tell us how it works."

"Much like it's already been working," Caviness said. "But now it will involve moving Malia to a safe house. We have two locations in play, and I took the liberty of having your house approved, Steve. Hope you and Jax don't mind."

"Of course not," Steve said quickly. "Anything."

Caviness nodded. "If for any reason the marshal service security is breached, all of our locations are at risk. I wanted to have a back-up location, and you have the, ah, interesting set-up under the stairs."

"One condition," Steve said, looking at Jax. "If we get to that play, you're with Malia."

"Understood," Jax said quietly.

"Malia, were you able to get the leave of absence from work?" Caviness asked. "I'm so sorry. It's the only way I could get it approved. The hospital, even with one of us embedded, just leaves you too exposed at this point."

"It was approved," Malia said. "They were a bit surprised that I wanted to take time for research, until I explained that it was to begin a study of the benefits of emergency doctors following patient care through discharge. They accepted that without question. And now, of course, I need to write something impressive during this time."

"So, a member of Five-O and a member of my team will be with Malia at all times," Caviness said. "McGarrett, I'll let you handle your team assignment. My team will be on a simple eight hour shift rotation."

"Chin, you have point," Steve said right away. "No way I'd let anyone separate me from Jax if there was a threat - I think we all relate to that."

Danny and Grover nodded. "Yeah, unless Renee got tired of my ugly mug, I'd be stuck to her like flypaper," Grover said.

"You need to switch out for any reason, or you need back up, you tag one of us," Steve said. "And then - and only then - do you give us your location."

"That's a good protocol," Caviness said. "We hope this will be a very temporary situation. The San Francisco office is doing everything they can to nail down David Pelosi's location and intentions. Our focus is shifting to protection at this point. Any questions?"

###
"Our limited surveillance indicates that she will be working the usual daytime shift tomorrow," the young man at the computer said. "There has been one evening shift, though. It's impossible to predict with accuracy. I could not breach any of the Tripler systems; only the simple CCTV camera in the parking lot."

WoFat nodded thoughtfully. "It's enough. If we see what we need to see in the morning, we act in the evening. Ensure that everything is in place."

Jax was curled comfortably on the sofa, her feet in Steve's lap, when she remembered the box in the back of the Supra. She stretched and started to get up.

"Need to hit the head again?" Steve asked sympathetically, still absently rubbing her feet.

"No, I need to get something out of my car," she said. "Totally forgot, after the briefing about Malia. Be right back."

Steve watched curiously as she grabbed her keys and made a quick dash to the car, returning with a bag. She reset the alarm and locked the door, and then curled back up on the sofa next to him.

"Kamekona actually suggested this shop," she said, shaking her head. "I stopped in . . . I know Kono says that people will flood us with stuff - which is really sweet, I can't believe - but anyway, I just - I saw these, and the lady said that babies actually need something to focus on, it develops their brain - Rachel said she was right, so . . . "

She reached in and pulled out two flat boxes and handed them to Steve. He opened one, face scrunched in concentration.

"Okay, I give - what the heck is it?" he asked.

Jax laughed. "It doesn't make sense flat. You have to hold it up, like -" She lifted a mobile carefully from the box, and suddenly a tangle of colorful ribbon became a circle of bright fabric race cars, dangling from what looked like a sleek chrome steering wheel.

"It's fast cars," Steve said, laughing. "No wonder it caught your eye."

"So, you attach this to the crib like this -" Jax demonstrated, "and when the babies are awake, but in their crib, it gives them something to watch. And it's supposed to be good for their eyes, or something."

"It's great," Steve said. "Let's go put it up."

When they got to the babies' room, Steve paused before switching on the light. "Check this out," he murmured, pointed at the light switch. It had been replaced with a dimmer. He slid the new switch up, just a bit, and the room was awash in the soft low light.

"When did you do that?" Jax asked. "That's perfect."

"Early this morning," he said. "It makes sense, right? I mean, middle of the night, we don't want to spotlight the kids. Okay, let's put these little cars up."

Jax waited until he had attached the mobile to one of the cribs before pulling out the second box.
"Not just cars," she said. She opened the box and pulled out the second mobile, and a circle of sailboats dangled from a small ship's wheel. "This one made me think of you." She attached it to the other crib, giving it a little push with her finger and smiling as the sailboats chased each other around in a circle.

"I love it," Steve said. He wrapped his arms around her, splaying one hand warm and steady against her belly.

"We can almost start counting the weeks backwards, now, until they're here," Jax said. She chewed on her bottom lip until Steve tugged it free with the pad of his thumb.

"Hey, we've got this," he said. "We'll get some diapers and some formula and we'll . . ."

"Yeah?" Jax prompted.

"Improvise, adapt, and overcome," he said.

She turned and stared at him. "Oh dear Lord - you're quoting the Marines. That's terrifying."

"Hey, sometimes they get it right," he said, shrugging and grinning at her.

#*#*#*#*#

"The office is quiet," Danny said, sitting across from Steve's desk. "Chin is so quiet . . . you wouldn’t think it would make a difference. Any word?"

"Caviness said everything looks good at the safe house," Steve said. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. "Malia is going to keep busy working on that research that she used as a reason to ask for a leave."

Danny smiled. "That's very typical of Malia," he said. "That's integrity for you."

"Yeah," Steve said. "You ever notice how people who are determined to do the right thing so often get screwed over?"

"It does seem to happen that way," Danny sighed.

Steve's phone buzzed and he picked it up, smiling.

"Tell Jax I said hello," Danny said.

Steve looked up at him. "How'd you -"

"You, ya goof," Danny chuckled. "You get this . . . this whole different face when she walks in the room, or calls, or texts."

"I guess I do," Steve said. His fingers moved over the screen of his phone. He paused and then chuckled again. "Jax says hello back."

"Yeah, what else?" Danny asked.

"Classified," Steve said smugly.

"You two are . . . something else," Danny said.

"Does it change? After you have kids?" Steve asked quietly, fidgeting with his phone. "I mean . . .
not how you really feel about each other, I know that's never going to change, not for us, but . . .

other stuff."

Danny laughed. "Well, while Rachel was in labor - both times - she informed me that I was never
touching her again. And those first weeks . . . you're so exhausted, yeah, you wonder if you'll
survive, much less get back to the way things were. But you do. And wow . . . watching Rachel with
the baby, it was magical. Maybe we're hardwired that way, to ensure survival of the species, or
whatever, but - wow. So yeah, it changes things but . . . for us, anyway, it just got even better."

Steve nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks, Danny."

"Hey, babe, it's quiet. Go home. Enjoy the calm before the storm," Danny said.

"You know, I'm gonna take you up on that, Danny," Steve said. "I'll put something on the grill,
maybe put some candles on the lanai . . . "

"There ya go," Danny said, nodding his approval. "And you can just, you know - stop right there. I
don't need to know any more."

#*#*#*#*#

Jax rubbed her lower back absently as she signed out at the security desk.

"You need shorter shifts?" Gus asked, waiting to sign out after Jax.

"Nah," Jax said. "This is nothing a long swim and a good night's sleep won't fix. I'll see you day
after tomorrow."

"Take it easy," Gus said. "Just because I can deliver babies doesn't mean I want any practice, you
got it?"

Jax laughed and grabbed her backpack. "Got it."

#*#*#*#*#

Steve sipped a Longboard as he puttered around in the kitchen. He pulled vegetables and pineapple
out of the refrigerator, cutting them and threading the pieces onto skewers. A stack of papers from
the last ob visit was clipped neatly to the refrigerator, and he searched through it.

The bloodwork had confirmed his own suspicion that Jax was mildly anemic - a glare from the nurse
had convinced him that it was no time to congratulate himself on an accurate armchair diagnosis. A
separate printout listed food especially high in iron.

"Spinach," he said decisively. Pupule paused on his trek toward the laundry room and regarded him
curiously. "Spinach, for Jax," Steve explained to the cat. "She needs iron, and she's not loving meat
right now. I'll make a spinach salad."

Pupule continued toward the laundry room, unimpressed.

#*#*#*#*#

Jax rolled the windows of the Supra down and enjoyed the breeze and the purr of the engine. She
rounded a curve midway toward home, and had to slam on her brakes to avoid colliding with a blue
sedan, stopped halfway off the road.

"Idiot -" Jax started to mutter, but stopped as she spotted a tendril of smoke coming from the hood of
the car. She pulled the Supra completely off the road and turned on her hazard lights.

The guard rail was dented and smeared with blue paint. Jax quickly calculated angles and wrinkled her nose in confusion - the position of the car didn't match the apparent points of impact. She grabbed her kit out of the back of her car and approached the sedan carefully.

The back door was open, revealing an empty car seat.

"Shit," Jax said. She began to search around, frantic, horrified at the possibility that a child had been thrown from the vehicle. Her hand went automatically for her phone, but it wasn't in her pocket, and she didn't dare take time to go back to her car for it. The driver's seat was empty, as well.

This is seriously messed up, Jax thought. She heard a rustle from the side of the road, and turned to investigate.

Steve tried Jax's phone again. It rang several times and then went to voice mail.

"Hey, ku'uipo, I guess you're driving home," he said. "Or maybe you got caught late at work. I'll . . . I'll see you soon. Don't be mad, I'm going to call the hospital to check. Okay."

Pupule rubbed a huge paw over his face.

"I'm just going to call the desk and see if she's still on duty," Steve said. "It's perfectly reasonable." He dialed another number and held the phone to his ear, waiting. The desk clerk picked up the call. "Yes, this is Commander McGarrett . . . I was expecting Jax home by now, thought maybe she stayed late at work? No? Oh. You're sure, an hour - okay, yes. Yes, thank you so much."

Pupule rubbed against Steve's ankles and meowed pitifully.

"Yeah," Steve said. He grabbed his keys and phone and headed toward the Silverado. He had Danny on the line before he was out of the driveway.

Jax felt the mask pressed over her face.

"Don't struggle," the voice said. A familiar voice. Cultured, slightly accented. She gasped at the realization, inhaling a lung full of nitrous oxide.

"It's nitrous oxide, it's safe for you and the . . . child," WoFat said. He held the mask firmly to her face, anticipating her movements, his other arm firmly around her shoulders. "I have no interest in hurting you. Just relax, and cooperate, and everything will be just fine."

Jax felt her muscles relax. She knew this was it, this was worst case scenario. As the gas flooded her system, she couldn't remember why it mattered.
Steve blew out a sigh of relief when he spotted Jax's Supra, hazards still flashing, pulled behind what appeared to be an accident. He barely had the Silverado in park before he jumped from the driver's seat.

"Jax," he called out, his long strides carrying him without hesitation toward the apparent wrecked car. Of course. Of course, she would have stopped, she would have called in . . . he looked around in confusion. There was no one in sight.

He recognized the hum of the Camaro even over the sirens. Danny pulled off the road, coming from opposite direction.

"Steve, is she okay?" Danny was yelling, even before he exited the car. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"I don't - get Kono on the phone, get her to call all the hospitals," Steve said. "Jax probably rode with the patient, you know how she is."

Danny nodded, and Steve could hear him giving Kono the information as he dialed Grover.

"Lou, yeah - Jax didn't get home from work, I drove toward Tripler - we've got a wrecked blue sedan, Jax's Supra pulled behind it with hazards, but no sign of Jax or the driver or -" he paused as he glanced inside the sedan - "shit, we've got an empty car seat in the back of the car. My guess is Jax pulled over to assist, went with the victims to the hospital? Would you call HPD, see what was reported?"

They hung up their phones at the same time, and Danny's eyes met Steve's as he pulled gloves out of his pocket.

"Danny . . . " Steve said, looking at the gloves. "Danny, you don't think . . . "

"Let's just call it a force of habit," Danny said carefully. "We're not gonna say. Let's look at the Supra."

Steve nodded numbly, a sense of vague dread crawling up his spine. He accepted an extra set of gloves from Danny. It was a joke among the team that he never had gloves - he still didn't think like a cop, most of the time.

"Wait," he murmured, holding a hand up as Danny approached the Supra. "Lemme check . . . "

He dropped to the ground, looking under the car.

"What are you -"

"It's clear, no explosives," Steve said.

Danny blinked at him.

"No IEDs," Steve elaborated.

"Yeah, I got that," Danny said. "I don't want to know what it's like inside your head, Steven, that you think of -"
Steve shrugged. "It's how you come back alive from over there. You always assume that . . .
anyway. We're clear."

They silently checked Jax's car.

"Danno," Steve said, holding up her phone. "On the floorboard behind the driver's seat. She keeps
her kit on the back seat. Must have slipped out of her pocket when she grabbed it."

"Her backup is in the glove box," Danny said. "So . . . she didn't see anything that she read as a
threat. That's good."

"I guess," Steve said quietly. He looked through the car once more, then moved on to the damaged
sedan.

"Her kit is still closed," he said. "Dropped by the back tire . . . probably when she saw the car seat . . ."

Danny stayed clear as Steve started looking intently at the ground around the car.

"Shit," Steve muttered, as he followed something toward the side of the road. "Did the kid get
thrown - Jax?"

"What have you got?" Danny asked.

"If the kid got thrown, and Jax tried to . . . these embankments are impossible . . . " Steve said.
"There's a reason there are guard rails, if she slipped . . . Jax?"

"Wait, Steve don't just vault over - you know good and well I can't throw myself down the side of
the cliff after you," Danny groused. His phone pinged. "Kono. What have you got? Damn. They're
sure? Okay, they'll call if - yeah. Yeah, okay . . . no, there's no . . . okay. See you in a few."

Steve's face fell as Danny shook his head slowly. "Kono's checked with all the hospitals. No one has
seen Jax. Maybe they're still enroute . . . Kono's coming here, she already pinged our cell phones for
location."

Steve smiled absently. Of course she had. Chin had taught her well. His phone vibrated in his pocket
and he grabbed at it desperately.

"Lou, the hospitals have nothing," he said. "Tell me HPD has something."

Danny was silent as Steve listened intently.

"Yeah, keep on it," Steve said. "Thanks, man. Yeah, I'm sure there's an explanation it just . . . hey,
do me another favor - get Charlie to bring a team out here. No, there's no evidence of . . . but it will
be dark soon, better now than . . . you know? Thanks."

Steve turned to Danny. "It's not because I think - look, one thing I've learned from you is always
collect evidence, even if you think you don't need it."

"Very good, grasshopper," Danny said softly. His tone was devoid of the usual snark, and Steve
couldn't stand it.

"Don't," he said sharply. "Don't look at me like you're gonna need to do the compassionate cop
thing, Danny, don't do it. Lou said HPD didn't have a report of a wreck but they had a complaint
from a homeowner over that ridge of a low-flying helicopter."
"Life flight?" Danny asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," Steve said. He started looking for a landing spot, his eyes scanning quickly in the glow of the sunset light. "There - that's where I'd -"

He took off toward what looked to Danny like an impossibly tiny level outcropping ahead, around the curve, on the other side of the guard rail. Danny followed carefully.

"Struts," Steve shouted back to him. "A helo definitely put down here, and lifted back off. You can see the rotor wash bent the leaves of those trees."

"If you say so," Danny said. The leaves looked perfectly normal to him. "So where the hell are they?"

"I don't know . . . but it makes sense," Steve said. "She gets here, rescue is already here. She doesn't need to open her kit if there's already equipment on scene. She got caught up - you know how she is, Danny - she had dropped her phone, so she didn't call, she went with - it makes sense. Kono's probably already got a call from one of the hospitals after all."

"Okay," Danny said. "Yeah, I'm sure you're right."

"I have to be right, Danny," Steve said. "Right?"

Danny squeezed his shoulder and tried not to look like a compassionate cop.

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Jax felt the mask lift from her face, and something else slide over her head, pressing against her ears. Within moments, the effect of the nitrous oxide lifted, and panic set in as she realized that she was in a helicopter. The world tilted.

"You're safe," a voice said in her ear. Of course. A headset. "I'll explain more when we land, it won't be long. I am going to need to blindfold you, though."

Jax shook her head and reached for the headset, her hands shaky and uncooperative.

"Jacqueline," WoFat said. "It's for your safety and protection. I'm not going to hurt you; please don't hurt yourself. Trust me, I have a vested interest in your safety and well-being. But it doesn't suit for you to know our location. Relax and cooperate, or I'll have to administer more gas, and even though it's safe, I'd really rather not."

Jax forced herself to be still. It was pointless, after all - it wasn't as if she could jump from the helicopter into mid air. She felt hysterical laughter bubbling up as unfamiliar hands wrapped a blindfold around her eyes securely. If WoFat only knew how unnecessary it was, worrying about her finding her way around. She'd almost taken a wrong turn to Kamekona's truck just yesterday.

As total darkness enveloped her, she thought of sitting in the sunshine, chatting with Kamekona . . . of going across the street to look at things for the babies . . . of Steve's delighted grin when they'd hung the mobiles over the cribs. She was thankful for the blindfold, then, as it collected the tears that silently escaped from her closed eyes.

#*#*#*#*#

"Hey, guys," Kono said, as she approached them. "Anything?"
"No, I thought you'd have heard from a hospital by now," Steve said. "We've got a helicopter that landed and took off here."

"I'll call again," Kono said decisively, pulling out her phone. "I'll go to all of the emergency departments myself if need be. Maybe they don't recognize Jax in scrubs, they're all used to seeing her in tac gear..." She paced back and forth in front of her car, talking rapidly.

Lou pulled up, his SUV followed closely by an HPD forensic team SUV. He eased his large frame from the front seat and immediately set out traffic flares, as Charlie quietly began pointing and giving directions to the techs with him.

"Oh, God, Danny," Steve breathed. "It looks like a crime scene. Is it a crime scene?"

"No, we don't know that," Danny said firmly.

Charlie approached them cautiously. "Commander, Detective," he said. "What are we looking for?"

"What do you see?" Steve asked. His voice was tight already.

"It's what I don't see that concerns me," Charlie said. "I don't see matching points of impact on that car to the paint on the guard rail. I don't see any evidence of blood or injury - which is, all things considered, probably good news, but it just doesn't fit. There's a car seat but no diaper bag. No personal effects in the vehicle."

Danny and Steve were stunned into silence.

"You're saying..." Steve said.

"I'm saying this wasn't an accident, as far as I can tell," Charlie said.

"It was staged," Danny said. "Staged to look like an accident."

"Jax was ambushed," Steve said. "She walked right into it, of course she would, because she thought someone was hurt... she thought a kid was hurt... shit."

"We'll process everything, collect everything as quickly as we can," Charlie said, glancing up at the fading light. "But at first glance... I'm afraid that's what it looks like. I'll try to get some answers for you, Steve."

Steve swallowed hard as Charlie walked away.

"Okay, Steve, now don't -" Danny started, but Steve's hollow glance made the words die in his throat.

"Danny, we've got Malia in a safehouse," he said, his voice strained. "What if someone thinks Jax, or the rest of the team, knows the location?"

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Jax's stomach lurched as the helicopter touched and bounced before settling. WoFat had removed the headset in order to secure the blindfold, and she'd welcomed the roar of the engine and roters as an accompaniment to the darkness. It meant she didn't have to hear, or see, or think. But now, as the engine cut and the roters slowed, and she felt WoFat's hand on her elbow, the reality of her situation was inescapable.

"Once we're inside I'll remove the blindfold," WoFat said.
Jax flinched as his hands removed her safety harness and guided her from the helicopter.

"Don't -" she started to protest, but with the blindfold, she was helpless. Under normal circumstances, she would have come up swinging, but now . . . she couldn't risk it. She couldn't risk fighting, or even falling.

WoFat smiled in satisfaction.

"So compliant," he said. "So different from our last encounter."

Jax stiffened her spine. She might be at his mercy for the moment but she was anything but compliant.

"Ah, there we are," he said. "You'll not risk your safety, not now. But you'll hate every minute of it, won't you? Fascinating."

She refused to acknowledge his comments as he led her, hands securely on her arms. She could feel the shift in air as they entered a building of some sort. The sound of a door closing behind them registered with her. It sounded surprisingly light, she thought. Not what she had expected.

"I can practically hear the wheels turning," WoFat said. "I want you to sit . . . there you go."

Jax felt something solid at the back of her knees, and reluctantly allowed herself to be lowered into a seated position. Then, out of nowhere, the dreaded press of a mask against her face and a rush of air . . . she tried to hold her breath, but a gentle slap to her cheek startled her and she breathed in.

"I just need to ensure your cooperation, for your own safety," WoFat was saying. "I've done my research, I know as well as you do that nitrous is harmless in your situation. Just relax . . . there. This is for your own good . . . well." He chuckled humorlessly. "Ultimately, it's all for my good, but I'll explain in a few minutes, when you're feeling more yourself again."

"Steve," Danny said gently. "It's dark. We can't do anything more here. Kono is going around to all the hospitals, and Lou is with HPD canvassing neighbors. Come on, let's go home."

"She's out there, Danny, with God only knows -" Steve started, shaking his head.

"I know, babe, but we'll get to the bottom of it," Danny said. "Standing here in total darkness won't help. It's another accident waiting to happen."

Steve walked toward his truck, silent, Danny falling in behind him. Instead of reaching for the driver's door, Steve opened the toolbox on the back of the truck and began pulling out gear. Danny wasn't even sure what all of it was, though he did recognize the night vision goggles and some other items from their last desperate foot search for Jax.

"Babe," Danny said quietly. He didn't dare try to touch Steve, not with the tension radiating from him. That would be asking for a broken arm, or broken jaw, or both. "This isn't going to help."

"I'm gonna look for her," Steve muttered.

"Steve. Come on, man," Danny said. "There was a helicopter. I don't think we're going to find her on foot."

Steve stopped, his hands wrapping around the edge of his truck, white knuckled in fear and
frustration. "We?" he said, half laughing.

"Of course, we," Danny said. "You know I'm with you every step of the way of this, Steven. Which means, you go out half-assed marching through the jungle, I'm on your heels. Which will be miserable for both of us, so . . . come on. You know this isn't the answer."

"I can't just do nothing, Danny," Steve gritted out in anger.

"Okay, so we go back to your place, we wait for Charlie's reports, we set up communication with the hospitals, with HPD . . . we try to catch a couple hours sleep . . . we wait for . . ." Danny trailed off.

"What do we wait for, Danny?" Steve asked.

Danny took a deep breath. "We wait for good news," he said firmly. "Or we wait for some sort of lead, some sort of evidence, and then we go after her."

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When Jax was fully aware of her surroundings again, she realized she was in a softly furnished room, resting in what felt suspiciously like a hospital recliner. She should know, she'd spent enough nights in those. She blinked, realizing that the blindfold had been removed, allowing her the opportunity to look around.

Her eyes landed on WoFat and she felt herself fill with anger and frustration.

"Now that I know who I have, I've provided a much more comfortable setting, yes?" WoFat said. "To think, this is our second meeting."

"To think, you ordered me shot at the first one," Jax retorted. Her usual expressive gesture was cut short, and she looked down, horrified to see soft restraints around her wrists. She moved her feet experimentally, and as she suspected, felt restraints around her ankles as well.

"You have a tendency to be combative," WoFat said. "I wanted to be prepared. For your safety."

"Oh, of course," Jax said, sarcasm dripping from her tone.

"You're still dependent on me for your well-being," he said sharply. "Make no mistake. You would be better served to voluntarily cooperate. I won't injure you, but I don't have to make you comfortable."

"Why should I believe for one minute that you won't hurt me," Jax challenged.

"Because I don't need to," WoFat said. "I've already won. You see, Jacqueline, every man has something - someone - in his life that is irreplaceable. And if that person is taken from him, nothing else matters."

"Shelburne," Jax whispered. "This is about Shelburne."

"Very good," WoFat said.

"You're wasting your time," Jax said. "I don't know anything."

"Oh, I know," WoFat said. There was a knock on the door, and a young man entered, followed by a petite young woman.

"Jacqueline, meet my young protege, an unlikely genius," WoFat said. "Tadeki, this is Jacqueline
Nolan McGarrett, who you know well as the object of your meticulous surveillance."

The young man nodded, barely sparing Jax a glance, as he busied himself setting up a video camera.

"And this is your nurse, Jacqueline," WoFat said. "She will ensure your health and well-being, and attend to your needs."

"I'm perfectly fine, I don't need a nurse," Jax said. "I'm pregnant, not terminal."

WoFat laughed. "If McGarrett thinks for one split second that you aren't in perfect condition, he will rain hellfire on our heads. It's counterproductive to my plan."

"Yeah? Well, better come up with a back-up plan," Jax said.

WoFat loomed over her. "You'll cooperate, though, every step of the way," he said flatly. "You are incredibly reckless with your own life, I've witnessed that first hand. But when Adam said that you'd taken a desk job, after the delightful news of your impending motherhood . . . I knew it. I knew the time had come. You would launch yourself at me, try to rip your throat out with your teeth, I know it. But not now. You wouldn't risk McGarrett's infant. Your own life you hold very loosely. But his child? Oh, you won't risk that. So you'll do exactly as I say."

"Adam?" Jax whispered. "He . . ."

"Hmm, it was brilliant, until his baser instincts rendered him useless," WoFat said. "But he had delivered the information I most needed - the tipping point. You're the key. The darling, the beloved . . . the perfect leverage."

"It's ready," Tadeki said.

WoFat stood behind Jax's chair and nodded, and Jax saw the light on the video camera turn red.

"I'll make this simple," WoFat said. "I've realized that the McGarrett clan does not, in fact, know the identity or whereabouts of Shelburne. Disappointing. But someone does know. Probably someone monitoring these transmissions, which, by the way, are clearly not originating in the Philippines. Amazing, what can be done with technology. Jacqueline will remain with me until Shelburne is delivered. My family in exchange for McGarrett's family, it's that simple. I'm a patient man. So there's no dramatic deadline, no ticking clock . . . just the plain truth that until I have Shelburne, I have Jacqueline." WoFat paused and looked down. He traced a finger over Jax's cheek, and then wrapped a curl around it. She flinched away from him, her composure wavering. WoFat looked back into the camera. "Come now, even the Navy and the CIA would agree that two for the price of one is a good deal . . . and before you default to the refusal to negotiate with terrorists, let me remind you - I'm the least of your worries, if you fail to protect Steve McGarrett's wife and unborn child. Think for a moment of what you stand to lose if you lose his loyalty. Let me know when Shelburne is available to chat, and we'll work out the exchange."

WoFat nodded and the light went out on the video camera.

"Send it," he said, nodding to Tadeki.

###

Danny followed Steve back to his house, talking quietly with Rachel on speaker phone.

"I don't know, babe, we're trying not to jump to conclusions, but we have a witness in a safe house . . . we're worried. Not gonna lie," Danny said. "Don't wait up, there's no way I'm going to leave
Steve alone until we get Jax back."

He ended the call, then watched as Steve slowly climbed out of his Silverado and walked up the steps. Steve entered the security code and unlocked the door, but instead of opening it and walking through, he turned back and sat down on the steps.

"Ah, shit," Danny sighed. He climbed out of his car and shut the door deliberately, then looked up at the starlit sky. "Again, I mention that the two of them, already, have been through hell and back several times. And neither of them will ever qualify for sainthood, not with the mouths on them, lemme tell ya. So, enough, yeah?" He walked slowly toward Steve and sat down next to him.

"I think maybe we should go in to the office," Steve said.

"If that's what you really want to do, I'll go with you," Danny said. "But you know it's going to be hours before the forensic guys finish with the cars. Kono's on the hospitals, Grover's tied in to HPD."

Steve paced on the porch. "I'm calling Catherine. Maybe there's satellite imagery of the area." He pulled out his phone and dialed.

"Can't hurt," Danny said.

Steve frowned at the phone as it went to voice mail. "Catherine. We have a situation. Call me ASAP."

Danny watched as Steve paced back and forth, apparently waiting for Catherine's return call. "Ah, Steve," he said hesitantly, "maybe we could go inside?"

"I'm not sure I can, Danny," Steve said quietly. "I'm not sure I can go in that house without her. I don't think I can walk past -"

"Okay," Danny said quickly. "Okay, babe. Tell me what you need. I'll grab it and we'll go back to the palace."

"Everything I need is in my truck," Steve said, with a wry grin.

"Well, yeah, everything you need for a zombie apocalypse, I'm sure," Danny groused.

Steve's phone buzzed and he grabbed it. "Catherine, I need - what? No, you tell me the hell right this minute, damn it - ok. Okay, on my way." He ended the call, his hand wrapping white-knuckled around his phone. He was off the porch and walking toward the Camaro.

"Keys, Danny," he barked. "We're going to Pearl Hickam. I'm driving. For some reason, the Navy has a lead on Jax."

"What's your name?" Jax asked the young woman who was busy taking her blood pressure.

"I'm just a nurse," she said. "I don't want to get in trouble. Your blood pressure is high."

"I'm upset," Jax said. "I'm being held against my will, you do understand that, right? And I'm restrained. If you take these off, maybe I could relax."

"He said you would try to convince me," the nurse said. "I'm not supposed to undo them. But you're not going to be hurt. You and your baby are very valuable. Please, if you are not well, I will be in trouble."
"I can protect you from him," Jax said. "If you could help me, we could get away. I have friends, they can protect you."

"But can they protect my father? And my sisters?" the young woman asked sadly. "No. No one can. I do as I am told. Please. For your baby, for my sake - please try to relax, calm yourself. I will bring you some water and some food."

"I'll need to pee," Jax said. She was aiming for feisty and fell somewhat into petulant, but she didn't care. "At some point, actually at many points, I'll need to pee. You have to let me up to pee."

"It will be arranged," the young woman sighed.

Steve blew through the doors of the small gray building so forcefully that Danny could simply walk through them in his wake.

"I want coordinates, you son of a bitch," Steve spat out, as Nick Taylor rounded a corner, walking quickly toward them.

"It's not that simple, Steve," he said, holding up a hand. "We couldn't read you in, not over the phone. There's something you need to see. Detective Williams . . ."

"Danny is fully vetted and can be read in," Steve said. "What the hell is going on?"

Nick gestured to a small conference room, as the few other occupants of the building scattered at Steve's approach. Danny took a quiet, deep breath. He knew there were parts of Steve that were kept carefully restrained, even around his friends and family. It was still unsettling to see it revealed.

Catherine was waiting for them in the conference room. A small screen was affixed to the far wall, with an impressive looking desktop computer on a table beneath it.

"You're going to want to sit down, Steve," Catherine said quietly. "Please."

"Cath . . ." Steve said, his voice strangled.

"We have a solid lead on Jax, and it gives us every reason to believe that she is safe and sound," Nick said.

"I hadn't even called you to let you know she wasn't accounted for," Steve said, still stubbornly standing at the end of the table, his arms folded. "How could you have a lead?"

"We've been monitoring communications - an email account, a radio frequency, a cell phone - all with indications that the messages were coming and going from WoFat," Nick said.

"Yeah, you'd narrowed it down to a location in the Philippines," Steve said. "We've been waiting for actionable intel."

Nick hesitated. "We were wrong. The intel was wrong. It was WoFat, we're sure of it now, but we were misled on the location. He was closer. He is closer."

"What does this have to do with Jax?" Danny asked quietly, though the icy pit that was forming in his stomach gave him some idea.

"You're going to want to sit down, both of you," Catherine said again.
Nick nodded at them. "It's best if we just let you see what was sent - not intercepted, sent - to us on
the email account we've been monitoring. Tech is still analyzing it, trying to get everything they can -
we called you immediately."

Danny pulled out two chairs and shoved a belligerent Steve into one of them, then nodded at
Catherine. Her fingers moved over the keyboard of the computer, and they could see an email on the
screen.

"He got a general email address for Naval intel for this base," Catherine said. "It's not protected,
anyone with enough patience could have sussed it out, but - it's psychologically significant. He wants
us to know that he knew, all along, that this account was being monitored. Everything that's been
sent out has been deliberate, to catch and hold our interest, so that when this was ready, it wouldn't
be overlooked." She glanced at Steve, then clicked on the video link embedded in the email.

The screen filled with the image of WoFat, standing behind Jax.

"Oh, dear God," Danny whispered. A rush of white noise seemed to fill his senses as he watched,
unable to focus or process anything that was being said, his eyes flicking up to the image of Jax's
face, and then falling again and again on the restraints. The video had ended and the screen
blackened for a few seconds before he realized it was over. He heard Steve's voice beside him,
inexplicably steady and clear.

". . . pupils are equal and reactive, her breathing isn't labored, no indication of bruising or guarding,
though it would be impossible to tell, really, since she's somewhat immobilized," Steve was saying.

"You're - what are you saying?" Danny asked, still trying to clear his head.

"He's saying Jax looks okay," Catherine said gently. She opened the door and gestured to someone
in the hallway, and magically returned with two water bottles which she placed carefully in front of
them. "She looks uninjured and safe, and that's the first priority."

"And Steve, you're good with sitting there analyzing like - like -" Danny stammered.

"Danny," Steve said, "this is the way I gotta do it, partner, or I'm gonna lose it. And right now, I
can't afford to lose it. Later, okay? Right now, I'm a SEAL and Jax is a hostage and WoFat is a
target. If you can't . . . Danny, if you can't handle this, it's okay, we'll get someone to -"

"No," Danny said quickly. He took a deep breath and a long sip of water. "No. I'm good. I'm with
you."

"Okay, let's see the video again," Steve said. "Because I didn't hear a single thing WoFat said the
first time through, if I'm being honest."

Nick nodded sympathetically. "She's okay, Steve. You'll see when . . . well. You'll see."

They started the video again, but Steve shook his head seconds into it and turned his face away from
the screen.

"Catherine," he said quietly, "can you . . . can you narrow the focus down to WoFat? I can't - she's -
I can't focus if -"

"I got it, Steve," Catherine said. Her fingers flew over the keyboard and deftly manipulated the
mouse, and the video resumed - this time, with everything but WoFat cropped out of the screen.

Steve watched intently, and Danny let his attention drift between the screen and Steve, his
investigative instincts taking over. SEAL or no SEAL, Danny intended to continue to observe Steve as the devoted husband and soon-to-be father that he was. Victims' subtle responses often yielded up clues without their awareness. Danny felt his mind shift into what Jax had teasingly referred to as the twilight zone - absorbing information without trying to process it, and waiting to see what floated to the top.

The video finished a second time and the room fell silent.

"Get me the coordinates," Steve said flatly. "Let me go after her. We'll end this."

"We don't have them, not yet, and it's really not that simple," Catherine said.

"Anything of significance?" Nick asked quietly. "Anything in particular jump out at you, fit pieces together for you?"

"It's all about Shelburne, every bit of it," Steve said. "Bullfrog, I got nothing, man. I couldn't give him Shelburne if I wanted to."

"What about the part where WoFat says Shelburne is his family?" Danny asked quietly. "He says, 'my family for McGarrett's family'. What the hell does he mean?"

"We've known that Shelburne - and I'm guessing we all agree that Shelburne is a person, for sure - has something to do with my family, with my dad," Steve said. "Or he wouldn't have tried to take Mary. But other than my dad's -" Steve stopped short.

"We know there was additional evidence," Nick said quietly. "We've all known. It . . . seemed prudent, not to put everything in one place."

"Then you know it was stolen," Steve said. "I don't have it, Bullfrog. What if it was what we need to find Shelburne?"

Nick and Catherine exchanged a glance, and Steve was suddenly, overwhelmingly aware of Joe's absence.

"Joe?" he asked quietly. "Where's Joe?"

"We hoped maybe you would know," Catherine said. "We hoped maybe he had made contact, that . . . no?"

Steve shook his head. "When?"

"We saw the video together," Nick said. "I went to my office to call you, Catherine went to wake up our best cyber forensic team. Joe . . . disappeared."

"That's two things missing," Danny said quietly. "The evidence from the Champs box, and Joe."

"You don't think it's a coincidence," Catherine said.

"Do you?" Danny challenged.

"WoFat said that Shelburne was his family," Steve said slowly. "Joe knew my parents, long before Mary and I were born . . . ."

"Is it possible that Joe knows - has known all along - who Shelburne is?" Nick asked. He stared at Steve, both of them sharing an expression of betrayal.
Danny, however, was looking at Catherine. He'd always liked Catherine, always suspected that she was underestimated. Her brown eyes met his, and he knew that she was already a step ahead of him. He nodded imperceptibly at the unspoken request in her eyes - he wouldn't make her be the one to say it.

"Babe," he said gently, wrapping a hand around Steve's tensed forearm. "I think we need to ask ourselves if Joe could be Shelburne." The air in the room turned heavy, oppressive.

Steve felt as if a fist was wrapped around his heart, squeezing.

"You're right, Danny," he said. "And then we need to ask . . . would Joe give himself up in exchange for Jax, or would he simply vanish?"
Joe looked around the dim interior of his bolt hole. He'd already gone to ground, and even now, even with all their considerable training and resources, Nick and Steve wouldn't be able to find him. His career was over, there was no denying it. But when it came down to keeping his promise to the Navy and the CIA, or keeping his promise to John McGarrett . . . well, he hadn't broken that promise yet, and he didn't intend to now. He just hoped that John would forgive him for what he was about to do.

'Protecting' Steve and Mary had turned out to be a lot more difficult than trying to make sure they survived to adulthood. Some days he questioned what, exactly, he was supposed to protect them from. He'd settled, years ago, on protecting them from the truth.

WoFat had called his bluff, and now Joe had to decide whether to protect Steve from the truth, or protect Steve's wife and unborn children from WoFat. Joe shook his head. It shouldn't be a difficult decision, and it wouldn't have been, if Doris had been anyone other than John McGarrett's wife and Steve and Mary's mother.

Shelburne. It all came back to Shelburne, just like he'd known it would. Joe sighed and picked up the satellite phone, blew the dust off the keypad, and pressed in a long series of numbers.

There was a crackle of static, and then a once familiar voice.

"He's found one of them?" Doris said, without introduction or preamble. There was no need. It was the only reason Joe would have to contact her.

"He's found all of them," Joe said. "I'm all out of smoke screens and cards to play, Doris. It comes down to you in exchange for Steve's . . ."

"For Steve's life?" Doris asked. "You know that's not even a question Joe."

"Not for Steve's life," Joe said. "It's more complicated than that. It's you, in exchange for Steve's wife."

"Stevie is married?" Doris asked softly. "The answer is still the same. I'll be there in under twelve hours. It's only an eight hour flight from Tokyo."

Joe was silent for a beat. "You've stayed there, then?"

"I'm here now," Doris said, laughing. "I've been around the globe a few times in the last two decades, Joe. Where do I find you?"

Joe glanced around. "You don't. Report to Pearl Hickam. Convince the Navy and the SAD that you'll work their angle. Convince them that if they turn you over to WoFat, you'll help them take down his network."

"And if I'm not willing to do that?" she asked.

"Pretend you are," Joe said. "And then do whatever the hell you want, once everyone on this end is in the clear."

"So your career will be over, you know that, Joe," Doris said.

Joe sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, but what can I say? I've seen the two of them together. My promise was to
protect Steve, and if he loses her . . . he loses everything. My career . . . pales in comparison."

"There's something you're not telling me," Doris said. He could hear rustling in the background, could easily imagine her rifling through a stack of identities and passports.

"There's a great deal I'm not telling you," Joe said. "There isn't time and it's . . . it's more than is my place to say. You don't have to do this, you know. There will be a military solution, of sorts. They're scrambling, but you know Steve. He'll come up with something. WoFat will slip up on something, some shred, and that's all Steve will need. You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," Doris said. "For all of them."

"For Steve and his wife?" Joe asked. "Mary?"

"For Steve, for Mary," Doris said, "and for WoFat."

Jax rubbed her wrist absently and the nurse looked at her, frowning.

"It shouldn't have left a mark," she said. "WoFat will be angry."

"Hmm? Oh," Jax said, looking down. "No, there's no mark."

"Good. If you're finished, then . . ." the nurse gestured impatiently back to the reclining chair.

"Please, there's no need for the restraints," Jax said. She had drawn out her bathroom visit as long as she dared. Wherever she was being kept, it seemed primitive, shabby. Possibly hastily constructed solely for this function. It made her hopeful that she could find a way out, find a way to communicate with Steve and the team. But with no windows in sight, and no sound that she could detect, it was impossible to guess. And if she was restrained . . . practically impossible to do anything but sit and wait.

"WoFat's instructions are clear," the nurse said anxiously. "You may have nothing to lose by resisting - you are valuable. I am not. Please, I'll let you get comfortable, and then I'll put the restraints on very loosely, but please do not let WoFat find fault with me. He has promised to release my sisters if I cooperate."

Jax sighed and returned to the recliner. "He couldn't spring for a bed? A mattress? Memory foam?" she grumbled. Her casual words belied the rising anxiety she felt as the nurse reached for the restraints.

"Please, try to sleep," the nurse said. "You've been awake for nearly twenty-four hours. You must rest. If not for your sake, or mine, then for the baby."

"I'll try," Jax said. She sighed and closed her eyes. "What happens if WoFat doesn't get what he wants?"

"WoFat always gets what he wants," the nurse said, dimming the lights in the room. "He wants Shelburne most. But he'll be satisfied with you."

"I want people on Danny's and Grover's families," Steve said, nodding at Nick. "Our people. Not HPD. Chin is already secure, I'll send Kono to join him. WoFat may decide he needs more leverage,
I don't want to risk it."

"Detective Williams, can you give me addresses and help make calls?" Nick asked, standing.

Danny nodded and followed Nick from room, leaving Steve and Catherine in awkward silence.

"How has Jax been enjoying Tripler?" Catherine asked quietly.

Steve managed a smile. "She really likes it, Cath. It's not exactly a desk job, you know? So she's . . . adjusting. Better than anything else would have been, I think." He paused for a moment, considering. "WoFat didn't make his play for her at Tripler, or at the house. He knew he had to isolate her from me, from the team . . ."

"From a hospital full of military and ex-military," Catherine added.

"But he knew her schedule," Steve said. "Knew when she'd be heading home. It was timed close, Cath."

Catherine nodded and grabbed for her phone. "What do you want me to add to the forensic guys' search?"

"CCTV around Tripler," Steve said. "It's how I would have done it. You don't need to risk having a person on the inside, if you can simply track movement. Low priority, though. We can worry about how he pulled this off later, after we have Jax back.

Danny and Nick walked back in. "Everyone's secured, Steve," Danny said. "So, what next? We go track Joe down, make him tell us what he knows, right?"

Catherine, Steve, and Nick exchanged a glance.

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen, Danny," Steve said quietly. "It would be a complete waste of time and energy. If Joe wants to tell us something, he'll find a way."

"Okay, then, what are our other options?" Danny demanded.

"We get a fix on WoFat's location and go after Jax," Steve said.

"Or we find Shelburne and work out an exchange," Catherine said.

Steve shook his head. "No. I'm done playing. I want to take WoFat out, once and for all."

"And risk Jax as collateral damage?" Nick asked quietly. "Don't you think we've already spitballed that scenario? Steve, he's not remotely objective. We go in there with . . ."

"No, I agree, we can't take a team in there," Steve said. "Just me. I go in alone. He wouldn't be expecting that."

"The hell he wouldn't," Danny exclaimed. "That's the first thing he's expecting. It's a suicide mission that gets Jax killed in the process. There has to be another way."

Steve exploded out of his chair. "Another way would have been for the Navy and the fucking CIA not to have tied my hands behind my back the last time we had a shot at WoFat." The chair left a dent in the wall as Steve stormed toward the door, wrenching it open violently.

Nick, Catherine, and Danny sat for a moment in stunned silence.
"One of us should keep an eye on him," Catherine said quietly.

"In a minute," Danny said. "Let's give him a minute, yeah? And what are our options? What is the Navy thinking, seriously?"

"Well, the United States does not negotiate with terrorists," Catherine said.

"Bullshit," Danny said. "The Navy has to know that Steve will not only resign, he'll go rogue. You two understand that, right? Come on. Someone has to have a plan."

Nick sat back in his chair. "Right now, Danny, we're hoping that Joe has a plan. Because the God's honest truth is - we don't have one. And Steve knows it."

Doris settled into her seat on the airplane and pulled out a tablet and pencil. She had a lifetime of explaining to do.

Dear Steve . . .

Danny found Steve outside, sitting on the metal stairs of the building. The pale moonlight reflected off something in his hands.

"We haven't picked out names yet," Steve said quietly, sensing Danny behind him.

Danny eased down onto the step next to Steve. It was an ultrasound picture, he realized, one of the more recent ones.

"The doctor calls them Baby One and Baby Two," Steve said. "Baby Two is smaller, see?"

"Yeah, I see that," Danny said. "Is Baby Two the girl?"

Steve nodded. "She's tiny, like Jax. But I'd put money on her being the one I can feel kicking. I don't know why, but that's what I think."

"Probably has Jax's temper," Danny said. "Though your own display just now was impressive."

"I don't see any way out of this Danny," Steve said, "and it scares the shit out of me. The only thing I can think to do is go look for Joe."

"Thought you all agreed that was pointless," Danny asked.

Steve shrugged. "Maybe pointless for two SEALs and an intel officer to look for him. Maybe not pointless for his friends' son to look for him."

"Ah. Something you've not shared with the class?" Danny asked.

"Could be," Steve said. "If Joe does have a line to Shelburne . . . if he's been withholding that information all of this time, his career is over. It would also mean that he's been lying to us - to me . . ."

The door behind them opened.

"Guys?" Catherine called out, breathless. "We've got a video call coming in. It's WoFat."
The lights turned brighter, suddenly, and Jax squinted up as WoFat came into the room. He looked fresh and rested, in a change of clothes. His hair still looked slightly damp. Jax had noticed that her own small bathroom was equipped with a tiny shower stall, and she regretted not yet having demanded a shower.

WoFat frowned at the barely touched food still sitting on the tray next to Jax.

"You didn't eat," he said. "You must."

"She - she tried," the nurse stammered. "Perhaps some fruit."

"Perhaps some coffee," Jax said, "and perhaps without these damn restraints. What do you think I'm going to do, slip out the back and call a cab?"

"Clever, you're hoping to gain information on your location," WoFat said. "Why didn't you simply ask? You're in a remote location. There is no 'back', there is no taxi. There is no one here to help you."

"We could be in the basement of a high rise in Honolulu," Jax said. "Sound proofed. I'm not going to believe a single thing you say."

"So you'd continue to look for an escape, then," WoFat said. "And now you understand why the restraints stay. You try to get away, I have to stop you . . . and someone could get hurt. It all comes back to your safety and well-being."

"Well, then, for my well-being, I would like a shower and some clean clothes," Jax asked. "And some coffee."

"Very well," WoFat said agreeably. "I need to demonstrate to Commander McGarrett that his family is being well cared for. If a shower and some coffee are what you want, then that is what you shall have. See? It's not that difficult."

Steve and Danny scrambled to their feet and took off after Catherine, into a secure communications room.

The screen flickered and fractured for a moment, then settled. The camera was focused, very little visible besides WoFat's face. Steve's trained eyes scanned what little he could see of the background and was disappointed - it looked as if the entire space had been draped with some sort of gray tarp.

"You won't see anything behind me," WoFat said calmly. "And you won't gain anything from this frequency, although it will be so fun for your people to try. I have the best of the best. Eventually, you'll be able to track this location, but not in time."

"You're putting your guy up against Naval Intelligence?" Steve said. "Bold move."

"Worth it, to have a little chat with you," WoFat said. "Thanks for taking my call."

"I want to see Jax," Steve demanded.

"In good time. You know . . . most men from Asian cultures wouldn't find her attractive," WoFat mused.
"I really don't give a shit," Steve said flatly. He let his training kick in, willed his heart to stay steady and his face to betray nothing.

"But I was raised by an American mother," WoFat continued. "I was taught to respect and appreciate a certain . . . spiritedness in a woman."

"Jax will spirit her foot right up your ass," Danny blurted out. Steve shook his head imperceptibly.

"Oh, I have no doubt," WoFat said. "Under other circumstances, I would have enjoyed turning her loose and having a bit of fun."

"If I can't see her, we're done here," Steve said. He turned as if to abort the video session.

"Very well," WoFat sighed. "I forget, you Americans don't understand honor. I gave my word that she wouldn't be harmed. But here, see for yourself."

The camera panned over to reveal Jax being led into the room. Her hair was in damp ringlets around her face, and she was dressed in soft, loosely flowing pants and tunic. Her skin was pale against the rich purple silk. As her eyes scanned the room, she caught sight of Steve on the small monitor behind the camera.

"Jax," Steve said quietly.

She nodded and then looked away, unwilling to give WoFat the satisfaction of seeing her lose her composure.

"As you can see, she is in good health," WoFat said. "She requested a shower, which was provided for her, and she was supplied with something other than those ridiculous military issue surgical scrubs to wear. Something as delicate and exquisite as Jacqueline should be dressed accordingly. I believe her other request was for coffee."

"Of course it was," Danny muttered.

"Have a seat," WoFat ordered Jax.

She stood, silently but stubbornly refusing, and WoFat laughed.

"This is amusing," he said. "Not as amusing as it would have been to physically force you to do what I want, but almost." His hand moved swiftly and smoothly and then there was a blade, glittering in the harsh light of the overhead bulb. He held it a hair's breadth away from the curve of Jax's stomach.

Catherine gasped, covering her mouth quickly with her hand.

WoFat looked into the camera, and just beyond it, to the monitor, to see Steve's reaction.

"Sit. Down," WoFat said evenly.

Jax closed her eyes, briefly, and dropped her head. She allowed herself to be nudged into a chair by the nurse. Steve watched, horrified, as Jax sank into the chair, and allowed the nurse to fasten soft restraints around her wrists.

WoFat chuckled. "They won't leave a mark, don't worry," he said. "I wouldn't dream of marring that perfect fair skin. But she won't give up the idea of leaving, and we can't have that. Now, how about that coffee?" WoFat glanced off camera as someone entered the room, and handed him a delicate,
steaming cup. "Oh, this smells wonderful," he said absently.

Jax kept her head down, refusing to allow the camera to capture her expression. She was on the verge of panic, on the edge of crying tears of rage and frustration. But the coffee... did smell wonderful. She could almost inhale the caffeine as she realized that it had been well over twenty-four hours since she'd slept.

"Here, allow me," WoFat was saying, holding the cup to her lips.

She pressed her lips together and shook her head slightly, her first instinct to refuse anything he offered her.

"Oh, now, don't be rude," WoFat said. "You asked for coffee, I brought you coffee. If you decline, I can arrange for a feeding tube. But then you won't get to taste it, and that would be a shame."

Jax's lips trembled as he pressed the cup to her mouth and tipped it. His hand slipped around the back of her head, steadying it as she drank. After a few sips, he handed the cup off to the nurse.

"Now, you see for yourself what excellent care we are taking of Jacqueline and the child," WoFat said, smirking into the camera. "I'm providing for her basic needs: food, shelter... and even her little luxuries, like a nice hot shower and a fresh cup of coffee. If she's pleasant, I might even, at some point, allow her to know what time it is. Day... night... it all looks the same inside a windowless building. But then, a little disorientation never actually hurt anyone, and I did promise only not to hurt her."

"I will find you and rip out your spine, you worthless bastard," Steve gritted out. "You want a trade? Let's start with me. Let her go, take me. Come on, you coward."

"Oh, you would be a different kind of enjoyment, to be sure," WoFat said. "But no, I like the prisoner I have. So easily convinced to be compliant. And if I don't get Shelburne, a lovely little consolation prize. I'd never thought about having a family, but I think I could warm to the idea. A soft body to curl up to at night, the pitter patter of little feet down the hall in the morning."

"It's never going to happen," Steve said. "She'll never give up and neither will I."

"Oh, that's touching, that really is," WoFat said. "Those words were meant for her, weren't they? Stubborn thing, isn't she? So determined not to display emotion. Not unlike you. All of that fire, all of that passion... that's saved up and unleashed behind closed doors, isn't it. Fascinating."

WoFat moved behind Jax, sliding a hand gently over her cheek and laughing as she flinched away. "There, now, I'm not going to hurt you..." he murmured. She shivered under his touch. "Ah, but others have, apparently. Don't worry, you're under my protection now." She tried to turn her head away from his hand, but his fingers tightened around her chin, tilting her face up toward the camera.

She looked beyond it, to the monitor. Steve was looking directly into the camera, forcing himself calm and steady. "It's been fun chatting, WoFat, but we need to grab some breakfast and get back to work," he said. "So, if you're done with your posturing and your attempts at intimidation that you've picked up watching corny movies... maybe we could get back to getting you what you want."

Jax looked into the camera for a split second, and Steve could read the relief in her eyes. She'd picked up on it, then, his reference to breakfast to orient her to time, if not to place. It was morning. It had only been about twelve hours, then, since she'd been grabbed. It helped, just as he'd known it would.

WoFat released her, and she tossed her hair back defiantly. He looked down at her, then back at the
monitor, suspicious. He'd thought that seeing each other would weaken them, but somehow in those seconds, their resolve was strengthened. His expression turned to barely controlled rage.

"Very well then," he said. "Take a good long look, Commander McGarrett. If you ever want to lay eyes on her again, you'll deliver Shelburne to me."

The connection was severed instantly, plunging the room into sudden darkness and silence.

Nick reached to the wall switch and brought up the level of light in the room.

"Did you get anything?" Steve asked the technician.

"Sorry, Commander," he said, shaking his head. "He bounced it off a satellite, through a remote relay . . . I mean, we have locations but they're bogus."

"What are the locations?" Steve asked. His voice was flat, emotionless.

"Email this morning was made to look like it was coming from a server in Coronado. This video call originated from an IP address supposedly from North Korea. Which is impossible, since -"

"I know," Steve said. "He's playing with me. Choosing places I've been. Keep at it. His guy is good, but you're better."

Danny watched as Steve slipped effortlessly into the role of SEAL team leader, and then realized that the Steve that he knew was relatively new to the world, still learning how to live on the bridge between military and civilian life. And yet this Steve was completely familiar, standing calmly and projecting confidence, treating the tech team with respect and consideration . . . this was simply the essence of Steve. The leadership was innate, the only difference was the team.

No wonder I didn't argue with him when he barged into my apartment, Danny thought. There's no arguing with a force of nature.

"We'll get you location, sir," the tech said. "You can count on it."

Danny watched Steve pull self-control over him like a shield.

"What else you got, Bullfrog?" he asked.

Nick tilted his head toward the door, and they followed him to a small room between the communications room and the conference room where they'd first started. Danny started to feel like he was in an alternate universe, or on the set of a movie. For a moment, it didn't feel real - and then he stepped into the room.

A whiteboard was filling with a timeline, most of it in what Danny assumed was Catherine's neat block print. It started with the first deliberate incoming message from WoFat. Steve stepped up to the board and added two more times, noting Jax's departure both from their home and from Tripler. He tapped the board with the marker.

"Couple hours, between her leaving Tripler and WoFat's first message," Steve said. "That gives us a maximum radius." He turned to a map and grabbed a pin, jabbing it in the location where they'd found Jax's car.

"We don't know what he was flying," Nick said, musing over the map.

"You think he was in the helicopter?" Danny asked, surprised.
"He was," Steve said with flat certainty. "He's doing this firsthand, now. He's traveling light, just a couple of trusted associates."

"Or threatened associates," Catherine said. "That woman with Jax looked terrified."

"Or acted terrified," Steve countered. "He would do that, Catherine," he added gently. "He knew how to get to Jax to begin with - he knows how to play on her sympathies."

"Either way, we have to assume there's no one to help from the inside," Nick said. "Not like last time. But he clearly knows that keeping Jax healthy is his only leverage. She's okay, Smooth Dog."

"Yeah, until WoFat has Shelburne . . . or knows that he won't have Shelburne," Steve said. "Then all bets are off."

Danny shook his head. "No. She's safe at least . . . at least until the babies are born. He's pathological. He wants . . . he wants Steve's family. Revenge . . . retribution . . . a replacement, for something. Not that profiling matters, we know who we're after, we just don't know how to take him down, without risking Jax. But . . . she's safe, for now. Which is a relief. Jax and the twins are much more valuable to him alive."

"Babies . . . he doesn't know," Steve said. "He's said child, infant . . . never twins, never babies. He has recent intel, but not the most recent, and not the closest. Jax has been obviously pregnant for a little while . . . since she took the job at Tripler. But surveillance would show that much. If he doesn't know it's twins . . ."

"Then there isn't anyone on the inside, feeding him detailed intel," Nick said, picking up his train of thought. "Joe knew about the twins."

"So, we gotta assume that Joe knows something - knows enough to disappear, throw away his career - that WoFat doesn't know," Danny said.

Steve turned back to the map and grabbed a red marker, drawing a circle around the red pin. "So, we have a window of time in which Jax and the twins are physically protected, we have a loose radius of how far he could have gone in two hours, and we know that he doesn't have all the intel. We still have cards to play."

"Okay, what's next?" Danny asked.

Steve took a deep breath. "Danny, you and Catherine are no good to us pushing it past exhaustion. Grab something to eat, try to get a little rest."

They both started to protest, but Steve interrupted them. "Steve's right. Danny, you're a brilliant detective but you weren't trained to endure sleep deprivation. And Cath . . . okay, just . . . under the circumstances, can you just not with the 'equally trained and capable' . . . we know you are. Probably more capable. But I need you and Bullfrog here, on base. There's something I need to go do."

Catherine and Nick exchanged a glance.

"Plausible deniability?" Nick murmured.

Steve looked at him for a moment, silently. Danny watched curiously as something of significance passed between them, without a word.

"I'll grab a snack, check in with the tech guys," Nick said deliberately. "Make sure Lieutenant Rollins is set with some chow and a private place to catch a quick nap."
"Danny," Steve said, turning to him. "You'd probably appreciate grabbing a shower and a change of clothes. Since you don't have a locker here, and since you might encounter difficulty getting on and off base without escort, I'll be glad to see to it."

Danny looked at Steve, confused, and then just shook his head. Plausible deniability meant that the less he asked, the better.

"Yes," he said simply. "Yes, that sounds good."

#*#*#*#*

Jax held her head high as the nurse prodded her out of the room. Her eyes scanned the short hallway for any identifying features, but once again all she could determine was a sense of the structure being poorly constructed. The video equipment had looked fairly sophisticated, to her uneducated eyes. She jerked her arm away from the nurse in frustration.

"Don't," she said, simply and sharply. She was in no mood to be touched, not by anyone.

"You're shaking," the nurse said, almost apologetically. "I didn't want you to fall."

"I'm fine," Jax snapped. "I need to go to the bathroom." She didn't wait for the nurse to respond, walking into the tiny space and slamming the door shut. Once behind the door, she pressed her hands against her eyes and bit back a sob of exhaustion and frustration. She splashed water on her face, realizing that she didn't, in fact, need to use the restroom.

I'm already dehydrated, she thought to herself, and forced herself to swallow a few handfuls of tepid water from the sink. She took a deep breath, and then another, and willed her hands to stop shaking before she left the room.

There was a fresh tray on the table next to the recliner, with a plate of fruit and a bottle of water.

"WoFat says you must eat and drink," the nurse said. "And if you want more coffee, you need only ask him, and he will bring it."

"I will never ask him for another thing," Jax gritted out, although she wanted more coffee so badly she could almost smell it.

"You must eat and drink," the nurse repeated. "And rest. You have not slept and that can be dangerous."

"I don't need you to tell me that," Jax said irritably. She picked up a piece of pineapple and forced herself to chew and swallow, while she tried desperately not to think of Danny and how he hated pineapple, or anything or anyone else.

#*#*#*#*

Danny waited until they were well outside the gates of Pearl Hickam before shifting in his seat and looking at Steve.

"So, are we going somewhere inside that big red circle you drew on the map?" he asked cautiously.

"What if I said yes?" Steve asked, half smiling.

"I'd get my vest out of the trunk," Danny grumbled.

"We're going to my house, where you really are going to take a few minutes to rest, eat, shower,
whatever you need," Steve said.

"And what are you going to do?" Danny asked.

Steve's knuckles turned white on the steering wheel.

#*#*#*#*#

Jax truly didn't need to be reminded the sleep deprivation could be dangerous. She just wasn't sure what to do about it.

The nurse had dimmed the lights again. Jax was already losing track of the approximate time. Had it been an hour since Steve had declared it breakfast time? Two hours? More? Less?

"I have a sedative," the nurse said. "It's safe past the first trimester."

"No," Jax said quickly. She didn't trust anything that WoFat had to offer. "I'll sleep. I'm tired, and the shower was very nice. I'm sure I'll be able to sleep. But please, without restraints. Where would I go? I'm not going to risk it."

The nurse pursed her lips and shook her head. "Restraints are ordered by WoFat."

Jax fought down the panic and allowed the nurse to fasten the restraints. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the subtle weight around her wrists.

#*#*#*#*#

Steve waited until he heard the water running in the guest bathroom before he slipped under the stairs and opened the hatch to beneath the house. He slipped down the fold down stairs, pulling the string for the light as he went. He rummaged under a shelf and pulled out a radio.

He thumbed a switch once, twice, three times, and waited.

A crackle of static, and Joe's voice came over the radio.

"Hello, son," Joe said, with a dry chuckle. "You remembered. Your old man must have showed you this when you were, what, fourteen?"

"Thirteen, sir," Steve said. "Joe. What the hell is going on? Did you take the evidence from the Champs box out of the Marquis? Why'd you disappear?"

"The only thing you need to know, right now, is that Shelburne is on the way to Pearl Hickam," Joe said. "Someday . . . I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me. I tried to keep my promise to your father the best way I knew how . . . maybe I did it wrong. I don't know."

"You've known, all along," Steve said. "Joe, people have died."

"It's bigger than you or me, Steve," Joe said. "Go back to the base, wait for Shelburne. I'm sorry I lied to you, son."

#*#*#*#*#

Jax crept into the babies' room to check on the twins, just one more time, before she went to sleep. She felt a hand on her shoulder, rubbing gently, and she turned.

WoFat smiled down at her. "We make a beautiful family, don't you agree?"
She jerked awake, violently, her heart racing. The nurse was scowling at her.

"You said you would sleep, you said you were tired," she said sharply.

"I did sleep," Jax protested. "I was - I was dreaming, I had to be sleeping . . ."

"You barely closed your eyes. You are going to get me in trouble," the nurse said.

Jax stared at her in disbelief. "I'll try again," she whispered, and closed her eyes. She would pretend to sleep, at least, and worry about the consequences later.

Steve found Danny in the babies' room, staring at the mobiles.

"Sorry, I didn't mean -" Danny started.

"It's okay, Danny," Steve said softly. He stared into the room, silently.

"Hey," Danny said, reaching to pull Steve into a hug.

"Danny, don't, I -"

But Danny wouldn't be deterred. He grabbed Steve anyway, wrapping his arms around him, and Steve relented. His hands fisted in Danny's shirt as he let himself lean into the shorter man's solid strength.

"This shouldn't be happening, Danny," he said desperately. "She shouldn't be mixed up in this, she should be . . . I don't know. Driving SWAT medic trucks too fast, drinking a beer with her team, going home to . . . to Patrick at the end of the day, or something."

"Okay, now, you wanna talk about an alternate universe," Danny said, half laughing. "We're gonna get her back. Wait - you're not all painted up and dripping explosives. What's the deal?"

"Shelburne is on the way to Pearl Hickam," Steve said.

Danny grabbed Steve by the shoulders and held him at arms' length, staring at him.

"What have I told you about burying the lead, Steven?" he demanded.

"Here," Nick said, staring at Steve in disbelief. "Shelburne is just going to . . . show up?"

"That's what my informal intel had led me to believe," Steve said. "So, can you do it? Can you get the gate security feed in here?"

"Yeah, of course, but - here?" Nick asked again.

Steve shrugged. "In the meantime, let's talk about most likely scenario of WoFat's current location."

Danny watched with absent curiosity as Steve and Nick plotted and speculated. Catherine soon joined them, her face scrubbed clean and looking more rested, and bearing a tray of four steaming cups of coffee.

Steve was three sips into his when he stopped, suddenly, choking.
"Excuse me," he said, as he bolted from the room.

"Ah, shit," Nick muttered.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking," Catherine said, her eyes filling with tears.

"Honey, it's okay," Danny said. "We needed coffee, it was a perfectly reasonable . . . you couldn't have known. He's walking a pretty fine edge."

"It's not just that, Danny," Nick explained. "It's . . . I know what he's doing. He calculating the windows, marking the timelines . . . certain windows are closing."

Danny's blood ran cold. "What do you mean? WoFat has no reason to hurt her, I thought we all agreed with that. What are you saying, certain windows are closing?"

"The psychological effects . . . look, she'd worked a full shift, right, before WoFat grabbed her," Nick said. "How likely is she to sleep, being held against her will, worried about - we're pushing into thirty-six hours, now, and Steve's keenly aware of that. If we get to forty-eight, there's a significant physical impact and . . . and that's under normal circumstances. We hit the thirty-six hour mark. He's keeping track."

Danny stared at Nick, trying to process what he was hearing.

"So you're saying, even if he doesn't lay a finger on her . . ."

"We've studied this, Danny," Catherine said gently. "It's part of our training, especially Steve and Nick's. What WoFat was doing with . . . what you saw on the video, with the coffee and -"

"Lines have already been crossed," Nick said. "WoFat is flirting with psychological torture. Forced dependence, removal of her autonomy, her ability to say no . . . it seems innocuous, but -"

"What Nick is saying, Danny," Steve said, standing silently in the doorway, "is that there's now way of knowing . . . we're not sure what shape she'll be in when we get her back."

"But she'll be okay," Danny said. "Right? I mean, she'll be shaken up, but she'll be okay?"

Steve hesitated, and before he could answer, Nick's phone began buzzing insistently.

"I've got one of the security gates," Nick said. He answered the call, putting it on speaker. "Go ahead, Leevy."

"Sir, I have a . . . this is highly unusual sir, but I have someone here asking to see Lieutenant Commander McGarrett," the officer said. "She says he's expecting her. Gives the name Shelburne."

"Have her escorted to our building, officer," Nick said. "She doesn't go anywhere on this base unattended, are we clear?"

"A woman?" Danny murmured. "Gotta say, didn't see that one coming."

"Chauvinist," Catherine muttered.

Nick was staring at Steve. "Interesting. The timing, and all, with you taking Detective Williams off base for some personal needs, and now a person claiming to be Shelburne showing up."

"It's something of a coincidence, now that you mention it," Steve said carefully.
They waited, each of them fidgeting nervously, until there was a knock on the door. Nick opened it, and two sailors stepped in, followed by a tall woman.

"Hello, Steve," she said.

Another set of sailors closed the door behind her and stood in the hall. Steve gaped at her in disbelief.

"Mom?"
"I understand that WoFat is asking for me in exchange for your wife, Steve," Doris said.

"I don't - there was a funeral, Mom, and Dad said - I don't . . ." Steve stammered.

Doris tilted her head at him and raised her eyebrow. "Steve. You need to focus."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, automatically.

"Do you have contact with WoFat?" Doris asked. She looked at Catherine. Perhaps the women would be quicker and sharper in a crisis. It wouldn't be the first time.

"He's been contacting us . . . left a trail of breadcrumbs to ensure our attention and then used it when he was ready," Catherine said. "Email, then a video call. Untraceable, so far - we have our best people on it."

"I'm sure," Doris said. "Frequency of contact?"

"About every six hours, so far," Steve said. "If the pattern holds true, that means any minute."

"Then there isn't much time," Doris said, and she looked at Steve wistfully. "I would have liked so much more time. We'll need to contact Langley, and be ready to arrange the exchange when WoFat calls."

"Arrange - no way," Steve said. "We can't trade you out for Jax. We'll find another way. You - you were dead, mom, you owe me answers, you owe Mary answers, we -"

"There is no other way, not without risking . . . her name is Jax?" Doris asked. "Never mind. Joe was right, it's too distracting, and we need to focus."

"Joe knew, didn't he," Steve said quietly. "He's known all this time."

"Joe did what he thought was best, and he sacrificed his career for you today," Doris said. "I hope you'll be able to forgive him. To forgive all of us. But right now, we need to be ready for WoFat's call. We need to be ready to work out the exchange. We'll do it on his terms, of course. And the CIA is going to sanction it." She winked at Steve. "Joe sacrificed his career, he wouldn't want the three of you to do the same. Get me a secure line."

###

There was a flurry of calls, some yelling - Steve could hear it even without the benefit of speaker phone - and through it all Doris was remarkably calm. It took shockingly little time for Doris to come back from the dead, and even less time to convince the CIA that getting inside WoFat's operation was an opportunity not to be missed.

"You're a CIA agent," Steve said, staring at her.

"I'm so sorry, Steve," she said. "I've had a little over twenty years to prepare for this day. I know this comes as a shock."

"We'll go ahead into comms," Nick said. "We'll come get you if we get a call from WoFat." Danny and Catherine followed him out, past the two sailors still stationed at the door.
"You're a fucking CIA agent," Steve said again.

"And you're a Navy SEAL, obviously," Doris said. She was nonplussed by the language. "Let's move on into new information. How is your sister?"

"Good," Steve said. He felt numb and wondered if he'd wake up, soon, with Jax laughing at him. "She's still living with Aunt Deb, but she's moving back here, before the babies get here."

"Mary's expecting?" Doris asked.

Steve stared at her again.

"Steven, really, you're not reflecting well on Naval Intelligence with this fish-eyed stare," Doris said. "When is Mary due?"

"It's not Mary, Mom, it's - Jax. Jax and I are having twins," Steve said. "It . . . " He stopped, sighing and shaking his head. "It would be nice for them to have a grandparent, you know?"

"Her parents aren't around?" Doris asked.

"You have no idea, Mom, because instead of finding a way to be part of my life, of Mary's life, you've been playing dead for two decades," he snapped.

"I could find them, if - " she started.

"No," he said firmly. "No way. I don't even know who the hell you are or what you've been doing my entire adult life, you don't go digging into Jax's life. She's off limits, do you understand? Not until . . . not until I have answers. All of the answers."

"That's fair," Doris said quietly. "It was to protect you, Steve. You and Mary."

"Did Dad know?" Steve asked abruptly. "That you were still alive? Because, I gotta say, if he did - he was in the wrong business. He should have been an actor."

"No. Your dad didn't know that I was alive," Doris said. "Only Joe. And WoFat, apparently . . . "

"What is your connection to WoFat?" Steve demanded. He stood up and started pacing the floor. "I've been tortured - tortured, Mom - for information on Shelburne, on you. Jax has been taken, twice . . . the first time because he was trying to take Mary. Jax managed to hide Mary, under the house, and gave herself up instead. I damn near lost her that time and now - who is WoFat to you?"

"It's who I am to him, Steve," Doris said softly. "It's difficult to explain, you see - "

There was a sharp knock on the door before it flew open, and Nick beckoned them. "It's time. He's opened a video call connection."

###

Jax counted the steps as she was led from her room. She wasn't sure why - it seemed like a good idea.

"Be quiet, for goodness sakes," the nurse hissed. "You sound crazy."

"Sorry," Jax whispered. She was vaguely aware that something was very wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on it.
WoFat scowled at the nurse as she prodded Jax into the room.

"She looks unwell," he said, appraising Jax.

"She's been resting," the nurse said. "She ate. I'm doing the best I can. Perhaps if we could leave off the restraints."

"Yeah," Jax said. She knit her eyebrows in confusion. She was normally more articulate than this, more sarcastic. Sharper. Danny would be so disappointed. The thought made her inexplicably sad.

"Put her in the chair," WoFat said.

"Do it myself," Jax mumbled, as she shuffled to the chair and collapsed into it. She was just so tired.

WoFat looked alarmed. "We can forgo the restraints," he murmured to the nurse. "Fetch her some coffee, tea . . . something."

Jax fought down a wave of hysterical laughter. She was no longer a threat, then. WoFat didn't think she could make it out . . . probably didn't think she could even get out of the room.

WoFat nodded and the camera light turned red.

"Commander McGarrett couldn't be bothered?" WoFat asked. "I must say, you're quite a lovely substitute."

"He will be here momentarily," Catherine said. "With Shelburne. Are you ready to discuss an exchange?"

"Ah, so the key was indeed the correct application of leverage," WoFat said. "Let's see if you've really managed to raise the dead."

Steve and Doris walked into the room, silently. Catherine stepped aside and Steve stood in front of the camera.

"I want to see Jax," he said levelly.

"No, first I see if you actually have Shelburne or if this is going to be another pointless conversation," WoFat said.

Steve started to argue, but Doris placed her hand on his arm, moving him gently aside, and standing next to him.

"Hello, WoFat," she said.

Danny felt a chill go up his spine, as his head snapped up to look at Doris. That tone . . . she spoke to WoFat exactly as she had spoken to Steve. He looked back to the monitor. WoFat seemed shocked.

"I was right, then," he said. "You were alive." His face hardened. "So you abandoned me, then, let me think you were dead. Something we apparently have in common, Commander."

"My hand was forced," Doris said. "When you give your life to something bigger than yourself, sacrifices must be made."

"Ah, so noble," WoFat said. "And you're willing to sacrifice yourself now, for the favored son."

"For both of you," Doris said. "This needs to end. I'm the one who hurt you, not Steve. Certainly not
his wife. You've verified my presence. Let Steve see her."

"She is, as promised, in good health," WoFat said. "She has been more than adequately cared for." He seemed nervous, and it didn't sit well with Steve. He shot Danny a glance then leaned toward the camera, his hands tightening on the back of the chair in front of him.

"I want to see her, now," Steve demanded. "Let me talk to her."

WoFat nodded and the camera panned to the side of the room. Jax was sitting, unrestrained, in the same uncomfortable wooden chair. Her eyes were closed, her lashes fanned dark against her pale cheeks.

"Jax," Steve said, his voice urgent. "Jax, what the hell . . ."

Her eyes blinked open immediately, and she looked at the monitor. "Steve . . ." She looked at Doris, confused, and rubbed her eyes. "I don't understand. I shouldn't be hallucinating yet."

"It's a long story," Steve said, "I'll explain in just a little bit, when you're home." He gestured to Danny, who crowded in next to him so that Jax could see him. "Danny and I are going to get you home."

"Is that your mom?" Jax asked, thoroughly perplexed. "Oh, God, I am hallucinating. I tried to sleep, I did, but - ."

"It's okay," Steve said. "Now you know you're coming home soon, maybe you can rest. Okay? I'm coming to get you, Jax."

The camera panned back to WoFat.

"What are the demands of the exchange?" Steve asked.

"Simple," WoFat said. "Shelburne will wait for me - alone - at the exact location where I collected Jacqueline."

"Not gonna happen," Steve said. "For all I know you'll kill both of them on the spot. I bring my team to the exchange."

"You come with Shelburne, unarmed, to the exchange," WoFat said.

"Not likely," Steve retorted. "Besides, Jax is going to need medical care. I bring a doctor."

WoFat thought for a moment. "A sniper in a labcoat? I think not. Bring the haole. He's obviously wrought with concern for Jacqueline, I think he's not much of a threat."

"You underestimate him at your own risk," Steve said, "but you're right about his concern for Jax. Me and Danny bring Shelburne, you and your guy bring Jax. Time?"

"No need to delay," WoFat said. "One hour."

Steve hesitated. Jax wasn't doing well, it was obvious, and every hour that passed would put her and the twins at greater risk. But if he was going to put together a tactical plan, find a sniper, get people in place - "

"One hour is agreeable," Doris said calmly. "And I expect to see my daughter-in-law with a bit more color in her cheeks by then." She nodded firmly to the technician, who turned off the camera and ended the transmission.
Steve glared at him.

"Sorry, Commander," he said sheepishly. It hadn't occurred to him not to follow her instructions.

Doris smirked at Steve. "What? There was no need to drag that out. She's lovely, by the way. Not what I would have expected, but lovely. Does she have a temper to go with that hair? Is that what attracted you to her?"

"We are not talking about Jax," Steve said. "An hour? Okay, Nick, if we can get snipers on the way, right now, there's good cover on the ridge across from -"

"Snipers? Don't be ridiculous," Doris said. "We're going to do exactly according to plan. Danny, is it? Hello, I'm Doris. I'm Steve's mom."

Danny shook her hand in bewildered politeness.

"Mom," Steve said, exasperated. "We have to find that split second where we can take WoFat out. He'll have to put Jax out in order to make room for you, unless he's flying something big, and I don't think he is. We can take the shot -"

"And then Jax and I are killed by shrapnel or rotor blades when he careens off? What would that accomplish? Steve, I'm going with WoFat," Doris said calmly. "It's the only way. Besides, we have orders."

"Orders? What the hell are you - Mom, who are you calling?" Steve asked.

Doris held up a finger, waited a moment, then held the phone out to Steve. He took it, glaring at her.

"Commander McGarrett," he snapped. Danny watched as Steve's eyes widened. "Yes, Rear Admiral Vincas. Yes, I understand, but . . . Special Activities Division. I see. Yes, sir. Well, with all due respect, sir, I don't think she's been active for twenty years . . . oh. Yes, sir. Yes, I see. Yes sir. Thank you, sir, we are concerned, but I think we have every reason to believe she'll be okay. Yes sir, to Tripler. Thank you, sir."

Steve started to hand the phone back to his mother, then did a double take. It was his phone. He hadn't felt her take it from his pocket. He shoved it back, sighing.

"One hour," he mumbled to Nick and Catherine, shoving past them. "Danny, with me. Doris . . . with them." He gestured vaguely in Nick's direction.

"Have you known Stevie long?" Doris asked Catherine.

WoFat led Jax back to her room himself, his hand firm on her elbow. She tried jerking it away, but his fingers tightened in an iron grip.

"You're hurting me," she said, furious, through clenched teeth.

"Sit" he ordered, pointing to the chair.

She started to resist automatically, on principal or out of innate stubbornness, and it infuriated him. His own temper flared and he drew back his hand, thinking better of it at the last minute.

Jax decided not to press her luck and sat down, seething. Under any other circumstances she would have risked it without thinking, without hesitation. She would have launched herself at him, going
for his neck with her teeth if that was the only available option.

"Oh, this is quite intolerable for you, isn't it?" WoFat crooned. "I knew it. You're a firecracker, aren't you? McGarrett domesticated you. Pity."

Jax turned her face away from him.

"Struck a nerve, did I?" he asked. "Fascinating. Tell me, did you deceive the nurse deliberately?"

"What are you talking about?" Jax asked.

"You're not sure if you're awake or asleep, lucid or hallucinating," WoFat said. "Sleep deprivation. An unnecessary experience, as I did meticulous research and was prepared. Nitrous oxide is harmless to you. There are sedatives that are also harmless, and you were offered one. Obviously, you declined it. So my question is simple - did you trick the nurse deliberately?"

"I - I don't know," Jax said. "I didn't want to take the stupid pill, okay? I thought I was sleeping, a little, but -"

"It's not a trick question, Jacqueline," WoFat said. "It won't change anything."

A shot rang out, close by, and Jax gasped.

"The nurse failed to keep you in optimal health," WoFat said. "I was just curious, as to how much of her blood is on your hands." He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Such a pity. I should have thought to ask for a little more time with you after all."

Jax stared after him as he walked out of the room, humming.

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"We can't do this," Steve said, pacing next to the Jeep. "I can't just hand you over to WoFat, Mom. There has to be another way."

"There isn't, Steven," Doris said. "I'll be fine."

"Do you have any idea - any - what he's capable of?" Steve demanded. "He's a soulless bastard. Anton and Víctor Hesse - they were responsible for Dad's murder. Declan Novak - a sociopath, used psychological torture against my entire team, kidnapped Jax and - and returned her to me tied up in a damn ribbon."

"She's quite resilient," Doris commented. "A civilian?"

"No, and we're not talking about her, we're talking about WoFat. These men - you know what they had in common? They were all afraid of WoFat, Mom. They answered to him," Steve said. "I can't just let him take you."

"You can, you will, and you are," Doris said. "We're both under direct orders. The CIA and the Navy know I can give them intel that will bring his entire network down. He still has people all over the globe, Steven, and if we cut off the head -"

"Three more will grow in its place, I know the rhetoric, Mom, I've been in international anti-terrorism for most of my adult life," Steve said.

"It's something of a family business," Doris said, beaming at him. "I'm so proud."
Steve stopped and looked at her, his hands on his hips.

"Any mother would be so proud," she added softly. "I'm sure your father was, too."

"I wouldn't know," Steve said bitterly. "He sent us away, Mom. After you . . . died. We were still kids, still in school, and he sent us away and - you know what, I can't do this." He stormed back toward the gray building, dull now in the fading light of late afternoon.

"Do you have children, Detective Williams?" Doris asked.

"Unh unh. No, we don't talk about my family, either," Danny said. "He's a good man. He's the best man I know. No thanks to you, apparently. I, for one, have no problem handing you over to WoFat. Whatever it takes to get Jax back, and as far as I'm concerned, no great loss. You wanna play cloak and dagger, you go right ahead."

"What, did you love her first?" Doris asked. "You seem exceptionally invested."


Steve came back, clutching the straps of three Kevlar vests. "Here," he said, shoving one at both Danny and Doris, and impatiently slipping into the third.

They rode in silence to the curve and overpass where the entire nightmare had started. Doris looked wistfully at the passing scenery.

"I'd forgotten . . . " she said. "I'd forgotten how beautiful it was. I missed it. I missed you, Steve, and Mary. I wish there was time to explain, time to make you understand."

Steve was silent for a moment, then glanced at her. "You'll be able to handle yourself, right?"

"Don't worry about me, Steve," Doris said. "Take care of your family. Do . . . do a better job than your father and I did, okay? I'll be fine. WoFat doesn't want me dead, he's just . . . confused. Hurt, and angry. Like you."

Steve pulled over to the side of the road and put the Jeep in park. He nodded, and started to say something, but then his head jerked up at the sound of approaching rotors.

"I - Mom," he said. "I'm sorry, if there was another way - we could -"

"This is the best way, we've established that, Steve," Doris said. "And no apologies. I'll try to get word to you, somehow."

They stood near the impossibly small clearing, braced against the downdraft of the helicopter. Steve's gun was drawn and ready as his eyes flicked back and forth between Tadeki, at the controls of the aircraft, and WoFat and Jax in the small back seats.

"Shit, this is taking years off my life," Danny grumbled, as he trained his sidearm on Tadeki. WoFat held a gun to Jax's temple, smiling.

The helicopter settled gently onto the ground with the engine and rotors still fully engaged. WoFat reached around Jax, pressed the latch on her seatbelt, and then nudged her from the helicopter. She stepped out on unsteady feet, and ducked beneath the onslaught of draft. WoFat had a hand tangled in her hair, and pulled her head up sharply.

Danny saw Steve's finger twitch against the trigger.
"Steve, no," Doris yelled. She put her hands up and moved between Steve and WoFat, and approached the chopper, barely ducking as her hair whipped around her face. She reached them, and Steve watched as she reached out and cupped Jax's face in her hand, gently. He saw her lips move, but it was impossible to hear her over the din. Then Jax was stumbling forward, falling, and Doris was directly in front of WoFat as she climbed into the helicopter.

Danny holstered his sidearm immediately and rushed toward Jax, while Steve cursed and kept his SIG trained on the helicopter until it banked sharply and for a split second seemed to fall from the clearing, before accelerating away, nose still tilted down slightly.

"Hey, we've got you," Steve heard Danny muttering to Jax, as the chop of the rotors faded. He turned back to see Danny kneeling next to Jax, baffled, as she tried to push him away.

"She's dead, he killed her," Jax said. "Just like Nira . . . Adam. It was - the girls, for Adam, it was WoFat, he - the nurse, she probably was . . . her sisters, WoFat will give them to Adam -"

"Hey, whoa," Steve said. He dropped to his knees next to Jax, wrapping his arms gently around her, trying to grab her hands and still her wild movements without hurting her. "Adam is dead, remember?"

"You gave your mom to that monster," Jax said, her eyes wide and glazed. "Why did you do that?"

"I'll explain, I promise," Steve said. He tried to cradle her head against him, tried to tuck her wild curls under his chin. She tilted her head back and then headbutted him. Her movements were weak and wildly unfocused, but she managed to make some impact, and a small trickle of blood appeared, dripping toward his lip. He swiped at it with the back of his hand.

"What the hell?" Danny mumbled, his eyes wide with alarm.

"It's okay, Danny," Steve said. "This is not unexpected."

"I'm sorry," Jax said, finally stilling in Steve's arms. "I'm . . . Steve, he was going to take the babies. Why does he want them? Are they okay?"

Steve took Jax's face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "Ku'uipo, stay with me, okay? You're a little shocky and confused. Let's go get you and the babies checked out. You want to go to Tripler, or you want to see if we can get a doc on base?"

"Pearl Hickam," Jax said immediately. "There's . . . we can't waste time. We have to track - he has your mom."

"Let's get back to base, we'll talk about all that," Steve said. He looked at Danny. "Call Catherine, please, ask her to have a female medic waiting for us. A good one."

For once, Steve was content to let Danny drive, and didn't give a passing thought to motion sickness, even in the back seat of the Jeep. He held Jax securely against him, murmuring nonsense, his lips pressed against her temple.

"Was that your mom?" she asked. "It looked like your mom. From the pictures at home. How is that possible?"

"It was, and we'll explain everything," Steve assured her. "Just close your eyes and breathe for right now, okay?"

Jax closed her eyes and Steve felt her relax. But almost immediately, her eyes flew open with a start,
"Hey, I've got you," he said, his hands gentle on her arms, steadying her.

"How long was I asleep?" she asked. "He killed her. He killed the nurse. I saw her body, in the hall, he didn't even move it."

Danny's eyes met Steve's in the rear view mirror.

"Jax, you're experiencing micro sleep," Steve said, explaining to Danny at the same time. "You were only asleep for about a minute, maybe less."

"That only happens in . . . that's in combat trauma," Jax said.

"Ummhmm," Steve agreed.

"I wasn't even gone that long," Jax argued. "I'm fine. Just a little spooked."

Steve pulled her back against him, gently. His hand hovered over her stomach. "Can I?" he whispered.

She hesitated, then nodded, and he placed his hand gently on the curve of her belly. Danny kept glancing anxiously in the rear view, until he saw a wide grin appear on Steve's face.

"I think . . . maybe there's a lot of adrenaline," Jax said. "But that's okay, right, because they're moving like crazy, and that's got to be a good sign?"

"I think it's a good sign, yeah," Steve said. "I'll feel better once we have a doctor agree with us."

Danny nodded and pressed more firmly on the accelerator.

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There was a uniformed medical team waiting for them when they arrived. It unnerved Danny, but Jax didn't seem fazed by it - at least, she was no more disoriented than she had been on the twenty minute drive.

That wasn't saying much, as far as Danny was concerned.

Steve and Jax were whisked away, leaving a shaken Danny with Nick and Catherine.

"Danny," Catherine said sympathetically. She pressed a cup of coffee into his hand.

"You guys tried to warn me," Danny said, shaking his head. "I've seen her shot, broken, concussed . . . this was almost that bad. She kept falling asleep, but just for seconds. She'd bolt awake, rambling about something."

"Microsleep," Nick said, nodding. "Her body is taking over and trying to shut down, but her brain won't quite let that happen. It'll straighten out."

There was a sharp knock on the door, and Nick and Catherine snapped to attention as a silver-haired officer entered.

"At ease, sailors," he said. "Hell of a day."

"Rear Admiral Vincas, this is Detective Danny Williams," Catherine said. "Part of Commander
McGarrett's task force, as well as a friend of his, and of Jax."

"I take it the exchange was successful," Vincas said. "We ready to debrief?"

"Commander McGarrett is with his wife, sir," Nick said. "We may not have had time to fully brief you on her situation. She's expecting. Twins. Obviously, our first concern was to have her checked out. She's exhibiting signs of sleep deprivation and shock."

"Can we get an idea of when they can join us for debriefing?" Vincas pressed. "We've just embedded a CIA, Special Activities Division agent with a high value international target. The Navy wants to know what the hell is going on. We like to stay ahead of these things, not play catch up."

Danny took a deep breath and Catherine sensed that things could get heated very quickly.

"Detective, I'm sure you're quite concerned about Jax," she said. "Why don't I escort you to the clinic, and I'll report back here with an answer to your question, Admiral."

Danny was impressed with the strength of Catherine's fingers on his elbow as she ushered him from the room.

"Asshole," he muttered, when the door was barely closed behind them. "Did you just abandon Nick? You are a credit to Naval Intelligence, Catherine. You remind me a lot of my wife, actually."

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"Tell me what I need to know, Commander," the doctor said. Steve liked her immediately - no nonsense, quiet, and Navy - not Air Force. "Lieutenant Rollins got me up to speed on the generalities."

"Mild sleep deprivation," Steve said, "mild shock . . . she's been through worse, seen worse. I don't think she's physically injured. But she's plenty rattled. Multiple episodes of micro-sleep on the way here . . . she's not coherent, but I'm pretty sure a nurse that was supposedly responsible for her care was murdered in her presence, or close by."

"Physically, her body is already maxed out, given that she's entering her third trimester," the doctor said. "And from what Lieutenant Rollins said, her time with that asshole may have been brief, but you witnessed behavior that bordered on psychological torture. Mentally and physically, she's fragile. I can clear her, and the babies, from a medical standpoint. You understand what I'm saying? I can say her vitals are stable and the babies aren't in distress. I'm not an OB and I'm damn sure not a psychiatrist. You'll need to follow up immediately with her specialists."

"Copy that," Steve said. "She didn't want to go into Tripler tonight. She works there."

"Understood. Okay, the nurse should be done checking her vitals and getting her into scrubs. Wanna tell me, real quick, why that was so urgent?" the doctor said, leading Steve back to the treatment room. The clinic was quiet, and almost empty, and Steve was profoundly grateful.

"She was not wearing her own clothes," he said simply.

The doctor stopped and looked at him before opening the door. "And this guy, we're going after him, right?"

"Damn straight," Steve said. "There's not a rock big enough for him to hide under forever."
"You must be Detective Williams," the doctor said, smiling at Danny as she slipped out of the treatment room. "Commander McGarrett said not to be surprised if you found your way here."

"I was protecting Rear Admiral Vincas from Danny's wrath," Catherine explained. "He's demanding a debriefing."

"Of course he is," the doctor said, raising an eyebrow at Catherine. "That argument is above my paygrade. I'll let Commander McGarrett deal with him."

"How's Jax?" Danny asked anxiously.

"Medically stable," the doctor said. "A little all over the place otherwise, which is to be expected. Not entirely sure that she's up for a debriefing, but I'll let her and Commander McGarrett decide."

"I'll stall," Catherine said, squeezing Danny's arm. She turned and started making her way back.

"You can go in, I'm sure," the doctor said, gesturing to the door. "I'm going to write up discharge papers."

"You're not keeping her?" Danny asked.

"It's not in her best interest to be in yet another unfamiliar environment," the doctor said. "Home. She wants to go home, and it's the best thing for her. Keep an eye on the commander, too, yeah?"

"Always," Danny said, smiling. He knocked softly before going into the treatment room.

"Hey, Danny," Steve said. "I've received five text messages from Rear Admiral Vincas. Would you stay with Jax? I need to go make a statement."

"He's very pushy about debriefing," Danny said, pulling up a chair. "Of course I'll stay with Jax."

"No," Jax said. "I can do a debrief."

"Jax, you're -"

"I can do it," Jax said stubbornly. "And then we can go home? If I can get through the debrief, can we go home, and not come back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, probably," Steve said reluctantly.

"Then let's go," Jax said. "My IV just finished, let's get this over with. The babies are fine, I'm fine, I'm just tired."

"That's why you should go home, so you can rest, and sleep," Danny pointed out.

"Danny," Jax said quietly. "I'm going to play some things over and over in my head for a while. Maybe I will even help."

Steve nodded slowly. There was a reason, after all, that you were debriefed when you came back from a mission. It wasn't for the sole purpose of record keeping.

"Okay," he said, "but I pull the plug if you start to spin out."


"Hey," Steve said, tucking his fingers under her chin and tilting her face up to his. "I get it. You
know that, right? I've got you, Jax. I know what this is, I've been through it."

She nodded. "I think the IV worked great and I'm no longer dehydrated. I need to hit the head."

Steve chuckled and bent to kiss her on the cheek. "Danny and I will be in the hallway. We'll go
debrief and then go home."

Steve let out a long sigh and leaned against the wall of the hallway, closing his eyes.

"You okay, babe?" Danny asked.

"The babies are fine, as far as they can tell," Steve said. "I was terrified, Danny. Even feeling them
move, on the way over . . . all I could think was, what if it was only one of them, you know? Two
heartbeats, plain as day. Jax is . . . she's definitely in shock, but you know how she is."

"Yeah, I do," Danny said, "and that's why I'm worried. She's going to shove this down, like she does
everything else. Go on as if nothing happened."

"She's been through much worse," Steve said. "Since I've known her, even."

Danny sighed. "Sometimes it's like deja vu all over again with you two. Come on. Let's get this over
with. I'm exhausted, too."

"You don't have to debrief, Danny," Jax said, as she slipped into the hallway to join them.

"Someone has to supervise you two yahoos," Danny groused. "You okay to walk, Jax?"

"How far is it?" Jax asked, as they stepped outside the building. She stopped, looking around in
confusion. "It's dark. Was it dark when we got here?"

Steve slipped off his watch and pressed it into her hand. "It wasn't," he said, "but it was pushing that
way."

Jax looked at the watch for a moment, her lips moving silently as she read the time and date to
herself. "It wasn't much more than twenty-four hours," she said. "Right?"

"Right," Steve said, as they started walking toward the now-familiar squat gray building. Exterior
lights gave it a soft glow.

"Okay," Jax said. They walked in silence until they reached the door. "I would really like some
coffee," she whispered.

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The debriefing was, in Danny's opinion, more like an interrogation.

"You're a SEAL," the Admiral said. "You're telling me you couldn't get a shot?"

"No, sir," Steve said calmly. "My - Shelburne deliberately blocked my angle."

"Would you have taken the shot, if you could have?" Vincas asked.

"Yes," Steve said, without hesitation.

"Even though you know the CIA, SAD, and the Navy had sanctioned embedding Shelburne in
WoFat's operation, with her full cooperation?" Vincas asked.
"Yes," Steve said, again. "I deeply regret every time I've missed an opportunity to take out WoFat. Permanently. I will never stop watching for an opportunity."

"Likewise," Jax said. Her voice was steady, but her hands trembled, wrapped around a cup of coffee.

"Ms. McGarrett -"

"Jax, please," Jax said, wrinkling her nose.

"Jax," Vincas said. "In deference to your understandable exhaustion, I'll try to be brief. You encountered a staged car accident on your way home?"

"Yes," Jax said. "Empty car. Empty car seat. I let down my guard, assumed it was an accident . . ."

"You were overcome? Or simply coerced?" Vincas asked.

"Gassed," Jax said. "Nitrous oxide. Short acting but effective. I woke up in a helicopter, and then was blindfolded. I can't help you with the location; I was blindfolded coming out, too."

"Distance?" Nick asked softly. "Any guesses?"

Jax shook her head. "I'm so sorry. I have a terrible sense of direction under the best of circumstances. I was disoriented from the nitrous on the way, and on the way back I was . . . just disoriented. Oh - I do know that WoFat wasn't the least concerned about me getting away."

Nick walked to the map and nodded at the red circle drawn by Steve. "Radius can be narrowed to inside an hour. And if he wasn't worried . . . I'm thinking one of the islands. Steve?"

"It's what I'd do," Steve said quietly. "We'll start with that assumption."

"Will you try to recover the nurse's body?" Jax asked quietly.

"Excuse me?" Vincas asked.

"There was a nurse taking care of me," Jax said. "WoFat killed her."

"Maybe you were confused," Catherine offered.

"I was confused, about a lot of things," Jax said, "but I know dead bodies. I had to step over her in the hall, on the way out. That wasn't confusion. She has a father . . . sisters . . . WoFat is trafficking humans as well as -" Jax stopped short. "There's something else, something important -"

"We'll try to recover the body," Steve said quietly. "Jax, when we first got to you, you said something about Nira, and Adam. Is that what you're trying to remember?"

"Adam killed Nira," Jax said slowly. "WoFat . . . WoFat handed Nira over to Adam, in return for Adam feeding him intel. On us, on the team. It was Adam. He was the mole."

"That's why the intel was more up-to-date, but still not current," Nick said, nodding.

Danny rubbed his hand over his face. "We have to go back, look at everything we have on Adam again. Why are you smiling, Steven?"

"Because now that we know what we're looking for, we might find something that leads us to WoFat," he said.
Rear Admiral Vincas looked back and forth between the matching grins on Steve's and Nick's faces.

"The Navy approves of the continued joint operation between the Five-O task force and our Naval Intel and SAD offices to track WoFat and ultimately bring down his global arms - and apparently human - trafficking," he said. "But gentleman, I think you're overlooking two things."

"Sir?" Nick asked.

"You'll also have to work with the CIA," he said. "And then there's the matter of Commander Joe White. Every alphabet organization is lined up for a piece of him. The man owes us all a great deal of explanation.

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Catherine and Nick cleared up the rooms cluttered with debris from the latest interaction with WoFat. They meticulously stored away every map, every note . . . knowing that it could be significant, even if they didn't see it now.

"It was a good call, having our people drive them and their vehicles home," Catherine said, stretching to reach a print-out that had been haphazardly posted to the wall.

Nick reached over her easily and yanked out the push pin. "Last thing we needed was a tragedy of one of them falling asleep at the wheel. I've seen it happen, sailors get home after a year deployment, crash on the way home from the airport. Here," he said, folding the long strip of computer fed paper neatly, and handing it to her.

She placed it in a file, the last piece, and looked around the now spotless room.

"They're giving us better offices, at least," Nick said with a sigh. "Maybe we'll even get a couple windows."

"Oh, now that would be a nice change. I guess this is the part where we go rest up and regroup and get ready to start all over again. But unlike Danny and Steve and Jax, we get to just walk home," she said. She laughed. "Alone. Again."

Nick looked down at her thoughtfully. "We wouldn't have to be alone," he said quietly.

"Nick . . ." Catherine murmured. "If you haven't noticed, this doesn't end well for me."

"If you haven't noticed, I'm not Steve," he said. "I'm not looking for just a friend, and you haven't been assigned to me. It doesn't always have to be complicated or end badly, you know. And I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. I was thinking sweat pants, a beer and a game on DVR to decompress, and eight hours of serious snoring. Then coffee, bacon and eggs."

"Snoring?" Catherine asked. She was walking towards the door, and Nick decided to take it as a win, falling in behind her. "That could be a deal breaker."

"Nah, I've pulled enough overnights with you," Nick said. "I can live with your snoring. It's kinda cute."
This installment was written and published more "in real time" over on ffnet, so as it's being posted here for the first time, the holidays and such are all discombobulated. But, I hope they help give the reader a sense of the passage of time.

Steve thanked the sailors who had escorted them home, then locked the door and set the alarm. Jax had already disappeared from the living room, and he called out her name softly. He expected to find her in the babies' room, but she answered him from his office.

She was leaning on the desk, holding a picture of Doris.

"I couldn't remember her name," she said. "I think my brain isn't working right."

"Moderate sleep deprivation, mild cognitive impair," Steve said, smiling at her. "It'll be okay."

"I called her mom," Jax said. "You always call her mom, and so does Mary, and when I recognized her, I called her mom. I don't think she minded?"

"I think she would have been honored," Steve said. "It's okay."

"How is she alive? What . . . did you know? Did your dad know?" Jax asked.

"I'll have to get into all of that with the Navy," Steve said.

"Are you okay?" Jax whispered. She reached for his hand and took it in hers.

"I don't think I've even started to process it yet," Steve said. "I was terrified for you. I really wasn't thinking about much of anything else."

"I tried to set up a clean shot for you," Jax said.

"I know," Steve said.

"He grabbed my hair and -"

"I know," Steve said softly. "Jax. You did the best you could. You came home to me, that's all that matters. You're okay, the babies are okay . . . we'll sort the rest out. But right now, you need to rest."

Jax nodded and moved unsteadily toward the stairs. She flinched at Steve's hand landing on her lower back to steady her.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"It's okay," he said softly.

Pupule wound around Jax's ankle, meowing piteously. She bent and scooped him up in her arms, rubbing his head as he purred loudly. Satisfied with her return, he stumbled to his bed and flopped down.
Jax stood in the center of their room, uncertain.

"I think I want a shower," she said.

"Okay," Steve said, nodding. "I'll grab a tshirt for you, which -"

"I can get my own damn shirt," she snapped. "I'm sorry. I'm not the only one who had a bad day. I'm sorry I keep snapping at you."

He kissed the top of her head as they reached the landing. "It was a shit day, not gonna lie," he said. "But I'm not the one who was held hostage by an international criminal. Cut yourself some slack. Let's try it this way: I'll take a quick shower, warm it up, while you grab anything you need. If you need any help, if you want anything, you tell me, okay? Otherwise, I'm gonna let you fend for yourself."

Jax bit her lip and nodded.

"You had a long, long day of not getting to make your own choices," Steve said quietly. "I get it. I've been there."

"It was only twenty-four hours," Jax said.

He cupped her face in his hand. "About the longest twenty-four hours of my life, how about you?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "Yeah, it was a long twenty-four hours. I'm sorry -"

"Shh, stop apologizing," Steve said.

"Stop interrupting," Jax said, grinning up at him. She sobered quickly. "I'm sorry, that the reason you're so good at dealing with this sort of thing is from experience. Is it classified?"

"Hmm, the particulars are," he said. He kissed her forehead. "I'll be done in just a minute."

True to his word, by the time Jax had rummaged through a drawer and located Steve's soft, faded Coronado t-shirt and a pair of fluffy socks, he was coming out of the bathroom, still slightly damp. She looked up, her eyes filling with tears.

"Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

"I just . . . this is real, right?" she asked, her lip trembling. "I'm awake?"

"Yes. You're awake, this is real," he said, nodding. "The short periods of sleep you've had . . . if you were dreaming, those dreams would have seemed very real. It's normal to be confused. It will pass. But this, right now, this is real."

He reached for her, and she noticed something crinkle in his outstretched hand.

"What do you have?" she asked.

"Ah. I found letters, to me and to Mary," he said, "in my pants pocket. They are from my mother, of that I am certain. I'm also certain that I can't deal with any more from her right now. I'm saving these letters to read when Mary gets here. I have no idea how she got them in my pocket ... I'll assume the same way she got my phone out of of my pocket."

"Your mom is a CIA pickpocket," Jax said, smiling. She yawned and her eyes fluttered.
"So it seems," he said. "Grab your shower before you can't stand up. I'll be right here, if you need me."

Jax nodded absently and padded to the bathroom while Steve turned down the bed. He left the softest light burning, and tossed Jax's favorite quilt at the foot of the bed. She came out of the bathroom, her hair damp and smelling of honeysuckle and gunpowder. He smiled at the sight of his t-shirt pulled slightly taut over the curve of her belly.

"What?" she asked.

"Always one of my favorites on you," he said.

"It might not fit much longer," she said.

"The socks, now, those are a nice touch, too," he said, gesturing toward her feet.

"He took my shoes," she said absently, "and made me wear those ridiculous pajama looking things and my feet were cold." She stopped abruptly, looking down at her feet.

Steve closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her. She didn't resist as he cradled her head in his hand, pressing it against his chest. "Are your feet cold now?" he murmured.

She shook her head, her soft curls tickling against his chest.

"I'm afraid to try to sleep," she whispered.

"I understand," he said. "I've got you, you know that, right?"

She nodded and let him nudge her toward the bed. She slipped under the covers and smiled tiredly as he tucked them around her shoulders. He slid in behind her, as he usually did, and wrapped an arm around her, his hand splayed on the curve of her stomach. He felt her tense.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"I need to see that it's you," she said. She turned, awkwardly, and he couldn't help but smirk as he shifted onto his back. "Shut up. You try turning over in bed with a beach ball stuck up your shirt."

She nestled her head onto his shoulder, slinging her arm across his waist.

"Better?" he asked, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Hmm," she murmured. "I'm too tired to sleep. We should have gone for a swim."

"Yeah, no," he said firmly. "You're pushing forty hours, Jax. That's getting dicey for a civilian."

"Not a civilian," she grumbled.

He sighed. This was no time to argue; he was beyond exhausted himself. "Jax, ku'uipo, you want me to go get that prescription the medic at Pearl Hickam sent home?"

She shook her head and fell silent, but he could still feel the tension radiating through her body. He rubbed her shoulder as he felt hot tears splash onto his chest.

"The nurse tried to get me to take a sedative," she said. "I was afraid to. I couldn't sleep, because I was . . . who can sleep when they're being held hostage? And there was just the hospital type recliner, and I couldn't get comfortable, especially not with those stupid restraints . . . "
His arm tightened around her automatically.

"I didn't want to take the stupid sedative, I didn't trust . . . he used nitrous oxide to knock me out, so I
couldn't fight, but a sedative . . . I didn't want to risk the babies, I still don't like the idea . . . but
maybe, if I had taken it, he wouldn't have killed her. He wouldn't have killed the nurse," Jax said.
"It's my fault she's dead. It's my fault WoFat has your mom. If I just called it in, before I got out of
the car, if I had just called HPD, or you, or Danny, or - God, I was so incredibly stupid. It's my fault,
all of it."

He rubbed her shoulder and kissed the top of her head. "It isn't, Jax. WoFat has been gathering intel
for weeks - months. He would have found an opportunity, someday, somehow. And it would have
played out exactly the same. Joe would have always contacted my mom, who would have always
gladly traded places with you. The only thing that could have changed was the timing. Or . . . if it
had been after the babies were born . . ." He swallowed hard. It had been terrifying enough, with the
babies safe as long as Jax was.

"I dreamed . . . or hallucinated . . . that I was in the babies' room, downstairs," she said quietly. "You
weren't there. WoFat was."

"I'm here, now, and this is real," he reassured her again. "If you have a nightmare, I'll wake you up,
and you'll know I'm here."

"I'm sorry that WoFat took your mom," Jax whispered.

"I think . . . I think it's a lot more complicated than that," Steve said. "I think she wanted to see him
again. It's going to take a while to get all the answers. Right now, I just want to hold you and not let
 go."

"Okay," Jax said. That did sound really good. She closed her eyes. Steve felt her muscles relax a bit,
and her breathing slowed, though it was still erratic. It would do. It would do for now, he told
himself, and the worst was over.

#*#*#*#*

Jax jerked awake yet again, and Steve's hand was soft on her shoulder, his lips brushing the back of
her neck as he murmured to her.

"You're with me, you're safe," he said. She'd shifted back to her left side mid-way through the night,
and he'd curled around her in their customary position. After the first several abrupt awakenings,
she'd relaxed enough that his voice and touch was sufficient to ground her.

"I don't understand," she mumbled. "I'm still so tired. Why do I keep waking up? I didn't even have a
bad dream that time."

"Your body and brain are trying to get coordinated again," he said. "You slept for over an hour that
time, Jax. Last night you were only managing ten or twenty minutes. Give it another couple days and
you'll be fine."

"I'm sorry, you must be completely tanked," she said. "I keep waking you up."

"Nah, just keeping my SEAL training current," he said. "You know I can go for another twenty-four
easy on an hour's sleep. I'll be fine."

"It's morning," she said, noticing the light filtering through the windows. "Thank God. I'll get ready
for work . . ."
"Jax, you're on medical leave," he reminded her. "Remember? The medic at Pearl Hickam sent word to Dr. Marks. You need three normal sleep cycles before you're cleared to go back to work."

"Shit, I forgot," Jax said. "Today and two more days?"

"Um . . . last night wasn't anything near to a normal sleep cycle," he said, kissing the back of her neck again.

"What the hell am I supposed to do for three days?" she grumbled, as she untangled herself from the covers and shuffled to the bathroom.

Steve sighed and flipped over on his back, reminding himself that the irritability was a classic by-product of sleep deprivation.

"We could start with a swim," he suggested.

"Don't you have to go to work?" she asked, mumbling around her toothbrush.

He joined her at the small sink. "I'll swing by the office at some point, to or from Tripler to see your OB; and I'll check in with Nick and Catherine while you're with Lieutenant Allen."

"You're spending your day shuttling me to doctors? Do I get any choice in the matter?" she demanded, spitting angrily into the sink.

"Yes. You get to decide if you want to swim before we go, you get to decide when and what you want to eat, what you want to wear . . . hell, decide which of us is going to drive and whether we're going to take the Supra or the Silverado," he said calmly. "But you don't get to decide to ignore the directions of the medic who treated you last night, who clearly said that you needed to follow up with your own docs."

She stormed into the bedroom and began rummaging for her bikini. Steve followed and quietly pulled out his trunks.

"This is patently ridiculous," she said, as she balled up her t-shirt and threw it into the hamper. "I've been shot, Steve. I've been concussed, broken . . . hell, pieces of the World Trade Center fell on me. I'm . . . tired. I'm a little tired, because I missed a night's sleep. Everyone's losing their shit and going to - to defcon five, or something, and it's pointless and ridiculous."

"It's not just missing sleep," he countered. "I think we both know that."

"I've been held longer, by worse," she said. "It's because I'm pregnant, isn't it? Everyone tiptoes around on eggshells, passing me around with kid gloves. It sucks monkey balls."

She was halfway down the stairs before he finished processing her tirade. He grabbed his phone and followed her.

"You want to swim, though, right?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes, because at least in the water I don't feel like . . . like a fucking oompa loompa," she said, slamming open the back door. "Or a - a manatee. Or a penguin. Jeez."

He jogged down to the water to catch up with her. It wouldn't do to let her drown, temper notwithstanding.

#*#*#*#*#
Jax sat silently in the passenger seat of the Silverado as they navigated to Pearl Hickam. Her long swim had diffused her anger and irritability.

"I'm really sorry," she said quietly. "About the . . . monkey balls. I know I'm not the only person who had a bad day, yesterday. I'm sorry about . . . your mom. About everyone lying to you, I mean."

He reached over and wrapped his hand around her knee. "I know, ku'uipo. Nick, Catherine, and I - we were trained to understand the implications of what you experienced. It's not the same as the training you had as a medic. I need you to understand, you're not being treated any differently than Nick or I would be, coming back from that situation."

"I doubt you or Nick would have to see your OB," Jax pointed out.

Steve laughed. "Okay, I'll give you that one."

She was quiet for another minute. "I'm still sorry. I was horrible to you this morning. I'm glad you understand - especially since I sure as hell don't understand - but I'm still sorry."

"I know, Jax," he said. "We're good."

"You've . . . had this happen. You said . . . I know it's classified," she said. "How long - how long were you gone? And how long did it take for you to feel . . . normal again?"

"Four days," he said. "And . . . okay, honestly? A couple weeks. But I had some additional injuries, so you're going to be better, faster. Okay?"

She nodded. "Can I do something to help . . . I'm going to go crazy, Steve, if I can't work for days -"

"Let's see what the docs say, and then we'll talk," he said.

She sighed and rested her head on the back of the seat. They rode in silence for a few minutes, until he stopped at a red light. She flinched violently and grabbed at the seat belt.

"Whoa, hey," Steve said, "you're safe. You're okay, Jax, you're with me."

"Holy shit," she said, closing her eyes again. "I need that to stop happening. How long was I asleep?"

"Um, about ninety seconds, give or take," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't understand this. I need to talk to Dr. Marks, to Gus."

"I'm sure they'd work you in . . ."

"No, ew, I don't want to see them as a patient, that's weird," Jax said. "No, I mean - Tripler is a military hospital. I don't . . . you're right, this isn't covered, not even in my tac medic training. I know how to patch and stabilize, but . . . I wouldn't have recognized this. If it was a patient, I wouldn't have understood . . . so I need to get more training."

"Okay," Steve said. "Jax, though, listen . . . just - it's okay. It's okay to be on this side of things."

"On the patient side, you mean," she said. She shook her head. "No. No, it isn't, really."

He sighed. "Yeah, okay. I know." He wrapped her small hand in his, and wished that she wasn't sitting so far away.
"I had a fax from the clinic at Pearl Hickam waiting for me this morning," Lieutenant Allen said. She folded her hands on her desk and looked at Steve. "Moderate clinical sleep deprivation with accompanying micro sleeps - so I'm going to assume the mood swings, temper, and generalized instability that go with it?"

"Yeah," Steve said, rubbing his face. "Apparently - and I quote - it sucks monkey balls and she feels like a fucking oompa loompa. I think the monkey balls was in reference to the required doctor's visits, and the oompa loompa, I think, is because she's put on a couple pounds."

"I see," Lieutenant Allen said. "You know, this pregnancy is difficult enough for her. We could have done without - let's see, I haven't read this thoroughly - oh dear. Hostage situation?"

"Longest twenty-four hours of my life," Steve said. "Worse even than the time she almost died from sepsis. Not coincidentally, caused by the same person."

"This person still living?" Lieutenant Allen asked.

"Yes. My mother voluntarily agreed to an exchange, for Jax," Steve said. "And then she put herself in my line of fire, prevented me from taking a shot. It's a clusterfuck."

"I thought your mother was dead," Lieutenant Allen said, her face crinkled in confusion.

"So did I," Steve sighed. "So did the CIA. Which is why I can't tell you any more about the particulars."

"And how are you feeling about this development?" she asked.


"And yet you brought Jax in, and didn't make an appointment for yourself," she said.

"After I wrap my brain around the case, I will," he promised. "I'd rather talk to you when I actually understand how this happened."

"That's fair," she said, nodding. "So, how much temper are we talking about? She's getting coffee, right?"

"Bathroom - again - and yes, coffee," he said. "It's a vicious cycle. Danny says it just gets worse, now that she's in her third trimester. I don't know what to tell you about the temper. She's messed up enough that she's lashing out, but not so much that she's unaware that she's doing it. Then she feels bad, and apologizes. I'm familiar with the cycle."

"First hand?" Stephanie asked.

"Yeah," he nodded. There was a soft knock on the door.

"Come on in," Stephanie called out.

Jax opened the door and entered the room quietly, a coffee clutched in her hand. "Sorry," she said. "I went to the bathroom, and then made coffee, and then had to go back to the bathroom. . . it's ridiculous. I was a little dehydrated, after - anyway. Extra fluids. Extra trips. It's a whole thing."

Stephanie chuckled. "It's a whole thing that won't last too much longer," she pointed out. "And then
there'll be a whole other thing. I'm sorry to hear that you went through such a harrowing experience. Thankful that you and the babies are okay, relatively speaking."

"Fine," Jax said. "Really and truly. I'm fine, the babies seem to be fine . . . we'll see the OB this afternoon. I just need to get everything signed off so I can go back to work, once I'm sleeping normally and not biting everyone's heads off."

"Well, that's an admirable and understandable goal," Stephanie said. "Let's talk about what happened."

"Okay," Jax said. "Steve, didn't you say you were going to check in with Nick and Catherine?"

Stephanie looked up at them. "If possible, Commander, I'd really like you to be here for this session," she said. "I think it's in Jax's best interest, and in your best interest as a couple. This situation has profoundly affected both of you."

"Absolutely, I'll stay," Steve said.

Jax bit at her lip.

"Jax, are you uncomfortable with Steve staying?" Stephanie asked gently. "Why?"

"I don't - he has enough to deal with," Jax said. "He shouldn't have to always deal with my shit. It's too much to ask."

"When Steve is ready to talk about this development with his mother, I'd like you to come with him," Stephanie countered. "Do you think that's too much to ask of you?"

"Of course not," Jax said. "No, if you think it would help, even a little, then - oh. Oh, okay."

"There you go," Stephanie said. "Now, let's talk . . ."

#*#*#*#*#

Danny leaned in the doorway of Steve's office and tilted his head toward Kono's office, where Jax sat, headphones in place, listening to audio surveillance.

"You sure that's a good idea?" he asked quietly.

"She can't go to work . . . she's still drifting into microsleeps and waking up disoriented," Steve sighed. "I have to go to Pearl . . . I'm not leaving her home alone. Plus, Danny, we're spread thin. We can use the extra set of ears."

"All true," Danny nodded. "How'd it go this morning?"

Steve rubbed his hand over his face. "OB says babies are completely fine. We stopped there after seeing Lieutenant Allen, which was . . . I don't know, Danny. She's got a lot of anger to process . . . and guilt. She's holding herself responsible for the whole thing - for stopping without calling in, for my mom . . . she thinks, if she hadn't been pregnant, that she could have done something different. Fought back. I think - I think maybe she resents being pregnant right now."

"She had to be compliant, in order not to risk the babies," Danny said. "That's not really in her nature."

"He would have been ruthless," Steve said quietly. "Brutal. Being pregnant spared her that. I'm insanely grateful for the fact . . . I don't think she sees it that way."
"She'll come around," Danny said. "I'll keep an eye on her while you're at Pearl, you know that."

"Yeah, I do," Steve said. "Thanks, Danny. Well . . . I guess it's time for me to go find out who Doris McGarrett really was."

Chin hung up the phone and joined Malia, Kono, and Caviness at the cozy table in the safehouse.

"That was Steve," he said, shaking his head.

"How are they doing?" Malia asked. "How's Jax?"

"Shaken up," Chin said. "But physically just fine, thank goodness. Her OB at Tripler gave her and the babies a clean bill of health. Steve has her working on this case, since she's not cleared to return to work."

"Good," Kono said, nodding. "She'd go crazy if she felt like she couldn't contribute something. How's Steve doing with the whole thing with his mom?"

"He's on his way to Pearl Hickam now," Chin said. "I guess . . . I guess he'll be briefed, or whatever the Navy and CIA agree to tell him. I can't imagine."

"I've seen families reunited after decades . . ." Caviness said. "Malia, if you were able to come out of witness protection . . . are there any family members who you would want to contact?"

"No," Malia said, shaking her head. Her eyes filled with tears. "No, not any more. My parents passed away while I was in med school. Some distant cousins . . . but they wouldn't remember, or care . . ."

Chin covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

She brushed away the tears and smiled at him. "I have a wonderful ohana right here, and I wouldn't change a thing."

Caviness' phone buzzed, and he stepped away from the table to take the call.

Malia turned to Kono. "Now, we need to plan a baby shower for Steve and Jax," she said.

"That's my cue to go make some sandwiches," Chin said. He kissed Malia on the top of the head as he went to the kitchen.

Kono and Malia were still chatting happily when Caviness hung up the phone, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"What is it?" Malia asked, as Chin came back from the kitchen.

"There's news from the San Francisco office," Caviness said. "It's significant. Do you want some privacy?"

"No, please, Chin and Kono will know anyway," Malia said.

"Yesterday, the body of David Pellosi was positively identified as the victim of a boating accident," Caviness said. "There were witnesses. Alcohol and speed were at play - there's absolutely no reason to suspect it was related to his father's organized crime syndicate. It's an unfortunate loss of life . . . but, the fact that he wasn't a target, apparently, means you're even further removed as a target. The
less he is - was - associated with his father's crime, the less of a chance you are. From a WITSEC perspective . . . we consider this good news."

"Oh," Malia said softly. "He . . . he seemed, at the time, like a good person. I'd always hoped that maybe he would find his way out of the family."

"The FBI has processed his apartment and office," Caviness continued. "There's no indication whatsoever that he was searching for you, or that he ever suspected that you were still alive. Again, from a case perspective, it's good news. It's looking more and more like you're not a target. Unless we find something on the extensive surveillance of The Company suspect . . . I'd say this ordeal can be put behind you."

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"Hey, rookie," Danny said, smiling down at Jax. "Time got away from us . . . late lunch? Grover's going to make a deli run. What would you like?"


"Okay," Danny said, completely nonplussed by her request. It wasn't the strangest he'd heard. He passed along the request to Grover, who laughed, and then returned to Kono's office.

"I need brain bleach," Jax commented, sighing. "Nothing about the Pellosi family, but plenty of other shady stuff. Nothing we could take to a DA, just . . . blech. Has anyone else turned up anything?"

Danny shook his head. "Nothing so far."

"That's good, right?" Jax asked. "I mean . . . lack of evidence means it's at least not likely that Malia's a target?"

"That's what we're thinking," Danny said. "Marshal service will make the final evaluation."

"Malia of all people doesn't deserve to live with a target on her back," Jax said. She stood up and rubbed her back absently.

"No one does," Danny said. "Not Malia, not any of us. Definitely not you, either."

Jax shrugged. "Yeah, but I knew I was a target, Danny. I shoula called it in when I came up on that car. It was a rookie mistake. A mistake that forced Steve's mom to come out of hiding. She was safe, Danny, until I screwed it up."

"She was mixed up with the CIA," Danny said. "I don't think she was exactly safe. You're gonna hafta let this one go, kid."

He gave her a gentle hug as she paced toward the door of the office.

"Where are you going?" he asked as she kept walking.

"I'm going to pee, Danny," she sighed. "It's my new hobby."

"#*#*#*#*#*

The office was empty except for Danny and Jax, who was curled on the sofa in Steve's office, snuggled under one of his spare hoodies.
"Thanks for waiting here. She okay?" Steve asked Danny quietly.

"Yeah, I convinced her to take a nap," Danny said. "She's been sleeping for about thirty minutes."

"That's definite progress," Steve said. "That's a really, really good sign, actually."

Jax blinked drowsily at the sound of Steve's voice. "Hey," she mumbled. "What'd you find out?"

He chuckled. "And hello to you too."

"Hello," she said, smiling as she sat up, her hair tumbling around her face in disarray. "I was dreaming about macaroni and cheese. Weirdest dream ever."

"Mac and cheese?" Steve laughed. "Okay. Well, that's much better than dreaming about international arms dealers."

"No kidding," she said. "So, what'd you find out?"

Steve said down on the sofa next to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Danny slouched in one of the chairs across from them.

"Most of it is heavily classified and redacted to the point of incomprehension," Steve sighed. "But I can tell you this: my mom was an operative long before she had me and Mary. She was mixed up in an operation that orphaned WoFat. She felt . . . guilty, I guess. Raised him for years, in Japan. The CIA offered her an exit strategy that involved placing WoFat into a children's home and relocating here. She met my dad . . . went on to live the life of a civilian for two decades. Someone, somehow, leaked her identity and she became a target. She faked her death as a diversion, and her records were completely sealed."

"So the CIA knew?" Danny asked. "They knew, all this time?"

"Her old handler knew," Steve said. "And Joe. Joe knew. He also knew that if I found out, I would have searched for her. He tried, in his own way, to protect me and Mary . . . he'd hoped, I think, that since Hesse tried to get the information from me and couldn't, that WoFat would realize that Mary and I were clueless, and give up. But when WoFat snagged Jax . . . we guess he realized that he wasn't going to stop, not until he had Shelburne. My mom."

"What will he do with her?" Jax whispered, horrified. "Aren't they going to launch a rescue mission?"

"The CIA and Special Activities Division intel indicates that my mother faked her death to WoFat, too," Steve said. "She was absolutely certain that she could convince him that she did it to protect him and that she's turned - that the CIA betrayed her twice, hung her out to dry, forced her to abandon her life, and that she's going to actively work to undermine the SAD."

"You think he'll buy it?" Danny asked.

"I don't know," Steve said. "Hell, she's a good enough actress, she fooled my dad for twenty years."

"Maybe not," Danny said quietly. "He had all of those scraps of paper, hidden in that toolbox."

Steve nodded slowly. "And he was the one that asked Joe to protect us . . . shit. What a clusterfuck."

Jax swiped at the tears spilling over onto her cheeks. "I'm so sorry. If I hadn't let -"

"Hey, stop right there," Steve said, shifting to face her. "Jax, she had a life - two lives - that none of
"She didn't look afraid," Jax said. "When she came up to me - she didn't look afraid, not one bit. That's good, right?"

"Yeah, that's really good," Steve said. "I think - I think we have to just believe that she knows what she's doing, that she can pull this off. She didn't hesitate, Jax. The minute she heard from Joe, she got on a plane and came. She wanted this, she wanted to secure you and the babies. What - what did she say to you?"

Jax smiled. "She said that I looked like someone who could hold my own, and that was a good thing since I'd married a McGarrett."

Steve chuckled, then sighed. "I have to tell Mary."

"Are you going to call her?" Jax asked.

"I'll wait," he said. "She's coming next week, coming here to stay. I'd rather wait and tell her when she's here, with us. Hey, Danny, your family is waiting for you, man. Let's call it a day. Anything on Malia's case?"

"Surveillance is turning up zilch," Jax said.

"And Caviness called with an update," Danny continued. "The man Malia was married to? Killed, in an accident. No suspicious circumstances. FBI gave his effects a clean sweep - no mention of Malia."

"Damn, that's a relief," Steve said. "I know Chin's going to sleep better already."

Danny grinned broadly. "Danny's Law. I predict that in a couple weeks - it's going to be a happy, happy Thanksgiving."

Steve waited for Mary at the gate, watching anxiously, searching for her amidst the rush of passengers coming off the plane. It was hard to find her petite frame in the crowd.

Mary, however, spotted Steve easily, standing a head above most of the people in the crowded airport. She shot her hand up in the air and waved, and he grinned and rushed to her. He picked her up in a hug, twirling her around.

"Welcome home, Mare," he whispered, holding her tight.

She clung to him for a moment, and then smacked him playfully on the shoulder. "Put me down, you oversized G. I. Joe. Where's Jax? Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Steve assured her. "She's waiting for us at the house. There's . . . come on. Let's grab your luggage, and then we're going to take a little drive. There's something I need to tell you."

The letters in his pocket felt inexplicably heavy as he drove toward the lookout.
Caviness and Kono waved and smiled at Malia and Chin as they pulled away from Chin's tidy home. "They get their happily ever after," Kono said. "And Malia can even marry Chin now, if she wants to."

"There's six people who know her identity, though," Caviness said. "And one of them's dating a U.S. Marshal. It does raise her exposure a bit."

"No more than any cop's wife," Kono pointed out. "It's something they warn us about in the academy. We take down bad people, and it makes them angry. Any of our loved ones could be caught in the crossfire, or used as leverage. She would have accepted a certain amount of risk anyway, just being with Chin."

"So . . . our risk is exponentially doubled, then?" Caviness mused.

"Hell no," Kono laughed. "Not with the way we shoot."

#*#*#*#*#

"Danny was right," Jax whispered, as Steve joined her outside on Thanksgiving morning. He smiled at her, handing her a cup of steaming coffee and sitting down in the aged wooden chair.

"No. Danny?" he teased.

"Yes," she laughed. "It's Thanksgiving . . . Malia is in the clear, Mary is here - to stay - and Gus even offered to take my shift today so I could be home. Danny was right. It's going to be a happy, happy Thanksgiving."

The sound of two car doors in the driveway had Jax turning toward the house. Steve grinned knowingly.

"I have a Thanksgiving surprise for you," he said. "Don't be mad."

Jax's face lit up as Fred and Maureen Hart appeared around the side of the house, walking toward them.

"Oh, bless your heart," Maureen said, laughing, as Jax stood up and waved. "You look just precious! How far along are you now, honey?"

"Twenty-nine weeks," Jax said. "I feel like a beach ball."

"You look absolutely radiant," Maureen declared firmly. "Now, I understand that we can convince most of these yahoos to go play football, keep them out from under our feet in the kitchen. That is, if you don't mind my help?"

"I'd love it," Jax said, "since I can't play football."

"Next year, darlin', Mo and I will hold the babies and you can join the game," Fred promised.

#*#*#*#*#

The house was soon full and overflowing with friends and family, and the day passed quickly with laughter and groans of overindulgence in the food spilling from every available surface of the kitchen.

"You ever get tired of emergency medicine, I have a job for you," Kamekona said, nodding his
approval at Jax. "I love a woman who isn't afraid to use butter."

"Simply marvelous," Rachel said. "Now, you look like you should be off your feet, Jax. Sit, enjoy the game - Renee and I will supervise clean up." She handed Charles Nolan off to Danny, who plopped next to Jax on the sofa.

Charles Nolan rested his head on Danny's shoulder, his thumb in his mouth, while one chubby hand reached curiously toward Jax's curls. He tangled his fist in her hair and chortled.

"Hey, it's humid," Jax said, grinning at him. "Don't make fun." She traced the back of her finger over his soft cheek, and he reached for her with both hands. She looked at Danny uncertainly.

"He wants you to hold him," Danny said. "I'm old news, but his pretty Aunt Jax is a novelty. Here."

Charles Nolan sat on Jax's lap, babbling up at her and batting at her hair. She held him awkwardly at first, but then settled in to bouncing him gently on her knees. He grinned up at her, toothless, and then broke into a huge yawn. Danny nodded in approval as she lifted him to her shoulder and rubbed his back. His little thumb popped back into his mouth, and he tucked his head into her neck and closed his eyes with a contented sigh.

"Oh," Jax said softly, her eyes wide as she looked at Danny.

"There ya go," Danny said quietly, smiling back at her. "See? Now it won't even matter if the Jets lose."

A few minutes later, Danny felt a warm weight against his shoulder, and looked over to see Jax sound asleep, still securely holding the sleeping baby. He heard the muted sound of a camera shutter, and looked up to see Steve grinning at him over his cell phone.

The smell of coffee drifted up to the bedroom, and Jax stretched, smiling. She slipped out of bed, grabbing Steve’s hoodie and wrapping it around her, and padded down the stairs quietly. There was no sound coming from the babies’ room, and she couldn’t remember if that was because they were sleeping, or because they hadn’t been born yet.

She should know. That was something she should know.

She put a hand on her stomach, looking down in confusion and then horror, as she saw the purple silk and felt the smooth texture under her hand.

WoFat appeared in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Jacqueline," he said. "Would you like some coffee? Come now, you know it smells wonderful, and you can have all the caffeine you want, now. You just need to ask for it. Ask me for coffee, Jacqueline. Ask me for everything you need. Your very life is in my hands, your very existence . . . your soul . . . your body . . ."

"Jax, you're safe, I've got you," Steve murmured, gently capturing her hands and holding them against his chest. He wrapped one strong arm around her, pulling her to him, tucking her face into his neck. "Breathe, ku'uipo, it's me. You're safe. You're home."

"The babies are quiet," Jax mumbled. "I don't - are they asleep?"

"The babies aren't here yet," Steve said. His hand drifted down, strong and warm, and splayed against her stomach. "They're still safe and sound." He bit his lip in the dark, concentrating, until he felt them move.

"I should know that," Jax whispered. "What the hell is wrong with me? It . . . it seemed so real. They - they were just quiet, and I wanted to get coffee, before they woke up, but you weren't here - he was here, and I don't know where they were -"

"Shhh," he murmured, his hand coming back up to stroke her hair gently, cradling her head against his shoulder. "It was a nightmare, it's over."

"Did I wake Mary up?" she asked, fretting.

"It's okay, it doesn't matter if you did," he said.

"I have trouble keeping roommates," Jax said. "In New York. Rent, it's so expensive, but - no one wants to live with me, I drive everyone away. I wake up screaming, or I put my hand at someone's throat if they come in the kitchen too fast. No one stays."

"I'm not a roommate," Steve said patiently. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying."

"I need to pee," Jax whispered.

Steve chuckled. "Of course you do." He loosened his hold on her, confused when she didn't move to get out of their bed. "What's wrong?"

"Turn on the light?" she whispered. "I'm . . . I need to see the door, I need to see that . . ."

"Okay," he said quickly. He reached out and turned on the lamp next to his side of the bed. A soft
glow filled the room. "There. If you hear anything at all at the door, it's just Pupule."

"It was so real," she whispered again.

He kissed her forehead gently, and slid out of the bed. He came around to her side and sat down, reaching for her shoulder and gently nudging her over. She looked up at him, and then past him, nervously. Keeping his movements slow and deliberate, he stood and went to the door and opened it, smiling softly at Jax.

"I'm sorry, I'm being stupid," Jax said.

"No, you aren't, and no apologies," he said. "I know how real it can seem. You're awake now, and you're safe."

"Steve?" Mary's soft voice came up the stairs.

"We're okay, Mare," Steve said. He closed the door carefully.

Jax untangled herself from the sheets and padded to the bathroom. She emerged, her eyes red rimmed, pale, and shaky. Steve wrapped his arms around her.

"I've got you," he said. She nodded against his chest. "You need anything to eat? Drink?"

"No," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Shhhh," he murmured. "Can you go back to sleep?"

She shrugged, and allowed him to guide her back to the bed. He held the covers up and she slipped in, sighing as he tucked the light blanket around her securely. He turned off his lamp and then eased his body in behind her, slowly.

"This okay?" he asked, wrapping an arm around her.

She nodded, but he could still feel the tension radiating off her. He let his fingers drift over the curve of her stomach in absent circles.

"I couldn't fight him," she whispered. "I was completely helpless."

"You did good, Jax," he murmured. "You stayed calm, you stayed alive."

"I was so scared," she whispered into the dark. "Oh, God, Steve, he has your mom."

"Hey, it's a completely different scenario," he said. "It's not the same. She's going to be okay, Jax, it's not the same. Shhh, I've got you."

"I'm so tired," she murmured.

"I know, I know you are," he said, his voice soft and warm in her ear. "Sleep. You can sleep, Jax, I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

####

Jax sighed and stretched. Her eyes still felt gritty, her muscles still tense. At least it was morning, and she could get up . . . put another day behind her, and not worry about sleeping again until later.

"Good morning," Steve mumbled, kissing the back of her neck. "Did you at least get a couple more
"I did," she said. "I will never, never take sleep for granted again."

His hand slid over the curve of her stomach. "Rest up," he said. "These nightmares will pass, Jax. They will. And then we're going to be sleep deprived for a really, really wonderful reason. Two reasons." He left his hand in place, waiting to feel the babies kick.

"And they're off," Jax murmured, as she felt the small movements.

"I can't get over it," Steve whispered. "It's amazing. I can't wait to meet them."

"Ow," Jax said, wincing. "Okay, one of your little ninja babies just aimed a direct hit to the bladder." She launched herself from the bed and headed for the bathroom.

"Why are they my babies when they make you run to the bathroom?" Steve called after her.

"That's the way it works, McGarrett," she called back. "Even I know that much."

#*#*#*#*

Mary sat in one of the chairs overlooking the water, the early morning breeze ruffling through her sleep-tousled hair. She held her mother's letter in one hand, her coffee in the other.

"Hey, Mare," Steve said quietly, as he sat down next to her. He took a long sip of his own coffee. "Thanks for making coffee."

"Figured . . . everyone would need it. Especially Jax. She okay?" Mary asked. "It was bad, wasn't it?"

"It was," Steve said. "She's still recovering, physically, from the sleep deprivation, which makes it even worse. But . . . it will get better. This helps." He raised his mug to her in salute.

"How did I not realize how amazing the coffee is here?" she asked, smiling at him.

"You were really, really young when you left," Steve said.

"So were you," she replied. "You were only sixteen, Steve. You couldn't have done anything differently. I'm - I'm really sorry I was so angry, when you told me. I just . . . I can't yell at mom, or at dad, and so I lashed out at you."

"It's okay, Mare, I understand," he said.

She shook her head. "You're too damn quick to take responsibility for things that aren't your fault, and let people take their anger out on you. Is that a Navy thing or a Steve thing?"

"Mary, I don't -"

"Yes, you do," she said. "Jax knows it, too. She feels terrible, you know, about how snappy she was when she came back from . . . from that horrible man."

"She talked to you about it?" Steve asked, surprised.

"Oh, shit, I didn't mean to get her in trouble," Mary said. "It's probably classified."

"No, it's fine - it's good. She doesn't talk about stuff enough," he said. "I'm glad."
"Well, I'm sort of all up in your business these days," Mary said.

"We're glad you're here," Steve said firmly. "This was the plan - we wanted you here, even before -" he gestured to the letter in her hand.

She sighed and looked at the letter, folded neatly. "Sorry, I know you need to take these in today. I just . . . I don't know, I guess I just wanted to hold it for a few minutes before it becomes - state's evidence, or whatever."

"I get it," he said. "I'm sorry, Mare, that we need to take it in . . . they'll give it back, I promise. But it needs to be analyzed. Handwriting, fiber . . . she was a CIA agent, it's very possible that cryptology will find something significant."

Mary was quiet for a long moment. "So, you take after her, then, I guess. With all your ninja skill shit. I guess it's genetic."

"I don't have it in me to do what she did, Mary," Steve said. "I've been offered . . . roles. Positions. Intelligence was as far as I was willing to go, and even that crossed into some gray areas that I'm glad to be done with."

"So, you're not going to fake your death someday, disappear, leave me and Jax here with your little spawn?" Mary said. She tried to keep her tone light, but Steve could see tears in her eyes.

"Mary -" he said, hesitating, choosing his words carefully. "I'm still in the reserves. I might be called to participate in something classified. I can't promise that I can always tell you and Jax exactly where I am or what I'm doing. But I can promise you that I will always do everything in my power to come back to you."

"What if the Navy orders you to go, like, to the other side of the world, and do something dangerous, and not tell us, and -"

"Mary. Mary, if it comes to that, if - if they don't allow me to turn down the assignment, I'll resign my commission," he said. "There was a time, yes, when the Navy was my entire life. My family is more important to me, now."

"It wasn't more important to mom," Mary said. "She left us, Steve."

"It was complicated, Mare," he sighed. "She'd been compromised. People were going to come after her, bad people. She was trying to protect us."

"Yeah, well, it didn't work for her, so don't get any ideas about it working for you," Mary said. "No disappearing acts."

"No disappearing acts," Steve promised. He stood, and leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "I gotta go, Mare," he said softly. He held out his hand for the letter and she handed it to him reluctantly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I would have brought both Mom and Jax home, if I could. Mom didn't let me, Mary. You have to believe me."

"I do, Steve," she said earnestly. "I never doubted you. Go, do your Navy SEAL shit. Jax and I have some quality girl time to enjoy today, we don't need your testosterone hovering around here."

#*#*#*#*#
Jax stood at the kitchen sink, watching Steve and Mary. She saw Mary place her letter in Steve's hand, watched as he laughed at something she said, and then amble toward the house. He came in the back door and closed it quietly behind him.

"Hey," he said, placing the letter carefully next to his, with his phone and keys. "You okay?" he asked, frowning slightly as he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her head against his chest.

She nodded against him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "I miss Billy," she said.

"Oh, ku'uipo, I know you do," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she said. She smiled up at him. "It's something the two of you had in common, being wonderful older brothers. I'm glad Mary is back home."

"What are you two doing today?" he asked, pouring himself a travel mug of coffee.

"I'm not sure," Jax said. "Mary mentioned wanting to scope out the physical location of a couple of places she's put in job applications. Probably Kamekona's for lunch."

"Tofu?" Steve smiled.

"Maybe," Jax laughed. "I like the idea of shrimp but then I smell it . . . anyway. You'll be at Pearl Hickam today?"

"Yeah, probably all day unless Five-O gets something big," he said. "I'm turning the letters over today . . . getting oriented to the new offices, surveillance equipment. I still haven't wrapped my brain around this . . . heading off to work with Naval Intel to coordinate with the CIA in regards to my mother, the rogue agent."

Jax blinked up at him.

"Wow. And I thought I was the one with mommy issues," she said.

His chuckle turned into a riotous laugh as he picked her up and twirled her around the kitchen. Mary stood in the back doorway, smiling broadly at the sight. Steve stopped swirling Jax and bent over her, one hand slipping into her hair while the other steadied her at the small of her back. He kissed her gently.

"I gotta go," he whispered, but instead of moving, he kissed her again, lingering.

Mary tried to back silently out of the doorway, but she lost her balance, slamming the screen in the process.

"Sorry, it's me," she said, quickly and clearly. She'd learned, in her first week back home, that it was in everyone's best interest not to startle Steve or Jax. "You were just laughing, and having so much fun, and it was just so good to see that, I didn't want to spoil it, and then . . . well." She grinned wickedly. "Then you were really having fun and I tried to slip back out but I'm not a ninja freak like my brother."

"It's okay," Steve said. "I really do need to leave, and you spared me the temptation to be really, really late." He kissed Jax again, quickly, before gathering up his belongings and heading out the front door.

"So," Mary said, smiling at Jax. "Good morning."
Jax laughed and poured Mary a cup of coffee. "Yeah, sorry."

"Don't be," Mary said. "It's been, honestly, kind of a buzz kill around here. I mean, I get it. You got nabbed - on purpose - our mom shows up - you were a zombie for a few days . . . and you know, Thanksgiving was awesome but we were still . . . I don't know. Kind of in shock, I guess. Not that I'm comparing how I feel to how you and Steve must."

"No, Mary," Jax said softly. "You get to feel how you feel. It's not a competition. I know you're hurt, and confused, and angry -"

"Ah. Steve mentioned . . ."

"Your impressive vocabulary and very decent left cross?" Jax asked, grinning.

"Hey, if he wasn't such a giraffe, that punch might have connected," Mary said. "You get to feel how you feel? That doesn't sound very Navy SEAL or NYPD SWAT. That sounds . . . Dannyesque."

Jax laughed. "Yeah, yeah it does, and it is but - he's right. And our - our therapist . . ."

"Hey, I grew up in LA, remember?" Mary said. "No need to feel awkward about therapy. In fact, I'll go with you."

"You'd do that?" Jax asked.

"Of course," Mary said. "Any time. Look I don't . . . I tease about you and Steve, you know, but . . . I do hear things. At night."

"Oh, Lord," Jax said, blushing.

"No, well, yeah - whatever, it explains twins, I guess - but I mean I know you both have some pretty intense nightmares," Mary said. "It's better, now, than it was when I was here last time. But still, last night -"

"Yeah," Jax said quietly. She remembered screaming, remembered Steve shaking her awake.

"Sorry." She put her mug down as a sudden thought struck her.

"Is that - is that why you offered to come, and stay for a while, after - shit. Did Steve tell you about - do you think we might hurt the babies? You think I might hurt -"

"No!" Mary said. "No, I swear, Jax - that never crossed -"

"Shit," Jax whispered. "Mary. What if I hurt the babies? What if I get caught up in a flashback and don't -"

"Jax. You won't. You and Steve . . . you won't. You won't," Mary said.

"You'll stay, for a while?" Jax asked.

"Of course, that was the plan," Mary said.

"We need to talk. With Steve," Jax said. "We need to teach you how to . . . how to slow us down, how to -"

"Hey, we will," Mary said. "That sounds like a good plan, just in case . . ."
Jax sat down with a thud onto the kitchen stool. "Mary, I'm scared shitless. Last night, I didn't - even after I woke up, for a few minutes - I couldn't figure out if the babies had even been born yet. What if I get that confused . . . Mary, what if I hurt the babies? I - I think it could happen. Don't tell Steve, he has enough to worry about."

Mary shook her head. "No way. I'm not keeping secrets from Steve. That's one thing this family has had enough of already. I say you talk to Steve, maybe. . . maybe you talk to your therapist about it."

"You say that like it's . . . I don't know, normal or something," Jax said. "To talk to a therapist."

"L.A, remember?" Mary grinned. She wrapped her small hand around Jax's wrist. "And it is normal, or at least it should be, for people who have been through the things you and my brother have been through. Believe me, I had a few sessions after you shoved me under the house and let those guys throw you in a van and take you away."

"You did? That's good," Jax said.

"Damn straight, so it's good for you, too," Mary said emphatically. "But that's for another day. Today, we start holiday shopping. I'm going to buy my niece and nephew something noisy and ridiculous because I'm going to be the cool aunt."

Steve sat in the cab of his truck outside the building. He rolled the windows down, and the gentle breeze drifted through. He held the letters carefully in his hands, and read through them one more time.

Dear Mary,

Don't be angry with Steve. Remember, he was just a kid, too, when all of this happened. He couldn't have done anything different, and neither could you . . . and neither could your father. I wish I could see you, explain in person. I wish I could know about all the things I missed. I thought I was doing the right thing, and protecting you . . . I'm starting to see that I was wrong, and that it might not have helped. Please, know that my intentions were good. I will do my best to close this chapter safely, and permanently, and then I can only hope that you will give me the opportunity to be a mother to you once more.

All my love,

Mom

Dear Steven,

I am so sorry that it is under these circumstances that I am finally able to tell you that I'm sorry. Sorry for leaving you and Mary, and your father . . . I did what I did to protect you, but even that fell short. I know that you have served your country with honor and bravery, and I hope that someday you'll understand that I tried to do the same. I am sorry that it is because of my actions that your wife is in danger. I can't believe I have missed so much. Please try to make Mary understand. Please try to help her understand that the right choices are often the most difficult. I will try to come back to you, back to both of you - all of you - if it is in my power to do so. But, I will always and forever choose to protect you, in any way that I can. If that means I can't come back . . . I love you. Take care of your family. Hold them tight. Don't let go.

Love forever,
Steve looked at the bottom of the page, at the words obviously scrawled in haste, added to the letter at the last minute.

That piece of shit Joe waited until I got to the island to tell me that your wife, the person being held hostage for my exchange, is carrying your children - twins. I'm to be a grandmother? I am not at all certain as to this development. I am not grandmother material. Still. I am happy for you, son. Know that I will do everything in my power to get them back to you. Twins, really Steven?

Steve chuckled. He could hear the exasperation in his mom's voice, as if she were in the truck with him. They'd had so little time . . .

He jumped as a soft knock on his window interrupted his musings.

"Hey, you okay, Smooth Dog?" Nick asked, leaning his forearm against the cab of Steve's truck.

"Yeah, I'm good," Steve said. He rolled up the windows and climbed out of the truck. "New digs are nice. Windows, even."

"Yeah, which is how we noticed you were a little slow on the exit," Nick said. "Sure you're okay?"

"I'm handing over letters from my mother, who I thought was dead," Steve said, "so they can be analyzed by Naval Intelligence and the CIA, to see if she left any breadcrumbs for us to follow before she went off the grid with an international arms dealer - in exchange for the return of my wife, pregnant with our twins. I'm not sure that I'm in the universe of 'okay' right now, but I'm ready to get to work."

"Fair enough," Nick said, slapping Steve on the back.

##

Mary flirted shamelessly with Kamekona and scored shave ice on the house for both herself and Jax. She carried the two heaping servings - one cherry and one watermelon - to the table, grinning.

"I don't know how you do it," Jax laughed.

"What, bat my eyelashes to get free food?" Mary asked, batting her eyelashes at Jax.

"Yeah, that," Jax said. She closed her eyes and sighed in satisfaction as the sweet, cool ice landed on her tongue.

"Come on, you never charmed your way out of a ticket?" Mary said.

"I drove my way out of tickets," Jax said, smirking. "Before I discovered law enforcement. Nah, I never understood how to do the whole flirting thing. It was just better if I didn't try."

Mary nodded. "You do know that 'Smooth Dog' has to be an ironic nickname, right?"

"Yes, that's been established," Jax said, laughing.

"It's one of the things that makes the two of you really perfect for each other," Mary said quietly. "I . . . I met Catherine, once. Everyone thought she and Steve were a good fit but . . . well. I could spot the 'charm' a mile away. Steve didn't need someone who could turn it on and off at will. He's . . . bless him. He's brilliant, fucking brilliant, I know this but - not when it comes to girls. Never was, not in high school, and I suspect - not that I was around much - not ever."
"I don't know how to play at anything, Mary," Jax said. "I couldn't if I tried. I didn't come here expecting . . . I was running away."

"And Steve caught you," Mary said, smiling at her. "I know. And I've never seen him happier. But I look forward to seeing if maybe, just maybe, that stupid goofy grin of his gets even bigger when these babies get here. Now, finish your shave ice - because Lord knows you didn't eat much of anything else, which, gotta say, worries me - and we are going to go buy some baby things. And - okay, please don't be mad but -"

"What?" Jax asked.

"I think, with Kono busy with that case with Malia . . . okay, someone has to step up and find you some more clothes that fit," Mary said. "Seriously, are you wearing one of Steve's shirts right now?"

"There's one other thing to discuss," Nick said quietly. "But not here. Not in uniform."

"Agreed," Steve said. "My place, seven. I'll throw some steaks on the grill."

"Your sister is home, and Jax. Are you sure . . ." Catherine trailed off, hesitating.

"Pretty sure they've earned the right to be read in to an unofficial gathering of friends," Steve said.

"But there are things about this situation that you can't -" Catherine started.

"Classified, right?" Steve said. He stood up abruptly, his chair scraping loudly on the floor behind him. "I'm aware, Catherine. I've been in the Navy even longer than you have. I outrank you, come to think of it. I am damn well aware of what I can and can not tell my wife and my sister. But tell me - what do they not know already? What have they not witnessed firsthand? They came into my house - my house, Catherine, and they tried to take Mary. WoFat had his filthy hands on -" He shook his head, stopping, and left the room.

Nick sighed deeply and looked at Catherine across the table.

"Flip for it?" Catherine asked.

"Nah, I got it," Nick said. He brushed his fingers across her shoulder, gently, as he left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

He found Steve standing alone in a darkened communications room. The plasma screens flickered and flashed with data, maps, dots . . . it was mesmerizing, even if you didn't know what you were looking at.

"Hey," Nick said quietly. He stood next to Steve, their shoulders almost touching. They fell in next to each other as second nature, years of training and missions ingrained into their muscle memory.

"Sorry, man," Steve said. His eyes stayed fixed on the screens.

"Look, if there's something that you and Jax elected not to disclose . . ." Nick said carefully. "Damn it, Dog, did that piece of shit -"

"No," Steve said. "No, but . . . he got inside her head, man. The first time, yeah, she took a beating, took a shot . . . picking her up off that forest floor, it felt like . . . gathering up a wounded animal. Sometimes I think . . . maybe that time was easier."
"That time - that time that she almost died, even after you got her back?" Nick asked.

"Yeah, well. You know what they say," Steve sighed.

"The only easy day was yesterday," Nick replied, automatically, the SEAL motto rolling off his tongue.

They stood in silence for a few moments.

"How much of this is WoFat?" Steve asked. His eyes still hadn't left the screens. "Suspected? Confirmed?"

"Suspected," Nick said. "Some of it is too unlikely to really even warrant surveillance but . . . we needed to feel like we were doing everything we possibly could."

"We."

"Catherine and I," Nick said.

"Yeah, about that," Steve said. He turned, finally, and looked at Nick. "Who's idea was it?"

Nick started to protest, then sighed. "What gave it away?"

"A dozen missions with you, half that many R&Rs in various ports of call around the world," Steve said. "And . . . well. I know a few of Catherine's tells. Who's idea was it?"

"Mine," Nick said.

Steve nodded slowly. Nick stood, waiting, not sure if he should be prepared to dodge a punch or launch into an explanation, until Steve's hand came to rest gently on his shoulder.

"Don't let her keep beating herself up, okay?" Steve said. "She - she got sucked into something way over her head, with the SAD. And . . . then she got more invested than she meant to . . . more invested than I did. She may have misled me, but . . . I hurt her. I didn't mean to, but that doesn't change the fact. So . . . make sure she understands, it's time for her to move on. It's time for her to find happiness. And if that's with you, then . . . that's good. That's really good, Bullfrog."

Nick let out an exhale of relief.

"Yeah? So - we're good?" he asked.

"We're good," Steve said firmly. "Look - I need to get out of here. See you tonight?"

"Go," Nick nodded. "Tonight. Hey, think Jax would make those potatoes? With the green things?"

"Chives," Steve said. "They're called chives -"

"Oh, like you knew what they were called, before she told you . . . "
Chapter 9

Steve's long stride carried him from the truck to the front porch. The house was quiet when he entered, but Jax's Supra was out front, so he called out her name softly. Mary appeared, coming out of the babies' room and holding her finger to her lips.

"Hey," Steve whispered. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, she looked axed, brah, I convinced her to go take a nap," Mary said. "We got baby stuff, come see."

Steve followed her down the hall, grinning.

"What?" she demanded, looking up at him.

"You, talking like you never left," he said. "Lemme guess, lunch at Kamekona's truck?"

Mary grinned self-consciously. "It comes back to you, like riding a bike, I guess."

"Hey," Steve said, tugging her hair gently. "I'm glad. God, I missed you, Mare."

"Okay, you big lug," Mary said, "don't make me cry and get all snotty and blotchy. Look, we got little tiny board shorts." She reached into the closet and pulled out two impossibly small sets of board shorts and rash guards, one in bright blue and one in a soft green.

Steve held them reverently in his hands. "How do they even - who makes these?"

Mary laughed softly. "Leprechauns, maybe, I don't know. Aren't they stinking cute? They had other things, you know, like little bikini type things, for girls but - Jax said why did girls get salt rash and an early start on skin cancer while boys were nicely protected, and really, I couldn't argue with that logic."

"Because it's good logic," Jax said, her voice warm and sleep roughened, as she padded silently into the room.

"Shit - bells!" Mary exclaimed. "I'm putting freaking bells on the both of you."

"Hey," Steve said, reaching out an arm for Jax. She tucked herself into his side, wrapping her arms around his waist. "These are perfect," he said. "You feeling okay?"

"I was tired," Jax said, yawning. "I got some rest."

"You didn't sleep," he said quietly.

"I rested," Jax repeated, a warning edge to her voice.

He dropped the subject, partly because that edge to her voice never boded well for him, and partly because she would probably sleep better at night if she didn't sleep during the day, and, well, mostly because he didn't want to ruin the moment. The three of them, looking at baby clothes, Jax safe and warm and solid in his arms.

Then he remembered they were having company for dinner, and sighed.

"What is it?" Jax asked, looking up at him. "How'd it go today?"
"We don't know anything new," he said. "But . . . we need to talk about Joe. Off the record. Off the base. I thought Nick and Catherine should come here tonight, if that's okay. I picked up steaks."

Jax nodded. "Of course. Let me guess, Nick wants potatoes?"

"He did mention those," Steve said, grinning. "If you're up to it."

"Easy," Jax said.

"I'll put together a salad," Mary offered. "And help with dishes and stuff. Wait, unless - should I leave? This is probably classified Navy shit, right?"

"You stay," Steve said firmly. He reached out his other arm and pulled her close, too. "We're family."

"Joe was family," Mary said quietly. "Mom and Joe . . . they lied to us."

Steve kissed the top of her head. He couldn't argue the fact. "Mary, Joe is in huge trouble with the Navy. His career is over. He'll be lucky to avoid time in the brig. He gave it up, all of it, to save Jax. We owe him loyalty, if not trust. Can you understand that?"

Mary nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I understand. Okay, let go, McClingy, I'm going to go start the salad."

"You sure you're okay with this?" he asked Jax, quietly. He felt her nodding again, her cheek snuggled against his chest. She felt warm and relaxed in his arms. "You had a good day with Mare?"

"I did," she said. "It was . . . it was really good, to do something normal. Or, what I think normal is supposed to be like. It feels weird, walking around Honolulu without a badge and a gun."

He looked down at her, skeptical.

"A badge and a gun that everyone can see," she amended, smiling. "I carry the Taurus. That's okay, right?"

"Of course," he said. "You have a concealed carry, and technically, Jax, you're still part of Five-O. That's never going to change. You're still listed as a consultant."

"I am?" she asked, beaming up at him.

"You - I thought you knew, I thought we discussed this," he said. "You reviewed surveillance for Malia's case."

"No, you control freak - apparently, I was pressed into service, just like Danny," she said, exasperated.

"I told you to keep the badge," Steve argued.

"I thought that was . . . metaphorical," Jax said, starting to gesture wildly.

Steve stared down at her, a slow smile spreading across his face.

"What?" she said, suspicious.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed. His hand hovered over her stomach and he glanced at her, always just the slightest bit hesitant. She rolled her eyes but nodded, smiling, and he rested his palm on the curve.
"Thirty one weeks," she said. "They're getting feisty."

He nodded, smiling in delight as a distinct flutter moved under his hand.

"You don't think they - what if they thought we were fighting, just now?" Jax whispered.

"Nah," he said. "You have a temper and I'm stubborn. They're probably already used to that. Plus, they hear their Uncle Danny, and you sound just like him."

"I should go cook the potatoes," Jax said. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm looking forward to a little more time doing routine things, you know? I think . . . probably, enough with the excitement."

"Until the babies get here," Steve said, grinning.

"Catherine, I swear, I can hear your teeth grinding," Nick said, glancing at her in alarm.

"I can't believe he knew," she mumbled, covering her face with her hands. "How the hell did he know?"

Nick shrugged. "We've been on dozens of missions together, Cath. You just - you pick things up when you live in each others pockets like that."

That made her feel some better. It was Nick, then, who gave them away.

"He said he knew your tells, too," Nick added, not remotely helpful.

"Oh God," Catherine groaned again.

"Yeah, I'm thinking that might be one of the tells," Nick said smugly. "You said that a lot, the other night, when . . ." his breath was knocked out of him in a whoosh. "Hey. For such a tiny person you have a deceptively strong hand," he complained.

"Shut up," Catherine said. "I hate you."

"Nah, you don't," Nick said confidently.

She sighed. "Maybe just a little."

They pulled into the driveway behind Steve's Silverado. Nick reached over and wrapped his hand around hers.

"We're here about Joe, Catherine," he said. "Steve knows, he's cool with it, it's all good. You don't need to feel self-conscious."

She shifted in her seat to face him. "I crossed a lot of lines, Nick. Steve probably hasn't told you everything. I'll need to, if this thing . . . if this thing between us is going to go anywhere, I - I did things I'm not proud of, I violated Jax's privacy and used that information to . . . I don't know where my head was."

"He told me you would do this," Nick said quietly. "He also told me not to let you. It's in the past, Catherine, let it go. Everyone else is."

She looked at him, her eyes dark and troubled.
"Try to let it go," he said, smiling at her. "Can you do that much? Try?"

"I can do that," she said finally. "Okay, let's get this over with."

He held her hand as they walked up to the door, and she refused to admit that she clung to him like a small child.

Steve answered the door, ushering them inside with a grin. He was wearing an apron and holding a set of tongs.

"Very nice," Nick said dryly, raising an eyebrow. "Did Jax finally teach you some kitchen protocol?"

"The apron? Nah, that was Danny," Steve said. "Kept bitching about me cooking in clothes that were covered in trace. Come on out to the lanai, I'll throw the steaks on."

Mary was on the lanai, setting the table.

"Mary, I think you've met Nick," Steve said. "And you remember Catherine."

Mary shook hands with each of them, awkwardly. She had met Nick, once, not that he'd paid any attention to Steve's baby sister. And of course, she remembered Catherine. They'd bumped into each other in the kitchen, once, in the early morning hours of one of Catherine ports of call.

"Jax will be down in a minute," Mary blurted, for lack of anything else to say.

Catherine remembered the bottle of wine that she was clutching in the hand that hadn't been clinging to Nick, and wondered when she'd become so pathetic.

"I brought some wine," she said hesitantly, holding the bottle out to Mary.

"Thanks," Mary said. "Oh, this looks very nice. I'll grab glasses."

"Make yourselves comfortable," Steve instructed. "I forgot pepper, I'll be right back."

Steve ducked back into the kitchen, just in time to see Jax coming in, heading for the stove. He stopped, staring at her, his head tilted in appreciation. She was wearing a shirt he'd not seen before over the familiar denim shorts. It was simple, a racer back tank in a soft, flowing batik fabric, but the cut of it managed to emphasize both her soft curves and the lean strength of her shoulders and arms, the old injuries long healed thanks to their shared love of swimming.

"Holy shit," he murmured. "Can we send everyone home?"

She ducked her head self-consciously. "Mary picked it out, is it okay?"

"Hell yeah," he said. He traced the back of his fingers over her shoulder, gently.

"How long does it take to find pepper?" Mary demanded, pushing in through the kitchen door. She stopped, grinning, when she saw them. "Told you," she said, smiling at Jax. "Steve, don't leave me out there with - with GI Joe and GI Jane." She flounced back out the door.

Steve grabbed the pepper. "Guess we better talk about Joe and feed everyone . . . so we can send them home."

Jax shook her head as she grabbed the potatoes. "Hopeless. You are hopeless." But her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes sparkled, and something felt right and settled in Steve for the first time
since he'd found her empty Supra on the side of the road.

"Hey, Jax," Nick said, tilting his Longboard at her in greeting.

"Catherine brought wine," Mary said, a bit reproachfully.

"I'm sorry," Catherine said. "I wasn't thinking -"

"I can have a few sips," Jax said. "Even if I couldn't, it's lovely. Thank you."

They filled their plates and spent a few minutes chatting over the food.

"I realize you guys are in an impossible situation," Steve said, nodding at Nick and Catherine. "How much heat is on you to bring Joe in?"

"Focus is still on WoFat," Nick said. "For the moment. At some point, the Navy is going to want to hold Joe accountable."

"Not to mention, he does have a lot of information regarding Shelburne," Catherine said. "Which means he could have insight into WoFat. Where he might go, how he might be tracked . . ."

Steve rubbed his hand over his face. "I don't understand why Joe didn't just come clean, come to me . . . I wonder if it might have -" he broke off.

"Don't," Nick said quietly. "You know as well as I do, second guessing won't accomplish anything. The current situation is this - WoFat is at the top of the Navy's - and every other agencies' - most wanted list. Shelburne is with him, we presume safe. Joe is wanted as a material witness regarding both of them. If you want access to Joe before the Navy . . ."

"You can't risk your careers for me," Steve said. "Not any more than you already have."

"You people are idiots," Mary blurted. "All of you."

They looked at her in surprise.

"Seriously. Navy this, access that . . . as if the entire universe is enlisted," Mary said. "As if playing by the rules and following orders has accomplished anything."

"Mary," Steve said, his voice low and warning.

"No, she's right," Jax said quietly. "What? The three of you get to call all the shots, because you're Navy? What about Five-O? What about immunity and means? What about ohana? Why isn't Danny here?"

Steve, Nick, and Catherine exchanged glances.

"Okay, you have a point," Steve said.

"Damn straight, I have a point," Jax said. "Joe wasn't in uniform when we came to get you back from Hesse. The Navy wasn't here when WoFat tried to grab Mary. The Navy couldn't find Shelburne, but Joe could - and he did, and if he hadn't, I wouldn't be here today. I'd be with WoFat."

"I get that, Jax, I do," Nick said. "But Joe is a Naval officer. He was under orders from the Navy to search both for Shelburne and for WoFat. He withheld key evidence that could have led to both. Had he come clean . . . there may have been no need to trade Shelburne for you. WoFat wouldn't have had a reason to go after Mary, or take you as leverage. Or order Steve tortured for information."
"Okay, so Commander Joe White was in defiance of his orders," Mary said. "But Uncle Joe . . . Uncle Joe tried to keep us from finding out that our mom was a CIA agent, and he saved Jax's life."

"He wasn't going to kill her," Catherine said.

Jax looked at her for a long moment. "No . . . no, he had other plans for me."

For the second time that evening, Catherine felt completely foolish. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean -"

"So, Danny's always complained that you get to act like a SEAL, and do crazy SEAL shit, even as leader of a civilian task force," Jax said. "He bitched about you so much those first six months I figured he had a crush on you or something. Anyway, it's because Five-O has immunity and means. You're Naval Reserves, you take orders from the Navy. But you're also Five-O, which means you get to make your own rules."

Steve rubbed a hand over his face, considering. "Yeah."

The corners of Nick's mouth twitched up. "It's a hell of a weird situation to be in," he said slowly. "Lines get blurred."

"Joe has worked closely with Five-O," Steve said. "And Five-O has worked closely with the Navy. This whole Shelburne, WoFat situation . . . ."

Jax smiled. "Could be difficult to say which agency Joe was working for, at any given point."

"It won't absolve him of having withheld information from the Navy," Catherine warned. "There will be consequences, there's no way around that. When we find him, when the Navy catches up with him . . . ."

"It might keep him out of the brig," Nick said.

Steve chuckled. "Joe won't be found unless he wants to be. But yeah . . . in the event that he wants to come in from the cold, maybe we can at least have a card up our sleeve."

"We have to look for him," Catherine argued. "If we don't, we're throwing away our careers."

"I didn't say not to look for him," Steve said mildly. "You can look for him all you want. First, there's no way the Navy wants him worse than it wants WoFat. The politics don't play - expend more resources on bringing in a decorated Navy SEAL, or on an internationally wanted arms dealer? No contest. You're not going to be allocated the resources to find Joe. Second, like I said - he won't be found unless he wants to be. Don't sweat it."

"But you can contact him," Nick said. "Theoretically. Rhetorically."

Steve shrugged. "I answer to the Navy, too. Wouldn't want to be accused of withholding information."

"Well, I'm not a soldier," Mary said stubbornly. "I'm not even freaking Five-O, which I still say is a stupid name. I can talk to whoever I damn well please."

Steve looked at her with fond amusement.

"Oh, don't look at me like some condescending big brother," Mary said. "Mom showed me the radio under the house."
Jax laughed at loud at the astonished expressions on everyone's face.

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Steve stood next to Jax at the sink, washing up the dishes. He had been quiet for a while, turning something over, and Jax had been waiting patiently for him to work through whatever it was.

"I'm sorry," he said, finally.

"Hmm. What for?" Jax asked.

"Oh, shit, there's multiple options?" he asked, wincing.

She laughed. "Yeah, well, tell me whatcha got so far."

"I'm sorry for acting as if I thought Five-O didn't have a role to play in all of this," he said.
"Officially or otherwise. It's . . . it's still new to me, doing things outside the Navy."

"But Five-O was formed specifically to bring in your father's murderers," Jax said. "Hesse. And people like Hesse - like Novak. Like WoFat. And you were given immunity and means."

"The Navy did pull rank, more than once," Steve reminded her. "And while WoFat had you . . . the only thing I was thinking about was getting you back. Chin and Kono were helping secure Malia. It was down to me, Danny, and Grover. But you're right - Danny should have been here tonight. Which brings me back to my apology. I'm sorry for trying to figure everything out from just the Navy angle, and forgetting that Five-O is my ohana. Being a SEAL . . . part of Naval Intelligence . . . I guess it's more deeply embedded than I'd realized. Old habits die hard."

"Apology accepted," Jax said. She swatted him with the dish towel. "And I get it, I do. Just . . . if you decide to go back, to the Navy . . . "

"I'm not -"

"If you do, you have to tell us. Me, Danny . . . Five-O," Jax said. "That's all, I just want to know. Don't just disappear on us."

Steve wrapped his arms around her and held her close. "Mary asked me the same thing. I promise, Jax - no disappearing acts." He traced his fingers over her shoulder blades.

"Get a room," Mary said, waltzing through the kitchen with her hands full of recycling. "Seriously, this is the last of the mess, and I'm going out. Don't wait up."

"Mary, are you sure you -" Steve started.

"Steve. Don't start," Mary said. "I'll be fine, I'll stick with the obvious places. Maybe I'll see if Kono can come with. But I need to go do something normal, something that doesn't involve the Navy and . . . I love you guys but I'm tired of watching hockey games on the DVR."

"I was going to ask if you were okay, and if you were sure you had enough cash," Steve said, arching an eyebrow at her.

"Oh. Yes, thank you," Mary said sheepishly. "I just . . . I'm okay, but this is just too much. I need to go out and not think about it for a while."

"Take the Supra, it's easier to park," Jax said.
"Be careful," Steve added softly.

Mary shot a grateful glance at Jax and grabbed the keys, along with her cellphone, and shoved her feet into a pair of low heeled booties. It might have looked ridiculous on anyone else, but Mary had brought her carefully careless style back with her from L.A, and Steve couldn't help the pang of concern as to how not ridiculous his baby sister looked. He stared after the tail lights of the Supra.

Jax shook her head and smiled at him. "When you're done fretting over Mary, I'll be upstairs," she said. Pupule trotted up the stairs next to her, carefully avoiding her ankles.

Steve turned off the lights and was entering the final number of the alarm code when his subconscious gave him a head slap.

Upstairs, sailor, his brain nudged. Hooyah . . .

Steve took the stairs two at a time, grinning. Pupule's nose scrunched in protest as the bedroom door was rudely shut in his face, and he flopped down on his bed on the landing. Jax smirked at Steve from the door of the bathroom, where she was brushing her teeth, her hair piled in a loose clip at the back of her head, and her face scrubbed clean. He joined her at the sink, his eyes twinkling at hers in the small mirror, grinning lopsidedly at her around his toothbrush.

"Neanderthal," she mumbled good naturedly, as she spit into the sink and dropped her toothbrush into the cup with a resounding clink.

"Guilty as charged," he said cheerfully. He followed her into the bedroom and wrapped his arms around her, holding her against him. His fingers once again traced over the soft skin of her shoulder blades and then toyed with the fabric gathered in the center of her back. "I mentioned I liked this, didn't I?"

"You might have," she said, her words muffled into his chest. She sighed contentedly and wrapped her arms around his waist as his fingers deftly pulled the clip from her hair, allowing her burnished curls to tumble around her face. "It's really comfortable."

"Well, it's important for you to be comfortable," he murmured. His hands drifted down to her waist, his agile fingers undoing the button of her shorts. He paused, taking her shoulders gently and stepping back a bit. She looked up at him. "This okay?" he asked softly. "It's been . . . since WoFat, and . . . I'm happy to just hold you while you sleep, if that's what you need."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's just . . . for a few days there I wasn't always sure what was real and what was . . . I needed to know it was real -"

"Hey, you don't need to explain or apologize," he said, cupping her face with his hands. He bent and kissed her carefully, deepening the kiss as she wrapped a hand around his neck with a delicious little sigh. He slid one hand into her hair, his fingers tangling in the curls, and pulled her close with one hand at the small of her back. He chuckled as the curve of her stomach nudged against him.

"Not funny," she complained. "I can barely reach around you."

"Because you're tiny," he said. "I can reach around you just fine, babies and all." He scooped her up to prove it, depositing her gently on the bed. He tugged her shorts off and shot them precisely into the hamper. Then he tilted her head at her appraisingly.

"What?" she said, just a little breathlessly. Her hands went to the hem of his t-shirt, and she started to tug. He helped her, shrugging out of it, and it joined her shorts in the hamper. Her fingers traced over the ink on his biceps, reacquainting herself with the reassuring swirls of color. "What?" she
demanded, noticing that he was still studying her like she was a puzzle to be solved.

"I, ah . . . think that possibly - and this is good, this is very good, it means everything is progressing according to schedule, I'm sure - but I think that possibly the logistics of this particular mission have, um, changed," he said.

"Well, I seem to recall that this . . . particular mission . . . started with both of us injured," she said. Her deft fingers made short work of the buttons of his cargo pants. "And we managed, with our exceptional backgrounds in field medic training."

"Anatomy and physiology," he said, nodding. "I recall."

"I feel certain that we can navigate the logistics," she whispered, close to his ear, and then her lips were grazing over the soft patch of skin just beneath it.

"I happen to be excellent at navigation," he murmured, his breath hitching.

"Yeah?" she whispered. "Prove it . . ."
Gus eyed Jax suspiciously.

"That's the springiest your step has been since your unfortunate incarceration," she said, putting her hands on her hips and narrowing her eyes at Jax.

Jax snorted with laughter. While most of her co-workers at Tripler had spoken of her hostage ordeal in hushed tones, with worried eyes and overly sympathetic glances, Gus had borrowed a phrase from an old sitcom and plowed ahead, filling Jax's first shifts back at Tripler with comforting, reorienting routine. In just days, Jax was feeling like her feet were back underneath her.

"Well, things are getting back to normal," Jax said, trying to will her cheeks not to give her away.

"Hot damn, back to commandeering the commander, then, are we?" Gus asked loudly, causing two of the orderlies to snicker.

"You are a sexual harassment complaint waiting to happen," Dr. Marks commented mildly, as he handed Gus a stack of charts. "Would you please make follow-up calls to these patients?"

"Absolutely," Gus said, handing the charts to Jax without a second glance.

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"It is damn good to have everyone back in the office, back to normal," Steve said, smiling at the team gathered around the smart table. "We've got the weekend coming up - baring a new case, I want everyone to try to get the hell out of town. We've earned it. How's Malia doing?"

"She's settling back in," Chin said, smiling. "Steadfastly turned down every offer from the US Marshal Service to relocate her. The exposure seems almost non-existent. I, ah, deactivated our listening devices."

"Thank the Good Lord above," Grover muttered.

"Her one disappointment is that she really can't publish the paper that she wrote while she was in the safehouse," Chin continued. "The chief of surgery was truly impressed, but understands her situation. He was one of only two or three people vetted by WITSEC when she was placed at the hospital. He offered to publish her paper under his name. It's a shame . . . but she's content to let the paper speak for itself, and hopefully it will still benefit the medical community."

"Good, that's good," Steve said.

"How are you and Jax doing, boss?" Kono asked. "It's still weird, her not being here."

"She's back to work," Steve said. "We're doing okay, Kono. Not gonna lie - it took us the Thanksgiving holiday and then some to get back on our feet - Jax had to learn to sleep again, and I had a hard time letting her out of my sight - but . . . better. Things are better."

"What's the latest on your mom? And WoFat?" Danny asked. He tried to keep his tone carefully neutral. It wouldn't suit to look like a jealous middle schooler . . . even if that's a bit how he felt, with Steve spending so much of his time at Pearl Hickam, with Nick and Catherine. Sure, it was an honor to have been entrusted with managing the day-to-day operations of Five-O, but everyone knew: Five-O was hollow without Steve filling it.
Steve took a deep breath. "That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to all of you, before we cleared out of here for the weekend. The hunt for WoFat was a joint Five-O and Naval Intel operation. And for a couple days there . . . I lost sight of that."

"It was a chaotic and stressful time, Steve," Chin said gently. "You'd put Kono and me on Malia's case. You and Danny . . . you weren't thinking about the Navy or Five-O - just about Jax. And Grover had his hands full just trying to keep everyone posted. No hard feelings, brah."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"So, you know anything new?" Danny pressed.

"The Navy and the CIA will be turning over every stone looking for WoFat and my mom - Shelburne. That is, if they don't get too busy in a pissing match," Steve said, running a hand through his hair. "As far as Joe . . . he'll be facing certain court martial . . . we, ah, we are going to concentrate on finding the international arms dealer, I think."

"But if Joe comes around?" Kono asked quietly.

"It's been mentioned . . . he has worked closely with Five-O," Steve said slowly. "Could be, he was under the impression he was operating with . . . immunity and means."

"There's been times I certainly felt as if Joe was part of the task force," Grover said, his face impassive.

"Had some issues with Joe," Danny said thoughtfully. "Didn't always follow protocol. Assumed he was taking direction from you . . . you know, as the leader of the task force. He sure felt like part of the team. I distinctly recall having witnessed him wearing Five-O issue kevlar on more than one occasion."

Steve shook his head and smiled at his friends. "Well. Interesting perspective, guys. Thanks. Now, go on, get out of here, before someone starts a crime spree."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Grover said. Chin grinned and shut down the smart table. Kono was already halfway to the elevator, cell phone in hand, checking the wave reports. Danny trailed after Steve, following him back to his office.

"Yes, Danny?" Steve drawled, as Danny lounged in the doorway.

"Oh, don't mind me," Danny said, waving his hand dismissively. "Just noticing the swagger is back in full force, along with the smirk. And you were whistling, Steven - whistling - when I came in this morning."

"I was making coffee," Steve said absently.

"Yes, yes you were, and why, when we all know Kono makes the best coffee?" Danny pressed.

"Maybe I wanted coffee," Steve said. "I got here early, I wanted coffee."

"Aha! You got here early," Danny said. "And yet, you were feeling a bit fatigued, thus necessitating an immediate supply of coffee."

"What the hell are you getting at, Danny?" Steve asked, exasperated. He leaned on his hands on his desk, glaring across it at Danny.
"You, my friend, got back into the Barry White," Danny said. He pointed at Steve. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Steve raised his hands in surrender. "Far be it from me to dispute your stellar detecting skills, Daniel," he said. "I mean, I had no idea you were so invested in my sex life with -"

"No, no, stop right there," Danny said quickly. "No, I do not need -"

"Hey, you brought it up," Steve said. "I mean, you know, you're the experienced father, you know how it is. Had to get a little creative, you know, with the pregnancy and everything -"

"Stop!" Danny yelled. "Stop, I beg you."

Steve smirked at him.

"I just . . . " Danny rubbed his eyes, refusing to look at Steve. "Okay, I definitely regret pursuing this line of conversation, I just . . . things are better? I just want to know . . . Jax, is she feeling better?"

"Oh, last I checked she was feeling fan-fucking-tastic," Steve said smugly. "Didn't get to chat much this morning, we thought we'd try showering together, you know, to save time, and -"

"Stop," Danny said weakly. "I think you've answered my question."

"She's doing okay, Danny," Steve said gently, sincerely. "She really is. Hey, she'll have tomorrow off. Why don't we take the Airstream out to the campsite, you bring Rachel and the kids."

"Yeah?" Danny asked, his eyes lighting up. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely," Steve said. "Jax and Mary will both love the idea. Come one, you know Gracie will be thrilled. Bring her board, I'll take her out in the water."

"She has been begging for more surfing," Danny said slowly. "We'll bring picnic lunch, enough for everyone."

"Deal," Steve said.

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"Best day ever!" Gracie shouted, as she balanced on her little surfboard. Steve body surfed the wave next to her, ready to grab her if she lost her balance with gravity, but she shifted her weight confidently and rode the wave until it dissolved into gentle foam. Steve threw up a fist in celebration, and then helped her paddle back out to catch another.

"Great," Danny muttered. "Now she'll be begging for surf lessons with Kono. And next thing you know, she'll be a teenager, wearing a skimpy piece of dental floss that masquerades as swimwear on this god-forsaken island." He gestured toward Mary, sprawled bonelessly in the sun on a beach towel, tanning in a tiny scrap of a bikini.

"We'll get her board shorts," Jax said. "And a rash guard."

Rachel snorted and shook her head. "You can try. I suspect she'll want to wear what the other girls wear."

Danny shook his head mournfully.

"Come on, Danny, you know it would have been the same in Jersey," Jax said. "I grew up going to
"Yeah," Danny sighed, remembering. Most of his memories of the Jersey shore were happy ones, although losing his friend made even the happy memories bittersweet. "The boardwalk, the concerts . . . the food. Man."

"Billy would drive us," Jax said. "He had a Nissan then. Wasn't the fastest, but it had an amazing sound system. He'd turn on the radio and the girls would just swarm."

"Like flies to honey," Danny chuckled.

"It was the first summer he had his license . . . I hustled those poor high school boys at arcade games and made enough to cover our gas and food," Jax said. "It was epic. We didn't even wait for summer vacation . . . we'd head out Friday night and not even go home. Billy would sling the car into the school parking lot minutes before the bell rang on Monday. It was the best. Sand, sun, music . . . and then once I had my license . . ."

"I don't remember much of a racing scene at the shore," Danny said.

"Nah, at the shore it wasn't about speed," Jax said. "It was more about your sound system . . . smooth ride . . . one summer Billy had an old Mustang convertible. It was gorgeous. And then there was the vintage VW van, which -" she stopped short.

"VW van, man that - oh, jeez," Danny said, looking at her, mildly horrified. "Please tell me it was full of car parts and stuffed teddy bears."

Jax looked at him sympathetically. "Okay, sure, Danny." She watched Gracie splashing in the water. "You'll . . . you'll keep closer tabs on Gracie," she said softly. "Right?"

"Yeah, babe," Danny said. He studied the wistful expression on Jax's face. "Yeah, but hey - you turned out just fine. Look at you . . . happily married, expecting babies . . . the best auntie my kids could ask for. Maybe you sowed a few wild oats, back in the day. No harm."

"Okay," Jax said, uncertainly.

"Oh, definitely okay," Rachel said, winking at her. "We weren't raised in bloody convents."

Jax smiled, her face lighting up in relief.

"Mommy, Danno, did you see me?" Gracie yelled, as she came running out of the surf, her board tucked securely under her arm.

"We did, darling, you were marvelous," Rachel said.

"I'm hungry, and Uncle Steve said Danno is probably having a stroke about sunscreen, and also I want to make a sandcastle," Gracie said in a rush.

Danny raised an eyebrow at her.

"Please, may I have something to eat, and then may I please make a sandcastle?" Gracie amended. She struggled to prop her board upright in the sand, and Steve wrapped one strong hand around the edge of it, helping her plant it firmly.

"I believe Charlie is getting a big hungry, too," Rachel said, standing and propping the baby on her hip. "Let's go back up to the campsite for a bit, Grace, and we'll get you and Charlie sorted, then
"Okay, mommy," Gracie said. She started to trot ahead of Rachel, then turned back and flung her arms around Steve. "Thank you, Uncle Steve," she said, her voice muffled at his waist. "That was the best surfing ever."

"You're doing awesome, Gracie," he said, his big hand wrapping around the back of her head. "Soon you'll need expert lessons, from Kono."

"Oh, great," Danny muttered, rolling his eyes. He stood, stretching languidly in the sun. "Babe, I'll go up with you and fix Grace-face a snack while you tend to Charlie. Bring you guys anything?"

"Beer," Mary mumbled contentedly from her towel. "Pretzels."

"I could go for a Longboard and a snack," Steve said, wiping his face. "Thanks, Danno."

"Lemonade, I guess," Jax said wistfully. Steve made a sound of commiseration and wrapped his arm around her, kissing the top of her head. "Make mine a lemonade, too," he said.

"No," Jax protested. "You shouldn't have to -"

"Oh, he bloody well can go without. He's the one what put you in this predicament. You shouldn't suffer alone," Rachel contributed helpfully.

Steve's eyes widened.

"Oh, partner," Danny laughed. "Just wait. It gets better. That's mild compared to what Rachel had to say to me when she was in labor." He was still laughing as he swung Gracie up onto his shoulders and fell into step next to Rachel.

Mary had turned over on her towel and watched the entire exchange with amusement.

"They're adorable," she observed, before pulling her hat over her face and sinking back into her towel. "All four of them. Shit. You guys . . . you're going to, like, literally double the minute Jax pops out those babies. From two to four in one fell swoop. Sweet."

"And then we'll be adorable?" Steve asked, teasing.

"Nah. You'll still be badass," Mary said. "You're gonna have badass babies, I just know it."
Early the next week, Steve peered at the ultrasound screen.

"My sister says the babies are going to be badass," he said. "What do you think doc? They looking badass in there?"

The obstetrician laughed as she carefully moved the ultrasound wand over Jax's belly. "Well, thirty-two weeks . . . they are badass enough that if for some reason - and I don't recommend it, mind you - but if you went into labor and delivered today? They would be okay. Extra, extra tiny, but okay."

"Wow," Jax breathed. "Seriously?"

"Ummhmm," she said. "Baby Two - have you picked names yet? - anyway, Baby Two is still smaller, proportionately, but also growing proportionately. Her lungs would need a little help, as of today. A few more weeks, not even that. And Baby One, based on weight, would probably not even need any interventions. Which brings me to a very important discussion: your birth plan."

"My what?" Jax asked.

"The notes from the gynecology specialist indicate that you were informed you would most likely need to plan a C-section," she said. "This was based on several factors - the adhesions, scarring . . ." she paused as Steve's hand wrapped around Jax's shoulder, his thumb tracing over her collarbone gently. "The average size of a singleton infant was part of that equation."

"What are you saying, doc?" Steve asked.

"The equation has changed," she replied. "Multiples are smaller, generally speaking, and Jax's case falls into that generality. The babies, individually, are smaller than average. A C-section might not be medically necessary."

Jax was silent, pondering the idea and fidgeting with the hem of the sheet.

The obstetrician folded her arms and propped a hip against the railing at the end of the bed. "You don't seem at all excited about this news."

"Sorry," Jax said. "Should I be excited?"

"Well, most women would prefer to avoid a C-section," she answered. "It's a surgery, after all. Involves an incision, stitches . . . a longer recovery period. A scar."

"Yeah, well . . ." Jax said, half smiling. "I seem to collect those."

The obstetrician smiled. "It would be minimal, actually, compared to your trophies from 9-11 and service here in Hawaii. So, let's take that off the list of concerns. A C-section would still mean an incision. Stitches. Longer hospital stay, restricted movement . . . you'd be limited in picking up the babies, at first. But, a traditional delivery would have risks as well. I assume with your emergency medical training, you're more familiar with those risks."

Jax nodded slowly and glanced up at Steve. He had a rudimentary knowledge, as well.

"Ah," the obstetrician said. "The standard risks, with which you're already familiar, coupled with your own unique medical history and risks . . ."
"It just - I had assumed, based on what I was told, that I'd be having a C-section," Jax said. "I - in that scenario, everything is planned. Controlled." She looked out the window, away from the doctor. Away from Steve.

The obstetrician propped a hip on the foot of Jax's bed and put a gentle hand on her knee. "That's important to you," she said quietly. "A sense of control."

Jax nodded silently, and Steve's thumb traced its comforting path over her collarbone again.

"I can understand that," the obstetrician said. "I'll send you home with some literature, and you can read over it. We'll make an appointment - soon, because twins have an uncanny way of arriving early - and discuss this further. We'll discuss your preferences. Commander, you will of course be involved, but this is Jax's op, are we clear on that?"

"Absolutely," Steve said firmly.

"And may I suggest . . . talk to Lieutenant Allen as part of the decision process," the obstetrician said gently. "For now, though, I suggest going and doing something relaxing. You both look stressed."

The doctor left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Hey," Steve said softly. "We'll read over the stuff, you decide, right? Your op."

Jax nodded and started grabbing for her clothes, her movements abrupt and frustrated. She still avoided meeting his eyes.

"I'll be right outside the door, I'm going to text the office real quick," he said.

"You have to go back in," Jax said. "Immunity and means doesn't mean you have the day off every time I have an appointment. I'm fine."

He flashed a grin at her. "Trust me, I have an idea."

"Isn't that about the time Danny starts to pull on his vest?" Jax asked.

#*#*#*#*#

Kono bounced on the balls of her feet, watching the end of the range anxiously for the sight of Steve's Silverado. The rest of the team sorted out weapons and boxes of ammunition.

"Hell, Kono, when Steve gave you free reign of the armory and the month's budget for practice ammo, you didn't waste any time, did you?" Grover grumbled, pulling another case from his SUV.

"Nope," Kono said cheerfully.

"Please tell me you did not bring any flashbangs or grenades," Danny said. He eyed her suspiciously.

"Scout's honor," Kono said. She raised her hand in a shaka sign.

"That's not -" Danny started, but her excited wave interrupted him.

"They're here," she declared. She jogged toward the truck, barely waiting for Steve to put it in park before flinging open the passenger door.

"Hey, Kono," Jax said, grinning, as she stepped down. She used the running board now, instead of
jumping, and she hated it.

"Did Steve tell you?" Kono asked breathlessly.

"That it's range day? Yeah," Jax answered.

"No, that he's going to put you on the SR-25 today," Kono said.

Jax looked up at Steve, who had sauntered around the front of the truck.

"The Knight's Armament sniper?" Jax asked, looking up at him with wide eyes. "No shit."

Danny rolled his eyes at the three of them. "Seriously?"

"The doc said, 'do something relaxing'," Steve said.

"Unbelievable," Danny muttered, throwing his hands in the air.

"You don't mind?" Jax asked, as Kono grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the booth set up with the high powered rifle. "This is your baby."

"When your arms get tired, we'll trade off," Kono said. "Besides, I have to requalify with my handgun next month. I need to practice that first."

Steve snorted. "Hardly," he said. "You could requal left-handed with a hangover. You just want to stay on record as having higher marksmanship scores than anyone in HPD."

"Shootz, boss, I wanna eventually go on record as having higher marksmanship scores than anyone in Five-O," Kono tossed over her shoulder. She and Jax stepped into the booth, arranging their ear protection.

"You've got a decade of experience on her, Steve," Chin said, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder. "She'll have trouble catching up with you."

"Yeah," Steve sighed. He watched Kono and Jax fondly. "But her eyes and reflexes will always be a decade younger than mine. She'll have trouble, but she'll catch me."

"Better practice, then, old man," Chin said, grinning as he headed off to his beloved shotgun.

Steve stood behind Kono and Jax, nodding in approval as Kono caught Jax up to speed on the rifle, reminding her of some of the finer points. He thought back to the first time he'd brought Jax to the range, right after she'd arrived on the island. Her shoulder and collarbone had been badly injured, and she'd spent the day gritting her teeth against the pain and practicing with her non-dominant hand. Today, her shoulder was completely healed, her arms strong and lean from swimming. Her first grouping was better than respectable, and Kono threw up a fist in celebration.

"Decent," Jax said, squinting down the line at the target.

"Damn good," Kono said. "It's been months since you've handled a rifle, much less the SR-25."

Steve's hand rested briefly on Kono's shoulder. "Mind if I cut in?" he asked.

"Go for it, boss," Kono said. "Just remember, this is a family friendly range," she added, winking at them.

Steve shook his head, laughing, as Kono moved to the next booth. His hand wrapped around Jax's
hip as he stood close behind her. Her curls sparkled, warm in the sunlight, and the familiar smell of honeysuckle and gunpowder drifted up to him.

"How'd it feel?" he asked, low, in the ear not covered by the protective gear.

She shivered in the mid-day sun, and he chuckled wickedly.

"Good," she said. "Different. My center of gravity is different, and I'm having to compensate."

He tilted his head. "Not sure what to tell you, to be honest," he said. "Just get a feel for it. Want to try a longer shot?"

"Hell yeah," Jax said.

He slipped her ear protection back into place and adjusted his own. A hand signal to the range attendant sent the target a few more meters down. Jax let out a slow breath and squeezed off several rounds, patiently, unhurried.

Steve grabbed a pair of binocs and looked at the target. He handed them to Jax and lifted her ear protection.

"Nice," he whispered.

She smiled in satisfaction as she studied her grouping - fairly close to center, reasonably tight.

"More?" he asked, his lips brushing under her ear.

"More," she murmured.

"What else do you want to shoot today?" he asked.

"Everything," she said, carefully adjusting the scope on the rifle. "I want to shoot everything."

Steve stole glances at Jax on the drive home.

"What?" she sighed. She could feel his gaze on her, even with her eyes closed and her head tilted back on the seat.

"You're a little sunburned, 'cross your nose," he said. "Otherwise . . . did you have a good afternoon?"

"The best," she sighed. "You know I love going to the range. Hanging out with the team . . . thanks." She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"You're welcome," he said, smiling. "It was good. How'd the babies like it?"

Jax chuckled and put a hand on the curve of her stomach. "I don't think they cared one way or another." She sighed, staring out the window.

"Jax . . . you're gonna have to help me out, here," he said quietly. "I can't - if you don't tell me what you're thinking, I can't - look. I get that you were kinda thrown, today, by what the doctor said but . . . I'm not sure I understand why. It is . . . is it the thing with, you know, not being in control? Because, I get that, I do. And if -"
"Please," she said. "Please can we . . . not tonight. Tonight, I want to just smell the gunpowder and feel the gun oil on my fingers and . . . please."

"Okay," he said, wrapping a hand around her knee. "Okay, ku'uipo."

He held her, wrapped in her favorite quilt, as they looked up at the stars.

"You still smell like gunpowder," he murmured, nuzzling her cheek.

"Hmm, so do you," she said. She snuggled closer to him, resting her head on his chest. His fingers brushed absent circles on her shoulder and arm, and she was so quiet and still that he thought, for a bit, that she'd drifted off to sleep.

"I've taken bullets," she said quietly. "Broken bones, blunt force trauma . . . I've been knifed."

"I know," he whispered.

"I handled all of it," she said. "I handled all of it, just fine, and it came with the job. I knew what I signed on for. We all do."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I know," he repeated.

He hugged her close. "You are not a chickenshit," he agreed. "But I know you're tired. Come to bed. Dream of sniper rifles."

She grinned, looking up at him. "You say the sweetest things."

Jax popped her head through the neck of her scrub shirt and then did a double take.

"What gives?" she asked, eyeing Steve's crisp trousers and blazer curiously. "You're wearing grown-up clothes."

"Meeting with the governor," he said, smiling. "Danny has pointed out that it doesn't hurt to try to offset the image of Five-O as being, um, trigger happy."

"Everything okay?" she asked quietly. "Have I been so caught up in - have I missed something?"

"No, Jax," he assured her, cupping her face in his hands. "No, I need to talk to her, get a feel for where she'd fall in the situation with Joe. See if, maybe, she'd be an ally."

"You think he'll come in?" Jax asked. "Do you think we'll ever see him again?"

Steve shook his head. "I have no idea, honestly. I'd like to think that he could, though. That his one questionable choice would be taken in context of decades of service to his country."

"Seems only fair," Jax said. "Good luck."

He kissed her cheek, gently, tenderly. "Have a good day," he said. His eyes fell on the stack of pamphlets sent home from the doctor's office, and he felt Jax tense. She pulled away from him
"I gotta run," she said. "Be there in plenty of time to get reports from the last shift."

"Jax," he said, tugging her to him and holding her close. "I love you," he whispered into her ear, quickly, fiercely, and then he let her go.

She flung her arms around his neck, standing on tip toe. She pressed her face into the crook of his neck. "Love you, too," she whispered back.

His hand cradled her jaw, his long fingers slipping under her ear. "You're okay?"

"Of course," she replied, quickly. "I'm okay, Steve. I - we'll talk, about . . . you know. Later. I'm okay." She turned her head, pressed another kiss to the palm of his hand, and then she was off, wrapping her stethoscope around her neck as she headed down the stairs.

How's Jax?" Governor Pat Jameson asked, gesturing for Steve to take a seat across from her desk. "Feeling okay? Babies doing okay? I can't believe WoFat got his hands on her - again."

"Yes, ma'am, she's doing alright," Steve said. "I wanted to talk to you about WoFat, about how we got Jax back."

"Go on," she said.

"Well, as you know, my mother was ready and willing to cooperate with the exchange," Steve said, "and the Navy and the CIA both approved the plan. They were happy to have her back in active service again. They believe - we believe - that she can help bring down his entire network."

"So I've been informed," Jameson said.

"None of that would have happened, ma'am, without Commander Joe White," Steve said, leaning forward. "He facilitated the entire exchanged."

"Hmm, because he knew Shelburne's identity this whole time," she said. She arched an eyebrow at Steve. "He was in a convenient position to facilitate, seeing as how he'd been withholding information."

"Until the time and situation was right," Steve said. "Five-O operates with immunity and means, governor, or it's pointless."

"I can not create a task force that outranks the US military," she said. "I don't have that kind of authority."

"Five-O doesn't outrank the military, but it could be considered paramilitary," Steve argued. "Civilian authority of the highest order - yours."

"What's your point?" she asked.

"Joe has collaborated with Five-O on numerous missions," Steve said. "He's contributed to the task force, and to the citizens and government of Hawaii."

"You want immunity and means - emphasis on immunity - for Joe," she said. "That's what you're getting at."
"Yes, ma'am," Steve said. "Look, I get that he put the Navy in a difficult position. I do. But Five-O is unique. It's civilian, but elite. Everything about Five-O stands unprecedented. I believe that immunity could be extended to Joe without compromising the integrity of the task force or of your office."

She studied him for a moment. "Let me talk with legal," she said finally. "And with the governors of the other states where we've just helped launch new task force groups. We do set a precedent, now. Other states will look at our actions."

"I understand," Steve said, standing up. "Thank you for your consideration."

"Steve," she said, as he reached the door. "I'm damn glad you got her back."

"We all are, ma'am," he said. "And I'm asking that we remember who made it possible. That's all."

"Good call yesterday afternoon," Danny said, quietly, standing in the door of Steve's office. "It was nice to hang out with Jax again, with the team. She seemed to enjoy it."

"Guns and coffee," Steve murmured. He'd come out of the locker room in his usual cargo pants and boots, and was pulling a polo shirt out of his desk drawer. "She's always been damn easy to please, Danny. Doesn't ask for much, you know? Just... can't seem to catch a break."

"Appointment go okay yesterday?" Danny asked. "I noticed the two of you rather obviously avoided talking about it yesterday so I didn't ask."

"Yeah, I guess," Steve said. "She was told she'd have to have a C-section. Now, they're saying maybe not? She seems... I don't know, freaked out. Quietly, mind you, but I can tell. I'm not sure I understand. We have stuff to read..." He pulled the shirt over his head, sighing.

Danny nodded, pulling his lip in thoughtfully. "You, ah... you have questions, feel free to ask me and Rach, okay, big guy?"

Steve looked at him sharply. "Shit. I feel like you know something I don't, Danny."

"Unsettling and unusual, isn't it?" Danny asked kindly. "Just... okay. I'm gonna say one word, just one... medical term, if you will, to get you started... and you do the reading, I think you might start to get the picture. Okay?"

"Okay, Danny," Steve said earnestly, and Danny had to smile.

"You're such a good guy, Steven, you know that?" Danny said. "Okay. When Jax isn't looking - this is important, pay attention - when Jax isn't looking, you look up episiotomy."

"Epi - Danny, what -" Steve started.

"Unh unh," Danny said, shaking his head. "You're a good friend. A brother. There are some things I'm not explaining. Look it up." He thumped the door frame on his way back to his office.

"Okay, Danny," Steve said earnestly, and Danny had to smile.

"You're such a good guy, Steven, you know that?" Danny said. "Okay. When Jax isn't looking - this is important, pay attention - when Jax isn't looking, you look up episiotomy."

"Epi - Danny, what -" Steve started.

"Unh unh," Danny said, shaking his head. "You're a good friend. A brother. There are some things I'm not explaining. Look it up." He thumped the door frame on his way back to his office.

Jax wrinkled her nose as she poured a cup of decaf in the nurses' lounge. She glanced up as Gus marched into the room and stood next to her.

"You're brooding," Gus said bluntly, hands on her hips. "Why are you brooding? Are you
hormonal?"

Jax chuckled and shook her head as she poured a bit of cream into her coffee. "Maybe, Gus."

"Shit, you had an appointment yesterday," Gus said in a softer tone. "Everything okay?"

Jax bit her lip. "I was told by one specialist that if I got pregnant, I would absolutely deliver via C-
section. Yesterday, the ob said maybe not. Because of twins being smaller." She glanced down at her
stomach. "Nothing about this entire ridiculous scenario seems small. I almost had to ask Steve to tie
my shoes this morning."

"Time to trade up to the clogs," Gus said. "Ugly as a warty toad but no laces. Anyway. 'Maybe not'
doesn't sound like a glowing endorsement. I'd say, demand they schedule a section. I know, you'll
get a lot of whooey - not so much here, thank God, military hospitals aren't big on whooey - about it
being a beautiful, natural whatever. Like somehow it's proof of being a real woman or a good
mother. I call bullshit. Schedule the damn section. And stop brooding."

"Yeah?" Jax said, considering.

"Well, I mean, I don't have kids so I don't have up close and personal experience," Gus said. "But
for what it's worth . . . look. I've helped deliver babies in combat zones. I get it. It's an uncontrolled,
uncertain scenario. Someone with control issues -"

"I don't have control issues," Jax protested weakly.

Gus laughed, loud and heartily. "I didn't say it was a bad thing, mind you, and don't even start with
me. I see you check your back-up with security every single morning. Your control issues are armed
and dangerous, and I suspect there's damn good reason for it. Stop apologizing for who you are, Jax.
Own it. Demand the C-section. And tell me when to stop scheduling you for shifts, don't mess with
my staffing."

She turned crisply on her heel and headed out of the room, leaving a bemused Jax in her wake.

Danny was filling out yet another incident report - the entire team dumped these on him, always,
without fail - when he sensed a shadow falling over his desk. He glanced up to see Steve looming in
his office.

"I swear to God - some people, you know, consider it polite to tap, even on an open door," Danny
groused. "I coulda been working on something confidential. Or sensitive. Personal, maybe."

"Like looking up medical terms," Steve said weakly. He collapsed in the chair across from Danny's
desk.

"I didn't - you just couldn't wait until you got home, could you," Danny sighed, putting down his
ballpoint pen. The governor had started demanding incident reports in triplicate. "So, the 'I am SEAL
trained I can deliver a baby on a moving aircraft carrier in a hurricane' didn't actually prepare you for
shit, did it?"

"Aircraft carriers have doctors. Surgeons," Steve said absently. "We're trained to give aid to fellow
SEALs. I can clamp an artery, deal with a collapsed lung . . . we had one afternoon session on
delivering a baby. The scenario was being pinned down in hostile territory with a group of civilians."

"And that's rare, for SEALs," Danny guessed.
"Hell yes, we get the civilians out, we don't get pinned down," Steve said. "That's the point."

"No, I think the point is that you know nothing about childbirth," Danny said, "or the aftermath."

"There was a video," Steve said, paling. "You told me to look up episiotomy. You shoulda warned me, Danny. Did - no. I don't wanna know."

Danny sighed and started to begin the process of talking his best friend through his latest crisis, but his phone and Steve's alerted at the same time. He could hear the phones of the rest of the team pinging as well.

"What the hell is breaking loose?" Danny said, grabbing at his cell.

"Shit," Steve said, leaping from Danny's chair. "The Admiral Clarey Bridge - there's reports of explosions."

Danny was right behind him, rushing to the center room along with the rest of the team.

"Steve, it's the bridge -" Chin was saying. Kono's eyes were wide with fear.

Steve was frantically calling Nick, his knuckles clenched white around his phone. Danny looked at Chin, his eyebrows raised in question.

"The Admiral Clarey Bridge - if it's true that there are explosions," Chin explained quietly, "then Pearl Harbor Hickam joint base could be under attack."
"Bullfrog, what do we know?" Steve asked urgently, as he pushed the Silverado faster and faster toward Pearl Hickam. "You and Catherine okay? What's going on?"

Danny could hear Nick's voice on the other end of the line, but couldn't make out what he was saying. The look of relief on Steve's face at least gave him hope that Nick and Catherine were safe and uninjured - for the moment.

"Okay, copy that," Steve said. Some of the tension seemed to ease out of the stiff line of his shoulders.

"What's going on? And why did we bring your truck?" Danny demanded.

"There was a massive explosion on the bridge," Steve said. "First thought, always, is a terror attack. Cutting off Pearl Hickam . . . there's a reason the Japanese bombed Pearl. It's a high priority target. Obviously, the entire base is on high alert. But they think the explosion was an accident. A fuel truck, possibly propane. Nick and Catherine are okay. And we're in the truck because of my gear, Danny. I have - we'll need diving gear."

"Oh, shit," Danny murmured. "That bad?"

"Eyewitnesses reported at least two vehicles in the water," Steve said. "Navy already sent teams in, of course, but . . ."

"I know, babe, you'll need to know that you've done everything you can," Danny said quietly. "Okay, what does Five-O do?"

"Whatever we can," Steve said. "But I want everyone to look for anything - anything at all - that could tie to WoFat. At this point, we have to assume that anything that could be remotely linked to me, or my family - there's a possibility that it could be WoFat."

"Understood," Danny said. Steve was thumbing another number into his phone.

"This is Commander Steve McGarrett," he said, speaking clearly and quickly. "We've got a massive incident on the Admiral Clarey Bridge, assuming we will have both civilian and military injuries. Civilians will be headed to Queens, military to Tripler. Have your people ready." There was a pause. "Copy. She's there, right? Copy. Thanks, Dr. Marks."

"Jax is working today," Danny said.

"Yeah, I just - I had a moment there, of wondering, what if for some reason -" Steve shook his head.

"Hey, I get it," Danny said. He waved his phone at Steve. "Rachel is at home with the baby, Gracie is at school. We check. It's what we do. Welcome to family life, Steven."

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"Okay, it's all hands on deck and it gets crazy," Gus said, tying a protective gown over Jax's scrubs. "We gown and glove because we have zero time to hit the locker room between patients, so we do what we can to avoid cross contamination. We could get nine patients or ninety - until they secure the scene and triage, we have no idea. You ever worked one of these?"
"Yeah, but always on the scene," Jax said. "I was the one securing the scene and doing triage."

"This is the next step," Gus said. "They come in, we do a quick reevaluation of their triage status. As you know, scenes are chaos, mistakes are made. Or they could have deteriorated in transport. Once we've confirmed their status, they go to trauma or treatment or waiting - one, two, three. Got it?"

"Got it," Jax said, nodding.

"Listen up, people," Dr. Marks said, standing on the counter of the emergency department reception desk. "They're sending civilians to Queens. We're getting the military personnel, possibly military dependents. It's possible we're going to end up with people separated from their loved ones, and frantic for information. We'll communicate with the scene and with Queens as best we can. It's also possible we'll get soldiers and sailors in here, injured, from an explosion . . . they might have a little trouble remembering they're stateside. Remember your training. Ask for help if you need it - McGarrett and Gus are both on today. Stay calm, focused, and in control. Remember you can only help one patient at a time, and trust your team."

"We've pulled extra staff from surgical and neuro," Malia said, holding the phone to her ear. "Chin, be careful, sweetheart."

A slow stream of patients arrived through the double doors of Tripler's emergency department. Jax was assigned to a young sailor whose shoulder had been dislocated, and who was sporting several deep lacerations, efficiently bandaged. Jax thought the work looked familiar.

"So, your shoulder was relocated in the field?" Jax asked, carefully helping a nurse ease the sailor into a dry hospital gown. Jax looked at the name tape and insignia on her uniform as she placed it in a generously sized plastic bag. "Lieutenant Miller, correct?"

"Yeah," the young woman said, smiling shakily. "My parents were so worried about me being deployed next year. They were worried that I'd get hurt."

"These things are unpredictable, aren't they?" Jax said. "I'm going to clean these lacerations, and then we'll get someone in here to give you the best sutures on the island. What happened on the bridge, do you know?"

"I was leaving the base, I'd almost made it across, and there was this ball of flame in front of me. Just out of nowhere. I think I saw a car go into the water," she added softly, her eyes filling with tears. "There were - they send a speedboat, with divers, from the base. I didn't - I didn't see them pull anyone up, though."

"It was chaotic," Jax said. "You might easily have missed it - they may have kept them in the boat and headed out of your line of vision. How did you get hurt?"

"There was a pile-up by that point - people just couldn't stop in time, or they were panicked - a Range Rover slammed into me, I think that's when I busted my shoulder up," she said. "But there was this mini van in front of me, one of the wives from the base, with little kids in the van. Her engine was smoking, the frame was twisted . . . an Air Force officer and I helped get her and the kids out. I think that's when I cut my arms . . . I didn't even realize I was hurt until Commander McGarrett asked me to report. He reset my shoulder, patched me up."

"He did a good job," Jax said, smiling. "He's good with shoulders and patches."
"I'd heard of Commander McGarrett, starting the task force," she said. "I've arranged billeting for his reserve group before. Sorry, that probably seems really trivial."

Jax paused, looking up from where she'd been gently debriding one of the cuts. "Absolutely not. Nothing you do for the Navy is trivial. It's all appreciated. I appreciate it."

Gus popped her head into the room. "McGarrett, I'm sending Dr. Peterson in to do the sutures. The paramedics are bringing in a head trauma, sounds like we're gonna need our PTSD whisperer. Get your ass over to Trauma 1 asap."

Lieutenant Miller blinked in disbelief.

"Sorry, you work in military trauma long enough, I think you get a gallows humor," Jax said, finishing up the debriding of the wound and covering it carefully with sterile gauze. "She doesn't take PTSD lightly, I assure you. None of us do."

"No, I get it. No offense take. It's - she called you McGarrett?" Miller asked. "Related?"

"Married," Jax said, smiling at her.

"Yeah? What are the odds," Miller said. She struggled to sit more comfortably on the bed, and Jax propped up a couple of pillows, easing her back into them carefully. "Well, good luck," Miller added, gesturing to Jax's stomach.

"Thanks," Jax said. "You, too. Be safe, wherever you're headed."

They could hear Gus's strident voice outside the door.

"Better run," Miller said, smirking.

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Kono stared after the retreating ambulance, her eyes wide and troubled.

"He'll be okay," Grover said, his big paw resting on her shoulder sympathetically. "Steve'll get 'im to Tripler, there'll be a whole team there, including Jax. You've seen her, she's good with this kinda stuff."

"It's not that," Kono said. "Yeah, Jax is great with this stuff. You saw that guy - it took Steve, Danny, and two paramedics to calm him enough to get him in the bus. Lou, what the hell do we do if Steve ever loses the plot on us like that?"

Grover looked at her solemnly. "I've wondered, sometimes . . . you think we really have any idea what Steve is capable of? It's just - sometimes, I feel like we catch a glimpse, you know? Like him coming down the outside of that building, like it was a kid climbing down from a treehouse, like it was nothing. He's talked to me, sometimes, about - well, not missions, because those are classified, but about how he felt, after the mission. So, yeah. I get what you're saying."

"I think we should start carrying tranq darts, and I'm not being cute or funny about it," Kono said, shaking her head. "Seriously, Lou, what would we do? If he loses it, really loses it, I don't know that the four of us could subdue him."

"I'll talk to him," Lou said quietly.

Kono looked up at him, guilty. "I didn't mean to put it on you -"
"Nah, it's okay kid. I called Steve out on his inner demons, and by default became the team member to deal with them. It's not that he doesn't trust the rest of you, it's . . . there's a different history, a different dynamic. He still looks up to Chin, still has that childhood hero thing with him. Danny . . . well, Danny deals with a lot of the day-to-day, Steve knows that, loves Danny like a brother but Danny would worry. Even more."

Kono chuckled. The idea of Danny worrying more than he already did was alarming.

"And you," Grover continued, "he can't help it, you can't hold it against him, but you came on young, and impressionable, and I know he thinks of you like he thinks of Mary. Wants to shield you from as much evil as he can."

"Nothing about Steve is evil," Kono protested.

"But he's come up close and personal with evil," Grover said. "It leaves a mark. And you feel like . . . like it can rub off, somehow, on those around you."

Kono thought about that for a moment. "Like 9/11 did to Jax," she said quietly. "So she gets it. That's one of the reasons they're so good together."

Grover nodded and smiled in agreement.

"I'm sorry," Kono said softly.

"What for?" Grover asked. They started walking toward Chin, who was sharing information with Duke and a man in Navy uniform.

"For whatever evil it was that touched you," Kono said, squeezing Grover's hand.

"We're gonna get this looked at," Steve said quietly, pressing a wad of gauze over Danny's eyebrow. Danny scoffed and raised his other eyebrow at the bruise darkening on Steve's jaw.

"You scared the shit out of me, Steven," Danny said. "Let's not worry about my head. Let's worry about the impending stroke, watching you go over the side of the bridge."

"His truck was unstable," Steve said mildly. "Couldn't wait for fire."

"Sorry," a muffled voice came from the gurney.

"Hey, Master Chief, you back with us?" Steve said. The paramedic made room for him to slide next to the man strapped to the gurney.

"My guys," he mumbled. "You get my guys? There was - the explosion, it -"

"Master Chief, you were in an explosion on the bridge, the Admiral Clarey Bridge, at Pearl," Steve said patiently. "Do you remember? You've got blunt force trauma to your kidney, and you took a pretty good blow to the head, you're probably concussed."

"The ship - we're under attack," he mumbled, struggling to sit up. "Damn pirates -"

"Steady on, Master Chief, we've got things under control," Steve said. He shook his head at the paramedic. "Keep him calm."

The ambulance pulled up to the emergency entrance at Tripler. As soon as it stopped, the paramedic
was the first out, pulling out the gurney, with Steve on the other end.

"I think I decked the wrong guy," the patient mumbled, looking up at Steve.

"No worries," Steve said. "We'll get you sorted, sailor. We're at Tripler. You know Tripler, right?"

"How long was I at Ramstein?" he asked.

"Ramstein?" Danny murmured, helping Steve lift the head of the gurney over the threshold of the hospital door.

"Landstuhl Medical Center," Steve explained. "In Ramstein, Germany. Severe combat trauma injuries go there first, before flying stateside."

"Sounds like our guy here has made that trip," Danny said.

Dr. Marks was waiting for them just inside the door, making notes as the paramedic gave report.

"Master Chief William Ingersole, had to be cut from his car on the scene. Driver's seat was twisted pretty bad, he reported severe pain over his right kidney. Driver window was spider-webbed, matching the bruising and laceration near his temple," the paramedic started. "Patient was extremely disoriented and combative. We couldn't safely render aid without the help of Commander McGarrett and Detective Williams - they need a look-over, too. Our patient got in a couple good hits."

"Orientation now?" Dr. Marks asked. He started looking around for Gus and Jax.

The paramedic shook his head.

"She's in Trauma 1," Gus said, walking by them at a fast clip. She stopped and did a double-take at Steve and Danny. "Commander, Detective . . . why am I not surprised. Wait outside Trauma 1, we'll get you cleaned up and checked out. We'll yell if we need the muscle, Commander."

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said automatically. Danny smirked.

"Thanks," Dr. Marks said to the paramedic. "We've got him from here. You bringing us more?"

"More than likely," the paramedic said.

Gus and Dr. Marks pushed the master chief into Trauma 1. Steve and Danny caught a glimpse of Jax, efficiently setting up in preparation for a patient. She was standing on tiptoe, hanging an IV of ringer's lactate, as the door opened.

"Jax, we've got Master Chief Ingersole here, blunt force trauma likely to the kidney, probable impact of head vs driver door," they heard Dr. Marks say. "Orientation is questionable."

The door fell mostly closed and Steve stood at the sliver of a window, watching and listening. Gus rolled her eyes and spared him a glare, prompting Jax to look glance his way. He smiled at her, their eyes meeting through the glass, and then the master chief's hand was wrapped around Jax's wrist.

"You shouldn't be here," he said urgently. "Oh my God, how are you on this ship? If the pirates board -"

"Master Chief," Jax said, putting her hand atop his. "we aren't on a ship right now. We're at Tripler emergency. I'm safe, and so are you. You're just a little confused, but it's okay. Dr. Marks and Gus are going to check you out and take good care of you."
"Master Chief, can you tell me what year it is?" Dr. Marks asked, flashing a penlight in his patient's eyes.

Ingersole hesitated. "You could be under duress," he mumbled. "Forced to treat the injured. Or you could be in collusion."

"How about we don't ask you anything, then," Jax suggested. "Just let us treat your injuries, is that okay?"

"My guys," he said. "My guys, they're hurt, I think Staples might have gone over . . . oh, God, I think the ship may have crushed him -"

"Help me roll him, I need to check that kidney," Dr. Marks said quietly, nodding at Gus. "Jax, just keep doing your best. I agree, let's go for calm, we've established disorientation to both time and place."

Ingersole groaned in pain as Dr. Marks and Gus carefully eased him onto his left side, to examine his right lower back.

"I'm sorry," Jax murmured. "I know you're in a world of hurt. We're going to take good care of you, Master Chief."

"My guys . . ." he groaned.

"I am positive that they're being looked after," Jax said. "Let's just concentrate on you right now."

"Are you under duress?" Ingersole whispered. "I'll get you out, I swear. I don't like the idea of women deployed to sea for this very reason. Holy shit, sailor, you're expectin'."

"I am expecting," Jax said, smiling at him. She took his hands in hers, gently redirecting them from batting toward Dr. Marks and Gus. "But I'm not a sailor, and we're definitely not on a ship. We're safe, at Tripler. We're not going to ask you to figure anything else out right now, okay?"

"You sound like a sailor," he mumbled, closing his eyes against the pain. "It's the way you say 'master chief'. That's why I don't trust 'em," he continued, jerking his head back toward Dr. Marks and Gus. "They don' say 't right. But you do."

"Well, they're Army, ya know? Whadda ya expect? My dad made master chief, before he retired," Jax said.

"Yeah?" Ingersole asked. His attention was fully focused on Jax, and Dr. Marks nodded his approval as he continued his examination. He murmured his findings to Gus, who furiously notated them in the chart.

"Hmm," Jax said. She pulled up a rolling stool so that she was eye level with Ingersole. "Served mostly stateside, retired from Earle Naval Weapons Station. Fire control."

"I'm sonar tech. Fire control, eh? Coulda used him on board today," Ingersole grunted. "Thought I recognized a Jersey accent, too. Earle's a good place to raise a family."

Danny glanced up at Steve, who was by this point eavesdropping shamelessly.

"Shit, her dad was a master chief petty officer, fire control?" Steve whispered.

"That's good?" Danny asked.
"That's fucking hard core, Danny. Highest rank of enlisted," Steve said. "No wonder her brother ended up in FDNY. Hard act to follow."

"You didn't follow your dad into the Navy?" Ingersole asked. "You chose medicine. Good girl."

"I chose NYPD first," Jax said, "but medicine is growing on me."

"Okay, Master Chief Ingersole," Dr. Marks said. "We're going to take you for a CT of your head and of this kidney. We just need to see how much damage there is, and hopefully we'll find that it's minimal enough to heal with rest and care. That alright with you?"

Ingersole looked at Jax, cautiously. "You're sure they're not under duress? And you'll be okay?"

"I trust Dr. Marks and Gus with my life," Jax said. "None of us are under duress. I will be just fine."

Gus opened the door to the room wide, propping it with the doorstop in preparation for wheeling Ingersole to radiology. Steve stepped out of the way quickly, but not before Ingersole caught a glimpse of him.

"Lieutenant Commander," Ingersole said, raising a hand in shaky salute. "Thank you for pulling me off the ship, sir. Are my men okay? What about Staples?"

Steve returned the salute. "Master Chief, it was my honor to help you out today, sir. Right now we're concentrating on your injuries."

"I'd like you to look after this civilian," Ingersole said. "She's the daughter of a master chief."

"Another honor, sir," Steve said.

"And stop calling me sir," Ingersole groused, as Gus pushed him toward radiology.

"We'll bring him back here," Dr. Marks said, "after the CT. I'm assigning you to him for the duration of his stay in the ER. You did a good job, keeping him calm."

"I don't feel like I did anything, or got anywhere," Jax said frustrated. "All I did was talk to him - distract him."

Steve shook his head. "You have no idea how disoriented and combative he was on the scene. Somehow, you were able to talk to him and distract him in a way that we couldn't."

"Geez," Jax said, noticing Steve and Danny's bruises.

"Yeah, get these two cleaned up while you wait for Ingersole to come back up," Dr. Marks said.

"I'm fine," Steve protested, "but he caught Danny right over the eye. It was a solid hit."

Jax pulled out her penlight and flashed Danny's eyes, while Steve looked on with concern.

"He concussed?" he asked.

"Borderline," Jax murmured. "Equal in size, slower in reaction. Nothing crazy for the rest of the day, at least. I can check you again later. This split - must have caught right on the knuckle. I'll actually make a note to check Ingersole for a fracture."

"Hush, don't harass my patient," Jax said. "Danny, butterflies would be easier, but stitches are gonna hold better, ultimately heal faster. Your call. I can slip in a couple sutures for you."

"Yeah, go ahead," Danny sighed. "Butterflies are a pain in the ass."

"Let me get charts and a room," Jax said. She headed to the nurse's station and pulled both Steve and Danny's charts. They saw her confer for a moment with Dr. Marks, who pointed at an exam room. Jax gestured, and they headed for the room.

"Get comfy, Danny, you're first," Jax said. "You want lidocaine?"

"Hell yes, I'm not a masochist like the two of you yahoos," Danny grumbled.

Jax chuckled as she gloved up. She cleaned the wound and then reached for a prefilled syringe on the suture tray. "Little stick, little sting," she murmured, slipping the needle expertly into Danny's skin.

"Son of a bitch, that hurts," Danny swore. "No more than when anyone else does it, though. Possibly I've had worse."

"Oh, thanks for the glowing review," Jax said. She pulled off her gloves and tossed them in the bin. "We'll let that settle for a minute. Now. What did you get into?" she asked, turning to Steve.

"Just clipped my jaw, I'm fine," Steve said. His hands wrapped around her hips automatically as she stood between his knees, her deft fingers carefully probing the bruise.

"Clip your jaw on Ingersole's fist, or pulling your crouching tiger hidden dragon shit catapulting over the side of the bridge after him?" Danny challenged.

Jax raised her eyebrows at Steve.

"His truck had one axle off the bridge," Steve said. "Fire was having trouble getting a cable connected. I helped."

"Of course you did," Jax said. "Okay, doesn't feel fracture. Anything else?"

"Might have twinged a few muscles," Steve shrugged. "Nothing a couple Motrin won't fix. Maybe a back rub, later . . . "

"I think I'm numb now," Danny said loudly.

Jax smiled at Steve, her hand still cupped around his bruised jaw. She bent and kissed him gently. "Glad you're okay," she murmured. "We'll check those sore muscles later."

"Yep, good and numb," Danny said.

Jax shook her head at him as she put on fresh gloves and picked up a pre-threaded suture needle.

"Want me to hold your hand, Danno?" Steve asked, settling back in his chair and stretching his legs out in front of him.

"Bite me," Danny said casually.

Steve chuckled and pulled out his phone, dialing Chin. He put the call on speaker.

"Kelly," Chin answered.
"Chin, you're on speaker with Danny and Jax," Steve said. "How are things at the scene?"

"Still pretty chaotic," Chin said. "But I just spoke with Commander Taylor and Lieutenant Rollins. Absolutely no evidence of terrorism or sabotage. The fuel truck blew a radiator hose, set of a chain of events ending in the vehicular pile-up. We've sent dozens of injuries to Queens, and I guess that many to Tripler."

"Recovery?" Steve asked quietly.

"They pulled two people out of the water," Chin said. "It looked pretty serious, but the EMTs said that they had pulse and respiration on the scene."

Steve sighed in relief and rubbed a hand over his face. "Good. Good, that's good. Okay, Danny's getting a couple stitches from that punch he took helping me with that disoriented sailor, and we'll be back over to help. We'll catch a ride back to the scene with one of the paramedics."

"Copy that," Chin said, as he ended the call.

"I should be on the scene," Jax said quietly. She placed a second stitch and tied it neatly. "One more," she murmured to Danny.

"No, you're right where you need to be," Steve assured her.

She finished, pulling off her gloves and disposing of everything in the red hazardous materials bin.

"Go," she said, smiling at them. "I'll expedite your paperwork. See you tonight?"

Steve bent over her, sliding a hand into her hair and kissing her gently. "See you tonight. Don't overdo it today, okay?"

Steve's phone buzzed, and he kissed Jax quickly one more time, then answered it as he and Danny headed for the ambulance bay.

"Mare," Steve said. "Yeah, we're all fine. Oh, that was on the - well, yeah, that was me, but I'm fine, and so is the driver of the pick-up. Yeah, I'm sure. No, there's nothing you can do for us at Tripler or on the scene . . . but Mary, listen - sometimes we all end up crashing at our place after a case like this, you know, to kind of decompress? So - yeah, that's what I was thinking. Beer, snacks, sandwiches - that'd be great. Thanks, Mary. We'll see you later."

"So, your place when this is all over?" Danny asked. He leaned his aching head back against the wall of the ambulance.

"Only if you want," Steve said quickly. "I'm sure Rachel and the kids -"

"I think I'm gonna need a little room to . . . decompress, like you say," Danny said. "Rachel gets it this time around. I checked in with her already, while you were staring moonstruck at Jax."

Steve smiled. "She's amazing, isn't she? I mean . . . she had that guy calm."

"If she can see what she's been through used for good . . . maybe that will help," Danny said. "Help her make sense of it all, you know?"

Steve was silent for a moment. "Before we got the call about the bridge, Danny, you - the episie thing."

"Episiotomy," Danny said quietly. "Yeah, sorry, buddy, to dump it on you like that I just - didn't
they suggest you guys take childbirth classes?"

"There's classes?" Steve asked. "No one mentioned them."

"Maybe because they thought you'd be doing a C-section," Danny mused. "But the classes tell you all about this stuff. Breathing exercises, so you can breathe through labor . . . all of your pain relief options . . . nursing . . ."

Steve was silent again. "Jax wants to bottle feed."

"Our moms did, right?" Danny said, smiling. "Whatever she's comfortable with, Steve. And jeez, twins . . ."

"I want her to have a C-section," Steve blurted. "She's - like you were saying. She's been through stuff. Things are starting to get better for her, and I - Danny, what I saw on those videos, God, that looked - traumatic."

"It can be," Danny said. "It wasn't for us, thank God, but - yeah. My sister, Stella, when Eric was born . . . there were complications, and . . . well. He's an only child."

"I want her to do whatever she wants but . . . I'm gonna tell her I think she should demand a C-section," Steve said. "Is that bad? I'm telling her to have surgery -"

"Steve," Danny said softly. "It'll be okay, babe. Nothing wrong with you wanting to protect her. Talk to her about it. You'll sort it out."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay," Steve said, taking a deep breath.

The ambulance slowed and then stopped. They got out, squinting against the bright light, and searched for the rest of the team. Steve squeezed Danny's shoulder as they spotted Kono and Chin, conferring with Duke and Grover.

"Sure you're up for more, Danny?" he asked.

"Once more into the breach, my friend," Danny said, rubbing a hand over his head. "Once more into the breach."

#*#*#*#*#

Jax sat next to Master Chief Ingersole as he dozed in a narcotic haze. Every now and then, he would mumble out a call for help, usually for his men. She watched his vitals carefully.

"Any changes?" Gus asked softly, putting her head inside the room. "Blood pressure holding steady?"

"So far so good," Jax said. She nodded at the collection bag at the foot of the bed. "Output is on target, too. I think his kidney is okay. Any word on a room for him in neuro?"

"Should be any time now," Gus said. "You wanna go up with him, get him settled?"

"Yeah, can I do that?" Jax asked.

"Of course," Gus said. "Marks said we'd be loaning you out as needed. If he wakes up in yet another room he's going to be even more disoriented. Buzz me asap if any of his vitals change. And you watch yourself, stay clear if he starts throwing punches again."
"Copy that," Jax murmured quietly, as Gus closed the door.

When Jax glanced back at her patient, he was looking at her, his dark eyes focused on her with purpose.

"Hey, Master Chief," Jax said. "How's your pain level, sir?"

"Manageable," he said. "Something's not right . . ."

"You have a catheter," Jax said apologetically. "You have a kidney injury."

He shook his head sadly, a few tears slipping out of his eyes and tracking down to the pillow below. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm not like this."

"You have a brain injury," Jax explained. "It messes with everything - your memory, your ability to process, your emotions. It's okay. You're safe. You're at Tripler Medical. Do you remember what happened?"

"Shit, I hate waking up in hospitals," he said. "Done it too many damn times. This is - this is different, I don't -" he started struggling to get up.

"You need to stand down," Jax said, calmly but firmly. "You're safe."

He collapsed against the pillows. "Not Somalia?"

"No, Master Chief. Honolulu. Pearl Hickam joint base, there was an accident as you were crossing the bridge," she said.

"I don't remember," he said. "I remember someone coming over the water. I was over the water. I thought it was Somalia, the damn pirates."

"Your truck was over the bridge railing," Jax said. "Someone came over to stabilize your truck. It's not Somalia. Not pirates. The explosion was an accident, a fuel truck."

Dr. Marks knocked quietly and came into the room. "Master Chief Ingersole, we're going to take you up to neuro. You're going to get some good rest, and the best care. Jax is going to go with you until you get settled. You have any questions?"

"Yeah, doc," Ingersole said. "Why does this feel different than every other time I've - it's like - I don't know how to explain it. I know I'm not at sea, I know I'm stateside, not off Somalia - but - I can't shake the feeling that I am. Like, I'm seeing two versions of reality, coming in and out of focus like . . . " he trailed off, shaking his head.

"Like the flicking between two lenses, at an eye exam?" Jax suggested softly.

He looked at her in shock. "Yes. Exactly."

"Master Chief, you have both a closed head injury - from your head impacting the window - and a deceleration injury - we think you probably braked hard, locked it up, trying to avoid hitting anyone else. You've gone beyond a simple concussion into what we call a traumatic brain injury. It's going to take a while to understand what all has been affected, and create a plan of treatment," Dr. Marks explained. "But we are. Our neurologists and neurosurgeons are the best. You're in good hands. I'm going to confer with the neuro on shift, and then a nurse from neuro and Jax are going to get you settled."
"Thanks, Doc," Ingersole said quietly. He settled back into the cushions and let out a string of expletives. "Sorry," he said, putting his hand over his face. "It's just - I survived the damn Somali pirates, only to get fucked up even worse stateside. Shit, I swear I don't usually swear this much, ma'am. I just thought, when I got stationed here, I'd be safe, you know? Home from the sea, safe."

"No apologies necessary," Jax said.

"You knew," he said abruptly. "You know exactly how to describe this - this god-awful feeling. How'd you know?"

Jax hesitated for a moment, then decided the simple truth was best. "I was at Ground Zero. 9/11. I've had some . . . issues. I understood what you were trying to say."

With one hand covering his face, he reached the other, uncertainly, toward her. "Thank you," he said, hoarsely. "For understanding."

She took his hand in hers, and they managed to get him all the way to the neuro wing without having to let go.

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The team stayed on the scene until the last injury was treated and everyone was accounted for. Wreckers cleared the mangled vehicles, and the old ferry system was back up and running, moving cars and people back and forth to the base.

Chin shook his head at the destruction. "How long, do you think, before the bridge is repaired?"

"Army Corps of Engineers is going to take on the project. It won't take long. Have to admit, they're the best at what they do." He stopped and looked at his team. "Good work today, everyone. Mary's got beers and sandwiches ready at the house, if anyone wants to stop by, settle in a bit before heading home."

They climbed wearily into their respective vehicles and headed back to the palace. The bare minimum of paperwork was completed, and they showered and changed in the locker room. Kono stood, her damp hair twisted up on her head, and examined her jeans. She sighed and tossed them in the haz-mat bin.

"Filing an expense report for those," she informed Steve, as he wandered, finally, the last of them, into the locker room.

"I'll sign it," he promised. He had already planned on everything but his boots going into the bin, and now, looking down at them in the fluorescent light of the locker room, he wasn't entirely sure they could be salvaged. Damn it. They were good boots, too, broken in just right. He sighed and put them into a clean trash bag; maybe he could deal with them later. The shower felt wonderful, and he indulged past his usual three minutes, trying to wash away the grime and some of the superficial scratches and cuts from his multiple encounters with twisted metal and concrete.

"Yo, Steve," Danny's voice came over the sound of the water. "You okay, babe?"

Steve turned off the water and grabbed for his towel. "Yeah, Danny. Guess I lost track of time."

"Nah, it's only been a little over five minutes. That's just long, for you," Danny said. "I've gathered up everyone's paperwork. It's all on your desk. Take your time."

"Thanks, Danny," Steve said. He pulled on the last of the clean clothes from his locker and made a mental note to restock.

True to Danny's word, papers were stacked neatly on his desk. He sighed and started plowing through them, signing his name on autopilot. If he'd needed to check behind his people, they wouldn't be on his team in the first place.

"Chin went to pick Malia up from the hospital," Danny said, folding into a chair across from Steve's desk. "He said they'd swing by the house - Malia wanted to check on Jax, see how they did at Tripler. It's nice they can share that, you know?"

Steve nodded absently as he continued signing off on reports.

"Grover was going to stop at home, check the kids homework. Said he'd definitely come back over for a beer," Danny continued. "Kono was going home. Might see her later, depending." Danny stopped and grinned.

"Depending on -" Steve said, a half smile on his face.
"Yeah, depending on whether an evening getting Caviness to kiss her assorted boo-boos is an option, or not," Danny chuckled. "Speaking of - we would all understand if you and Jax wanted your privacy this evening. It's been a long day."

"She misses the team," Steve said. "I sent her a text, asked if she was up to it, and she said definitely. I'm taking her at her word. I think she'll want to see for herself we're all okay. Apparently there was news footage . . ."

"Oh, great," Danny muttered. "I better go call Rachel . . ."

#*#*#*#*#

Master Chief Ingersole had drifted into a troubled, fitful sleep. Jax sat quietly in the chair next to his bed, watching his vitals carefully. The floor nurse assigned to his room knocked softly on the door and came in.

"I know your shift is over," she said. "It's okay, I've got it."

"I'll wait a while longer," Jax said. "I don't want him to wake up in a strange room with no one familiar around. Once he wakes up and we're sure he's aware of where he is, I'll clock out. Thanks."

She went back to waiting, quietly, squeezing his hand and murmuring to him when his brow furrowed and his head moved in agitation on the pillow. Finally, he opened his eyes.

"Hey, Master Chief," Jax said softly. "We're in neuro now. How's your pain?"

He stared at her, wild eyed, without the faintest glimmer of recognition.

"It's Jax, your nurse from downstairs, in the emergency room. We're at Tripler, you're safe," she said, wrapping her hand around his forearm.

He moved quickly, reaching up and wrapping his beefy hand around her throat.

"Where the hell are my men?" he hissed. His monitor beeped wildly as his pulse ox monitor was forced off the end of his finger by the motion. "It's a trick, I know it's a trick, sending you in here. I'm not gonna fall for it. Not gonna give anything up. Take me to my men -"

The door flew open and two orderlies rushed to pull Ingersole away from Jax. The nurse was close on their heels.

"I was at the station, I saw," she said, wrapping an arm around Jax's shoulders. "You okay?"

Jax nodded, numbly, as the orderlies fastened soft restraints around Ingersole's wrists, as he struggled weakly against them.

"Please, he was just startled, please don't use restraints," Jax said.

"It's policy, ma'am," one of the orderlies said kindly. "It's for his safety, too."

"The doctor is on the way with a sedative," the nurse said. "Let's get you out of the room."

"You think I'm upsetting him," Jax said, her shoulders slumping. "God, what a rookie mistake. I shouldn't have touched his arm . . . he knew me, down in the ER. He did, he knew who I was, it . . ."

The neurologist walked past them swiftly, his footsteps measured and controlled. Jax could hear him speaking with the master chief, his voice firm but kind. She stood on tiptoe to peer anxiously through
the glass of the door. The doctor was bent over the bed, one hand on Ingersole's shoulder, speaking to him.

"He's very kind," Jax murmured.

The nurse smiled. "He is. We see this constantly. The master chief is in good hands, I assure you."

"He didn't mean to hurt me," Jax said. She could feel the skin of her throat heating, imagined it was probably turning red by now.

"Of course he didn't," the neurologist said, joining them just outside the door. He closed it softly behind him. "We understand that -" he stopped, glancing at her name tag in confusion.

"McGarrett. Medic," Jax said quickly. "I'm a medic in the emergency department, they hired me to work with patients with PTSD . . . for whatever it was worth."

"Ah," the nurse nodded. "Stop beating yourself up. That wasn't PTSD."

"It wasn't?" Jax asked, confused. "I mean, it looks like what -" she stopped. It wouldn't do to say that it looked like a lot of the nightmares she'd coaxed Steve through. "It sure looked like a flashback."

"It was, partly," the neurologist explained. "The master chief has a traumatic brain injury. It's even more complicated. The flashbacks are more sudden, more vivid . . . much less predictable. And there's the added factor of amnesia - he may or may not remember anything that happened in the emergency department. He may remember all of it, the next time he wakes up."

"So, how -" Jax shook her head, frustrated. "What do you do? How can you help him?"

"Lots of testing, to see if we can determine the exact location of the worst of the damage," the doctor explained. "And then lots of trial and error to see if we can find a treatment that helps."

"So, he's . . . what, he can't go back to work?" Jax asked.

"He's going to be with us a little while," the nurse said gently. "And then, probably, a rehabilitation facility. Occupational and physical therapy . . . behavioral and cognitive therapy."

"And then?" Jax whispered.

"It depends," the doctor said. "Sometimes we have a fantastic outcome."

"Sometimes you don't," Jax said.

The doctor was silent, and Jax felt a prick of tears rush to her eyes.

"Why don't you check in on him next time you're on shift?" the nurse suggested gently. "I think, probably, you should go home. Ice that throat, it's going to bruise. Do you think you should check in with your OB?"

Jax shook her head. "It didn't compromise my airway, not even for a moment. Just superficial. I'm fine. I'm - I'm really sorry. I should have known better."

"Not to worry," the nurse said. "I promise you, we're going to take excellent care of him."

"He's afraid of pirates," Jax blurted. "Somalia. He served, off the coast."

The nurse nodded. "We'll take care of him. Go, take care of yourself."
Jax nodded mutely and headed for the elevator, moving on autopilot until she found herself blinking, standing in front of her locker in the emergency department locker room.

"McGarrett, what the hell -" Gus muttered, her strong hand tilting Jax's jaw. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Jax said. "Turns out if you add a brain injury to PTSD it gets even dicier. I knew better. It was my fault."

"Your shift was over an hour ago," Gus said. "Clock out, go home, put your feet up. I want a note from your OB before you come back."

"Gus, I -" Jax started to protest.

"Zip it," Gus said, her tone firm but not unkind. Her eyes softened as she looked at Jax. "No one - and I mean, no one - gets it perfect every time. Not even you. So, get over yourself, rest up, get back on the horse. Got it?"

"Got it," Jax said. She grabbed her backpack out of her locker. "Thanks, Gus."

"Hmm, get out before I have to sign off on your overtime," Gus groused. "Note. From the OB."

"OB nurse okay?" Jax bargained, prompting an eyeroll and a grin from Gus.

"Get, before I call the Commander to come get you," Gus said.

#*#*#*#*

Steve was just starting to pace when his phone buzzed with a text from Jax. He read it, sighed in relief, and sat down hard on the front porch steps.

"She's just now getting off work," he said, as Danny sat down next to him, wrapping a hand around his shoulder. "I mean, I should have expected - I did expect, honestly, with the number of sailors and airmen we saw shuttled over there today - that she'd run late."

"I'm glad she thought to text," Danny said. "Okay, now, let's grab a beer, hunh?"

Steve nodded and followed Danny inside the house, his bare feet silent on the old wood floors. Mary was in the kitchen, setting out bowls of pretzels and chips, and unwrapping the sandwiches she'd assembled.

"This is perfect," Steve said, wrapping her in a hug. "Thanks, Mare, I mean it. None of us were up for going out tonight but . . ."

"I get it," Mary said. "I remember. When Dad . . . do you remember? Sometimes, there'd be half a dozen cops here, just sitting, looking out at the water, drinking a beer. I never understood."

"I didn't either," Steve admitted. "I do now. I'm going to watch for Jax." He headed back toward the front door.

"I'll take a plate out to Chin and Malia," Danny said.


Danny chuckled. "It was just an intense day, Mary. There was a lot of chaos . . . a lot of people hurt. A day like that, your body just churns out the adrenaline, you know? So you can keep up, stay
focused, stay sharp, do what you gotta do. And then -"

"The day is over but the adrenaline isn't," Mary guessed. "Your eye looks like shit, by the way."

"Thank you for that astute observation," Danny said, piling a plate with food.

Steve smiled at the sound of his sister and best friend sniping at each other in the kitchen. It felt right, and safe, and like home. He could easily picture them taking food out to Chin and Malia, who had headed straight for the chairs closest to the water. Malia, no doubt, needed to decompress as badly as the rest of them, and while their house was charming, it wasn't near the ocean - and the sea was as much as part of their blood as it was his, as it was Kono's. He chuckled to himself. There'd been a quick snapshot text from a smiling Kono and Brian, thanking him for his offer of hospitality but taking a rain check. Kono was the one member of the team who still needed a different kind of decompression from time to time - the kind involving tequila, loud music, and a considerate and capable boyfriend to ensure that she got what she needed - and got home safely.

It was just dark enough now that the headlights of Jax's Supra cut through the twilight as she turned into the drive. Steve stood, waiting patiently, as she turned off the car engine. Moments passed, and she still hadn't emerged from the vehicle. He padded out to her car, slowly, and braced one strong arm on the hood of the car, opening the door with the other.

"Jax," he said softly. "Hey, ku'uipo, you okay?"

She turned her eyes up to his, and shook her head silently.

"Hey," he said urgently, crouching down next to her. "Hey, what happened?"

"I've never done patient care, not really," Jax said quietly. "I've patched people up, held them together - literally - and turned them over to surgeons and doctors and . . . he woke up, in neuro -"

"The master chief?" Steve asked.

"Yeah. He was disoriented, and I thought - I guess, I thought, like with you or Danny, if I reminded him, he'd - but he didn't remember me. Not at all. He's going to have to be in a facility, Steve - therapy, long-term, and - I don't know. I don't know if he'll be able to stay in the Navy or -" her voice broke, as tears spilled over onto her cheeks.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Steve murmured. "I'm sorry, Jax. But he'll get the best care, you know he will. I can look into his case myself, make sure it's accounted for as a base-related accident, I -"

"It could have been you," Jax blurted. "Any number of times. You. Or Danny. It's not just PTSD, it's more, it's - his actual brain, is damaged, it's - they might not be able to fix it. It could be you."

His hands were sliding under her back, her knees, and pulling, lifting her out of the car. He nudged the door shut with his hip and in a few long strides was sitting on the front steps, holding her.

"He didn't recognize me," Jax whispered. "What if - what if I get called to Tripler, or Queens, one day, and it's you, or Danny, and you don't -" she broke off, pushing her fist against her mouth.

"Shh," he whispered, cradling her head against his shoulder. She pressed her face into his neck, and he could feel hot tears splashing against his skin. She pulled back, cupped her hand around the bruise on his jaw, and then pressed her lips against it. He stayed still, allowing her to kiss over the fresh bruise, sat patiently as her lips traced up to the old scars across his eyebrow, his temple, into his hairline.
"It could have been you," she said, her voice hoarse with fatigue and emotion. "It could be you."

"Yeah, it could," he said slowly. "It was a radiator hose, Jax. A radiator hose blew, caused the driver of the fuel truck to wreck, set off the pile-up that almost pushed the master chief off the bridge. So yeah, it could be me, or you, or anyone. But it wasn't. Not today."

He held her, murmuring soft phrases of pidgin into her ear, until he felt her relax.

"You good?" he asked softly.

She sighed and nodded. "Yeah. I'm hungry."

He chuckled at that, stood up, making sure she was steady on her feet. "Come on, Mare's put out a spread in the kitchen. Danny, Chin, and Malia are here."

"Explains their cars in the driveway," she said dryly. Steve followed her inside, as she paused at the hall table, stowing her stethoscope, shears, and hospital ID.

"Geez, you carry almost as much crap now as you did with Five-O," Danny said, coming through to check on the long silence from his best friends. "Holy shit, Jax, what the hell - who did that -"

Steve took in Danny's alarmed expression and grabbed Jax's shoulders, turning her around and looking over her frantically under the soft light of the entry.

"I didn't see - it's almost dark outside -what -" he fell silent as his eyes fell on the faint bruise forming at her throat.

"It was my fault, I made a rookie mistake, and I'm fine," Jax said. "The master chief woke up disoriented, and I thought - I was too close. I wasn't being careful."

Steve's fingers were tracing over her throat, his eyes wide. She shivered under his touch and smiled up at him.

"I'm fine," she said softly. "Really and truly."

His hand slid down to her stomach, not pausing this time, possessively splaying over the curve.

"They're fine, too," she assured him.

He waited until he felt the now-familiar flutter under his fingers. A soft smile spread over his face.

"We're all fine, and we're all hungry," Jax reminded him. "I was promised food . . ."

She puttered off toward the kitchen while Steve took a moment to collect himself, shaking his head at Danny.

"Sorry, babe," Danny said. "I didn't mean to - I just saw that bruise and all I could think about was -"

"That first day she got off the damn plane," Steve said. "Same here. But she's fine."

"Is she really?" Danny asked quietly. "Took you guys an awful long time to come inside."

"The master chief was more seriously injured than she'd realized at first," Steve sighed. "She took it hard. Especially when he didn't recognize her."

"Shit," Danny said softly. "I didn't mean to blurt all that out, by the way - that was pretty unfiltered
of me."
Steve laughed, a little shaky, but genuine. "Danny. Buddy, I don't think you could filter if your life depended on it."

By the time Grover stopped by, they were sitting around a small bonfire on the beach. He grabbed a beer from the ice-filled kitchen sink and ambled toward the small glow.

"Lou," Steve said, raising a bottle in salute. "Family doing okay?"

"They are," Lou said. "Little shaken up, apparently, by the live footage. Especially the part where you shimmed over the side of that bridge."

"There was shimmying?" Jax said, curious.
Steve waved his hand dismissively. "Just helped attach a cable to the master chief's pick up truck. It wasn't a big deal."

"It's on youtube now," Mary supplied helpfully. "There are lots of hits. And girls leaving, um, messages. I bookmarked it."

"Oh, hell yeah," Jax said. She started to stand up, struggling a bit to find her balance. Mary bounced up and grabbed her hands, laughing.

"Come on, I'll show you," she said. "Malia, come on, you too."
Malia dimpled, pleased at being included. She kissed Chin quickly on the cheek and followed Mary and Jax into the house.

"Okay, so I'd be prepping for a royal butt-chewing about irresponsibility," Danny said, watching the women file into the house. They could see them, through the glow of the window, standing around Steve's desk, Mary's fingers on the laptop. "You, my friend, are sitting there with your usual lack of self-preservation."

Steve took a long swig of his beer. "Well, Daniel," he drawled, "maybe Jax has a different perspective than Rachel."

Chin chuckled and shook his head.

"It was a pretty risky stunt," Chin said. He started to gather up his and Malia's plates and bottles. Danny moved to help him, grabbing Steve and Jax's plates as well.

"Thanks," Steve murmured, as Danny waved him back into his seat and followed Chin into the house.

"Appreciate the time to chill out," Grover said. He stretched his legs out in front of him. "Quite a day. Wasn't sure you and Danny were going to be able to subdue that injured sailor."

"He was disoriented," Steve agreed. "Came up swinging."

"That he did," Grover said, nodding. "Kono was a little shaken up."
"Yeah?" Steve asked, surprised. He turned to look at Grover in the dim light of the bonfire. "She's seen me and Danny take much worse hits before."

"True, true. What if you had been the one swinging, though?" Grover asked quietly.

"What are you getting at?" Steve asked, picking at the label on his bottle.

"I think you know," Grover said. "Someday, it could be you, yeah? Take a hard hit to that hard head of yours, you don't know your ass from your elbow. Don't know your present from your past. Don't know your friend from your enemy."

"Kono . . . worries that I'm gonna hurt someone on the team," Steve said quietly. "Like the master chief hurt Danny . . . hurt Jax. Hell, like I hurt Jax, that time -"

"Could we take you down, Steve? The four of us," Grover mused. "I'm not sure we could."

Steve pondered for a moment, then shook his head slowly. "I'm not sure you could," he said. His voice was low and serious. "I've thought about it. From the very beginning, to be honest. When I first got back to the island, I was . . . my head was in a pretty screwed up place. Thanks to you, and Danny and Jax - and therapy - it's better. But even then . . . I hurt Jax. Could've killed her."

"Didn't come here to bring up ghosts and guilt, McGarrett," Grover said.

"I know, Lou, but . . . Kono's right to be worried," Steve said. "Shit, is that why she didn't -"

"Now, don't you go adding completely needless guilt," Grover said quickly. "That girl was practically buzzing. She needed to go out and blow off some serious steam, and that's why she's not here. But, she raised a concern. Mentioned a tranq gun. I told her I'd share with you."

"I appreciate it," Steve said. "I'd never want any of you to worry and . . . and not tell me."

"So, you take some time, think about what you need to tell us to do, should we find ourselves in a situation with you injured and confused," Grover said. He put a huge hand on Steve's shoulder. "Now, I'm gonna go home and get some much needed rest."

"Take your time coming in tomorrow," Steve said. "Rest, spend some time with Renee. Drive your kids to school."

"I'll take you up on that," Grover said. He ambled up toward the house, leaving Steve alone, staring into the fire and past it to the water.

"Give our love and goodnights to Steve," Malia said, as she and Chin gathered their things and headed out right after Grover.

Mary was smiling at her phone. "I'm going to join Kono and this guy of hers while the night is still relatively young. You know, for people who didn't save lives today."

"Saved my life with those sandwiches," Danny declared, giving her a hug.

"Tell my brother I'm in good hands and not to worry," Mary said, grabbing her bag. "Oh. Um . . ."

"Take the Supra," Jax said, smiling. "Be safe. Uber home and I'll get Steve to fetch the car tomorrow if that's an issue."
Mary stopped, looked at Jax, and then past her, to the pictures of their parents on the wall of Steve's study. "I'm done with reckless behavior," she said. "Fun? Yes. I'll go out and have a blast. But . . . this family has enough loss, and God knows, enough risk, already. When I say to tell Steve not to worry, I mean it."

"Thanks, Mary," Jax said softly.

Mary gave her a jaunty salute and dashed out the front door.

"So, your Neanderthal animal husband played Tarzan today," Danny said, tilting his head toward the laptop. "Did you enjoy the footage?"

"Wish I could have been there," Jax sighed.

"You're both crazy," Danny declared, as they went into the kitchen to clean up. He wasn't surprised when Jax's small, strong fingers caught at his jaw, tilting his head under the light to examine the stitches over his eyebrow. "How's it look? Some renegade medic stitched me up in a military hospital."

"Looks damn good," Jax said. "Nice even stitches. Will barely leave a scar. How's the headache? Any nausea?"

"A dull throb, but that often accompanies a day with my delightful partner," Danny said. "No nausea. I'm not concussed, babe. How's that bruising?"

"If I didn't have this whole Irish freckles and fair skin thing going on, it wouldn't even have bruised," Jax said. "No pain, no big deal. Nothing like . . . other times. Really and truly. It was an accident, all the way. One I caused, by not using common sense."

She looked out the window, at Steve, who was sitting motionless by the fire.

"He said you took it hard, that your patient was seriously injured," Danny said softly. He started filling the sink with soapy water, collecting dishes and slipping them into the suds.

"I can't do this without him, Danny," Jax said quietly. "I can't. I . . . I barely can imagine myself with kids as it is, but trying to do this, if he's not . . . damn it. I swore, I promised myself that I'd never let myself be this dependent on anyone, and look at me."

"Yeah, look at you," Danny said. "Married to one of the best men I've ever known, about to start a family, surrounded with friends and family who love you. And looking damn good."

Jax rolled her eyes. "Looking like a baby whale. I couldn't even stand up without help."

"It's the sand," Danny declared. "No one can stand up gracefully from the sand."

The two of them watched as Steve proved Danny wrong, unfolding his long frame with ease. He stood, his arms crossed over himself protectively, and stared out at the water.

"Okay, the obnoxiously muscled and agile Super SEAL can stand up gracefully from the sand," Danny groused. "And I'm gonna go, before the two of you start being all -" he gestured helplessly. He wrapped his arms around Jax and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Thanks, Danny," she said, leaning into his solid strength.

"You're going to be great parents, babe," he whispered. "You'll see. And as far as the dangers of our
job...you gotta stay past that. You know as well as I do that all of life is a risk. Those people on the bridge today, the people in the World Trade Center, on those airplanes that day...they weren't cops. Or SEALs." He tousled her hair affectionately, then grabbed his things from the hall table. Jax could hear him, faintly, on the phone with Rachel as he closed the front door behind him.

She finished up the dishes quickly, watching as Steve still stood, looking out over the water.

"He's brooding," she informed Pupule, who sat at the back door looking out. "It's been kind of an intense day."

Pupule watched as Jax headed out the door toward Steve. Satisfied that his humans were looking after each other, he headed up to the landing and curled up in his bed.

"Hey, sailor," Jax said quietly. No day was a good day to sneak up on a SEAL, but especially not a day that involved an adrenaline crash.

He turned his head and looked at her, then glanced back at the obviously quiet house.

"Shit, I lost track."

"No worries," she said, wrapping an arm around his waist and leaning into him. His arm wrapped around her protectively. "Everyone said to tell you thanks for hosting. Danny and I cleaned up. Oh, Mary went out to catch up with Kono and Brian. She'll be safe."

He nodded. "Good. She needs to have fun, but...anyway. Good."

"And you? Are you good?" Jax asked quietly.

"Adrenaline crash," he shrugged. "Was thinking another hot shower, honestly."

"I'll make you some tea," Jax suggested.

"That'd be perfect," he said.

She looked up at him, searching, but didn't press. When they reached the kitchen, she puttered around with the tea kettle and tea while Steve kept moving, slowly, steadily, toward the stairs. She could still hear the water running as she reached the bedroom, carefully carrying two steaming cups. She placed them carefully on the dresser and went into the bathroom.

He was leaning against the wall of the shower, the water beating down on his shoulders. She stepped deliberately into his peripheral vision, hoping to avoid startling him.

"You're being careful," he said, his voice muffled by the water.

"I've startled one sailor today," she said lightly. "Don't need to do it again."

"Kono's afraid of me," he blurted out. He turned his head toward her, water dripping from his lashes. "Danny and I, took both of us to subdue the master chief. Us and a couple EMTs. Kono's afraid I'll lose it on a case, take out the team."

Jax slowly peeled off her scrubs, tossing them into the hamper, and then slipped into the shower. Steve's fingers traced over her shoulders, up to the faint bruise on her throat.

"I damn near killed you," he said quietly. "The master chief, today, he coulda killed you. Danny had to have stitches. Kono's afraid of me. Of what I'm capable of."
Jax put her face in the water, tilting it up until her hair was soaking, and water was dripping off her lashes as well.

"I'm afraid I'll lose the plot and hurt the babies," she said, looking up at him. "I want you to teach Mary how to take me down, if she needs to."

He reached for her shampoo, putting some of it in the palm of his hand, and then gently working it through her hair. When he was done, he tilted her head back, cradling her head in his hand, as the water rinsed the suds away.

"We're a little bit screwed up," Jax said. "I think we might need, I dunno, professional help."

He looked at her, at the twitch of a smile hovering on her lips, and felt a small sense of relief.

"Yeah. I hear the Navy has some really kick ass therapists," he said, reaching for the shower gel. She was soon relaxing under his touch.

"I mean, they have to," she said, shaking her head in mock distress. "Those sailors, they're a handful. But I'm pretty sure the SEALs are the worst."

"Oh, the worst?" he asked, turning her gently under the water to rinse off the gel. She shivered. The water was turning cool. He turned off the faucet and grabbed a fluffy towel, wrapping it around her, then grabbed another for himself and wrapped it low around his hips.

"The worst," she confirmed. "In fact, I have solid evidence of a certain SEAL rushing ahead of the local fire department today, using his personal climbing gear to go over the side of a bridge, and attach a stabilizing cable to a pick up truck. I mean, that kind of recklessness. It is a concern."

He smirked at her in the mirror as they brushed their teeth.

"Recklessness? Hm. Were you concerned?" he mumbled around his toothbrush.

"Very," she said, nodding. "I think I need to check you over, very thoroughly, make sure there aren't any injuries from that stunt that have been overlooked."

"Well, you're the professional," he said. He turned to look down at her, and tossed his toothbrush into the cup without looking.

"Show off," she murmured, and then his lips were against hers, and there might have been something else she was going to say, but she couldn't remember.

Steve grinned down at her, propped on one elbow and tracing the fingers of his other hand over her bare shoulder. The moonlight filtered into the otherwise darkened room, splashing patterns from the blinds onto the walls.

"You okay, there?" he asked. "A little dehydrated, maybe?"

"You're so smug," she groaned. "It's infuriating. Why do I find you so attractive?"

He grinned even wider. "I do have a certain skill set."

"They teach you all that in SEAL school?" she murmured. "Or did it come with the abs? Oh, I know - the ink."
He ducked his head down and kissed her, slow and unhurried. "It's you."

"Ugh, me," she sighed, pulling the sheet up to cover her stomach.

"Yes, you," he said. "Why do you find that hard to believe?"

"Because I'm thirty two weeks pregnant and I look ridiculous," she said. "Come on. I mean, there are two little tiny humans floating around in there. It's absurd, when you think about it. And I don't think my belly button is ever going to be the same. I look ridiculous."

He brushed her curls away from her face. "Say I thought you looked ridiculous. I wouldn't care. Because, in about eight weeks, we get to meet these little humans, hold them in our arms. If you did look ridiculous, it would only be temporary, and totally and completely worth it."

"Okay," she shrugged, "that I could believe. Maybe."

"But I happen to think you look incredible," he murmured. "It's not ridiculous to me, it's pretty much the most amazing thing I could imagine. I like the way you look. You've always been tiny and curvy at the same time and . . . holy hell, it's always turned me on. That hasn't changed a bit in thirty two weeks. It's not going to change in eight more, either."

She looked at him dubiously.

"Okay, you need references," he said. "Ask Danny. I dare you. Ask Danny if he was turned on by Rachel when she was pregnant with Gracie and Charlie. You don't believe me? Get another guy's perspective."

"You're crazy," she said, but a small smile was playing over her lips. "You - really? Even now?"

"Hell yeah," he said. "Pretty sure I just demonstrated that. Like, repeatedly."

She laughed, snorting indelicately. "I think I need another shower," she commented. "That was - you were - um, athletic."

He beamed down at her and helped her get untangled from the sheets, and then whistled on his way into the bathroom.

#*#*#*#*#

Mary slipped quietly in the front door, and Pupule staggered down the stairs to greet her. He liked this extra person, he'd decided. Sometimes she let him sleep on her bed, which was nice. He looked up at her, hopeful.

"Hey, buddy," she whispered. He followed her down the hall. She opened the door to her room and let him in. "I'm just gonna grab a shower," she informed him, still whispering.

The hot water felt blissful . . . for about three minutes. Then it turned cool. Mary shivered and grabbed her towel, shooting dark glances at the ceiling above her.

"One would think it would be safe to take a nice hot shower at two in the morning," she muttered, as she slipped into her pajamas. "Smooth Dog my ass. Horn Dog, more like it. Geez."

Pupule blinked at her sympathetically. His other people had been exceptionally noisy, after all, and it was high time everyone got quiet enough to let him sleep.

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"Oh, shit, I think Mary tried to take a shower," Jax whispered, as she slid under the covers for the second time.

"Oops," Steve said, completely unrepentant. He slid in behind her, wrapping an arm around her and kissing the back of her neck.

"She's here to help us," Jax protested. "We have to take good care of her. Seriously, I'm seven kinds of relieved that she's willing to stay here to help figure out the baby stuff."

"I'm glad too," Steve said. "Not because I doubt you - not for a minute - but, simple logistics says that an extra person is going to mean a lot. And . . . I'm glad she's here. I didn't know how much I missed her. I wish . . . I wish our dad had found a way to keep us together, you know?"

Jax turned, awkwardly, until she could face him. Her fingers traced over the bruise on his jaw, and then threaded through his hair.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry you missed out on that. And I'm definitely sorry that Mary did. I wouldn't have made it through those years without Billy."

He stroked her hair away from her face. "Your dad . . . was a master chief," he said hesitantly. Bringing up the subject of her parents rarely went over well. But she was drowsy and content, and went along with his conversation.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean . . . I guess, not my biological father, since I don't know who that was, but yeah. By the time he was stationed at Earle, he was a master chief, and it was good, you know? Things just seemed . . . I don't know. Easier. Our mom was less stressed all the time. We had a nice house . . . got to go to the shore so much, which I loved . . ."

"He would have been making a really decent salary," Steve commented. "That probably did make things easier. Maybe . . . maybe some of your mom's stress was about money, earlier?"

"Probably," Jax said. "Don't get me wrong, she was never satisfied. Always inexplicably jealous of 'officers' wives. I didn't understand . . . everyone seemed to think highly of my dad."

"Hell yeah," Steve said. "Jax, a master chief is . . . hell, I salute them first."

"He always said the true officers respected the enlisted," she murmured. "Backbone of the Navy, he liked to say."

Steve nodded in agreement. "So, you have good memories of your time at Earle, then?"

"Yeah. Like Master Chief Ingersole said today, it's a good place to raise a family. Dad wasn't deployed but a couple short times while we were there, which meant he was around to -" she broke off short.

Steve thought for a moment, piecing together the small bits of information he'd collected about Jax's family life, and filling in the blanks.

"To protect you?" he whispered.

"To help our mom," Jax said. "I've told you - Billy was amazing, he was such a good kid, good student. I was a handful. I was just a lot of trouble. When Dad was around, I . . . I seemed not to get in as much trouble. We had a few good years."

"Only a few?" Steve asked, stroking her cheek with the back of his fingers.
"Things just... it just would have been better, for them, if I hadn't been in the picture," Jax said. "Once I moved out, with Billy, they could put all of the problems between them, behind them. Move on."

"They moved on while you were in the hospital, barely surviving 9/11," Steve said angrily. His hand moved to wrap protectively around the scar on her side. "Their problems were never your fault, Jax. And no one - no one, would have been better off if you hadn't been in the picture. I'm really, really glad that you're in the picture."

He could see her eyelashes fanning slowly over her cheeks.

"Get some rest," he said. He shifted onto his back, pulling her close to nestle her head on his shoulder.

She curled against him, and hummed in satisfaction as she found a comfortable position with one leg tossed over his.

"Are you using me as a pillow?" he whispered, brushing his lips against her forehead.

"Yes."
When this story was originally published "in real time" over on ff net . . . it lined up with the calendar at some point, which seemed like a good idea at the time . . .

Jax grumbled sleepily as Steve slipped out of the bed while it was still dark.

"Stay asleep," he whispered. "It's very early, and you don't have a shift. I'm just going into the office to get caught up on a few things, then I'll be back. I'm making an appointment with Lieutenant Allen, I'll be back to pick you up."

"'Kay," Jax mumbled.

"Do you remember anything I just said?" Steve asked, smiling down at her.

"Early," she sighed.

He chuckled as he crept down the stairs, and wrote everything out in a note in his neat block print, and left it by the coffee maker.

Danny's eyes automatically took in the details of Steve's office: blinds still closed, two cups of coffee on the desk - one empty, one half-full, a larger stack of papers on the right side of the desk, almost no papers on the left side of the desk.

"You've been here for hours already," Danny said. He deposited a muffin on Steve's desk. "From Gracie. Apparently, Jax mentioned to her that cooking was a good thing to do when you are worried, and so she made muffins yesterday. Kids at school knew about the bridge. She knew we'd be there. Hence, muffins."

"Thanks, Danno," Steve said, grinning. He took a bite of the muffin. "This is shockingly good," he mumbled.

"Why would you be shocked that my daughter makes delicious muffins?" Danny asked. "Of course she makes delicious muffins. Why have you been here for hours?"

"Wanted to get caught up," Steve said. He looked at Danny apologetically. "Would you mind taking point today? Jax and I need to go see Lieutenant Allen."

"Sure, babe," Danny said. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Everything okay?"

"Kono mentioned to Grover yesterday - after we grappled with that disoriented sailor - she's thinking of carrying a tranq gun. In case I lose my shit on a case and try to take out my own team," Steve sighed. "Jax is worried that she'll flip it one day and hurt the babies. Wants me to teach Mary how to take her down."

"Shit," Danny muttered. "I'm sorry."
"What do we do, Danny?" Steve asked. "Should we not have - I mean, should we have asked ourselves these questions before?"

Danny shook his head. "Look, I've seen firsthand how off the page Jax can get. But nothing that triggers her involves babies in any way. Worst case scenario, I could see her mistakenly thinking they're in danger when they're not. I bet Lieutenant Allen will agree with me."

"But you're not arguing that Kono should carry a tranq gun," Steve said.

"Oh, no, I think that's entirely appropriate," Danny said, grinning. "Big 'ol tranq darts. Strong enough to take down an elephant. Come on, Steve. We know enough to know that we don't know."

"Is that a riddle, or are you having a seizure of some sort?" Steve asked. He rolled his eyes and took another bite of muffin.

"Steve," Danny said. His tone was serious and he leaned forward again. "This is a civilian task force. I tease about having to keep you reined in, but seriously, man... we know you're exercising a lot of restraint, every day. Sometimes, like yesterday, when you casually toss a rope around a belt loop and launch yourself off the side of a bridge - sometimes we get a little glimpse of SEAL Steve. We know that we've only seen the bare surface of what you're capable of, and frankly, yes, it's a bit terrifying. Would you ever, in a million years, choose to hurt one of us? No. You'd take a bullet for any of us, any day, and twice on Sunday. But you have the potential, because of your past - not because of any fault of your own - to lose your shit. We have to be honest about it."

"I could have killed Jax," Steve whispered.

"Yeah, but you didn't, because I taught her well enough that even confused herself, she headbutted you off, you big goof," Danny said. "But could the four of us have taken you down that day? Maybe. Would one or more of us have been hurt in the process? For sure. Here's the problem, for me anyway - we all know that Kono is more badass than the four of us guys put together."

"Fact," Steve agreed, nodding.

"But you'd break her arm like a dry twig in winter," Danny said. "And you'd never, never forgive yourself."

"Shit, Danny," Steve said. He sat back in his chair and rubbed his hand over his face.

"Look, I think it's unlikely to the point of remote. Very remote, like Siberia remote. Or one of those god-forsaken pineapple farms remote," Danny said. "But now that it's been brought up, you're not gonna rest easy until you've addressed it. Come up with a plan. I bet they call it a scenario or some shit, in Army war college."

Steve glared at him. "I wouldn't know," he said, "since I'm in the Navy, Danny, the Navy."

Danny grinned.

"I'm going to talk to Lieutenant Allen," Steve said. "Then I'll come up with a plan - a scenario - and we'll talk about it, as a team."

Danny nodded, and started to head out of Steve's office. He turned back, talking to Steve over his shoulder. "Can I be the first to shoot you? We need to know if the tranq is strong enough..."

#*#*#*#*#
Jax smiled, reading the note in Steve's precise block script, as she poured a cup of coffee. Pupule nudged the door to Mary's room open with his paw, and padded out to the kitchen. His footfalls were heavy on the wood floors.

"You are remarkably noisy, for a cat," Jax informed him.

He plopped on the floor and proceeded to clean his backside.

"Oh, so dignified," Jax muttered, sipping her coffee. She heard the front door open and close quietly, and in a few silent strides Steve was in the kitchen, his arms wrapped around her.

"Good morning," he said, smiling against her shower-damp curls. "You know, you've had three showers in the last twelve or so hours?"

"Watch the coffee," she protested, holding her mug precariously out of his embrace. "Well, the first shower you nullified, the second shower would have been sufficient, I agree, but I was still half asleep and didn't think of that when I went for the third shower."

"Nullified," he mused. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"You are in a suspiciously good mood," she said, "for someone who got up at o dark hundred so you could drag us to see a shrink."

He looked down at her, his hazel eyes serious and searching. "I think we should go talk to her, but -"

"I agree," she said. "I'm willing, Steve, I just - I wish it wasn't an issue."

"I know," he said, wrapping his arms around her again.

"Good Lord," Mary mumbled, padding into the kitchen. Her hair was in wild disarray, her tshirt hanging off one shoulder. "I don't suppose I dare hope for hot water?" She stumbled to the coffee pot and poured a huge mug.

"I'm so sorry," Jax said. "I took a shower about twenty minutes ago, and it wasn't a long one. You should be fine. I'm sorry about, um, last night."

"I'm not," Steve informed her, smirking.

Mary growled at Steve around the edge of her mug.

"I'm thinking of a couple improvements over the holiday," Steve said quickly. "Believe it or not, things actually do slow down for the task force. HPD ramps up with petty robberies, B & Es, that sort of thing, but I guess even organized crime and serial murderers take some time to be with family. So, I'll look into a new hot water heater. I'll ask Grover, he has a family. And I was thinking . . . the bedrooms in the house are full, but we have the Airstream. I was thinking of hooking up water and electric supply here, at the house, so we could use it for guests. What do you think?"

"The Harts said they wanted to come," Jax said. "That would be nice, for them. Private."

"And Aunt Deb, she will want to visit, after the babies are born," Mary said. "Speaking of . . . I love being back here with you guys, and I know Five-O does a great Christmas party but - I was thinking, this year, I'd go back to spend Christmas and a few days with Aunt Deb."

"Of course, Mare," Steve said. "We'll miss you, but . . . Aunt Deb has spent every Christmas with you since you were a little kid. I don't like to think of her being alone. Maybe next year she can come
Mary nodded. "That's what I was thinking. Okay, I'll look at flight information."

Pupule trotted off after her.

"I think he's choosing a new favorite," Jax said. "Poor kitty. Probably for the best."

Steve chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Wait until the babies are old enough to play with him."

"Oh, he's going to hate that so much," Jax said. "We'll get video."

#*#*#*#*

Stephanie smiled at them as they came into her office.

"Thanks for making time for us on short notice," Steve said. He sat down, stretching his long legs out in front of him. Jax scowled. Her feet didn't reach the floor, and now she was too round to comfortably tuck them under her.

Stephanie held up a finger and grabbed a footstool, hidden under her desk.

"Here, borrow mine," she said, smiling as she tucked it under Jax's feet. "Hey, wipe that smirk, sailor. Not everyone in the Navy is six feet plus of rippling muscle, diving over the side of a bridge. Impressive, by the way."

"Good Lord, didn't anyone have anything better to do yesterday?" Steve groaned.

Stephanie narrowed her eyes at the faint bruising on Jax's throat and Steve's throat. "Please don't tell me . . ."

"No, well sort of, but it was a patient," Jax said quickly. "PTSD plus TBI. I made a rookie mistake, and I actually didn't understand the extent of the TBI situation. I do now."

"It is one of the reasons we're here," Steve said. "My team has expressed concern - so, what I hope there wasn't news footage of yesterday, we pulled Jax's patient up out of that wrecked pickup. He was disoriented, combative. Danny ended up with a couple stitches. It's . . . it's not outside the realm of possibility that could be me."

Jax's hand tightened around his.

"I need to have a plan. I need to know that my team can safely handle that scenario," Steve said. "Kono and Danny are thinking a tranq gun, with varying motivations from each of them, I think. And . . . okay, I really personally don't think this will be an issue, but Jax is concerned, to a degree, about a scenario in which she's disoriented and . . . how that will affect -"

"I'm afraid I'll hurt the babies," Jax said. "Don't sugar coat it, Steve."

Stephanie took a deep breath and nodded at them. "Wow. Okay, that's a lot to discuss. I might need some time to do a little more research, and come up with some suggestions. Of course, we can review all of your current practices - combat breathing, grounding - maybe go over those together with your team, Steve, and with anyone who is helping Jax those first critical weeks at home with the babies."

"My sister," Steve said, smiling. "She's delaying taking a full time job so that she can be available to
help out for a while."

"That's lovely," Stephanie said. "I'm genuinely relieved, actually . . . how much does she understand about your PTSD?"

"She's um . . . she's been in the house when we've had rough nights," Jax said quietly. "I think she gets it."

"She needs to be read in to the situation," Stephanie said. "Fully vetted."

Steve smiled at her terminology, but nodded in agreement.

"This is not some family secret," Stephanie continued. "You are blessed with this amazing group of friends, and now family, that you have in your life. I'm serious. Read them in. You're not fooling them anyway. Now. You said that was one of the reasons you wanted to come in. What was the other? What else is going on?"

Jax looked at Steve. She wasn't sure, either, what he could possibly have in mind.

He shifted on the sofa so that he could look at Jax, to gauge her response to his next words.

"It came up, that maybe Jax doesn't need to have a C-section, because of twins being smaller," he said. "Things have been so crazy, we haven't had time to read over all the stuff they sent home with us, but her OB encouraged us to include you in the conversation."

Jax shifted uncomfortably.

"Okay, well, I think it might have been wise for the two of you to have this conversation privately, before including me," Stephanie said. "Jax, what do you think?"

"About the conversation or the C-section?" Jax asked, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.

"Either," Stephanie said.

"I don't mind talking about it here," Jax said. "Before all hell breaks loose again."

"Fair enough," Stephanie said. "How do you feel about delivering naturally versus by C-section?"

"They told me, from the beginning, that I'd need a section," Jax said. "I don't - I hadn't really thought about . . . I think, it's frowned upon, though, to have a C-section if you don't really need it."

"Why do you think that is?" Stephanie asked.

Jax shrugged. "Hell if I know. Look, a C-section is a very controlled situation. You've got anesthesiology there, and an obstetrician, and the pediatric nurse . . ."

"Does the idea of a controlled situation appeal to you?" Stephanie asked. "That's essentially a rhetorical question, you realize that."

Jax shrugged again, and nodded.

"It appeals to me," Steve said quietly. He faced Jax again. "It's your body, your decision, ku'uipo. But after everything . . . I don't know, Jax. I don't know if it's a good idea for . . . shit, I don't know how to say this."

"Just say whatever you're feeling, Steve," Stephanie suggested.
He wanted, so badly, to blurt out his increasingly strong opinion that Jax would be crazy to attempt a natural birth, that it looked terrifying, and traumatic, and that he wanted nothing to do with it. He pushed his feelings down.

"It's Jax's body, her decision," he repeated, his voice growing hoarse with emotion. " Enough. There's been enough times where that hasn't been an option, where that's been taken away from her. . . she gets to decide. Who gives a shit what anyone else, including me, thinks about it. That's what I feel."

Jax stared at him, speechless.

"Jax, what do you think about what Steve just said?" Stephanie prompted. "I'm interested in that, first, then we'll talk about the delivery plan."

"I hadn't thought about it, that way," she said slowly. "But that's part of it. I don't like the idea of -." She shook her head. It sounded terrible in her head, she couldn't imagine how it would sound if she said it out loud.

"Don't censor yourself, Jax," Stephanie said. "You get to feel how you feel. I suspect that's why Steve decided to bring this up here. You two need a bit of help giving yourself permission to say what you really think. God only knows how long it's going to take to figure that out, but anyway - go ahead."

"It scare me, to think about . . . what if I tried to deliver the babies and it made me think of . . ." Jax hesitated. Her lip trembled, and she blinked rapidly, trying to hold back tears.

"You've suffered not just psychological damage, but physical trauma, as well, as a result of sexual assault," Stephanie said. For once, she was willing to go along with their more gentle terminology. "You're concerned that physically, delivering the babies naturally, might be a literal painful reminder of that physical trauma?"

Jax nodded, tears slipping out of her eyes with the motion. "There were - I had stitches. After New York. When I got here, I still had stitches. Malia knew. No one else did. But that's one of the reasons they said, if I ever had a baby, I might need . . . there's a ridge of scar tissue. And the idea of -." She stopped and shook her head again.

Steve wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head against his neck.

"Could you tell?" she whispered. "You never said, but . . ."

"Yeah," he whispered back. "Yeah, Jax, I could tell."

"I'm sorry.-" she started.

"Don't you dare apologize," he whispered fiercely. "Never. And - don't do it. Please, can we insist on a C-section? I know I said it was your decision, but I'm asking you, please. Please don't put yourself through -."

"Yes," Jax said, nodding. "Yes, I want a C-section. I was afraid you would think, I don't know, maybe you wanted that experience, as a father-"

"No way, no," he said. "Danny made me look up the word episiotomy. Holy shit, it's terrifying."

Jax had to laugh, then, at his horrified expression and tone. She brushed the tears away from her eyes and smiled up at him. "Okay, we're going to schedule a C-section."
"Thank God," he said.

Stephanie smiled at them. "See, that wasn't so bad. You could have figured that out without me. How do you feel, about making a decision?"

"Like I disarmed an IED," Steve said. He sank back into the sofa relieved.

Jax thought for a moment, a soft smile spreading across her face. "Like I'm . . . really, truly, one hundred percent excited about having these babies. Also, I feel hungry."

They sat at one of the tables in front of Kamekona's truck, waiting for the order.

"You're sure you don't mind me coming back to the office?" Jax asked. She was nibbling on a skewer of teriyaki shrimp, one of Kamekona's new ideas.

"Are you kidding? Everyone will be happy to see you," Steve said.

"Do you have a new case?" she asked.

"Not yet," Steve said. "Danny would have let me know. But the day is young. Unless - was there something you wanted to do at home? I could get a black and white to run you back -"

"Nah, I'd rather hang out with you guys. Mary's going to be busy working on a flight and packing," she said. "The most I would have done is maybe start thinking about a few Christmas gifts, maybe thought about food for when everyone comes over. I can do that just as easily at the office."

"Yeah, we never seem to manage to be very organized about holiday shopping," Steve said, laughing. "Thankfully everyone on the team is easy to buy for. I have no idea whatsoever for Mary, though." He paused, glancing down at his hands. "I haven't exactly been a good brother . . . I think the last time I sent her a holiday gift was the year Dad . . . anyway. Any ideas?"

Jax grinned. "Well, actually . . . she's mentioned that she really, really likes VW bugs."

"A car?" Steve asked. He raised his eyebrows. "I mean, yeah, we could probably -"

"Not a new car," Jax explained quickly. "A project car, that I could restore for her. They're pretty cheap, even on the island. And then she could pitch in some, as she's able, for parts and stuff. Between us, we have three working vehicles, and she enjoys driving the Supra, too. I just thought - before too long, she's going to have her own place, and she's thinking near downtown so she'll have public transportation access, but within a year, I'm sure I could have it up and running."

"I love it," Steve said, reaching across the table and wrapping his hand around hers. "It's a great idea, Jax."

"Yeah?" Jax asked. Her eyes were shining with excitement. "Okay, my next day off, I'll follow up on a couple that I've looked at. We can get it hauled to the garage after she leaves for Los Angeles."

"We can send her a picture of it on Christmas day," Steve said. He nodded in satisfaction. "There's only one drawback."

"What?"

"How will we ever, ever top this gift?" Steve asked, grinning.
The team was delighted to see Jax, and they all left their desks to hang out and eat in the breakroom. They chatted about the babies, and Danny quietly kissed Jax on the cheek when she announced, with confidence, that she would be scheduling a C-section with her obstetrician.

"For what it's worth, babe," Danny whispered, "I think you're making a good call."

"C-section babies have pretty heads," Grover proclaimed.

As they finished, Steve cleared his throat, and they looked at him expectantly.

"Before we get back to our desks . . . I've asked Lieutenant Allen to help us formulate a plan to address a concern that I think we all share," he said quietly. "It has crossed my mind, more than once, that what happened with the master chief on the bridge yesterday could happen with me. We all know that Jax and I had a clusterfuck of a situation a while back, in which she could have been seriously injured."

Kono glanced down, twisting her hands in her lap.

"Kono," Steve said gently, "you were one hundred percent on point to realize this was a concern, and absolutely right in sharing it with a teammate. I'm glad you did. Don't ever second guess watching out for the safety of our team. So, we're going to discuss specifics, and I'm going to take the lieutenant up on the offer she's made, to work with us as a team. Here's what I want you to understand: I would rather live permanently disabled in some way, than to live with the guilt of having hurt one of you, or an innocent civilian. Are we clear? If it comes to it, you guys take me down in whatever way you see fit." He stopped and grinned at them. "I mean, you know - try to get a clean shot."

They all looked solemnly at him, and Jax shook her head.

"Seriously, guys," she said. "It's the right thing to do. You're all excellent marksmen. I don't want to live with Steve if he's hurt one of you. So if you're worried that I would hold it against you - don't be. By the way, though, headbutting him hard, right in the nose - that seems to work pretty well."

They all laughed.

"We can hope that this will never be an issue," Steve said. "Thanks to you guys - your support, your friendship - I can honestly say that my head is on straighter than it's been since I became an active SEAL. But like we saw today - a head injury, another factor - it could be a problem. And you're good, every one of you - the best backup I could ever ask for, and I'm proud to serve alongside each of you. But the honest truth is that none of you have the same kind of training that I have. I've learned -" he glanced at Danny - "that the focus of law enforcement is to control, to subdue, to get people into custody safely. You need to understand that my training was to neutralize threats . . . usually with extreme prejudice. If I come at you confused - I'll be coming at you hard. You need to respond accordingly. Don't hesitate. Are we clear?"

The team nodded, and murmured their understanding.

"Okay, well, then get back to work," Steve said, smiling.

"Jax, I'm reviewing everything we have on Adam," Kono said. "We're hoping something will give us some new intel on WoFat. Would you like to - oh, I'm sorry, that may not be at all -"

"I'd love to," Jax said quickly. "Seriously, that would be great. Plus, your office smells nice."
They saw it at the same time, their heads close, peering at the screen in Kono's slightly darkened office.

"Holy shit," Jax whispered. "Is he -"

Kono backed up the CCTV footage of the assassination attempt on the governor and they watched it again.

"Holy shit," Kono repeated. "He is. He was. He's -"

"Looking straight at the building where WoFat had the sniper nest," Jax said. "He knew it was coming. He was involved at least that far back. I'm going to get Steve."

Nick hung up the phone and shouted, pumping his fist in the air.

"What are we celebrating?" Catherine asked.

"Kono and Jax just confirmed WoFat's claim that Adam was embedded, feeding him intel," he said. "Footage of the sniper shot at the governor - Adam was way ahead of the action, staring right at the building where they found the sniper nest. He was definitely the mole."

"Which means -" Catherine said, grabbing for her phone and her laptop.

"Which means, we get the best of the Navy and the best of the CIA on every single piece of evidence, every single piece of communication of Adam Chan's," Nick said. "He made a mistake. Somewhere, sometime, he made a mistake. And we're going to find it."

"And then we're going to find WoFat," Catherine said, her eyes glinting.
"Don't," Danny said quietly. "Have you learned nothing? Pain isn't biodegradable. You bury it - it doesn't decompose."

"Please tell me you have not been dragging those old, tired things out of the attic every Christmas," Mary said. She was faced off against Steve, her hands fisted on her tiny hips. "I don't know if it's stingy or pathetic. Or both."

"But you're surprised, aren't you, that I even put up a tree," Steve said. "And lights."

"Yes and no," Mary sighed. "Because you're a big softy, and I bet that first year, Danny's little girl looked up at you with those big brown eyes, and asked when Uncle Steve was going to put up his tree. And it was probably done the next morning."

Steve rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "That night, actually. Seriously, Mare, the things are still in pretty good shape. And all of the ornaments from when we were kids . . ."

"Okay, I give you the sentimentality of the ornaments, you giant marshmallow," Mary said. "But Steve, think about it - a thirty year old artificial tree? It's a fire hazard."

"You're probably right," he admitted.

"Plus, did it occur to you that Jax might like to choose something?" Mary asked.

"No, it did not, because Jax just isn't . . . " he tried to explain.

"What fresh sibling rivalry have we here?" Jax asked, coming down the stairs. "And Jax isn't what?"

"What did you think of the Christmas stuff we put up last year?" Steve asked.

"It was . . . Christmassy?" Jax offered. "I don't know. There were lights, and it made Gracie happy. I think she was worried that Santa wouldn't be able to find us."

"I rest my case," Steve said. "Mary thinks our stuff is lame."

"And a fire hazard," Mary added.

"Why?" Jax asked.

"Because it's thirty years old," Mary said. She set her jaw stubbornly.

Jax's eyes widened, and she looked up at Steve. "Wait, that's not stuff that you got when you came back to the island?"

"No, it was in the attic," he said. He had a sinking feeling that he was about to be outnumbered.

"The lights?" Jax asked faintly.
"Probably from the nineties," Steve admitted. "They still work."

Jax glanced at Mary and then back at Steve. "Babe. You're FDNY's worst nightmare."

"So, Jax and I are going to go pick out some new things," Mary said. "Steve, we'll still hang all the family ornaments. It's just . . . don't you think it's time for some new traditions? The house is still full of ghosts. I mean, our mother has come back to life, which is weird, but . . . "

"Okay, Mare," he said, smiling down at her. "Don't go crazy. You're not even going to be here, remember?"

"I know, that's why I need to make sure this is done right before I leave," Mary said. "I'm going to go get ready." She bounced down the hall toward her room.

Steve wrapped his arms around Jax. "Good morning," he murmured into her hair. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sick or injured," she protested. "Gus just refused to schedule me because I can't see my damn feet. I'm a tripping hazard. I'm going to be out of work for ages. Seven more weeks before my due date, and then six weeks after that . . . "

"Jax, your job at Tripler is secure," he assured her. "If you want to go back."

She looked up at him, horrified. "I want to go back."

"Okay," he laughed.

"That's okay, right?" she asked, anxious. "I mean, my mom stayed home with us, and your mom worked, so . . . you're okay with me working, right?"

"I'm okay with whatever makes you happy," he said. "Renee works, Rachel stays home right now. There's no wrong choice, Jax, not as far as I'm concerned."

She relaxed against him, resting her head against his chest. She had to scoot her feet back a little, to accommodate her belly, and he was glad that she couldn't see the grin on his face.

"When we go for my next visit, then, you can check out the day care at Tripler," Jax said. "I want you to see it, make sure you think it's okay."

He rubbed circles on her back. "Okay, we'll do that. You sure you're up for going out with Mary today?"

"Goodness, yes," Jax said. "I'll need something to do, while I'm benched. Sounds like decorating will make Mary happy, and it will give me something to do. I'll probably end up cooking way too much, but that's okay, the team will be coming over, right?"

"Christmas Eve," Steve said. "Started the first year of the task force, not gonna change if I can help it."

"Good," Jax said. "Although we'll miss Grover this year. It's their year to go back to Chicago for the holidays. And Mary. Speaking of, I better go get ready."

"She just got in the shower," Steve laughed. "Trust me, you've got plenty of time. Come look at what I have planned for the Airstream."

She took his hand and followed him to the side yard. The Airstream was parked, as always, on a
small level patch of grass, facing the driveway. A series of neatly driven stakes and colorful marking tape now surrounded the vintage trailer.

"So, first, I'm thinking of having a parking pad poured for it," Steve said. "That's where you see the blue taped stakes. If we get a lot of rain, the ground could wash away from under it. It's pretty sandy. And then, I was thinking, instead of cement stepping stones, maybe build what looks like a little boardwalk, from the driveway to the pad, and from the pad to the house. So our guests can come and go without getting wet or sandy. What do you think?"

"A boardwalk?" Jax asked, smiling. "Seriously?"

"Well, it won't be exactly like the Jersey shore, but -"

His explanation was cut short by her arms wrapping around his neck.

"It's going to be perfect," she whispered. "I'll love it. Our guests will love it. Will you have it done before the Harts come?"

"Absolutely," he said. "And . . . later, sometime, if you want to ask your parents to come . . ."

"They've never called," she said quietly. "Since 9/11, since they left, without even going to Billy's service, they . . . not once. Danny told them, he wouldn't change his personal cell number, because of all his family and friends in New York, you know? He made sure they had it. They've never called."

"They don't know you're married," Steve said. "They don't know about the babies. Maybe . . . if they knew . . ."

"I know," Jax said. "I know, and maybe I should . . . I just . . . I wanted them to call for me. Not for . . . they'd love you. My mom, she'd be so impressed because you're an officer. And my dad, he'd respect you, your service. But me . . . they haven't called for me."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "I'm sorry," he whispered, his lips brushing against her curls.

"I'm sorry your mom won't be here," she said. "Maybe next year."

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "That would be incredibly weird. But . . . yeah. Mom and Uncle Joe, showing up for Christmas. God, what a mess."

"You think you mom and Joe . . . ever . . . you know . . ." Jax trailed off thoughtfully.

Steve looked at her with a horrified expression on his face. "Why do you do that?" he hissed, glancing down the hall anxiously toward Mary's room. "First my dad and the governor, now - what the hell?"

Jax snorted with laughter.

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"Don't have the babies until I get back," Mary said, squeezing Jax tight at the security gate, just before boarding for her flight.

"I'll do my best," Jax said. "Don't remember all the things you loved about LA and decide to stay."

Mary laughed. "Not a chance. I'll be home. Not for Christmas, but soon."
Jax drove out of the city limits to the ramshackled auto parts lot where she'd scrounged parts for both the Supra and the Marquis. She'd spotted a VW there on her last trip. It still sat, near the front of the lot.

"Hey, my favorite haole," the owner called out. He was a cousin of Kamekona's. Or Kono's. Maybe both.

"Howzit," Jax said, grinning.

"Ah, see, I knew, you stay long enough, you pick up the bird," he said, smiling back at her. "You need more parts?"

"Actually, I'm ready to start another project," Jax said.

"Looks like it," he said, gesturing to her belly.

"Well, that too," Jax said. "But I am thinking about that little baby bug right there."

"Yeah? That's not built for speed, sistah," he said, frowning.

"Good, because it's for Steve's sister," Jax said.

#*#*#*#*

Jax came home to the empty, quiet house. She put down her keys and phone and walked around, looking at the decorations that she and Mary had finished the day before. Simple green garland was swagged on the landing railing, twinkling with white lights. An artificial tree stood in the front window, several brightly wrapped packages underneath.

She sat down on the sofa and stared into the room. Pupule jumped up onto the sofa and tried to climb into her lap. He looked suspiciously at her belly and settled next to her with a disgruntled sound.

"I know, buddy," she said, scratching the top of his head. She sighed, then got up and went into the kitchen. Ingredients and measuring cups and bowls were lined up neatly on the counter, but it was too early to start cooking. Next she went into the babies' room. She gave each colorful mobile a spin, watching the colorful cars and sailboats dance over the cribs.

They hadn't quite finished organizing the babies' closet. A couple of her boxes from New York still sat on the floor, stacked neatly. She knelt down awkwardly and opened the top one. It was the box of random items from her various cases in New York. She'd only opened it once before, to pull out the items she needed undercover in the racing scene. One by one, she pulled out the items, turning them over idly in her hands. She could imagine Danny and his sister, looking at each other in confusion, as they'd emptied this particular drawer into a box. There was the leather mini skirt from a vice bust. She wrinkled her nose in distaste and dropped it back. Her fingers brushed against a traffic ticket book and she groaned. Her days as a beat cop were long, hot, and exhausting. Memorable, in the worst kind of way. She shoved it aside impatiently and caught her fingers on a black apron.

Her last undercover... the Irish bar, with Patrick. The shift she'd missed when...

She shoved the box into the back of the closet, her hands shaking. A voice in the back of her head told her to walk away, to go to the kitchen and start doing something - anything. But her shaking hands moved to the next box, opening it. She remembered the contents of this box - Billy's personal effects. She turned the items over in her hands, reverently, unaware of the tears streaking down her face.
She was only vaguely aware of finally standing up, walking on autopilot out the back door and down to the water's edge.

#*#*#*#*

Steve was on the phone with Nick when Danny came into his office.

"You want me to come in and help?" Steve asked. He gestured for Danny to take a seat across from him. "Okay, yeah. Thanks, Nick. You and Catherine . . . yeah? Well, enjoy the time. Keep me posted."

"Any progress?" Danny asked, when Steve hung up the phone.

"They managed to recover a hard drive from one of the laptops from Adam's house," Steve said. "They'll go over it with a fine-tooth comb. But it's going to take time."

"So, no rushing of to Pearl Hickam on this, the final hour of our workday, before our well-earned Christmas Eve and Christmas Day vacation?" Danny asked.

"No rushing off to Pearl Hickam," Steve confirmed. "Not today. Today, I'm going to go home, see Jax."

"Ah, and not Mary," Danny grinned. "No wonder we're not rushing off to Pearl Hickam."

#*#*#*#*

Caviness smiled as Kono opened the front door of her cottage and squealed in delight.

"It came!" she shouted. "Our gift for Steve and Jax came. Holy shit, that was cutting it close."

He watched as she flicked out a blade and neatly slit the tape on the package. She folded back the bubble wrap and pulled out two neatly folded items.

"One black and one camo?" Caviness said.

"SWAT and spec ops," Kono said absently. "They'll probably carry different stuff, they need to be able to tell them apart."

"I can't believe you found diaper bags with tactical elastic," Caviness said.

"Texas," Kono shrugged, and Caviness nodded. That did explain a lot, actually.

#*#*#*#*

The Silverado rumbled to a stop in the driveway, and Steve climbed out, humming. He'd never much bothered to celebrate the holidays while he was active duty. He paused and looked at the house before he went up the porch stairs. He had intended to come home for the holidays, a couple of times. Instead, he'd ended up agreeing to take one more mission, one more chase. He would always call his dad, though . . . usually on a sat phone.

Like the one he'd been talking on when he'd heard him murdered.

His steps toward the house were slower, his feet dragging a bit as he went up the front steps. Opening the front door slowly, his eyes were drawn to the wall where . . . he shook his head, trying to push the thoughts, the memories, aside.
"Jax?" he called softly. The house was silent, and he headed toward the stairs, thinking that perhaps she was finally starting to admit her need for extra rest during the day. Clutter on the floor of the babies' room caught his eye, and he stepped in. His eyes swept over the open boxes. Her commendations, random belongings . . . Billy's medals, his gloves . . .

"Shit," he swore. He called her name louder, fighting a sense of panic in the silence that followed. Pupule meowed loudly, a big paw pushing against the back door. Steve moved quickly to the kitchen and looked out, sighing in relief when he saw the sun glinting off her red curls. She was sitting in one of the wooden chairs, looking out over the water. He let the screen door thud closed, and saw her hastily wiping at her face as he approached.

"You don't have to do that," he said softly, crouching beside her chair. "You don't have to try to pull yourself together, ku'uipo. It's just me." He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb brushing away a few tears, and kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I came home from the airport, and the house was empty and - okay, as much as I love your sister, I thought I was looking forward to a couple days, you know, but I guess - and I don't know why I looked through those stupid boxes, and -" she stopped, shaking her head.

He sat down in the chair close to hers and took her hand in his.

"I had the option, on several of my tours, to catch a flight home for the holidays," he said quietly. "And every time, I would imagine it - catching a taxi from the airport, so I could surprise my dad. What it would feel like to walk up the front steps again. But every time, something came up. A new piece of actionable intel, another terrorist cell located . . . I didn't come home. A couple years, I missed calling."

"I'm sure he understood," Jax said.

"I didn't think he cared, to be honest," Steve said. "Until Chin told me that he never missed my football games. That he was proud of me. Then I realized that . . . it would have meant a lot to him, for me to come home. Today, coming into the house, all decorated . . . it made me feel losing him all over again." He looked at her, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of her hand.

She nodded. "Billy would have come from New York," she said. "He would have put in vacation and come, for the holidays, maybe even planned to stay to see the babies. We would have picked him up at the airport, made him feel a little awkward with a lei, and brought him here. And he would have stayed in the Airstream. And he would have come again next year, and the babies would . . ."

"I know," Steve said, around the lump in his throat. He could picture it, too. Billy and his father both playing with the babies. He tugged on Jax's hand. "Come'ere," he murmured.

They heard the back door thud again, and Steve didn't even bother to look around.

"Danny?" Jax mumbled.

"Danny," Steve chuckled.

Danny sat down in the chair that Jax had just left. "Ghosts of Christmas past and future?" he said quietly.

"Yeah," Steve said. He brushed hastily at his eyes.

"Don't," Danny said quietly. "Have you learned nothing? Pain isn't biodegradable. You bury it - it
doesn't decompose."

They sat quietly for a few minutes, and then Danny continued. "Holidays are hard. It's like, you've
got your every day standard of okay to live up to, which is hard enough. But then, the holidays, man,
you've got this unrealistic expectation of merry and bright, and then you've got all this pain that you
carry around, and it's just - the gap is just this huge, yawning chasm, you know?"

"Yawning chasm," Jax whispered against Steve's neck. "We gonna regret getting him another word-
a-day calendar?"

"I wish I'd met your dad, Steve," Danny said. "And I wish Billy was here, babe. But Steve, I'm glad
that I met you. Regret the circumstances, but damn, I'm glad that you pulled a gun on me and then
 barged into my apartment. Five-O changed my life. And Jax, I'm glad you're not spending any more
Christmases alone in that hell-hole of a walkup you called home in New York."

"It was a cute apartment," Jax protested.

"You should have seen Danny's first apartment here," Steve said. "And the second. Want to talk
about hell-hole?"

"Well, sure, because it's a million degrees on this rock," Danny said. "But it's home. We're home for
Christmas."

Steve's arms tightened around Jax, and he kissed the top of her head. "We are home for Christmas,
Danny, you're right. And we're glad you'll all be here tomorrow."

"For a couple of snarly lone-wolf types, the two of yous do seem to enjoy hosting the gatherings,"
Danny grumbled.

Jax shifted in Steve's arms so she could face Danny. "You been talking to Bridgett," she stated.

"Maybe," Danny said, laughing.

do have good instincts."

"I do, I absolutely do," Danny said. "I also have a Camaro, which unfortunately does not have trunk
space for my precious daughter's Christmas gift. So I was hoping that Uncle Steve would let me
borrow his ridiculously overcompensating pickup truck?"

Steve laughed as he and Jax untangled themselves to stand and head toward the house.

"Told you before, Danny," Jax said, a wicked glint in her eye, "it's not an overcompensation."

"You were stoned on pain medication when you said that," Danny said, waving his hands. "Why?
Why would you say something like that stone cold sober? I hate you, I hate you so much."

"You love me, Danny," Jax said, throwing her arms around him. "Merry Christmas Eve eve. Let's
go get Gracie's present."

###

Christmas Eve dawned, overcast and breezy. Jax stretched and snuggled back against Steve.

"Good morning," he murmured, his lips brushing the back of her neck.
She sighed and nodded sleepily. "You sleep?" she asked.

"I did," he said. "You?"

"Yeah. It's a Christmas miracle," she mumbled, giggling.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. "You're sure? You're okay?"

"I am," she said firmly. "We have a big day, sailor. We have our entire, crazy, wonderful extended family coming over this evening. I have a full day planned in the kitchen."

"What are my orders, ma'am?" he teased, trailing his fingers over her hip.

"Cease and desist, or I'll never get the turkey in the oven on time," she said. "And stay out of my way. Work on the Airstream set-up."


###

The evening was proclaimed a huge success by everyone. They all crowded around Chin's iPad for a Facetime chat with Grover, then scattered around the house, lanai, and yard with plates laden with food.

"Commander McGarrett," Max said, nodding up at Steve. "Thank you for including me, once again, in your holiday festivities."

"Of course, Max," Steve said. "I know Hanukkah ended on the twentieth this year. Things were . . ."

"Quite hectic for your team," Max said, beaming. "But thank you, I had a good Hanukkah. Perhaps next year, you will be able to join me for one of the evenings."

"It would be a true honor to light a candle with you, Max," Jax said, joining the two. She slipped her arm around Steve's waist.

"Have you given any thought to any religious training for your children?" Max asked.

Steve and Jax looked at each other, their eyes wide.

"Um, no?" Jax said, hesitantly.

"Yeah, not so much," Steve agreed.

Max spread his arms wide. "The babies will be surrounded with love. What else matters, really?"

###

They cleared away the last of the mess shortly before midnight, and Steve playfully tugged Jax's hand until she stood under the bunch of mistletoe.

"This spot saw a lot of action tonight," Jax said, grinning up at him.

"It's about to see a lot more," Steve said, as he bent and kissed her gently. "I missed Mary being here but . . . on the other hand . . . she isn't here . . ."

"We have the house to ourselves?" Jax whispered.
"Not for long," Steve said, smiling. He splayed his hand over her stomach. "About five weeks, give or take?"

"Better make the most of it then," Jax said solemnly, her eyes sparkling in the lights from the tree."
Jax watched anxiously for Mary to get off the plane. They were practically nose to nose before they spotted each other.

"It's easier to find Steve," Mary said, grinning. "He sticks out, you know. Above the crowd."

"I stick out . . . around the crowd," Jax said.

"You look awesome, shut up," Mary said, throwing her arms around Jax. "You guys, seriously. A VW? I can not believe . . . is it at the house, really? The garage?"

They started walking toward the airport exit.

"It is. I've never worked on a bug, I'm excited. How much you wanna learn?" Jax asked.

"You think I can do it?" Mary questioned. She looked skeptical.

"Yes," Jax said emphatically. "If you're interested, I'll show you. If not, you just get to choose the specs, and that will still be fun. How was your Christmas with your Aunt Deb?"

"Nice," Mary said. "I met up with some friends while I was there, helped Aunt Deb with some things in her condo . . . missed you guys, but it was good. How were things here?"

They climbed into Jax's Supra. She grimaced as she ratcheted the driver's seat back another inch, and Mary hummed sympathetically.

"So?" Mary prompted. "Your Christmas, with Steve."

"Oh, it was good," Jax said. "The team came over on Christmas Eve. I did a traditional dinner, you know - turkey, stuffing, the whole nine yards. Figured, next year, I might have my hands full. We'll probably do finger foods next year. And then, Christmas day we, um, slept late and then we worked on the Airstream . . ."

Steve reached up easily and snagged the mistletoe, playfully dangling it over Jax's head as they made their way up the stairs. Jax turned on the next to last step and looped her arms around Steve's neck. He grinned at her and held the mistletoe up, raising an eyebrow.

"Goof," she said, as she snagged the back of his neck and pressed her lips to his. He tossed the
mistletoe in the general direction of the landing, cradling her head with one big hand while his other arm slid around her back.

"Mistletoe," Jax murmured, blinking slowly. "No, don't look smug . . . mistletoe is poisonous to cats."

"Shit," Steve said, casting around the landing. Pupule glared at him and Jax stifled a giggle. Steve secured the mistletoe, double bagged it, and placed it in the bottom of the bathroom wastebasket.

"Thanks," Jax mumbled around her toothbrush.

"He thinks I was trying to off him," Steve mumbled around his.

Jax rubbed her back absently as she puttered around the room, stopping more than once to twist and roll her neck.

"Your back hurts," Steve observed quietly. He was standing in the doorway, arms crossed, watching.

"I guess," she shrugged. She looked at the bed wistfully. There was a time that Steve would have nudged her over onto her stomach and rubbed her back . . . she glanced down at the generous curve of her belly and sighed.

"Aw, ku'uipo," Steve murmured sympathetically. He turned the covers down on the bed and patted the mattress. "Come'ere."

She slid between the cool sheets and stretched, watching him curiously as he rummaged in her bedside drawer.

"What are you -" she started to say.

"Aha," he declared, holding a tube of coconut oil lotion in hand. "Found it."

"My stretch mark cream?" she asked, arching an eyebrow at him as she propped up on one elbow.

"Oh. I just knew you smelled more like coconut than honeysuckle these days. What are - never mind. Scoot your back over to the edge of the bed," he said.

She looked at him skeptically.

"I won't let you fall," he assured her, squeezing some of the lotion onto his hands.

She huffed and squirmed as she turned over, awkwardly, until she was close to the edge of the bed. He knelt on the floor next to her and stroked his big hands firmly down her back, pressing the heels of his hands against her spine.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

"Good?" he asked. The heel of one hand made its way back up her spine, then both hands were wrapped warmly around the aching muscles of her neck.

She muttered something unintelligible, and he chuckled. She closed her eyes and sighed again.

When she opened them, the softest light of morning was seeping in between the blinds.

"Hmm?" she mumbled, confused.
"Mele Kalikimaka," Steve murmured, his arms wrapped around her securely.

"I fell asleep," she said.

"Ummhmm," he agreed.

"I'm sorry. There was mistletoe and everything," she sighed. "Mele Kalikimaka."

He stroked his fingertips over her stomach. "Next year . . . will be their first Christmas."

"I bet you Danny and Rachel's gift next year will be 'What to Expect the Toddler Years'," Jax quipped, giggling.

"The sequel to 'What to Expect the First Year'? This year's gift," Steve laughed. "How many of those are there?"

"I have no idea," Jax whispered. "Lots, I guess. I didn't read all of 'What to Expect When You're Expecting'. Probably why I'm so clueless."

"The parts I read were kind of terrifying," Steve said. "And I've seen combat on several continents. Anyway. Our last Christmas alone, just the two of us . . . shit." He sighed and flipped over on his back.

Jax turned over, with difficulty, and nestled her head on his shoulder, tossing a leg over his. "What? What's wrong?"

"I should have taken you to the big island or something," Steve said. "A resort."

Jax snorted. "The tourists would mistake me for an attraction. An albino whale. Besides, I'm excited about working on the Airstream. I can't wait to help you build the boardwalk . . ." She sat up and grinned at him.

"What?" he asked, smiling up at her indulgently, a big hand reaching up to push her sleep-mussed hair away from her face.

"Mele Kalikimaka," she said. "I want you to open your present. But first I gotta pee."

He chuckled and unfolded himself more slowly from the bed, pulling the covers up out of habit.

#*#*#*#*#*#

"What did you get Steve for Christmas?" Mary asked. They were still fighting their way through the busy airport traffic - both islanders returning home from holiday travel, and tourists coming to enjoy a break from winter.

"Hmm? Oh. A tool belt," Jax said absently.

"Seriously? A tool belt. And your big plan for Christmas was to spend the day on home improvement?" Mary asked, dubious.

"Steve and I don't do well with too much time on our hands," Jax said. "And yeah . . ." she sighed happily. "Tool belt."

Mary's face scrunched in confusion.

"Like a thigh holster," Jax mumbled, blushing. "For hammers and stuff."
"Boots?" Danny asked, incredulous, as he reached across Steve's desk for the stapler. "You got Jax boots for Christmas?"

"Work boots," Steve said, rummaging for a paper clip. Year end reports were kicking their asses. "Her SWAT boots aren't appropriate for construction activity. Too hot, no ventilation."

"What's wrong with sneakers?" Danny demanded.

"Around nails? Wood slivers? Power tools?" Steve countered. He smirked at Danny and dropped his voice. "Couldn't risk an injury while we worked on the Airstream . . . she can't exactly see her feet. But you didn't hear that from me."

Danny chuckled. 'Oh, yeah, I remember those days. Rachel was glad to be in Hawaii for this last pregnancy - she defaulted to flip flops for the last month. In Jersey, I had to tie her shoes for her."

"I love it," Steve said, running his calloused hand over the smooth leather of the tool belt. "It reminds me of the one that was my grandfather's."

"The one you keep hanging in the garage, even though it really can't be used," Jax said softly. She pulled her legs up under her, sitting sideways on the sofa to look at him. 'Yeah.'

He took her mug and sat it gently on the coffee table with one hand, cupping her face with the other, and tilting her face to kiss her gently. His long arm snagged a box from under the tree, and he put it on the sofa cushion next to her.

She removed the paper and opened the box, moving aside the tissue paper and pulling out a pair of brown workboots.

"They look like your desert boots," she said, grinning widely. "I love your desert boots."

He laughed and wrapped a hand around her ankle. "Emphasis on desert. Your SWAT boots are way too heavy for working in this climate." He hesitated, his thumb tracing over her ankle. "This house . . . we're about to bring the fourth generation of McGarrett here. Jax, it's not fancy, and it will never be new. There are going to be ongoing repairs and maintenance, staying ahead of the salt."

Her eyes sparkled. "It's home. It's worth it."

"Well, then let's make a boardwalk," Steve said.

"I'm going to run up and get a thicker pair of socks," Jax decided. "Start the coffee?"

Steve was puttering in the kitchen, pouring their coffee into unbreakable outdoor thermoses, when he heard Jax huffing in frustration on the stairs. He turned, smothering a grin when he saw her struggling with her boots. She'd managed to get her feet into them, but couldn't bend to reach the laces.

"Hey," he said, smiling at her. He gestured for her to take a seat on the stairs, and took one booted foot at a time and tied the laces, double knotting them for security.

She stood up, hooking her thumbs into the pockets of her denim overall shorts, which she'd tossed over a simple sporty swim top.
He blinked at her, absently flicking his tongue over his bottom lip.

"I put on sunscreen," she said hesitantly, glancing down at herself. "I know, I don't really have tanks or anything that fit, or jeans -"

"'S'perfect," he mumbled. "Boots comfy?"

"Very," she said, bouncing up on her toes. "Awesome. Oooh, coffee."

She grabbed her thermos and headed out the back door. Pupule stalked down the stairs behind her, weaving slightly, his fur disheveled. He stopped on the bottom stair and gazed up at Steve.

"How'm I supposed to get any work done, her looking like that, hmm?" Steve asked the cat. Pupule walked deliberately down the hall and stood in front of the babies' room. "Oh, yeah," Steve sighed. "We're on a deadline."

He stepped into the laundry room and quickly swapped out his polo shirt for his USNA t-shirt, the sleeves long ago discarded. Grabbing the tool belt in one hand and his coffee in the other, he headed out the door and joined Jax as she perused a stack of lumber.

"How do you know where to start?" she asked. "And how did you learn -" she gestured at the lumber and the heavy, carefully organized tool box.

He took a sip of coffee and rested his thermos carefully on a stack of wood. "Annapolis," he said quietly, as he fastened the tool belt around his hips. "Summers . . . I stayed there, worked with Habitat for Humanity. My first year after graduation . . . I accepted a humanitarian deployment. Rebuilding a village in - well. I can't say."

She was looking up at him, her fingers tracing over the ink on his biceps. "It sounds nice . . . why doesn't it seem like a happy memory?"

"I always thought it was," he said. He glanced back toward the house. "Now I think . . . I should have come home. Helped my dad."

"Well . . . did he ever ask? Send for you?" Jax asked, squinting up at him.

"Nah," Steve said. He shook off the mood and leaned over his toolbox, selecting a heavy hammer, pry bar, and some other implements and slipping them into his tool belt. Jax tilted her head appreciatively at the sight. He stood, gesturing toward the stack of wood, and the weight of the tools pulled his battered cargos lower on his hips. Turning to face her, he picked up the hem of his tshirt to wipe some sawdust from his face.

"Jax? That sound like a plan?" he prompted.

Her eyes flicked from the belt, to the flash of toned abs, to his ink. "Hunh?" she asked. "I have no idea what you just said."

"Your job is going to be to stabilise each board while I secured it," he repeated.

She blinked at him owlishly.

"Put your foot on the board while I nail it, so it doesn't bounce out of place," he said, smirking.

They laid out the boards, fidgeting with them until they were pleased with the placement.

"It's perfect," Jax said, as they stood back to admire the effect. "It's like a little boardwalk sidewalk."
"Great. That's actually the hardest part, laying it out," Steve said. He grabbed his hammer and then rummaged in his truck for the nails he'd picked up at the hardware store. "Okay, angle your foot against the board, about center, and try not to move it. I'll start with a nail in each end, and then add one in the middle."

"Don't you need a nail gun?" Jax asked, glancing at the considerable work ahead of them.

Steve tapped a nail into place, then drove it home with one powerful stroke of the hammer.

"Nah, I'm fine," he said absently, repeating the process on the other end of the board. Jax sighed, a curious little noise that caught his attention. He glanced up at her, his eyes flicking up over the line of her legs, the curve of her stomach, one strap of her overalls slipping off one bronzed shoulder.

They finished the boards leading from the driveway to the Airstream's generous parking pad.

"You look like you really need to rehydrate," Jax commented. A slight sheen of sweat deepened the colors of Steve's ink, and she traced her fingers over the swirls.

He toyed with the metal clasps of her overalls. "You should take a break, too. I know your back was hurting after being on your feet yesterday."

She murmured in agreement as his hand slid into her hair and tilted her head back.

"We should probably test everything in the Airstream," he murmured. "I had an electrician and plumber set up the hook ups, but . . . you know. We should make sure the fans and screens work to cool it." He started walking her backwards toward the door of the trailer.

"Couldn't hurt to check out the shower," she said, deft fingers already working on the tool belt. "That involves the electrical, the plumbing, and the drain. Very complex." She stepped backwards, unconcerned, trusting that he wasn't going to let her fall.

"Anything could need adjusting," he agreed. His hand wrapped around her hip, guiding her backwards up the stairs. The second stair put her at the perfect height for a slow, gentle, unhurried kiss . . .

The trail of clothes led from the door of the Airstream back to the tidy, ship-like bedroom.

"The fans work great," Jax murmured. She shivered and flailed a hand absently toward the sheet tangled around her ankles. Steve smiled and untangled it, pulling it gently up to her shoulders. His big hand pushed the edge of it away from her hip, his thumb tracing over the ink there. She blinked up at him, her lashes fanning over her sun flushed cheeks.

"I haven't dared look to closely," she said. "I was afraid gaining weight would -"

"Perfect. It's still perfect," he assured her, his hand sliding under the sheet to rest on her stomach. "With all the swimming . . . I think whatever you've gained is all baby. Babies."

"That's what the coconut oil was about," she said, dropping her eyes. "I didn't want the ink to be ruined with stretch marks . . . I have enough scars. I'll have another one, with the C-section. I'm going to be a mess . . ."

He silenced her with a kiss, his free hand cupping around her face.
"And when have I ever, ever cared?" he reminded her. He traced a gentle finger over the jagged, irregular scar on her shoulder. "Much rather you have a C-section scar than a bullet scar, any day. I'll be with you for the C-section, and we'll finally be able to hold the babies."

She snuggled into his embrace. "We only have four weeks. Names. We haven't talked about names."

He was quiet for a long moment, and she turned to face him. Her fingers traced over the line of his jaw, the stubble flecked with more silver than when she'd first met him.

"You have an idea," she said, her eyes sparkling. "Tell."

"I'm totally open but . . . I was thinking, maybe naming the babies after our siblings," he said slowly. "Mary . . . Billy . . ."

She nodded, smiling, even as a soft sheen of tears filled her eyes.

"Danny," he continued, grinning. "Freddie."

"You do know there's only two babies," she said, laughing softly. "Shit . . . you want - you want to plan on more . . . I don't know -"

"No, ku'uipo," he said quickly. "No, I . . . we can toss names around for these two. Middle names, you know . . . it's just an idea."

"Oh," she said, relieved. "Okay. I love the idea." She was quiet, and he thought she was turning names over in her head.

"Steve?" she said finally.

"Yeah?"

"We need showers," she said. "And I can't bear the idea of putting my stinky overalls back on."

"Hmm," he murmured in agreement. He'd learned to accept her wild leaps of thought as part of the pregnancy. But putting his sweat dampened clothes back on after they'd tested the Airstream's shower connection didn't appeal to him, either.

"How're we gonna get back into the house?" she snickered.

Eventually, they settled on wrapping in sheets and making a run for it, dodging the fat, insolent raindrops of an impending afternoon thunderstorm. The rest of the day was spent eating leftovers and dozing, snuggled together on the sofa.

Pupule regarded them serenely from his position in the corner of the couch. This was more like it. He blinked sleepily at the Christmas tree before his purr turned into a snore.

#*#*#*#*#*#

"Steve?" Danny prompted. "So, did you get to the porch you wanted to add, or no?"

"Hmm?" Steve asked, pulling his attention back to his partner and the stack of papers between them. "Oh. Porch. No, thunderstorm rolled in. Ended up taking us Christmas day and yesterday to finish the boardwalk."

"Thunderstorm," Danny asked suspiciously. "The one that rolled in about two o'clock, was over by three?"
"Yup," Steve said. He suddenly found the year-end report on car insurance claims filed by the team completely engrossing. He cleared his throat and refused to meet Danny's eyes. "So, ah, how did Gracie like her dollhouse?"

"Ah, the Barbie dream house which is in turn a veterinary hospital, or an international banking firm, of which Barbara is the C.E.O.," Danny said, his voice full of unmistakable pride. "She loves it. We all love the season passes to the zoo and aquarium, too, from Uncle Steve and Auntie Jax. Gracie's already marking the calendar with the special events. Have you and Jax figured out your gifts yet?"

Steve grinned up at him. "We read the first chapter, the one about what to do the first week at home. That's as far as we got. But the pillows . . . I have to admit, we're a little confused. There's the ones that look like oversized airplane travel pillows -"

"You'll appreciate those when you're trying to give the tiny little things their bottles," Danny said. "They curve around, give you a place to rest your elbows."

"Ah," Steve said, nodding. It made sense. "And the one giant fluffy pillow, as big as Jax?"

Danny sighed. "Sorry, man. Rachel insisted. Jax is gonna love it, these last few weeks of pregnancy, it will help her get comfortable when nothing else will. And, it will give her great support, keep pressure off the C-section incision."

"Then why are you apologising, Danny?" Steve asked, his face scrunched in confusion.

"Because," Danny sighed. "Charlie is gonna be walking soon, and that damn pillow is still between me and Rachel too many nights."

Grover arrived, having slept in to offset some of the jet lag from his return flight from Chicago. He ambled into Steve's office.

"Hey, Lou," Steve said, standing up and clapping him on the shoulder. "Welcome home, man. Good to have you back."

"Good to be back," Grover said. "Damn, I'd forgotten how cold it is in Chicago. Catch me up, what's going on here?"


"Ah, man," Grover said, shaking his head sympathetically.

Steve looked at Danny and Grover, who were both regarding him with fond, inscrutable expressions.

"What?" he demanded.

They smiled and chuckled.

"It's gonna be great," Danny said, his blue eyes crinkling in a smile. "Danny's Law. You and Jax . . . you're gonna have a very, very happy new year."
I have no idea how Naval Reserves works, the official status (if there is one) of SEALs in the reserves, who can order who to go where - and I didn't research it. I assume it's probably not researchable by mere mortals. So, much of this next bit is PURELY my imagination and what needed to happen to make my plot work. Also, my college level science courses included Environmental Biology and The Biology of Women. Anything I get *right* about science in this bit is purely by happy coincidence and google. Think escapism. Think . . . helicopters picking up cabins out of the midst of a raging forest fire. Generally, I pride myself on impeccable research but this time . . . eh. If it's good enough for the paid writers of the tv series, it's good enough for me.

Mary was thrilled to be included in a New Year's Eve party at Kono's. The assortment of surfing and law enforcement friends was unusual, and put some of Steve's lingering concerns over Mary to rest.

Jax and Steve dropped her off, with assurances that she'd be grabbing an Uber home, and headed to the Williams' home for New Year's Eve.

"Thanks ever so for coming," Rachel said, as she welcomed them at the door. "Gracie is beside herself . . . it's been ages since we've celebrated New Years with friends."

"Thanks for inviting us," Jax said, as an enthusiastic Gracie wrapped her arms as far around Jax as she could. "I absolutely don't feel like being jostled and shoved in some crowded bar. This is perfect. What smells so amazing?"

"Crown roast," Danny said, wiping his hands on a towel as he came out of the kitchen. "Plus plenty of vegetable dishes, don't worry."

"Anything that smells that good is bound to taste perfect," Jax assured them. "I'm back to meat. There's no explaining it."

"Pregnancy is its own explanation," Rachel said. "Don't expect to find logic or reason in pregnancy. Or motherhood, for that matter."

#*#*#*#*#

Steve smiled fondly as Jax navigated their way home, struggling a bit to reach the gas and brake pedals of the Silverado. With Jax as the designated driver, he'd indulged in a second glass of wine with dinner, and the celebratory champagne at midnight.

"Next year, we're getting someone to watch the babies and I'm taking you someplace nice for New Year's Eve," he declared.

"Danny's place is nice," Jax said. "And Gracie wiped the board with all of us in Monopoly. That's going to be hard to top, honestly."

He started to say something, but a ping from his phone interrupted them. He fished it out of his pocket, squinting at it. Instinctively, he straightened in his seat.
"Rear Admiral Vincas," he said. "Good evening, sir."

Jax's eyebrows shot up and she glanced at him, worried and curious. Steve started to put the phone on speaker, and then reluctantly pulled his finger away from the screen.

"Sir, given the time of your call, I suspect I should mention that this is not a secure line. My wife is in the vehicle with me. Actually, she's driving, we're about five minutes out from home," Steve added. There was a pause. "I understand. I would request that you send a driver to my residence, then, to give me a ride. Thank you sir, yes, best to be completely safe."

He ended the call and stared at Jax for a moment.

"Is it your mom?" she whispered.

His eyes widened. "God. I hope not. Not that we know of but . . ."

"You have to go to the base. Possibly further," she finished for him. "Possibly much further. National security?"

"Global," he said quietly. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Shit, Jax. I promised you I wouldn't do this. They promised me they wouldn't ask but . . ."

"They need you. Specifically," Jax said.

"Yeah," he sighed.

"Well, don't let it go to your head, sailor," she said, grinning, as she turned onto their street.

"Jax, I -"

She pulled into their driveway, switched off the ignition, and shifted to face him. "Steve. Before I ever met you, I knew that you were Lieutenant Commander Steven J. McGarrett, ten feet tall and bulletproof. Danny told me . . . he told me that being part of the Navy, being a SEAL, it was your heart and soul. He likes to think we've made room for more, which he totally takes credit for, by the way, but still. I knew. I knew exactly what I was signing up for, remember? My dad was deployed several times, a few on very short notice. Looking back . . . I think he must have been very, very good at whatever it was he did. Anyway. They need you and . . . you need to do this. Yeah, the timing is a little dicey, and if you had a choice, I know you'd choose a different time but . . . you gotta."

He stretched his arm along the back of the truck seat, wrapped his hand around the back of her head, and kissed her. It was awkward and strangely angled and absolutely perfect.

By the time the driver arrived, Steve was in working uniform and had his seventy-two hour pack by the front door.

"You be careful," Steve said. "Anything - anything at all - feels off - you go straight to Tripler, you got it? And don't forget to set the alarm. Do you want me to have Bullfrog put someone on the house? No, wait, Grover could ask a buddy from HPD. I could go ahead and call the Harts -"

"Steve," Jax said, brushing her fingers across the name tapes on his chest. This was her favorite uniform. That always made him laugh, because in his experience, most women swooned over the dress whites. Jax wasn't most women, though, never had been. She knew the pain and loss behind most of the ribbons and medals. No, she preferred the uniform he preferred - the one simply identified him as a member of the Navy, just the small insignia to indicate his rank. Coming home
from reserve weekends was usually very, very fun, as Jax took great delight in removing the uniform piece by piece . . . "Are you listening to me?"

"Hmm?" he said, blinking.

"I said, I will call Tripler at the slightest twinge, but that I will be absolutely fine," she repeated patiently. "And also, I said that it's okay for you to want to go. No guilt, okay? Just . . . try to get back before the babies come."

"Jax," he breathed, cupping her face in his hands.

He heard the polite, brief beep of the car waiting for him outside their house. He bent and kissed her, intending to keep it short and sweet. But he felt the need to somehow express to her how much he appreciated her uncanny ability to understand exactly what he was feeling, exactly what he needed, and the kiss quickly turned passionate. One hand tangled in her hair, and one at the small of her back, he reluctantly pulled his lips from hers, tucking her against his chest instead.

He heard the staccato beep of the car waiting for him in their driveway. Her hands fisted in his uniform for a moment, and then she was pushing gently against his chest.

"Go," she whispered. "Be safe. I love you."

He kissed the top of her head once more. "Be careful. Love you."

#*#*#*#*# *

"You want me to go back to North Korea, back to where I lost Freddie," Steve repeated flatly, staring at Rear Admiral Vincas in disbelief.

"We're tracking satellite imagery of rogue North Korean militia that's intersected with an IP address and coordinates that this team has been following very, very closely," the admiral said. "It can't be a coincidence."

"Steve," Nick said quietly, on the other side of the conference table. "We've got highly suspicious activity moving around the exact location where you picked up Anton Hesse. And we've traced back one of Adam Chan's emails to a verified, authentic IP address. Same location."

Steve felt his heart stop and then start again with a thud.

"WoFat? You think you've got WoFat?" he asked, his hand clenching into a fist.

"Yes. And we think WoFat might be brokering a deal with this rogue militia, which makes the regular North Korean military look like boy scouts," the rear admiral said. "It's a political and global powder keg and it's not exaggeration to say that we are trying to stop a potentially global - potentially nuclear - incident."

"There's no time to get another team up to speed, Smooth Dog," Nick said, steepling his fingers together and leaning forward. "There's no other team that knows the terrain, knows the way in and out. We're it, brother."

"I need to let my wife and my Five-O team know -" Steve started.

"Out of the question," Rear Admiral Vincas cut him off short. "Your wife knows you've been called away on a mission for which you are uniquely qualified, that has global security implications. She can inform your team, and that's all the information they need."
Steve started to argue more, but the lightning fast processing and years of Naval Intelligence training took over, and he sighed in resignation. The admiral was correct. He couldn't - and shouldn't - reveal more. It was pointless and of no comfort or help to Jax and the others, and in the event of any sort of media leak, would make them targets of investigation.

"Sooner we go, sooner we get back," Nick murmured, wrapping a hand around his shoulder.

"You're going?" Steve asked.

"I said 'we', brother, I meant it," Nick said. "We're going to hump it double time to the border, the rest of the team will establish a base, and then you and I go in. Fast, silent - we recon and if need be . . . set explosives. I'm with you all the way. Your gear's on the plane and we have an eight hour flight to put together a plan. We gotta roll."

"You let him go?!" Mary shrieked.

Jax arched an eyebrow at her. She was tired, dark circles smudged under her eyes, her hands wrapped around her coffee mug. Sleep had eluded her, and she'd spent the rest of the night tossing and turning. Pupule had finally abandoned the coveted position on the bed.

"Mary. First of all, no one 'lets' Steve do anything. You know better," Jax said quietly. "Secondly, if it was important enough for him to go, then . . . he had to. For him not to go, for something like this . . . it would be like me driving past the scene of a wreck and not stopping to help. It's . . . it's in our DNA."

"Yeah, like mother like son," Mary said bitterly. She was slightly hungover and now wired on adrenaline - an unfortunate combination.

"It's totally different," Jax said.

"Whatever," Mary said, flouncing over to the coffee pot and sloshing some into a mug. "Bottom line, mom bailed. She left us. Now Steve's left us. You're a month away from having his baby - God, babies - and he left. You have no idea - I've been through this before - you have no idea what it's like, to be left behind."

"Really?!" Jax shouted. "Really, Mary? I have no idea?"

"I was a child," Mary yelled. "I was in fucking middle school, my mom died, my dad shipped me away to the mainland. I lost my mom, my dad, and my brother in one fell swoop."

"You still have your brother," Jax hissed between gritted teeth.

"No. The Navy has my brother," Mary said. "It's always come first. Always. Take a number. Get in line."

Jax watched helplessly as Mary grabbed her tote bag and flounced out the door.

"I don't think you should drive, Mary," she called, rubbing her back absently as she tried to catch up to her.

"Not planning on it," Mary shot back. She was texting furiously as she stomped off the porch and toward the street.
Jax pulled Steve's hoodie closer around her and sat down on the front porch, watching until Mary was out of sight. She tried Mary's cell phone several times, to no avail. Finally, she gave up and went inside, moving around the house aimlessly. She dusted, vacuumed, tossed in a load of laundry. She started to pull the sheets off the bed, but changed her mind as she held Steve's pillow to her face.

The morning seemed to go on forever, minutes passing sluggishly into hours, until finally Jax felt like she could call Chin without waking him up.

"Happy New Year, Jax," Chin said, picking up on the other end of the line. "Everything okay?"

"No," Jax said. She had to stop and clear her throat. "Is there a way you could ping Mary's cell phone, without having to go into the office?"

"I can. What's wrong? Where's Steve?" Jax could hear Chin moving quickly and efficiently through his house, firing up his laptop in his home office.

"Steve got a call . . . he had to go. It was a matter of global security," Jax added defensively. "Mary is furious, she stormed out of here, I think she was calling a friend to come get her . . . I just want to know that she's safe and okay."

"Jax, what do you mean he had to go? Are you okay?" Chin asked, even as his fingers flew over the keyboard.

"I'm fine, I need to be sure Mary is okay," Jax insisted.

A long moment passed as Jax listened to the soft clicking of Chin typing in information and passwords. "I have her at Kahala Mall," he said finally.

"Shopping," Jax sighed. "I never understood the idea of shopping as a means of diversion. I guess she's safe enough there."

"Jax, just give her some space," Chin said. "You want us to go over and check on her? I'm sure Malia wouldn't object to a nice lunch and a little post-holiday bargain hunting. Maybe we could get eyes on her. Discreetly."

"Maybe . . . maybe that would be okay," Jax said, uncertain. "It's just - she's really, really upset, Chin. I don't know what to do, and I'm afraid . . . she's promised not to drink and drive, but I know . . ."

"We know, Jax," Chin said softly. "Steve's had to arrange for a couple of short rehab visits for Mary, since their dad died. You're not betraying any confidences. It shows how much you care, that you're worried . . . and you're right. This is an incredibly stressful situation for her, and we don't want her to get hurt."

"Thanks," Jax sighed in relief.

"I'm equally concerned about you," Chin said. "You call us, call Malia, if you need anything. Got it?"

"I'm fine, just worried about Mary," Jax insisted. "Thank you so much, Chin."

"Ohana," Chin said simply. "Of course."
Jax was sitting by the water when she heard the familiar purr of the Camaro's engine. Danny, of course. Chin probably called him before even leaving for the mall. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the chair, suddenly and overwhelmingly exhausted.

"Hey, rookie," Danny said softly, easing into the chair next to hers.

"Danny. It's your day off," she sighed. "You should be home with your family."

"See, the thing about Steve . . . I spent six months on this godforsaken island, completely alone. Except for Meka. No friends, no family. Precious little time with Gracie. Rachel hated me. Stan tolerated me. Mr. Hoppy? He bit my finger and peed on my favorite tie. And then Steve pulled a gun on me, then conscirpted me into Five-O. And then, I had a family. Then you dropped out of the sky into the Honolulu Airport, shit beat out of you, barely holding it together, and not only did I have my new family, my ohana, I had a little piece of Jersey back in my life. So, I am home, with my family. Right here, next to you. Later, if you're up to it, Rach will bring the kids over. But right here, right this minute, I'm exactly where I need to be. Why the hell didn't you call me? You shoulda called me, the minute he left." Danny stopped, finally, his hands coming to rest in his lap.

"It was the middle of the night," Jax said. "And then Mary came home, and she was so furious, and . . ."

"Mary will get sorted," Danny said. "Steve's coddled her a bit, I think. Understandable. She's a good kid, a good person . . . she's terrified, and lashing out. And you?"

"I'm a Navy wife," Jax said. "When you told me about Steve? That's how you described him - as a SEAL. I knew he was a SEAL, knew he always would be. You don't retire from that, you're never an 'ex-SEAL'. I knew what I was signing on for, Danny. I'm proud of his service."

"That's all about Steve," Danny said. "I know who he is, the big lug. I wanna know - how terrified are you, babe? 'Cause, I gotta say, I'm terrified. He's my best friend, my brother . . . hell, pretty much my brother-in-law . . . and I'm scared. I'm scared something will happen to him. I'm scared he'll get hurt. I'm scared he won't come home. You scared, Jax?"

She nodded, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes.

"Yeah, it's okay to be scared," Danny said. He slipped out of his chair and came to stand behind hers, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She held on tight to his thickly muscled forearms and sobbed as he murmured words of consolation and kissed the top of her head.

When she was all cried out, Danny pulled out a wad of tissue and held it to her nose, just like he would have for Gracie.

"Blow," he instructed, and she did.

"How come you know how to do that?" she asked, sniffing.

"It was in the manual they sent home from the hospital with Grace," he said.

"They send home a manual?" Jax asked, perking up. No one had told her there'd be a manual.

"They - no, you hopeless wing nut, the closest thing to a manual you get is the book we gave you for Christmas," Danny said.

"Oh. It seems helpful," Jax said.
"It is helpful, if you're not too scared to read it," Danny said. "Now. Guess what I brought with me?"


"You are really bad at being pregnant, I'm gonna just say it," Danny said. "I did bring coffee. I also brought a case of the best canned tomato I could find, a bag of produce from the market, and that good sausage and ground beef you like, from the butchers. Guess what we're gonna do?"

"Start a meth lab," Jax said grumpily.

"Little shit," Danny muttered, taking her hand and pulling her up from her chair. "I also called my ma. In New Jersey. Time difference be damned. And you know why I called my ma?"

Jax stopped, her eyes going wide. "Your mom's gravy? We're going to make your mom's gravy?"

"You swear to never reveal the recipe to anyone, so help you God?" Danny intoned.

Jax nodded vigorously, wiping her eyes.

"Okay. 'Cause you got babies coming, you should have a freezer full of gravy," Danny said. His hand wrapped around hers, warm and comforting, and they started walking toward the house.

"And coffee? You said there was coffee . . . "

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"We're about an hour from the base," Nick said quietly. He and Steve had their heads bent over a topographical map.

"Copy that," Steve murmured. He was calculating distance, angle, likelihood of cover. Trying to quantify their best chances of getting in, getting out, and getting home alive.

"It may not be WoFat," Nick said.

"I know. You've reminded me a dozen times," Steve said.

Nick was like a dog with a bone. "You gonna be able to handle it, if it is WoFat?"

"I'll do what the Navy sent me to do," Steve said. He dropped his eyes back to the map.

"Dog. I was there, remember? I saw . . . " he dropped his voice, mindful of Steve's and Jax's privacy. "I saw him hold a knife to her stomach, Steve. That was my wife, my unborn children? Not sure there'd be any objectivity left at this point. I want to know, can you handle it?"

"I'm not going to compromise the mission, endanger the team, or risk your life," Steve said. "Damn it, Bullfrog, that's the best I can do. Okay?"

Nick nodded. It would have to do. He waited until Steve disappeared into the back of the plane to sort his gear, and then went to talk to the rest of the team. He had some very, very specific instructions to give them.

#*#*#*#*#

Chin and Malia had planned to keep their distance if they saw Mary, and simply report back to Jax, assure her of Mary's safety. The sight of her sitting on a bench outside the Baby Gap, sobbing, changed their plan.
"Oh, bless her," Malia murmured, as they approached.

"Mary," Chin said softly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, sweetheart."

She covered her face with her hands. "I was awful. I was awful to Jax. I can't believe he did this to her, to us. To me. He left. He went God knows where, and what if he doesn't come back?"

Chin and Malia sat on either side of her.

"I was supposed to be here to help, with the babies, and I was awful. She won't want me back in the house, and who will help her with the babies? She's clueless, honestly, and what if - what if something awful happens to Steve, she'll be alone," Mary wailed. "I'll be alone."

"No one is going to be alone," Chin said firmly. "Let us drive you home."

Mary shook her head. "I forgot. I was so upset about Steve and . . . dad, and mom and . . . I forgot that she lost her brother. And I said some awful things. I can't go home."

"Of course you can," Malia said. "Who do you think sent us to check on you?"

Mary sniffed. "Jax? She sent you?"

"You didn't answer her calls," Chin said. "She was worried, wanted us to check and be sure you were safe."

"She set Five-O on me, to track me down, you mean," Mary said. "She's as bad as Steve."

"She and Steve have lost too many of the people they love," Malia said. "You have to accept that they are going to be overprotective. The point is that Jax was much more worried about your safety than she was by anything you may have said while you were upset."

"Their poor kids," Mary grumbled. "It's a good thing they'll have a cool aunt."

I hate the cold," Steve said absently, as his eight man team picked their way through the frozen vegetation. "I didn't think it bothered me, all the places I've been deployed. Thought I hated Afghanistan sand more. But no. Definitely hate the cold most. Hate North Korea."

Nick glanced at him. Steve's hatred of North Korea probably had a lot less to do with climate and a lot more to do with watching his best friend bleed out as he sped away with their target, and then standing in a frozen field, listening to his dad murdered half a world away. He didn't think now was the time to point that out.

"You put together a good team," Steve said quietly, tilting his head to the six men picking their way carefully behind them. To Steve's surprise, they weren't all SEALs: there was also a munitions expert, a communications whiz, and a field surgeon.

"Catherine," Nick said. "Catherine put together the team. If this mission is successful, she'll probably end up outranking me."

"Pretty sure they outrank us in every way that really matters, anyway," Steve said, grinning. He held up his fist, and the men behind him stopped, quiet as a sigh. Instructions were given, equipment was set. Six men would stay in the DMZ, just shy of the North Korean border.

The munitions expert pressed radiation sensitive badges onto the velcro of Steve and Nick's
uniforms.
"They may have gotten more sophisticated since you were last here, sir," he said. "We hope not, but . . . best not to take chances."

"We'll be radio silent," Steve said. "You're close enough . . . if shit hits the fan, you probably won't need us to tell you. You'll hear it. We don't make it back by the agreed upon extraction time, you drop back another two clicks into South Korea. Don't stay in the DMZ, understood?"

They nodded in agreement.

Steve and Nick continued forward, moving silently through the ground cover.

"There's a little part of you that doesn't hate this," Nick said, his eyes twinkling.

Steve looked at him, unable to smother a grin. "Hooyah."

#*#*#*#*#

"Oh, thank God," Jax murmured, throwing her arms around Mary. "You're okay? You're sure you're okay?" She mouthed a thank you to Chin over Mary's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Mary blurted. "I'm so pissed at Steve. And you're so damn calm and mature about the whole thing I was pissed at you, too. You didn't go into labor or anything, did you?"

"I'm fine," Jax said. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "I'm a tiny bit pissed at the Navy, for asking, if I'm being honest."

"I think that's okay," Mary said. "Have you heard anything?"

"It doesn't work that way, Mary," Jax said gently.

Mary's face fell and her eyes filled with tears.

"I'll call Catherine later," Jax promised.

"Steve's Catherine?" Mary asked dubiously. "Of the 'oh god oh god oh god' Catherine fame?"

"Yeah, I wasn't mad at you so far but don't push it," Jax warned.

Mary shrugged. "Whatever. Steve seems to have way more fun with you than he ever did with her."

Malia laughed as Chin covered his face with his hand.

"I think that's our cue to leave," Chin said.

"We made Danny's mom's tomato gravy," Jax said. "There's going to be pasta. And pizza. You could stay. Rachel is bringing Gracie and Charles Nolan over . . ."

"You'd like some company?" Malia asked softly.

Jax nodded and looked at Mary. "If it's okay with Mary, yeah. I mean, unless people have other plans . . ."

"I'll call Kono and Grover," Chin said decisively. "We'll take shifts if it comes to it. I promised Mary that no one was going to be alone, and I meant it."
Nick caught Steve glancing at his watch more than once.

"Got someplace to be?" he asked drily. They were picking their way painstakingly toward the camp. Landmines were, at some point, going to be an issue. It was just a matter of how increasingly paranoid the militia had become.

"It's late evening back home," Steve said. "Damn. Mary. She's going to be furious with me. I should have . . ."

"She would have been furious either way," Nick said. "It's Danny I would worry about."

Steve chuckled. "Danny'll be busy fussing over Jax like a mother hen. God, I hope she's okay. She seemed okay. Nothing was happening."

"We'll get you home in time, Smooth Dog," Nick said.

They fell silent as the first signs of the encampment became visible. Taking cover, they pulled out their dulled binocs and peered into the camp.

"I'm seeing only militia," Nick murmured. "No official North Korean presence. But there's a tacit tolerance to the militia. Pentagon thinks North Korea will gladly finish anything this militia starts."

"I see standard perimeter security," Steve said. "No towers, that's to our advantage. We come in low."

"My money's on the building to your two o'clock as their munitions storage," Nick said. "If we can get past those two guards on the northwest corner . . ."


"They can't start anything without weapons," Nick finished. "In the chaos, we look for the person giving orders. Take him down. One very serious question."

Steve looked at him expectantly.

"If WoFat is in this camp, will we bump into your mom? And if so, how the hell do we keep her safe?" Nick asked.

Steve shook his head. "Too many variables. We focus on the target."

"Improvise the rest?" Nick asked, grinning.

Catherine wasn't surprised to see Steve's number on her caller id. She answered the call with a simple hello.

"Catherine," Jax said. "I'm sorry to . . . well. I don't know, exactly. Steve left his phone here. That means, wherever he's going, he worries about exposure for all of his friends and family."

"You know I can't respond to that," Catherine said.

"I know," Jax said. She was sitting on the second story lanai. The official story was that she needed to use the bathroom - again - but the truth was she just needed a few minutes of quiet. A few minutes
away from the sympathetic glances of the rest of the team.

"He wouldn't have gone if there'd been any other way," Catherine said. "They wouldn't have asked if there'd been anyone else to ask."

"I know. Nick?" Jax asked simply, knowing that Catherine couldn't confirm or deny.

Catherine was silent.

"So," Jax said. "You're alone?"

"Well. I'm on a military base," Catherine said wryly. "There isn't much 'alone' at Pearl Hickam."

"Come over," Jax said.

"Jax, I can't divulge -" Catherine started.

"No, I know," Jax sighed. "Come over. Don't be alone. The team is here, there's food . . ."

"That's - incredibly generous," Catherine said. "I'm on duty. I'm . . . monitoring."

"I understand," Jax said.

"But . . . thank you," Catherine said quietly. She hesitated a moment. "They have an agreement. The group that went. Steve makes it home. No matter what, they make sure he comes home."

"Steve won't agree to that," Jax said.

"They know. They're not going to bother to tell him," Catherine said.

"That will work better," Jax said.

"Whatever I can do on this end to bring them home safe . . ." Catherine said.

"I know. Thank you, Catherine," Jax said quietly. She ended the call, then idly flipped through the pictures on Steve's phone. Her vision blurred and a dull ache set in behind her eyes. She sighed, tucking his phone into her pocket, next to her own, and went to fetch her glasses.

Chin, Malia, and Danny were putting away the last of the dishes.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of time," Jax said, wandering into the kitchen.

"It's not a problem," Chin assured her. "Mary is taking refuge in a bubble bath. Grover and Rachel headed home with their families. Kono and Brian went to check in at the office, make sure there aren't any impending Five-O cases."

"And Chin and I are going to head home, as long as you're okay," Malia said. "Any pain, cramping?"

"Little bit of a headache," Jax said. "I'm really tired. Maybe a little dehydrated?"

Danny filled a glass with water and handed it to her.

"A Tylenol wouldn't hurt," Malia said. "Shall I check your blood pressure?"

"If the water and Tylenol doesn't take care of it, I'll check," Jax assured her.
"Try to rest," Malia said. "Preferably on your left side. Or with your feet elevated."

"I will," Jax promised.

"And call us, the minute you need anything or hear anything," Chin said, as he and Malia headed out the door.

Danny fished a Tylenol out of the cabinet and handed it to Jax. She swallowed it, making a face.

"You need to go home, Danny," she mumbled around a second sip of water. "You've got family to take care of."

"Thought we covered this when I got here," Danny said, his blue eyes crinkling in a smile. "Grace went home with Lou and Renee, so that Rachel could sleep in tomorrow, putter around with Charlie. I'm staying here tonight. Go on up to bed, get some sleep."

She kissed his cheek absently and padded up the stairs, beyond exhausted. Pupule fell into step next to her, and Danny heard the soft snick of her door closing. He grabbed a beer and stepped out onto the lanai.

"I promised them a very happy new year," he said, staring at the stars. "You're not gonna make a liar out of me, right? Because, I gotta tell you - those two . . . their faith is spread pretty thin. Come to think of it, mine is, too."
Their movements were almost perfectly synchronized, Steve noticed, as his target and Nick's target went down without a sound. Sudden inspiration struck, and he caught Nick's eye as he started to remove the unconscious man's uniform.

Nick tilted his head and looked flatly at Steve and then deliberately back down at the man slumped at his feet. The guards they'd just taken out were closer to Danny's height, and not even nearly his broad build. The uniforms would be useless for the six plus feet of Navy SEAL.

Idiot. Steve could hear Danny's voice, fond and exasperated, in his mind. He was cold and he missed Hawaii. He missed Jax. Nick was next to him, checking the clip on the small automatic rifle hooked to his tac vest.

"I think I might get out," Steve said absently.

"You're a jackass," Nick said. "Let's discuss your retirement over a single malt on the beach, not right now. Right now, we need to destroy that stockpile, get our intel, and get the hell back over the border."

Steve nodded, and they carefully began placing the charges.

"Damn, these are small," Steve said. "I hope they do the job."

"If I weren't focused on setting fuses, I could go so many places with that," Nick said wistfully.

With enough charges in place to take out the building, they took cover again behind a smaller structure - an outhouse, from the smell of it. It was annoying, but to their advantage. No one would come this way unless they needed to, and they damn sure wouldn't linger.

"Best guess, which building is their communications?" Steve asked, thoughtfully turning over a few extra sets of explosives. "We could buy a lot more time to look for WoFat if we could cut off their contact. This place is pretty remote."

Nick paused a beat. "It may not be WoFat," he reminded Steve. "But my guess, the concrete building, there, at your seven o-clock. It's the one with the generator."

"Worth it?" Steve asked, calculating distance and exposure. He knew that Nick was doing the same.

"Hell, yeah," Nick agreed. "If we have them cut off from reinforcements, we stand a much better chance of getting out of here without any extra holes in us. We also risk blowing up our primary target."

"We take out the armory first," Steve said. "Watch to see who flushes out of that building. All of my
instincts and experiences tell me the leaders are bunkered in there - it's the strongest building, and probably the only one with heat. We take the building out behind them."

"Agreed," Nick said. "Although . . . we could just take the building out. Period. Pick up the literal pieces later."

"Brass needs to know if North Korea is actively coordinating with this militia," Steve pointed out. "We need to know if the North Korean army is backing and arming this group - it changes the landscape."

"You'll be able to tell the difference if the camp is in chaos?" Nick questioned.

"I'll know," Steve said grimly. Nick didn't question him further. If Steve was certain, he was certain, and that was good enough for him.

"Okay, time's wasting then," Nick said. "Cover me."

Before Steve could argue, Nick had grabbed the surplus explosives from his hand and was sidestepping silently to the concrete building.

"Damn it, Bullfrog," Steve muttered, his eyes scanning frantically to see if Nick's movement was detected. The idiot. He was exposing himself, keeping Steve safely back, keeping him in cover. It was a stupid, stupid plan, Steve thought, glaring at Nick.

The first charge was set when the door of the building opened. Nick flattened himself against the wall. The door blocked him from the view of the person exiting, and with any luck, Steve thought, they might yet pull this off. For all their bulk, SEALs were remarkably gifted at melting into the background of any given situation. The door closed, and two men - not in uniform, Steve noted, so militia, then - walked out. Steve wondered idly about telepathy and mind control, as they turned, to his immense relief, away from Nick.

Nick didn't look relieved, he looked shocked, and dismayed, like someone whose clever plan had just backfired. Steve felt the cold steel of the stock of a rifle make contact with the back of his head, and understood why. There was the roar of an explosion and a wave of heat at his back, and then nothing.

 Damn concussions, Jax thought. She could have held her own, probably, but pain plus dizziness meant that her three assailants were quickly gaining ground. It pissed her off. They were good, better than most civilians. She took a closer look at the face just inches from hers, hissing something about knowing her place. Shit. These assholes weren't civilians, they were NYPD. And one of them had clocked her good, based on her double vision and the pain spiking through her head. He was saying something about Danny, why was he talking about Danny?

Danny wasn't sure what he heard first, Jax's distressed mutterings, or Pupule's frantic pawing at the bedroom door. He was off the sofa like a shot, his short legs taking the stairs two at a time. Pupule hurtled through the bedroom door when he opened it and stopped short, looking up at him. Danny knocked softly on the bedroom door.

"Jax?" he called. He'd witnessed her coming up swinging more than once. No sense taking unnecessary risks.

"Danny?" Mary's sleepy voice came from the bottom of the stairs. "What's wrong?"
"Jax might be having a nightmare," Danny said. "Hold on."

"Danny," Jax sighed. "Do we have a case?"

"You awake, Jax? There's no case. You with me?" Danny stepped cautiously into the doorway. "Also, you decent?"

Jax sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Danny, what the hell . . ." she muttered. "Oh, geez. My head is killing me." She swung her legs, awkwardly, over the side of the bed. To Danny's relief, she was wearing an oversized tshirt, faded FDNY lettering visible in the pale moonlight as she shuffled to the bathroom. He chuckled. Her brother had been a big guy, about Steve's height, but with the added bulk typical of firefighters.

"You finally outgrow Steve's t-shirts?" Danny quipped. She mumbled half-heartedly in response. He waited patiently as he heard the sound of the toilet flushing, the splash of water in the sink and then . . . nothing. He called her name again.

No response.

He pushed open the bathroom door, privacy be damned. She was standing in front of the medicine cabinet, squinting at a bottle of pills. She held it out to him, blinking slowly and swaying a bit on her feet.

"I can't read this, is it for headaches?" she asked.

He carefully took the bottle from her and wrapped his hand around her neck, trying to steady her and get a good look at her eyes at the same time.

"Jax, how bad is your head hurting, babe?" he asked.

"Assholes gave me a concussion, it hurts like hell, Danny," she said. "Gimme my scrip. Better yet, get the damn childproof cap off it. Geez, you're the one with the kid, not me."

Danny's eyes widened in alarm. "Jax, what's going on? Are you with me right now?"

"You gonna give me the pills or not?" she demanded petulantly. "And turn off the fucking light."

Mary had crept up to the landing. "Why is Jax cursing like a sailor?"

"Because when she's concussed or altered she has no filter," Danny said.

"She shouldn't be concussed or altered," Mary said.

Danny wrapped an arm around Jax's shoulder and steered her into the bedroom.

"I know," he said, jerking his head to indicate his need for Mary's help. "That's why we're taking her to Tripler."

#*#*#*#*

Steve didn't so much regain consciousness as slam into it, with a rush of adrenaline that left him shaking.

Or maybe that was the cold.

He had barely twitched before grabbing hard at self-control, willing himself to not betray his
conscious state until he'd managed an inventory of sorts. Pain radiating from the base of his skull matched the memory of a rifle stock impacting. He matched the superficial burns he could feel on his back with the memory of the explosion behind him - the munitions store, no doubt - and then dismissed them. As injuries go, it was insignificant. His back had probably been shielded by whoever had clocked him. He dismissed that as well. Pressure on his wrists indicated restraints, and the pull of his shoulders combined with the sensation of his bare toes barely touching the dirt beneath them indicated that he was up the proverbial shit creek. The only sound he could make out, aside from his own pulse pounding in his ears, was a slight wheezing, irregular breathing close by. He hazarded lifting one eyelid, ignoring the sticky sensation as more superficial bleeding, and spotted Nick.

He assumed that Nick's position mirrored his own - hands tied, the rope slung over a beam and secured to the wall. Their boots had been removed, but the rest of their clothing seemed relatively intact. He supposed it was pointless to hope that any weapons had been overlooked, but then, few people would know all the places to look. Nick's eyes were open, watching him.

"How long?" Steve muttered quietly.

"How long were you out, or how long before the cavalry arrives?" Nick responded, voice barely audible. No matter, they were both perfectly adept at reading lips.

"Calvary - no, they're to drop back if we don't make it back," Steve argued. "And yeah, how much did I miss?"

Nick shook his head and winced. "Group of eight, five SEALs and three guys crazy enough to volunteer to come along, and you honestly think they're going to drop back? You've been napping for about an hour. Eight hour flight to our base in Seoul, four hours on foot to the border, they were giving us four hours to cross in, do our thing, get back to them. They'll hold steady for no more than thirty minutes, give us a margin. Two, three hours . . . we should expect some sort of diversion. You okay for that long?"

Steve nodded carefully. "Concussion, minor burns. How about you?"

"Sorry about the burns. Detonated the munitions, thought maybe, if I could create a big enough distraction . . . wasn't big enough. You were already down, there were too many of them. Couldn't get to you," Nick said. He pulled at his wrists in frustration.

Steve looked around for a possible means of escape. The windowless structure didn't look especially sturdy, and they were bound with rope, not chains.

"Yeah, we've managed to get out of worse," Nick said. He'd already had time to take inventory. "One door, no windows. If we can get our hands free, we can bottleneck anyone coming through the door. Take even one guy out, get a weapon . . . might not even need the cavalry."

The door swung open and a man dressed in a North Korean military uniform stepped inside, flanked by two other soldiers. Steve wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed that it wasn't WoFat.

"How did you arrive at this location?" the man asked, in carefully cultured English. Steve recognized his insignia indicating a rank equivalent of major. The others were in plain, unadorned uniforms. No rank. Just muscle.

Steve answered in Mandarin Chinese. Nick wasn't sure, but he thought that it was something along the lines of calling the man a little disappointment. Or perhaps calling part of the man a little disappointing. Regardless, Steve was immediately on the receiving end of a vicious punch to his...
midsection, the rope rubbing painfully against his wrists as his feet swung out from under him.

"You are Americans," the major stated.

Nick and Steve just stared at him. He hadn't asked a question. Their general complexion and build screamed American, but then again, this was why they had ditched uniform and insignia at the border, and gone in wearing what Danny referred to as "ninja gear". Zero identifying features. Not even their dogtags. Steve wondered who would take their tags back to Jax and Catherine, if -

"He's not very good at this," Nick said conversationally, looking at Steve and interrupting his train of thought.

"Or maybe he understands Mandarin," Steve suggested, panting. His comment earned him another blow, and he kicked out violently at the soldier. His kick didn't connect. So, muscle and speed.

"How many are you?" the major demanded, turning his attention to Nick.

Nick answered in Farsi. Steve had more than a passing knowledge of Farsi, enough to know that Nick had just insulted the major's mother. And sister. And girlfriend . . . no. Absence of girlfriend. Steve grinned, then grimaced as Nick received two punishing blows to his kidneys, leaving him swinging and panting against the pain.

Shit. It could be a long two or three hours.

"McGarrett," Gus barked. "What the hell are you doing in my ER?"

Jax looked at her, confused, and Gus was on the near side of the nurses' station so quickly that Danny wondered if she'd vaulted over it. Her penlight was in hand, flashing at Jax's eyes, before he could even open his mouth.

"Detective Williams," Gus said. "Sorry, it took me a split second to realize this wasn't Jax lurking around looking to be entertained. Symptoms?"

"Headache, mild earlier, but she woke up disoriented and complaining about it being bad," Danny said. "She'd said something about taking her blood pressure if Tylenol didn't work, but I didn't know how to get her to do that, so I brought her straight here."

"And we're taking her straight up to obstetrics," Gus said. "I'll have them page Captain Bluedorn, her OB."

"Steve's sister is parking the car," Danny said.

"They'll get her in the right place," Gus assured him. She calmly pressed a wheelchair into the back of Jax's knees, and a gentle push on her shoulder had her seated.

"What is it?" Danny asked anxiously. "My wife has had two babies, this didn't happen. And Jax is accident prone, sure, but she hasn't fallen or anything."

"Right here, Danny," Jax said irritably. "God, do I do that? Talk about patients like they're not there?"

"We all do," Gus said, patting Jax's shoulder. "You with me, McGarrett?"

"Yeah, Gus," Jax said tiredly. "My head's killing me and I have to admit, I'm losing the plot here and
there. But I'm mostly here."

Gus was wrapping her blood pressure cuff around Jax's arm and popping her stethoscope into her ears one-handed. Danny was fairly certain that she had an extra hand, somehow, because she seemed to be doing four things at once in a moving elevator.

"BP's high, McGarrett," Gus said. "But not off the charts, scary high. High enough to give you a nasty headache, and probably high enough to land your ass in a bed here overnight. Your tactical training probably only touched on preeclampsia, but - aha, yes, now that I've said the word you recognize the warning signs. Any chance you're fighting a bug? Blood sugar off? Unusually stressed?"

Danny's laugh had just a tinge of hysteria, Gus thought.

Catherine paced in her tiny office. She'd tried to doze as much as she could those first eight hours, knowing the team was simply en route to the US military base in South Korea. It was the next eight hours, this eight hours, that was most nerve-wracking. These were the hours of radio silence, of Steve and Nick trying to get in and out of the militia encampment. Orders were concurrently simple - destroy what you can, find out what you can, get the hell out - and complicated. They would have to decide what to destroy, what to preserve, and most importantly, when and how to get out.

She looked at the clocks on the wall again. Two hours. She should hear something in two hours.

Rear Admiral Vincas appeared in her doorway with a cup of coffee, steaming hot.

"I wouldn't have asked them," he said quietly, in a rare expression of concern and compassion. "Lieutenant Rollins, if there had been anyone else even remotely capable of the mission, I wouldn't have asked McGarrett. But given that I had to . . . Taylor refused to consider anyone else as the second."

"I know, sir," Catherine said, accepting the coffee gratefully. "Respectfully, sir, may I make a suggestion?"

"Absolutely."

"It doesn't seem strategically prudent, to be in this situation," she said. "Where the success of a mission of global impact rests on one person's shoulders. It's strategically unsustainable, sir. Not to mention -"

"No, go ahead, Lieutenant, finish your thought."

"Well, sir, it's manipulative," Catherine said, straightening her spine. "An aspect I've found increasingly present in the Special Activities Division."

The admiral sighed and didn't bother to disagree.

Steve glared at Nick, absolutely furious, as the door closed behind the major and his lackeys.

"You did that on purpose," Steve hissed. His jaw was aching - one of the soldiers had just enough of a reach to catch him solidly, and he had, over and over. Steve wasn't sure if the fact that the other two men were of shorter stature was a blessing or a curse - their faces and upper bodies had been
spared the brunt of the abuse, but his ribs and kidneys were aching. He knew Nick must be in absolute agony, as he'd managed to goad and manipulate the soldiers into taking most of their frustration out on him. Steve was equal parts impressed and furious.

"Don't know - what - you're talking - about," Nick grunted out.

"You're provoking them, drawing their attention to yourself," Steve said. He jackknifed his body in half, ribs screaming in protest, as he tried to wrap his feet around the rope and create some slack. It worked, in a fashion, but his hands were hopelessly swollen by this point.

"Maybe I'm - tired - of you - being such an - attention hound," Nick said. "Shit."

"How bad?" Steve demanded. He was working furiously in an effort to dislocate his thumb so that he could slip his hands through the rope.

"Might have - broken - a rib," Nick said.

"Yeah?" Steve kept his tone light, even though his mind was screaming at the potential dangers of a broken rib. Punctured lung, punctured spleen . . . "suck it up, Bullfrog. Broken ribs, shit, you get those playing football."


"Shut up, stop talking," Steve said. He realized that his shoulder was going to dislocated before his thumb, at this point, and that would accomplish nothing. He lowered his feet to the ground, growling in frustration.

"If we - get rescued - by a radio jockey," Nick said, his head lolling on his shoulders, "we gonna - be embarrassed?"

"Nah, the radio jockey is gonna get a promotion," Steve said. "And we get to kick back at my place with a grilled steak."

"Okay," Nick agreed. "Another hour - I'm good -"

"The hell you are," Steve said. "You've bought us enough time, Nick. Don't do this, man, let them come after me."

"Agreement is - you go home - no matter - what," Nick said.

"Damn it to hell, Bullfrog, that's no way to run a mission," Steve hissed. He could hear footsteps approaching. So far, they'd managed to destroy the militia's stockpile of weapons, confirm that the North Korean government was, in fact, in collusion with the militia, and royally piss off and provoke the relatively low-ranking military officer in charge. It was, all in all, a good day's work - except for the part where a simple rope was keeping them from securing their freedom and getting the hell out of dodge. He slipped into combat breathing, preparing to override Nick's efforts to absorb the brunt of the abuse, and try to occupy the goons until the beautiful idiots on the team that Catherine had assembled decided to disregard the orders and come save their asses. He was confident in his ability to withstand the unimaginative beating handed out so far. Mentally and physically, he was calm and prepared.

He wasn't prepared to see WoFat walk through the door.

Oh. Well, shit, his brain prompted, sounding, as it often did, like Danny. I guess WoFat is brokering the deal, then.
Captain Bluedorn closed the door to Jax's room behind her quietly, and stepped down to the end of the hall to the family waiting room. Mary was curled in a miserable lump on the sofa, while Danny paced anxiously.

"Doc, what's going on?" Danny said, pouncing on her.

"She's doing fine, resting comfortably," Bluedorn said, holding up her hand to ward off their interruptions. "I'm very glad you brought her straight in. She does have a condition known as preeclampsia. As complications go, it's not terribly unusual, especially in multiples. One of the first really obvious symptoms is the headache, so we have to say she's past the earliest stages, but she's not complaining of shortness of breath or severe abdominal pain, so we're hopeful that we've caught it early."

"Early, what does that mean, though?" Danny demanded.

"Early, meaning, we can manage her blood pressure and monitor her carefully, and hopefully hold off delivering the babies a while longer," Bluedorn said.

"They're not due for another month," Mary said. "It's too soon."

"It's actually a pretty typical delivery time for twins," Bluedorn explained. "We could deliver right now, and anticipate that the worst complication would be that the smaller of the two babies might need some respiratory support. It would be nice if we could get to week thirty-seven. At that point, there would be almost no risk of complications to the babies. However, Jax is our primary concern right now. If she's in distress, obviously, the babies will be in distress, and we'll have to deliver. I understand that Commander McGarrett is . . . away."

Danny nodded shortly, a dark look passing across his face.

"It's important that you understand that this likely would have happened, regardless," Bluedorn said. "And either way, negativity about the commander's activity will only increase stress. Clear?"

"Understood," Danny sighed. "Can we see her?"

"Absolutely. We're giving her extra fluids, some medication to control her blood pressure, and trying hard to get her pain under control. You'll need to keep the room quiet and dark, but I believe she'll find your presence comforting. You also need to understand - she's probably not going to be going home until after the safe delivery of the babies. I'm not comfortable with the risks," Bluedorn said.

"Thank God," Danny said fervently, as Mary nodded. "We're not comfortable with the responsibility. But you're saying . . . we may want to circle the wagons, take shifts?"

"Precisely. You're in it for the long haul, but the good news is, pretty soon - healthy babies, healthy mom," Bluedorn said.

Danny and Mary tiptoed into Jax's room. She was curled on her left side, an IV running into her right hand. A nurse was gently tucking a blanket around her shoulders.

"She still has a pretty gnarly headache," the nurse whispered. "We've given her something, it should kick in pretty soon." She slipped out quietly.

Mary hesitated, unfamiliar and uncertain in the face of Jax subdued and in pain. Danny, however, was all too familiar with the scenario. He pulled up a chair and sat down, taking Jax's hand in his.
His broad hand brushed the hair back from her face.

"Hey, rookie," he whispered. "Doc says you're going to be fine, and the babies are going to be fine. You could pop those kids out right now, if need be."

"Steve's not here," Jax whispered back.

"I know, I know," Danny said. "But he will be, yeah? And in the meantime, we're here, and we're not going anywhere. The whole team will rotate, need be, and it will all work out fine, you'll see. You just rest. By the time you wake up, you'll be feeling better, I'm sure of it. Just sleep, honey, we're right here."

#*#*#*#*#

"When they told me that some Americans had located this facility, destroyed our weapons, I must admit, I didn't anticipate it being you," WoFat said. He gestured, and two men slipped into the room behind him. They were dressed in neither military nor militia uniforms. Steve thought he recognized one as the helicopter pilot from Jax's kidnapping.

"You remember Tadeki," WoFat said conversationally. He gestured again, and Tadeki whipped out a huge blade and moved purposefully toward Nick.

"No!" Steve yelled. "You cowardly son of a bitch, you leave him the hell alone."

"So easily leveraged," WoFat laughed. "So easily manipulated by threats to the people you care for. We're simply going to move your friend to a more . . . convenient location. I'd like to speak with you privately."

Nick could barely protest, much less fight, as the rope binding his hands was sliced with a stroke of Tadeki's blade. Steve wasn't entirely sure that Nick remained conscious, and given the state of his ribs, and the fact that Tadeki had tossed him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, it was probably best if he hadn't. The door closed behind them.

Steve growled in frustration and lashed his feet out at WoFat, kicking in pure, unadulterated rage.

"You're going to start a nuclear holocaust, you know that," Steve said. "You arrogant bastard."

"And not one passing thought to whether or not mother dearest is helping me," WoFat tutted. "Speaking of mothers . . . how is the little wife? Still radiant? So lovely, so . . . ripe with child."

Steve felt fury rising like gorge through his chest and he wrapped his hands around the rope binding his wrists and pulled with every ounce of strength he had left.

"Absolute asshole," Steve hissed. WoFat neatly dodged his kick.

"My associates tell me that after destroying their property, you and your companion wasted their time with insults," WoFat said. "Care to come up with anything more creative? Perhaps I can inspire you."

He struck like a cobra, years of training in martial arts evident in his lightning fast, perfectly aimed blows. A high, roundhouse kick connected with Steve's browbone, dangerously close to his temple. The skin split and blood poured into his eye, obstructing his vision and making it even more impossible to attempt to deflect or dodge the calculated blows.

Steve clenched his jaw and refused to give WoFat the satisfaction of more than a few reluctant
"Nothing? No insults to my manhood in several languages? You used up all of your insults already? I'm disappointed. Of course, my associate's approach was... common. Heavy-handed. Without... vision. Lacking in elegance." He withdrew a long, slim cigar from a pocket and lit it.

"What the hell do you want?" Steve demanded. His muscles strained as he imperceptibly lifted his body weight, releasing some of the pressure around his wrists. WoFat was looking at his cigar, contemplating it. Steve risked pulling himself up just a bit more. His frantic, uncoordinated thrashing had actually accomplished something and the rope was riding closer to the joint of his thumb.

The thumb that Jax had dislocated, her first day on the island.

"I want to relieve some of my frustration at my plans being thwarted," WoFat said. "You see, I was arriving here today to collect payment for my... merchandise. Now, my... customers are reluctant to pay, seeing as how you and your friend have destroyed the goods. I'll eventually get my money. In the meantime, I'll have my pleasure."

"You're a sick son of a bitch, but at least you're picking on someone your own size," Steve said. He gritted his teeth as WoFat approached him, the tip of the cigar glowing red hot.

It was almost too easy, Steve thought, as a white hot pain seared through the exposed skin of his hipbone, and a harsh cry was ripped from him. Even if it took repeated efforts, his thumb would eventually give way, and he could match his attempts with the contact of that damn cigar.

By the fourth burn, his pain receptors were so busy that it was relatively easy ignore the pain of his thumb, slipping out of joint. He managed to catch the rope with his good hand.

WoFat smiled in satisfaction as the smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils, unaware that his prisoner was a hair's breadth from freedom. Then his face clouded in confusion as Steve smiled, a gory, bloody grin spreading across his face as one hand pulled free of the rope and thrust deep into a pocket, wrapping around the remaining detonator.

The back wall of the building exploded in a shower of cinderblock and ash. WoFat turned his head for a split second, distracted, before he realized the folly of turning his back on six plus feet of enraged Navy SEAL. The rope that had secured Steve to the overhead rafter made a whistling sound as Steve whipped it free and wrapped it around WoFat's throat.

Steve pulled, leaving the narrowest of airways, and WoFat was desperately gasping, trying to pull in enough oxygen to remain conscious. Almost two hundred pounds of pressure rested, pinpointed down to the size of Steve's kneecap, centered over his lungs. He was immobilized, squirming, like a bug on a pin.

Chaos and confusion outside the partially destroyed building ignored, Steve took the cigar from WoFat's twitching hand and held it so close to his eye that his eyelashes brushed against it, gracefully brushing the burning ash away. A few flecks fell onto his lower lid, burning. WoFat would have screamed in pain, had he been able to draw in enough air.

"You let us see how you looked at her," Steve said, his voice low and threatening in WoFat's ear. "You tried to get inside her head, tried to scare her. Control her. Psychological torture. You dared look at my wife. You think I'm gonna let you keep your eyes, hunh, after you laid eyes on her? Think I'll let you keep your hands, after you touched her?"

WoFat whimpered with what air he had left, praying to any available deity that he would slip into
blessed, merciful unconsciousness. But Steve was too knowledgeable.

Anatomy and physiology, after all. Extensive field medic training. Jax's lilting, teasing voice sounded in his ears. Their mutual understanding of human anatomy had provided countless pleasurable moments. WoFat had threatened, too many times, to take that away. Now, Steve's understanding of physiology told him that a little more oxygen, if you please, would ensure WoFat remained conscious while he rendered him his due punishment. He lifted his knee slightly, allowing WoFat to take an almost reluctant breath.

"Son," Joe's voice sounded in his head. Of all the times for his conscience . . . and that was weird. Usually his conscience sounded like Danny.

"Son," Joe said again. "We're better than that, aren't we?"

Steve whipped his head around, not releasing WoFat even a fraction more of an inch. He wouldn't have recognized Joe in a dark alley. His hair was long and matted, thick beard obscuring most of his face.

"Joe?" Steve gasped. He forced back the pain that was trying to make its way into his awareness. "What the hell -"

"I'm tempted to help you torture him, because God knows he deserves it," Joe said quietly. "But how does that make us any better?"

Steve quickly turned the rope into a series of knots behind WoFat's wrists and ankles, rendering him helpless, writhing on the floor. Steve stood over him, staring down at him impassionately.

"I could just shoot him," Steve said.

"And then . . . you wouldn't know where your mother was," WoFat gasped, a ghastly attempt at a smile on his lips.

"Steve," Joe said, shaking his head. "Don't let him bait you. He's secure. He may or may not know anything about your mother, but he damn sure knows what the North Korean government is doing, arming rogue militia and concentrating forces. Let's get him to the people who can do the most good with that information."

"How -" Steve said, gesturing at Joe. The pain was starting to insist on moving to the forefront of his consciousness, much to his annoyance. It made processing a bit difficult.

"Tagged along with your friends," Joe said wryly, gesturing to the crumbling wall behind him. Steve could hear gunfire and chaos. "They thought you and Nick would need rescuing. They were half right."

"Bullfrog," Steve gasped.

"He'll make it, but we need to get you all the hell back over the border," Joe said. As if on cue, a Jeep barrelled up to the exposed wall of the building.

Joe nodded to Steve, and they hauled WoFat, still squirming, into the back of the Jeep. Steve accepted the snub nosed automatic offered to him by the cheerfully grinning communications officer.

"Damn, if Bullfrog didn't say we'd get rescued by a radio jockey," Steve muttered.

"I'm just here to pick up the trash," he said, speeding off after a covered truck, which Steve assumed
contained the rest of their team, given that gunfire was coming out of the truck and taking out the few frantic military and militia that stood between them and the border.

"How bad is Bullfrog?" Steve demanded.

"Needs a hospital," the officer said shortly. "Should be able to make Yokosuka Naval Base."

Steve nodded. It was a two hour flight, but the naval base there had a top notch hospital. There were so many reasons to get the hell out of Korea and into Japan.

"We'll need to obtain medical care for the prisoner," Steve said coldly. WoFat's face was gray, his eyes closed.

"What's wrong with the prisoner?" the officer asked, glancing at Steve as he rocketed across the uneven terrain.

Steve tilted his head and regarded WoFat clinically. "Pretty sure a compression fracture of a couple vertebrae. Maybe a broken rib or two. Might have nicked a lung."

The officer's eyebrows shot up.

"He got off easy," Joe muttered.

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"I'm sorry," Mary whispered, tears streaking down her face. "I'm not like the rest of you, I don't deal with this stuff every day. Steve is no where to be found, Jax is . . . she's got this glazed look in her eyes, like, she's in so much pain but she's used to it, and . . . how do you people live like this?"

Chin hugged her close. He remembered Mary as a very little girl, and in some ways, he would always see her as such. She was trying so hard to be strong, but she was right - she wasn't used to this.

"We don't expect or want you to get used to this, Mary," he said gently. "Why don't you go on home, get some real rest?"

She shook her head stubbornly, and Chin decided to try a different tactic. "Steve has always come home. Always. And when Jax comes home, it will be with twins. I'm guessing there's probably things yet to be done around the house. Why don't you try to get some good rest, and then Kono and I will send over a couple of aunties to help you get the house ready for everyone. Do you think you could do that?"

Mary sniffed and nodded. "I can get another bag together for Jax, too. I know what some of her favorite things are right now. She likes her big pillow, and her fuzzy socks."

"That would be perfect, Mary," Chin said. "I'm going to have a uniform drive you, okay? You're too tired to be behind the wheel. When it's Kono's turn to come visit Jax, I'll let her know to swing by and pick up the things you have ready."

Mary nodded again and threw her arms around Chin. "Thank you," she whispered. "I don't think they really appreciate everything you do."

"It's all going to be okay, Mary," he said, kissing the top of her head. "We'll call you, immediately, if there's anything new on either Steve or Jax."
He saw Mary safely to the HPD officer available to drive her, and then made his way back to the family waiting room. Danny was there, pacing again.

"They're changing her sheets and her gown," Danny said. "She kicked me out."

Chin smiled. "Danny. You need to take a break."

"I'm fine," Danny said, waving his hand.

"Danny. You need to take a shower," Chin said.

"Funny, Jax said the same thing," Danny said, smiling sheepishly. "I'll ask the nurses if they mind if I use her shower."

"You'll ask Jax," a nurse said, sliding smoothly into the waiting room. She extended her hand to shake Danny's and Chin's in turn. "Good morning, gentlemen. I'm Mia, Jax's nurse. I'll be here for the duration, catching showers and naps, like you, when I can. Captain Bluedorn and I reviewed Jax's disturbingly voluminous medical record and agreed that - especially in the absence of her husband - what she needs most, in addition to astute medical care, is consistency in personnel. I don't leave until she does, along with two healthy babies. That is the one and only acceptable outcome. No one so much as blinks in her general direction without her consent and approval. Do we have an understanding?"

Danny and Chin gaped at her.

"Gentlemen?" Mia prompted.

"We have a fantastic understanding," Danny said, taking her hand and pumping it enthusiastically. "You're serious. You're not leaving until everything is okay?"

"Affirmative," Mia said. "Her condition is stable, but only in the sense that she's not getting dramatically worse. She's also not improving. We're looking at delivering the babies within twenty-four hours, or on a moment's notice if she deteriorates. It's not conducive to her health care or her understandably brittle frame of mind for there to be a new nurse read into the situation every eight hours. I work with a team who will ensure that I receive adequate rest to do my job, but I don't leave."

"Shit," Danny said. "She's going to be devastated if Steve isn't here . . . or at least if she's not heard that he's okay."

"She's a Navy wife, which means that she will comport herself with dignity," Mia said.

Chin raised an eyebrow at her.

"That simply means that the three of us know better," Mia said, her voice sympathetic. "It also means that we are going to give her absolutely every bit of control that we can give her, in a situation which is rapidly spinning out of control. I've read her chart. I know what that means to her."

It was Danny's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"I've been an obstetrical nurse for ten years," Mia said. "My master's degree and research, however, is as a post-traumatic psychiatric nurse practitioner. I also happen to be a lieutenant in the United States Navy and a Krav Maga devotee. Which means, I will care for Jax to the best of my considerable ability, up to and including beating the ever loving crap out of anyone who makes her feel threatened."
"Understood," Chin said, nodding reverently.

"I like you," Danny declared.

"Which of you is Danny?" Mia asked.

Danny raised his hand nervously.

"You may be with her. I don't want a rotation of friends in the room. No offense," she added, glancing at Chin. "You will be of tremendous help as a point of contact for anyone who needs to be kept in the loop, and of course, we will send for you if she asks for you. But otherwise . . . she needs rest, and privacy. Soon enough, there'll be cause for celebration. Until then, peace and quiet are key."

"No offense taken," Chin said. "Danny and I can communicate quietly as needed via text. And I'll be happy to steer everyone clear. Her sister-in-law . . ."

"Is precious, and trying hard, but Jax feels protective of her, and feels the need to mask her pain and discomfort for her sake," Mia said.

"I've sent her home to rest and get the house in order," Chin supplied.

"Good call," Mia said, visibly relieved. "Okay, Danny. Back to you. When asked who her support person would be, in her husband's absence, she named you instantly. Your friend is correct - you're due a shower - and I'll make sure we have a comfortable recliner so you can rest if she's resting. You're up for this?"

"My wife's had two children," Danny said. "I'm good with the baby stuff. And Jax . . . I've been with her through the other stuff. I'm up for it."

"Rules are simple. Anything that happens in that room, happens with her permission," Mia reminded him. "You want to use her shower, you ask her. You think she needs her pillow adjusted, you ask her. She's frightened, and in pain, and Lieutenant Commander McGarrett is God knows where doing God knows what. We help her hold it together until he can, go it?"

Danny nodded firmly and followed Mia back down the hall.

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They made it back to the original make-shift base, inside the DMZ, and took a few moments to regroup. Steve motioned for two of his fellow SEALs to guard WoFat, while he checked on Nick.

"Bullfrog, you think you can make it to Yokosuka, or you want us to get you to the infirmary on the base here in Seoul?" Steve asked, running a practiced hand gently over Nick's broken ribs.

"Nurses are way prettier in Yokosuka," Nick said. "Doc can wrap my ribs, hold me together until then, right?"

The field surgeon nodded a confident affirmative.

"I want to get the hell out of Korea, South or otherwise," Nick added.

Steve nodded, and then turned as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Joe was there, pressing a neatly wrapped package into his hand.

"Joe, were you tracking WoFat? I don't understand," Steve said. His agile brain was under assault from fatigue and pain, and he couldn't quite piece together how this grizzled version of Joe had
appeared in a North Korean militia encampment.

"I was tracking your mother," Joe said. "Not WoFat. She's left breadcrumbs, and trace evidence. There's a journal here, that the SAD and Naval Intel should find helpful. Couple other artifacts, as well. Take care, son."

"Joe, you -"

"I'm exiled, Steve," Joe said. "I go back, I go to Leavenworth. I'm not ready for that, not yet. Besides, someone has to look out for Doris. She's good, but she's not invincible."

"She's not working with WoFat," Steve repeated. He wanted to be sure he had it right.

"No, Steve, she's not working with him. Why do you think he was so furious with you? You didn't give him what he wanted, after all," Joe said. "Take care. Get home to that spitfire of a wife of yours. She'll ream you a new one if you miss the birth of your children."

Joe melted into the underbrush. If it hadn't been for the curious glances of the other team members, Steve might have thought he'd imagined him the whole time. The parcel was a solid, compact weight in his pocket, grounding him.

The communications officer helped an ashen Steve move WoFat into the plane that would speed them to the Yokosuka Naval Base. Two solemn, unsmiling fellow SEALs immediately took positions to secure him, as the rest of the team grabbed gear and helped a stubbornly upright Nick onto the plane as well. Once they were safely over South Korean airspace, Steve held a phone in shaking hands and placed a call to Catherine.

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The room was dim, and smelled of freshly washed sheets and clean soap. Jax's hair was damp, tucked up neatly in a clip to keep it out of her face.

"Feeling any better?" Danny asked, smiling down at her.

"Miss my own shower, but this was nice. Thank you," Jax said, managing a smile for the nurse who'd just helped her.

"Speaking of showers, both Chin and your nurse have informed me that it's my turn. Would you mind if I used your shower?" Danny asked.

"Knock yourself out, Danno, you're a little ripe," Jax said.

Danny pretended to glare at her. "I'll just be a minute," he said, grabbing his bag.

"I'm not going anywhere," Jax sighed. As Danny slipped into the bathroom, she craned her neck to try to see the blood pressure and heart rate readings. The equipment had been angled away while the nurse helped her get cleaned up and changed, and she couldn't see it.

Mia noticed and moved the screen. "Better?" she asked.

"I'm not getting any worse," Jax said, her eyes tracking expertly across the readings. "BP is holding steady. Is that the babies' heartbeats?"

"Mmm, we have you on a fetal monitor," Mia said. "Babies are doing great. Your BP is holding steady, as you said."
"But it's still too high," Jax said.

"It is," Mia agreed. "Scale of one to ten, how's your pain?"

"Headache? About a six," Jax said.

"There's additional pain?" Mia asked. She fixed her amber gaze steadily on Jax.

"Some low back pain," Jax said quietly. "Probably from laying on my side - I know, left side is definitely best, I understand. I think maybe the babies are squished and tired of being in one position."

"It's possible," Mia agreed. "Or it's possible that despite our efforts to press pause on this whole situation, you're close to going into labor."

"I'm having a C-section," Jax said, an edge of panic in her voice.

"Absolutely," Mia agreed. "I have Captain Bluedorn and the anesthesiologist on speed dial. If you do go into active labor, they'll be here within moments to do a C-section."

"Okay," Jax said. She relaxed. "But unless I go into labor, or something changes . . ."

"We can simply stay the course," Mia said. "Give that husband of yours time to get his delectable ass back in here."

"You've met him," Jax said, grinning.

"Not in person," Mia said. "There was a YouTube video, though, the day of the bridge?"


"I do not want to know," Danny said. He resumed his position next to Jax's bed, nodding his thanks to Mia for the newly placed comfortable recliner. He took Jax's hand in his. "Okay, is it time for a nap, or an embarrassing story from Steve's early days in Five-O?"

"Story," Jax said, settling into a more comfortable position.

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Danny realized they'd both drifted off to sleep when a change in the soporific tone of the assorted monitors woke him. Mia was already next to them, her eyes tracking over the readings. She pressed a hand against Jax's lower back as Jax, half-asleep, gave a low moan.

"What's happening?" Danny asked quietly.

"I do believe that was a contraction," Mia said calmly. "Damn."

"She's going into labor?" Danny asked, his voice climbing a register. "Sorry," he whispered, withering under Mia's glare.

"One contraction does not labor make," Mia said. "It may be a Braxton-Hicks, a situation I'm sure you've experienced."

"Oh, yeah, couple false starts," Danny said. "I called them practice runs."

"Good save," Mia said.
Jax stirred, her own whimper waking her.

"Sorry," she whispered automatically.

"You gonna apologize for being human?" Danny asked, rubbing her hand. "What hurts, babe?"

"My back," Jax said. "It feels crampy and wrong. I don't want to do this, Danny."

"What don't you want to do?"

"I don't want to have the babies without Steve," she said.

"He's gonna be back before you know it," Danny said. His words sounded hollow, even to him.

"It's been thirty-six hours," Jax said. "Most successful missions are completed in twenty-four. It's been too long."

Danny sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. A muted melody from "Surfer Girl" sounded from his phone, and he reached for it. He smiled at the text message.

"So," he said, rubbing Jax's hand with a finger, "Mary sent Kono over with a bag of stuff that she said I was too stupid to think to grab for you. Something about a big pillow? You want me to go fetch it from the waiting room?"

Jax smiled and nodded. "Tell them thanks for me, please?"

"You got it, babe," Danny said.

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The flight to Yokosuka caught a tailwind. It made for a ride that was smoother and faster than Steve had dared hope for.

"You hanging tough, Bullfrog?" he asked, ignoring his own pain to crouch in front of his friend.

"Your mom?" Nick asked, groggy from the blessed dose of morphine administered by their very own field surgeon. Catherine was, in fact, a genius, and she was in charge of putting together teams from now on.

"No sign of her," Steve said. "Joe said he's been tracking her, and she left some intel for us to take back to the SAD and Naval Intel. Hard copy. Old school."

"Yeah, she's pretty smokin' for old school," Nick mused, his brain misfiring on pain and narcotics.

"Dude," Steve grimaced. "No."

"Sorry," Nick said. "You check in with Cath? I mean, Lieutenant Rollins?"

"Yeah, I checked in. She was worried about your sorry ass. I may have mentioned that you'd be at Yokosuka for a bit," Steve said. "My bad. Might interfere with your plans for flirting up the Navy nurses."

"Navy nurses are awesome," Nick said. "Wait. What might interfere?"

"Lieutenant Rollins," Steve drawled. "Course, she shows up at Yokosuka, sees your hairy, gnarly ass hanging out of a hospital gown, she might swim back to Pearl."
"She's comin'? Why?" Nick asked.

"Navy's impressed with her, wants her as part of the team overseeing WoFat's incarceration and questioning. Plus, it seems she has a misguided notion that you might be the frog that turned into a prince," Steve teased, smiling down at his friend. "Even if you are a stupid son of a bitch who breaks protocol."

"Whole team agreed," Nick said, closing his eyes. "You made it back, no matter what. We had a plan."

"It was a stupid plan," Steve said. "And it didn't work."

"Noted."

"Commander," the field surgeon interrupted cautiously. "The prisoner is requesting some pain relief."

WoFat was, in fact, moaning and writhing on the floor of the small plane.

"Check his vitals, administer enough pain relief to keep him . . . relatively comfortable," Steve said. "Far be it from me to violate the Geneva Convention." He stood, moving painfully, and stared down at WoFat.

"You'll wish you'd executed me," WoFat said weakly, through gritted teeth.

"Oh, I already wish I'd executed you," Steve said. "I wish I was more like you. I wish I didn't have a conscience. I wish I could have tortured you, let you feel just a little bit of the pain that you've handed out to me and mine, through the Hesse boys, through Novak. You couldn't stand it, could you? Let other people do your dirty work but it just wasn't the same, it just wasn't enough. You had to get your own hands dirty, right?"

The field surgeon was checking his vital signs. "The commander here suspects you might have a compression fracture. I'd try to be still, if I were you."

WoFat stared up at Steve, hatred overcoming his pain for a moment. "That's right," he said, ignoring the doctor. "You can turn me over to the authorities, Captain America, be the guy in the white hat. I'll always be the man who held a knife to the belly of your pregnant wife, felt her shiver when I touched that smooth, soft cheek of hers. I'm in her head, and yours. I've touched your entire family. I've already won."

Before Steve could reply, WoFat was screaming in agony as his hand was crushed under the boot of one of the other SEALs. The sound of a bone breaking reverberated through the suddenly quiet plane cabin.


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The sun was shining and a soft breeze swayed the hammock. Jax was curled in it, content, something supporting her weight perfectly as she dozed. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"Hey," Steve said, smiling at her. She was curled around him, safe, and he was gently rocking the hammock with one foot tossed casually over the side. Gracie was in the background, laughing, and chasing a little blond child up the beach.
"Charles Nolan is running," Jax said. "How much did I miss?"

Fred and Maureen Hart were sitting in the Adirondack chairs, each of them bouncing a baby on their laps.

"You haven't missed anything yet," Steve assured her. "Danny said we would have a happy new year."

"I'm hallucinating," Jax said, a cold chill moving up her spine.

"You're dreaming," Steve corrected her, tenderly stroking her cheek.

"I don't have good dreams," Jax said sadly.

The finger continued to stroke her cheek, and she closed her eyes, trying desperately to hold on to the image of her family, happy and safe. The cold continued to press against her spine, seizing the muscles and making her cry out in pain.

The finger stroking her cheek no longer belonged to Steve, and she forced her eyes open.

"Hello, Jacqueline," WoFat said, his long, smooth finger moving over her skin.

"Jax, come back with us, babe," Danny was saying.

"Don't touch me," Jax gasped, and Danny pulled his hand away from her as if he was scorched.

"You were dreaming," Danny said. "You looked happy, and then you didn't. Hey. You with me? Catherine called."

"Steve?!" Jax asked, instinctively trying to sit up.

"Careful," Mia murmured. "May I help you? You can sit up a bit, if you'll let me adjust your bed and pillows. Is that alright?"

"Yes," Jax said. "Yes, please, Danny, is Steve okay?"

"Steve is okay," Danny said, taking her free hand in his. Mia expertly adjusted bed, pillow, and pregnant person, until Jax was sitting up more comfortably.

"You can sit up for thirty minutes, your blood pressure is stable," Mia murmured. "And I'll get you some coffee. Decaf." She slipped out of the room, giving Danny privacy to fill Jax in on Catherine's call.

"Just hung up the phone. Their mission was successful. Steve's a little beat up, Nick's in rough shape but he's going to be okay," Danny said slowly, giving Jax time to absorb the information. "Catherine is headed to meet up with them, at the Yokosu - Yosudoko - oh, shit, some naval base in Japan. They're almost there, by now, and then it's only a six hour flight from there to Pearl. They'll get Steve out as soon as they can. Probably before Catherine even gets there to process the prisoner."

"Prisoner?" Jax whispered. "WoFat?"

"Yeah, babe. They got him," Danny said. He was suddenly overcome with emotion, thinking of all of the misery and pain inflicted on his friends, his family, by the man.

"WoFat... Steve found WoFat, and WoFat is still alive?" Jax asked, disbelieving.
"He's being held on charges of international war crimes," Danny said. "He's going to be held in maximum security at The Hague. I had to look it up. It's a long, long, long way from here. He can't hurt you again."

"She'll understand, now," Jax said. "Mary. She'll understand why he had to go."

"Of course she will," Danny said.

"I need a pencil and paper," Jax said frantically.

"Okay," Danny said, He started rummaging around the room. "What do you need it for?"

"I was supposed to have some baby names written down," Jax said. "How much time do I have before Steve gets here?"

"Sit still, Commander," the nurse scolded.

Nick grinned at him, loopy, from across the room. His own nurse was a soft, gentle wisp of a thing, her soft blond hair caught up in a barely regulation French braid, her hands cool and gentle on his battered body. Steve had been assigned the nursing equivalent of a drill sergeant.

"Ow," Steve protested, as sergeant nurse expertly slid an IV needle and catheter into the back of his hand.

"Oh please," she said, shaking her closely cropped salt and pepper head at him. "You didn't even feel that."

Steve clamped his mouth shut, sullen and peevish. He hadn't, actually, it was an expertly placed IV. It looked like it would hurt, though, when he saw it go in.

"Lie back," she ordered sharply, and he complied. Finally, she whistled in sympathy as she saw the raw circular burns on his hipbones. "Geez, honey, who'd you piss off? Little closer to center and somebody would have had a major disappointment when you arrive back stateside."

"My wife - ow - might have objected, yes," Steve said. "My pregnant wife, who I've been informed is in the hospital, but no one will give me a damn phone, so I don't know what the hell is going on. Please, there's a plane, and I have to be -"

"I know there's a plane, it takes off from this base, and it's not leaving without you," she said. Four blobs of cold, blessedly numbing gel landed on his skin. "The plane is being fueled, the flight plan is being logged, and a pilot is being secured."

"I have a prisoner to secure," Steve insisted. "I should be -"

"You should be right where you are," a strident voice said.

Steve and every other person in the room snapped to whatever semblance of attention they could achieve. Nick stifled a sharp cry of pain.

"Carry on," the voice said, and then the man was in Steve's field of vision.

"The honor is mine, Commander McGarrett, Commander Taylor," he said. Nick waved, back to looped on narcotics. The admiral smiled. "I wanted to come thank you in person, on behalf of a grateful nation and a more secure global community. The actions of your team will go largely unnoticed, which is of course, as it should be. The least we can do is say thank you. I understand you left a pregnant wife at home to come complete this mission."

"Yes, sir," Steve said. "I've received word from the lieutenant who really deserves a great deal of credit for her work on this mission -"

"Cath? You're talkin' about Cath," Nick said, nodding. "You're a good man, Steve. You always give credit to people. Good man. Good SEAL. Good boyfriend, in your own way, she says. Says enough, makes me a little insecure, to be honest -" His nurse stood, useless and wide-eyed, while Steve's nurse calmly picked up a pillow and placed it over his face.

"Anyway," Steve said hastily, "I've received word that she's in the hospital, sir, and no one seems to know how serious it is or - I need to secure Wo -" he stopped, cleared his throat. Who knew how much of this mission was completely classified. "I need to secure the prisoner, he's injured, but he's not to be trusted, sir, he's extremely dangerous -"

"We understand, Commander," Admiral Panosk said. "The prisoner is already under heavy guard, and not on this hospital ship. He will receive medical care courtesy of the United Nations, stabilized, and held under the highest security protocol established by the Navy, until which point he is turned over to the international courts and held at The Hague."

Steve swallowed hard. "You have him. We have him."

The admiral put a careful hand on Steve's obviously bruised and swollen shoulder. "We have him, son. You've completed the mission. Get patched up, get home to your wife and family."

Steve nodded, the first wave of the inevitable flush of adrenaline from his overstrung system threatening to crash over him. His nurse picked up on it immediately and released a dizzy Nick from his pillow muzzle and swept back to Steve's side. A cup of juice was miraculously in his hand.

"Drink" she said, sternly, and he did.

"Better?" she asked, and he nodded.

She snapped her fingers at an orderly. "Uniform for the commander," she said. "Everything, including skivvies, socks, and boots size . . ." she tilted her head appraisingly at Steve. "Twelve and a half?"

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said meekly. The orderly scurried off.

She picked up a neatly organized bundle which included a towel and some basic toiletries and plunked it down on the gurney next to Steve.

"Soon as he gets back, shower," she said, pointing imperiously to a small locker room. "I'll be here with your paperwork and someone to drive you to the plane when you get out."

Steve stared at her retreating form in amazement as the orderly rushed back, uniform and boots in hand, breathless.

"Wow," Steve said. "She should apply to special forces."

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Jax's hand was shaking so badly that Danny had to hold his phone to her ear.

"Steve?" she said, shaking her head at Danny. "It's a terrible connection, I can't - Steve?!" Her face fell. "Lost the signal," she said.

"He's on his way, though, babe," Danny said, "and soon enough you'll see him in person. If they have to deliver the babies before he gets here, well, we'll just have them all cleaned up and looking pretty for their daddy, right?"

"What do you mean?" Jax said. She sighed as Mia reluctantly lowered the head of the bed to return her to the preferable position on her left side. "We have to give them a bath and stuff?"

"Did you - okay. We have a few hours, at least. Let's see if Mary packed . . . aha! Both books. Let Danno get you up to speed . . ."

Steve shifted uncomfortably in the airplane seat.

"Sorry, sir, they said first available flight," a young lieutenant apologized.

"If it gets me home the fastest, I'd gladly stow away in the cargo hold," Steve assured him. "Hey, do you happen to have a pencil and paper?"

"Sure, sir," he answered, reaching into his neatly organized gear bag.

"Thanks," Steve said, accepting the offered materials. "I've got about six hours to come up with some baby names . . ."

Chapter End Notes

Steve's nurse is probably related to Gus. Or Joe. Who knows, she just showed up. I wasn't going to tell her to leave.
Steve's nurse had grinned wickedly and jabbed a hypodermic into his backside before he left, and he spent a great deal of the flight dozing in a pleasant narcotic haze. Now, though, as the plane made its descent to the landing field at Pearl Hickam, reality - and the accompanying pain - was setting in. The young lieutenant who had provided pencil and paper, winced in sympathy as Steve made an aborted effort to stand.

"Shit," Steve groaned. The muscles of his abused torso had locked into position, and every bruise was screaming for attention.

"Could I help, sir?" the lieutenant asked hesitantly.

Steve sighed. He wasn't going to get off the plane under his own steam, that much was apparent. At his nod, the younger officer offered a firm grip, and between the two of them, Steve managed to get on his feet, panting.

Chin and Kono were waiting for him, just steps from the plane. Kono's hand flew to her mouth at the sight of Steve, bruised and battered, being helped off the plane.

"Catherine didn't relay to Danny that you were totally axed, brah," Kono chided. "We'd have brought Malia."

"I'm just stiff," Steve grunted, but he allowed Chin to wrap a supportive arm across his back as he started limping toward Chin's SUV. "What's going on with Jax? All Catherine said was that Danny had called her, said that Jax had been taken to Tripler. I tried calling from Yokosuka but the signal was shit."

"Her blood pressure went up, and they're having to work hard to keep it under control," Kono explained. "She's okay, but they definitely won't send her home until after the babies are born. We need to stop you in the emergency department on the way in?"

"Nah, I was treated at Yokosuka," Steve said. He climbed, with difficulty, into the passenger seat of the SUV. Chin was firing off a text to Danny while he waited for Steve to get settled. Kono closed Steve's door and popped in the back seat.

Chin navigated them calmly back through the security gate at Pearl. Once outside the base, he reached down and flipped on the lights, and pressed decisively on the gas pedal. Steve looked at him in alarm.

"Danny says hurry," Chin said.

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Jax's room was a flurry of controlled chaos.

Danny sat unmoved in the middle of it all, holding Jax's hand and smiling at her. His free hand smoothed an errant curl away from her face, his thumb rubbing at her jaw, clenched tight in pain.

"Chin and Kono picked Steve up, and they're on their way," he said softly.

"He's okay?" Jax asked anxiously. "Why hasn't anyone told us anything?"
"I'm not sure," Danny answered. "But as long as he's okay, that's all that really matters, yeah? You can sort the rest out later. He's going to be here in time for the babies."

Mia stepped close to Danny, into Jax's field of vision. "We hope he'll be here in time. Jax, your BP is going through the roof. We have to move you into the delivery room now. Danny can walk with us, then watch for Steve and bring him to you when he gets here, okay?"

Jax fought against a wave of panic and nodded. Mia nodded to an orderly who kicked loose the brake on Jax's bed, and they started moving out of the room and toward the end of the hall. Danny kept a firm grip on Jax's hand, and kept up a running litany of soothing nonsense. He reluctantly let go of her hand at the last minute, Mia's hand firm in the center of his chest, blocking his entrance into the procedure room.

"Detective - Danny," she said gently. "You're not scrubbed and gloved. Go, wait for her husband and bring him here. He'll have to scrub and glove up in the first room, and then we'll let him back, okay?"

Danny nodded.

"If he's a fainter, stall," Mia said, winking at him.

"You have no idea, with these two," Danny sighed. He turned and trotted back down the hall toward the waiting room and elevators. He checked his phone, but there was no more word from Chin. "Come on, guys, don't make a liar out of me," he muttered.

The doors opened with a polite ding, depositing a grimly determined Steve on the obstetrics floor, with Kono and Chin on his heels. His own pain and discomfort forgotten, Steve rushed to Danny.

"Danny, what the hell is going on? Where's Jax? Is she okay? Catherine said that you'd called her, told her that you had to bring Jax to Tripler, but connections were shit, and I couldn't - are the babies okay?" Steve demanded, his words tumbling out in a rush.

"Why aren't you in Jax's room?" Kono asked, her eyes wide.

"Right after you guys left to get Steve, her blood pressure shot up again, and they couldn't get it - they're doing the C-section, right now," Danny said. He grabbed Steve, carefully, by what looked like the least injured part of him. "We gotta go, right now, get you down there."

"I'll call Grover, get him to pick Mary up and head over," Chin said. "Go - we'll be in the waiting room."

Steve limped down the hallway, Danny hovering next to him.

"Geez, you look like shit," Danny muttered. "Nick?"

"He'll be okay. Danny, Jax - what -" Steve stopped outside the door. "I shouldn't have left, what -"

"Look, the nurse said it probably would have happened either way," Danny said. "She's felt pretty shitty - headache, really bad. Then contractions which she felt in her lower back. Not fun, but she's okay. She'll be okay, Steve, they just need to deliver the babies so they can pull out all the stops and get her blood pressure under control. Go on, you don't want to miss anything."

With a very gentle shove, Danny pushed Steve into the scrub area of the procedure room. A petite, bright-eyed nurse was waiting with gown and gloves.
"Commander McGarrett," she said, beaming. "They're just started her anesthetic. You familiar with scrub procedures?"

"Yeah," Steve said, craning his neck to see into the next room. He caught a glimpse of Jax, the curve of her back exposed in the opening of her hospital gown. A man in scrubs was bending over her with a huge needle, aimed directly at her spine.

"Commander, scrub up," the nurse prompted, tilting her head toward the sink.

With shaking hands, Steve scrubbed his forearms and hands with the disposable brush provided.

"Don't forget your nails," the nurse reminded him. "I understand that your wife doesn't have a spleen. We're taking extra precautions. Oh my . . . your poor hands, what -"

Steve looked down at his hands. His wrists were severely abraded, his thumb swollen to twice its size and a vivid shade of violet.

"We'll double glove," the nurse said softly.

Steve nodded mutely as the nurse gently patted his arms and hands dry, then held open gloves for him. Next, she helped him into a yellow gown and hair cover, and then slipped booties on over his feet. She hooked a face mask over his mouth, gently securing the elastic behind his ears.

"Well," she said, satisfied with her work. "Go meet your babies."

Steve took a deep breath and pushed into the room. The strong smell of antiseptic tinged his nostrils. His eyes automatically went to the bank of readouts above Jax's head, but it was confusing. One of them, he assumed the one associated with her blood pressure, was beeping insistently and flashing red. He recognized Captain Bluedorn, even with hair cover and mask, and she nodded at him briefly. He thought that he read concern in her eyes. The man with the needle was pointing at Jax's back and murmuring something to Bluedorn. Steve felt his heart stutter.

A nurse was sitting at the head of Jax's bed, her amber eyes looking up to meet Steve's. He could tell she was smiling behind her mask, and she murmured something softly to Jax, holding up a warning finger to keep Jax from moving. She gestured to Steve.

His heart in his throat, Steve went around the head of Jax's bed, and sat down on the stool that the smiling nurse pulled up next to hers. Steve looked down at Jax, terrified. Her cheeks were pale, dark lashes fanned over them, lines of pain around her eyes and mouth.

"Hey, ku'uipo," he murmured. He looked at the nurse, stricken.

"I'm Mia," she said, resting a gloved hand on his forearm. "It's okay, Commander. Everything was stable, and then it wasn't. She's having contractions, and with her blood pressure so high, she has a hellacious headache. But she's okay, and the anesthesiologist will have some relief, very quickly. Hold her hand, it's okay."

Steve carefully took Jax's hand in his and squeezed it gently. She squeezed back, hard.

"We're going to administer a spinal block," Captain Bluedorn said. "It goes to work much faster than an epidural. With any luck, you'll only experience one or two more contractions before it's working completely, and then we'll deliver your babies. You need to hold very, very still, Jax."

"If you look at the needle and pass out, I will kick your ass," Mia murmured quietly, in Steve's ear.
"Yes, ma'am," Steve said automatically.

Jax managed a half smile.

"Jax, you need to breathe," Mia instructed.

Jax shook her head stubbornly. A machine behind Steve's shoulder beeped in protest.

"Your pulse ox says otherwise," Mia said sternly. "You can do this, breathe." She gave Steve a careful kick.

"Would combat breathing be okay?" Steve asked. "We didn't take classes . . ."

"That would be perfect," Mia said.

Steve took both of Jax's hands in his and looked in her eyes. "You can do this," he said quietly. "Just like we always do. Four in . . . hold, good . . . four out . . . there you go, Jax."

Captain Bluedorn looked at them dubiously.

"It's working to keep her calm," Mia said, looking over Steve's head at the doctor. "We don't need to get her through labor, just through the spinal block."

Bluedorn nodded and started to place her hand on Jax's hip. Mia tilted her head a bit, raising her eyebrows.

"Jax, I'd like to stabilize you, while the anesthesiologist administers the spinal, okay?" Bluedorn asked quietly.

Jax nodded, a jerk of her head, scrunching her eyes closed, and the doctor stood behind her, hands braced on her hip and shoulder.

"Okay contraction's over, you're gonna feel a little stick, and a sting," the anesthesiologist explained.

"That's to numb your back, before the spinal," Mia explained.

"Cold," Jax complained.

"Yeah, I know," Mia said softly. "Tell us when it's not cold anymore, okay?"

Jax nodded. She was studying what she could see of Steve's face above the mask.

"You're concussed," she said softly. "Headache?"

"Little bit," he said. She could see his eyes crinkle in a smile. "You?"

"Worst ever," she admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, what are you apologizing for?" he asked, stroking her cheek with a gloved finger.

"Scaring you," she said. "Making a fuss. We had a schedule, a day picked out, and -"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I just want you to be okay, you and the babies. I'm so glad I made it back."

"Nick?" she asked.
"He'll be driving the nurses crazy for a week or so," Steve said, "but he'll be fine. He tried to divert their attention . . ."

"Catherine told me . . . had a plan, for you - you to make it back, no matter what," Jax said. "My back feels really funny."

The anesthesiologist made a couple of gentle pokes to Jax's back, with no response or acknowledgement on her part. Steve dodgedly avoided looking at the huge needle that he picked up off the tray next.

"Go ahead," Captain Bluedorn murmured. "Her contractions are so irregular, if you wait . . ."

Steve heaved a sigh of relief when the anesthesiologist replaced the needle gently on the tray and nodded at the doctor.

"Thank you," Captain Bluedorn said, as he ambled out of the room, shedding his gloves.

"Shit, shit, shit," Jax murmured, grabbing Steve's hands as her face scrunched in pain.

Mia put an expert hand on Jax's belly. "Okay, another contraction. Those babies are definitely ready to come meet the world. The spinal only takes ten minutes to work, just breathe through this one more time, and then you're home free."

Jax nodded, clenching her jaw.

"I know it's pointless to try to tell you to relax or coach you through this," Mia said. "You do need to breathe, in some fashion. It doesn't have to be pretty, just get some oxygen in, okay?" Steve noticed that she was readying an oxygen cannula, out of Jax's field of vision.

"You've got this," Steve said.

"What else, besides the concussion?" Jax demanded. "You're guarding your ribs."

"It doesn't matter," Steve said. "I'm fine, I'm here."

"Later," Jax said. "Later, I want to know - that you're okay -"

"Sure," Steve said. "Later, I'll tell you all - well, not all - I'll tell you what I can."

"Danny told me," Jax whispered. "WoFat. You got him."

Steve nodded slowly.

"He can't hurt the babies, not now," Jax whispered.

Steve wrapped his hands around hers and leaned forward. "He can't hurt anyone, not ever again."

Her eyes filled with tears. "It's over?"

"Yeah, ku'uipo. It's over. No more looking over our shoulders," he said softly.

Captain Bluedorn was running the tip of a ballpoint pen on the bottom of Jax's foot.

"Do you feel that, Jax?" she asked.

"Hmm?" Jax asked absently, her eyes still fixed on Steve.
There was a chuckle, and then careful, gentle hands were positioning Jax on her back. Mia set up a frame and a drape, just above the curve of Jax's belly.

"I wanted to watch," Jax protested.

"Oh, hell to the no," Mia said firmly. "You medics are all the same, and no. Just, no. We'll hold each baby up just as soon as we pull them out, that's as much as you're going to get."

"I can watch, though, right?" Steve asked brightly.

"No, you can't - you people are unbelievable," Mia said. "You're here to support your wife, not earn a field surgery ribbon. Geez." She busied herself with equipment.

"You can peek," Jax whispered to Steve. "And tell me about it later."

 Grover arrived with Mary, and they all huddled in the waiting room. The nurse who helped Steve scrub up popped into the room with an update.

"Things are going okay," she said. "She's had a couple of really miserable contractions, but the spinal should be kicking in any minute, and they'll be able to deliver the babies."

"Her blood pressure?" Danny asked anxiously.

"It's sky high," the nurse said. "But it should resolve, very quickly, once the babies are delivered. They'll continue to give her medicine to bring it down."

"The babies?" Mary asked.

"No sign of distress," the nurse assured them. "They have pediatric nurses standing by, just to be sure. I'll come back and give you an update just as soon as I can."

"You look nervous," Jax whispered. "I can't see anything but your eyes. Your eyes look nervous. Do you have sutures or butterflies on that lac?"

"Sutures," Steve said. "I am nervous." He hazarded a glance over the drape and regretted it immediately. Captain Bluedorn was poised with a scalpel, and for a split second, all he could see was WoFat, with a deadly blade held to Jax.

"Whoa, sailor," Jax said, seeing him pale beneath his face mask.

He closed his eyes and swallowed convulsively.

"Stay with me," Jax murmured. She glanced up at Mia, over Steve's shoulder. "He's not squeamish. . . there was . . . someone threatened me - us - recently, there was a knife -"

Mia's hand wrapped gently around Steve's shoulder. Anyone could see that beneath the surgical garb, he was harboring a multitude of injuries.

"This is not that," Mia said. "Stay with us, Commander. You don't want to miss this, I promise."

Steve shuddered, nodded, and opened his eyes. He forced himself to focus on Jax, to stay present.
"Okay, don't look after all," Jax said. Her face was still lined with pain.

"Does it hurt?" Steve whispered. He stroked her cheek with his gloved hand.

"No . . . feels like . . . a zipper," Jax said. "I still have a killer headache."

"I wish we could dim the lights, but we can't, not in here," Mia said. "But you'll be back in your nice quiet room, with your babies, really soon."

Jax's eyes widened as she felt a strange tugging sensation, and then Captain Bluedorn and another nurse were smiling at them, holding up a squirming, wriggling bundle wrapped in a sterile towel.

"Here's your boy," Captain Bluedorn said softly, angling the baby.

Steve and Jax gaped in amazement as the doctor rubbed the baby's chest. He coughed weakly and sputtered, and then gave a weak cry.

"I know, it was much nicer in there, wasn't it?" Bluedorn murmured, handing the baby off to a waiting nurse. Steve had roughly sorted them into categories, based on their scrubs, and the lemon yellow appeared to be pediatric. Still, his eyes narrowed as his baby was handed off to a stranger.

"We have two newborn specialty pediatric nurses in the room," Mia explained, reading the tension in his shoulders. "They're going to get the babies cleaned up and checked out while we sew Jax up, and then we'll all meet back up again in her room."

The nurse wheeled the baby, now wrapped in a blanket and with a blue cap on his head, up to the head of the bed. Mia nudged Steve a little less gently on his shoulder, and he reached out, awed, and touched the baby's hand.

"He's all covered in goop," Steve said. "But he's kicking and moving . . . that's good, right?"

"Moving is definitely good," Jax said. "Oh, yeah - Danny said they'd have to be cleaned up. I think that's normal."

Mia blinked at them in disbelief.

"They didn't tell us about the classes," Steve said, by way of explanation.

There was a murmur on the other side of the drape, and Captain Bluedorn's head was bent over, the second pediatric nurse hovering alongside her.

"Okay, you've got the babe, do what you do," Bluedorn said calmly, passing off a small bundle to the nurse. "Mia, let's get some pitocin going for mom, yeah? Standard dosage for PPH, add the drip to her IV. Prep for a transfusion, and dial up the mag a milligram."

Steve stood up, ready to take on whatever was threatening his family. He actually fumbled for a nonexistent weapon at his waist.

"Stand down," Mia said firmly. She was moving around Jax's IVs efficiently as she talked. "Captain Bluedorn is a little concerned about Jax's bleeding, so we're adding something to her IV for that, and magnesium to prevent a seizure. Your little girl is being a little reluctant with breathing, she liked it better getting her oxygen through her umbilical cord, so the nurse is going to try to coax her into using her lungs now. We have the situation under control."

"She's too quiet," Jax whispered, looking up at Steve. "I don't think they're supposed to be quiet."
His heart in his throat, he watched as the pediatric nurse held the impossibly tiny bundle in one hand, and rubbed vigorously with the other. She looked up at the other nurse and shook her head slightly. "Oh my God," Steve breathed.

"Let's not have easily misinterpreted non-verbal cues in the room, please," Mia said clearly, shoving a stool expertly into the back of Steve's knees. "Update on the baby girl?"

"Sorry, we're just not getting a good response with the first step," the nurse said quickly. "Suction and oxygen, can you -" she tilted her head toward their little boy, and Mia nodded and pulled his little bassinet closer.

"Hey, little fellow," Mia said, picking him up, squirming. "You get to hang out with mom and dad a couple extra minutes while your sister gets some attention." She placed him gently on Jax's shoulder.

"Excellent, but let's add another milligram of pitocin, thanks," Dr. Bluedorn said. Steve hazarded a glance in her direction. There was gauze - lots of it - most of it saturated with blood.

"We've got this," Mia said. "I know it's terrifying, all of it, but nothing that's happening is terribly unusual. We're still okay. Do you have a name picked out for this little guy yet?" She fiddled with Jax's IV as she talked.

Jax's reached up, tentatively, and stroked the baby's cheek. He nuzzled against her shoulder, brushing his fuzzy cap against her jaw, and yawned.

"Holy shit," Jax whispered. "Just like that."

"Yeah, just like that," Mia said, smiling.

Steve put his hand on the baby's back, marveling at the way his little bottom tucked into the heel of his hand.

"We haven't picked names yet," Steve said. "But we have some ideas. I made a list on the flight back from . . . where I was."

"I wrote some stuff down, too," Jax said.

There was a tiny mewling sound, followed by a sigh of relief from both nurses.

"Okay, she's breathing, looks like she's experiencing a bit of TTN," the nurse said. "We've got her on oxygen, let's get her to the nursery and set up."

"NICU?" Mia asked, holding a hand up to Steve, who was vibrating with anxiety and frustration.

"No, not at this point," the nurse said, smiling. "She just needs some good coaxing, more suction . . . we have better equipment in the nursery."

"Okay, let's give mom and dad a peek, please?" Mia said, raising an eyebrow.

"Quick, but sure," the nurse agreed. She pushed the bassinet over to the head of Jax's bed. "I know it looks scary, seeing your baby with an oxygen cannula, but she's going to be okay. This isn't unusual with C-section babies. They don't experience the labor and delivery squeezes a bunch of fluid out of their lungs, so they need extra help."

Jax couldn't reach the baby, her hand pressed against the clear side of the bassinet. Steve reached over and stroked two fingers over the top of her head, then settled his hand on her back. Her entire
torso fit neatly into the palm of his hand, her knees still pulled up tight underneath her. She made a weak sighing sound.

"Is she in pain?" Steve asked, horrified.

"No, no," the nurse assured him quickly. "She's just figuring it out. Next time you see her, I promise, she's going to be doing better. But we need to go, work on clearing her lungs. We need to get both of them back, check them out properly, okay?"

Jax's eyes filled with tears as the other nurse picked up the infant boy.

"With their permission," Mia said quietly. "Steve, Jax - this is what the babies need right now. Is it okay with you?"

Jax nodded, tears spilling over and tracking down to the pillow.

"Yeah," Steve managed hoarsely. He looked down at Jax, wondered if the panic he saw in her eyes was mirrored in his.

"Wait, no," Jax said, brokenly. "No, someone has to go - Steve, you have to go with them - they can't be alone, I don't know those nurses, anything could happen - you have to go -"

Captain Bluedorn caught Mia and Steve's eye and shook her head, her lips pressed in a thin line of worry.

"I need Steve here to help me with you," Mia said quickly. "Danny. How about Danny goes with the babies? You trust Danny, I know."

Jax nodded, and Mia tilted her head at the young nurse who'd helped Steve scrub in and kept the rest of the team updated.

"I know where he is," she said quickly. "I'll get him, take him to the nursery myself."

Jax nodded mutely, looking after the babies until they were through the door. She looked up at Steve, stricken.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have had a C-section, that's why she's having trouble breathing -"

"Jax, look at me," Mia said, her tone brooking no argument. "That's not how this went down. This wasn't your planned C-section. This was what we had to do, it was best for you and for the babies. None of this is because of anything that you did or didn't do, understand?"

Steve pulled the stool as close as he could to Jax and took her face in his hands. He was vaguely aware of an increased flurry of activity behind him, but he ignored it and focused on Jax's emerald eyes.

"The babies are going to be just fine," he said. "And their Uncle Danny is going to be so proud, he's going to take good care of them."

"He's right," Mia said. "The babies are in excellent hands. Let us take care of you now."

Jax seemed to sag against the bed, the color fading from her skin.

"Someone . . . needs to take care of Steve," she said slowly, tiredly. Her lashes fanned against her cheeks as she blinked slowly.
"Jax, we need you to stay with us," Mia said. "Tell Steve your number one name choice for each of the babies. Hmm? What did you come up with?"

Jax blinked up at them, biting at her lower lip uncertainly. Steve realized that even her lips were pale, losing color, and an all-too-familiar cold dread snaked up his spine.

"Jax," he said, patting her cheek.

"Oh, hell no," Bluedorn said. "Not on my watch." She began barking out a series of orders, which Mia carried out calmly and flawlessly.

Steve slid a hand under Jax's head, cradling it, his gloves catching and tangling in her curls. He reached up and grabbed the mask from his face, flinging it aside, and kissed her tenderly. Her eyes closed, a half smile on her face.

He could see her lips moving, and he bent down, putting his ear close to her mouth.

"They're cute, right?" she whispered. "Even goopy."

"Yeah," he said, his voice strangled around the lump in his throat. "They're freakin' adorable."

She nodded, and then her eyes slipped closed. Her skin was colorless and cold beneath his hand.

"Damn it to hell," Captain Bluedorn snapped. "Mia. Get the anesthesiologist in here, we've lost the window on our spinal. Hang the transfusion. And get the dad the hell out."

Grover wasn't entirely sure that the tiny scrub-clad person who popped into the waiting room looking for Danny was even old enough to be a nurse. But she was urgent, even in her politeness, and request-demanded that Danny Williams come with her, please, to the nursery. Steve and Jax wanted him to be with the babies, and there were issues, and please, just follow her.

Danny rushed off with the nurse, leaving Grover, Mary, Chin and Kono bewildered and concerned.

"Do you think . . . do you think they're okay?" Mary asked, her voice trembling.

"Hey, they wanted Danny to go be with the babies in the nursery," Grover said. "Not the NICU - the nursery. That has to be a good sign."

"You know Steve and Jax, they're a little bit paranoid," Kono said. "They just don't want the babies out of their sight. With strangers. I mean . . . WoFat . . . he may be in custody but . . ." she trailed off, looking to her cousin for his agreement.

Chin's face was troubled.

"What? What do you think is wrong, Chin?" Mary asked, bolting up out of her chair, her fists clenched.

Chin smiled gently, he couldn't help it. She reminded him so much of a young, furious Steve in that moment. "I'm just not sure why they would separate the babies from Steve and Jax. I'm sure there's a good explanation."

The door to the waiting room opened and they all looked up expectantly.

"Steve," Mary gasped, rushing to him and throwing her arms around him. He winced, but wrapped
his arms around her and held on tight.

"Steve, what's happening? The babies okay? How's Jax?" their questions tumbled over each other.

Steve raised red-rimmed eyes and looked at them over Mary's head.

"I - guys, I don't know," he said. "I don't think she's okay."

Kono took his hand in hers. "Who, Steve? Jax or the baby?"

"Both - neither," Steve said. He closed his eyes and rested his head on Mary's. His head hurt, more than he'd remembered, and something seemed wrong, very wrong.

Only Grover's surprising speed and considerable upper body strength kept Steve from crushing Mary beneath him when he collapsed.

The waves of pain that had crashed over and over and over again were receding, and he fought to clear his mind. Something was happening, something important, and no matter how badly he hurt, he couldn't miss it.

Jax.

Jax was having the babies but there was blood, too much blood, even he knew that. He looked down toward the end of the table, he had to convince the doctor to do something, quickly.

WoFat smiled at him, the scalpel dripping blood . . .

"Stand down, Commander," a no nonsense voice demanded. "You're at Tripler, Jax is fine, the babies are fine. Lock it down, sailor."

Steve forced his way back to awareness, focusing on the sharp smell of antiseptic, the tell-tale glare of overhead lights, and the familiar beeping of a cardiac monitor. All strangely reassuring, for someone who despised hospitals.

"Welcome back," Gus said. "You with me?"

"Jax? The babies?" Steve demanded, rubbing a shaky hand over his eyes. He scowled at the IV in the back of his hand, and turned to glare at Gus.

"Oh, don't even with me," she said. "You fainted. Swooned. You needed fluids and some pain meds and - no, stop, it's just regular Tylenol, you can piggyback it with Motrin, no narcotics. We don't want you dropping the tiny McGarretts."

"They're okay? Both of them?" Steve asked. "Jax . . . oh, God, there was so much blood . . ."

Gus put a hand on his shoulder as he struggled to get up. "Everyone's okay," she said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "Captain Bluedorn and Mia are the best, they're the best team in the whole damn department. McGarrett is fine, she's in recovery. I was hoping you'd wake up from your beauty sleep, thought she might appreciate it if you were there when she came around."

Steve nodded, pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes and taking a shaky breath.

"Your IV is about done, I'll cut you loose," Gus said. "Don't want to freak McGarrett out, she's having a rough day. But you're riding in a wheelchair, no arguments. I'm not gonna throw out my
back hauling your ass up off the floor."

Steve fidgeted impatiently while Gus pulled the IV.

"Am I in the emergency department?" he asked, looking around in confusion. It didn't look like the emergency department, and he should know, really.

"Good Lord, no, you're on the obstetrical ward, one of the places I tend to avoid at all costs," Gus complained. "And how I ended up stuck taking care of your fainting spell is beyond me."

"I did not faint," Steve protested. "And I want my clothes back."

"Word got out McGarrett was delivering the babies, my shift ended, I thought, what the hell, I'll go see the little buggers, check on my favorite head case," Gus said, ignoring his protest. She steered him into the wheelchair with a steady hand. "Opened the door to the waiting room just in time to see you keel over, almost on top of your sister. The rest is a history of paperwork the floor nurse is gonna pitch a fit over."

Gus paused the wheelchair at the waiting room and pushed the door open with her clog-clad foot.

"Dehydration, pain, exhaustion, and seeing his wife damn near bleed out on the delivery table," Gus said flatly, as Grover, Chin, Kono, and Mary all looked up. "He's sorted now, I'm taking him to McGarrett. When they get back to her room, I'm sure your patience will be rewarded, and you can see them. And the little spawn. Whatever."

Chin's mouth quirked in an aborted smile. For all of Gus's bluster, there was an unmistakable fondness in her eyes, and the way she maneuvered the wheelchair, with incredible care, spoke volumes. Mary rushed to Steve's side, holding her cell phone out for him to see.

There was a picture of the babies, one little blue fuzzy cap and one pink, swaddled and furious, in side-by-side bassinets.

"They're okay," Steve murmured.

"Danny's been keeping us updated, and they're absolutely fine," Kono said. "Once Jax is out of recovery, Danny says they'll bring the babies to her room. Brah, you gotta get with names, like, seriously."

"We'll get right on that," Steve said. "Been a little busy, you know, with taking down international criminals and such."

"Enough yammering," Gus said. "I'm not even on the clock. Nice to see you, Five-O, Five-O adjacent sibling. Catch you later."

She wheeled Steve down to the far end of the hall, past the delivery room. He caught a glimpse of harried janitorial staff, shaking their heads as they restored order to the room. A shudder went through him, remembering . . .

"Hey, don't spin out on me, sailor," Gus said firmly.

"I'm not, I swear," Steve said. "But shit, Gus, I've seen medevac scenes that weren't as . . . it was bad."

"Probably looked a little worse than it was," Gus said pragmatically. She pushed him through a door, into a quiet, dimly lit room. She held out her fist and he bumped it, smiling at her.
"Thanks, Gus," he said.

"Yeah, whatever, congratulations," she said. "Tell McGarrett I'll see her before she leaves."

Steve recognized Mia, propped in an impossible position on a chair in the corner, dozing. Captain Bluedorn stood up from her chair and approached him, smiling tiredly.

"She's really okay?" Steve said, his voice unsteady. Jax was still pale, but not colorless. She was hooked up to one IV, but nothing else as far as he could tell. He followed the line of the IV up to a bag of clear fluid.

"She's going to be completely fine," Bluedorn assured him. "Sorry I kicked you out so abruptly, Commander. She was losing too much blood, too fast, and her spinal was wearing off. We, ah, may have done a couple of procedures that um, technically should have waited for a surgeon, but . . ."

"Immunity and means," Steve murmured, smiling at her. "Thank you. Whatever you did, thank you."

"Your wife did a great deal to save her own life," Bluedorn said. "Her cardiac and pulmonary systems held up under extreme conditions."


"Well, it showed," Bluedorn said. "I'm going to go get cleaned up and catch a couple hours sleep before my next shift. I'm not superhuman, not like Mia, who we think functions on some sort of hybrid battery or something. Good luck, Commander McGarrett . . . and congratulations."

The door closed quietly behind Captain Bluedorn, and Jax stirred, wincing. Steve stood and went to her side, brushing her hair away from her face. Her cheek was warm beneath his fingers, and he let out a shuddering sigh of relief. Her eyes blinked open and met his.

"The babies?" she whispered. "Steve, the babies . . . our little girl - is -"

"Absolutely fine," Steve said. "Danny's with them, sending pictures and updates to Mary and the rest of the team. They're both fine. Kono's demanding names, soon."

Jax smiled, shaky, and nodded. Her lip trembled and she pressed her hands to her face.

"They're really fine," Steve murmured, gathering her in his arms. "God, you scared me, ku'uipo. But the doc says you're fine, too, says all that swimming made your heart and lungs so strong."

Jax pulled back slightly and touched the fresh bandage over his eye. She noticed his hospital gown and frowned.

"What the hell?" she demanded. "Did you get a CT? What did that son of a bitch -"

"Hey, hey, I'm fine," he said. "Little dehydrated, things went sideways with you and I hit a wall, adrenaline crash, you know how it goes."

She was raking her eyes over him expertly, landing on his abused wrists and hands.

"Steve," she whispered, tracing a finger over the bandages and his swollen thumb.

"Yeah, had to dislocate my thumb," he said. "Brought back memories, of the day we met. You helped save my life, ku'uipo, by making that thumb a little more mobile."
"It's not funny," Jax whispered. "Oh, God, I almost lost you, didn't I?" Her hand cupped around his face.

"Hey, I'm here, we're both okay, the babies are okay . . . that's all that matters," he said, kissing her forehead.

She smiled up at him, then looked past him, smirking.

"Better than the video, right?" Jax asked, tilting her head to look at Mia, who'd woken up and was sitting behind Steve.

He yelped and grabbed at the back of his hospital gown, unspeakably relieved when his hand brushed against the familiar cotton of his boxer briefs.

"Where are your clothes, by the way?" Jax said, smiling up at him again. "How the hell did you end up in a hospital gown?"

"Gus," Steve said faintly. "Pretty sure it was Gus."

"I think . . . I missed a great deal," Jax said, her eyes scrunching in confusion. "At some point, someone's going to have to start at the beginning."

"How about later . . . after we get your family reunited?" Mia asked. "What do you say, the four of you together?"

"I say it's about damn time," Steve said, backing away from Mia awkwardly. "And thank you."

#*#*#*#*#

It took a bit of coordination of effort, but in short order, Jax was settled back in the comfortable bed of her room and Steve - back in his own clothes and compartmentalizing efficiently - was kissing her on the cheek.

"I'll be right back," he said, grinning down at her. "With the babies."

"You're sure you're ready?" Mia asked Jax. "It's okay if you're not."

"I'm really, really ready," Jax said. Steve grinned again and headed out the door, his stride confident and sure.

Mia tilted her head in appreciation at his departure.

"Right?" Jax said, nodding. "Delectable. Really and truly."

"Indeed. Okay, while he's not here to hover and fret - you are going to get up and go to the bathroom. I know. It seems impossibly cruel, but it's important," Mia sighed.

#*#*#*#*

"Danny," Steve said, and found that he couldn't get anything more out.

He didn't need to.

"Steven, so help me God, the all of yous scared the living shit outta me," Danny said. He opened his arms wide and enveloped Steve in a hug.
"I know, Danny, I know," Steve murmured. "Thank you, Danny, thank you for . . . you were here, you were here until I could get here, and . . ."

"Hey, where else would I have been, hunh?" Danny said, patting his shoulder. He pulled back and smiled at him. "You should be holding at least one baby, right this minute."

Steve stood over the bassinets, marveling at the infants. He flexed his hands nervously. They looked so tiny, so fragile, especially the little one, wrapped in pink.

"Oh, God, Danny, she looks -"

"Just like Jax, I know, it's uncanny," Danny said, chuckling. "How's our girl, how's Jax? They sent me down here to the babies, and then next thing I'm getting this frantic text from Mary, how you'd said Jax was in trouble, and then you fainted -"

"For the love of - I did not faint," Steve said. "I passed out, Danny, from dehydration and - and pain, and exhaustion and -"

"Yeah, yeah, you did a very manly passing out, I'm sure," Danny said, hands waving. "Pick her up, goof."

"I'm afraid I'll hurt her Danny," Steve whispered. "She was - she wasn't breathing, I was so afraid -"

"They suctioned the crap outta her lungs, she was good to go," Danny said. "And this little fella, nothing wrong with his lungs, he made that abundantly clear."

"They look pissed," Steve said, finally reaching out and patting their bottoms. "And they're all curled up."

"Well, you spend nine months in a perfectly comfortable, climate controlled, nice quiet environment, and then get yanked out into bright light, noise, and -aww, hey, punkin - a scary vacuum thing going all up in your business, you'd look pissed, too," Danny said. "Though, actually, they look angrier than the average baby. Maybe they both have Jax's temper."

"That's not even funny, Danny," Steve said, his eyes wide.

"Commander McGarrett?" a nurse asked. "You have - ah, yes. The bracelet on your arm has a bar code. I need to scan that, and the babies bracelets, any time you bring them in or out of the nursery."

"Copy," Steve said briskly, holding out his hand. He checked out Danny's wrists. "Where's Danny's bracelet?"

"I - um, he -" the nurse stammered.

"Please provide Detective Williams with a bracelet, so that he can bring the babies in and out," Steve said politely. "Also, my sister Mary McGarrett, will need one as well, please."

The nurse smiled and nodded. "With your permission and a picture ID, I can make that happen." She narrowly avoided saluting. The commander was in civilian clothes and she was in scrubs, but still . . .

"So, let's get these little ones to their mommy, whattaya say?" Danny asked, nudging Steve.

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah . . . wow. Do we - what do we do with them?"

The nurse exchanged an amused glance with Danny. She pointed to cubbies built into the bassinet. "Diapers and wipes are on board, sir," she said. "Due to the delay, with your wife in the recovery
room, they were each given a few ounces of formula. But it shouldn't interfere with nursing -"

"We're bottle feeding," Steve said firmly.

"Even after a delay, there's really -" the nurse started again.

"They've decided to bottle feed," Danny said quietly. "If you'll round up what they need to get started, one of our team will go get more formula, if needed."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," the nurse said quickly. "Let me just stock their bassinets for you." She hurried off and came back with bottles and formula, stashing them efficiently.

"Okay, guys, we're all set," Danny said, cooing at the babies. They waved tightly furled fists in his general direction. "Let's go see mommy."

Steve pushed his infant son's bassinet as if it were unexploded ordnance. Danny walked casually beside him, one hand pushing and one hand resting on the pink swaddled bundle.

"Names, Steven?" Danny said pointedly. "Names would be helpful."

"We haven't - all hell broke loose, Danny, we didn't settle on anything. We'll get on it, I promise," Steve said.

They pushed open the door to Jax's room and went in. She looked up, pale again, and her face lined with pain.

"Jax . . ." Steve murmured, alarmed. "What -"

"Nothing," she said, waving her hand. "I had to get up and pee. It was . . . unpleasant. Oh . . . they're here . . ."

Danny chuckled and slid the bassinet right next to her bed. He bent and kissed her cheek.

"You scared us, babe," he said softly. "Steve most of all. But look, here you are - happy ending, what'd I say, hunh?"

"Thank you, Danny," she said, "for everything."

"Always, kid," Danny said. He smothered a huge yawn.

"Stop it," Mia ordered, smothering one of her own. "Okay. You guys need some serious family time. We're going to leave you to it. You know where the call button is."

Steve looked at Danny, mildly panicked.

"Hey, it's not rocket science," Danny said. "Mia's right. I need sleep. And a shower. You need uninterrupted time with your babies. And please, for the love of God, names."

Danny and Mia slipped out the door and closed it quietly behind them. The room was quiet, save for the vaguely disgruntled noises coming from the bassinets.

"Holy shit," Jax whispered, glancing between Steve and the babies. "Why do they look so mad? Should we hold them? We should hold them."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah, okay."
He rubbed his hands on his pants. He'd handled footballs, hand grenades, bombs. He could handle a squirming infant.

"I'm handing you our little girl, and I'll hold our boy, first," he said. "Then we can switch off?"

"Okay," Jax said. "They're so tiny. Smaller than Charles Nolan."

Steve read off the side of the bassinet as he picked up the tiniest bundle. "She's four pounds fourteen ounces," he marveled, his hand sliding under her easily. He remembered to support her head. Carefully, slowly, he lifted her out and placed her into Jax's waiting arms.

"Wow," Jax said, one finger tracing over the gentle curve of a cheek. "How much does he weigh?"

"Five pounds eleven ounces," Steve whispered, as he picked up their son and cradled him against his chest.

"They're smaller than Pupule," Jax said.

"Both of them, put together, are smaller than Pupule," Steve said. "How are you doing?"

"Awesome," Jax said. "I feel a little high, if I'm being honest."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. He sat down, carefully, propping his hip on the edge of Jax's bed. "So, names . . ."

###

The team was in the cafeteria, having soothed their frazzled nerves with a very decent moco loco, they now lingered over coffee. Mary's phone pinged, and she pulled it out.

"It's Steve," she said, her face lighting up. "He and Jax want us to come see the babies. They're ready to introduce us!"
They made their way as quietly as possible through the hallways - Five-O was no stranger to glares from nurses - until they were outside the door of Jax's room. Mary opened it first, popping her head in the crack. The other four jockeyed behind her, bumping into each other.

"Come in, come in," Steve said, gesturing. To absolutely no one's surprise, he'd managed to fit onto the bed with Jax. He was cradling a miniscule pink bundle in the crook of one elbow, his other arm snuggling Jax close to him.

"Naturals," Grover declared. Jax had the blue bundled tucked onto her shoulder, her small hand fitting neatly around a tiny bottom. "You guys are naturals, look at you."

Kono was snapping pictures on her cell phone and wiping discreetly at her eyes.

"Names, for the love of God, tell us you have names," Danny said, rubbing his hands together.

"We do," Steve said. He cleared his throat. "We settled on naming the babies after our brothers and sister... so, guys, I'd like you to meet Ann Hart McGarrett." He smiled and held the baby toward Mary.

"Me?" Mary whispered. "You named the baby after me?"

"Mary Ann, yeah," Steve said. "And Freddie. Two people with an amazing capacity for love. Here, you can hold her. Surprisingly enough, she doesn't break."

Mary took the baby and nestled her in her arms, swaying gently. "Hi, Annie," she whispered. "I'm your Aunt Mary. Wait, is that okay? Annie?"

"Yeah, we called her Ann for about two minutes, and then it was Annie," Jax said, shrugging. "And this little guy is already Billy, aren't you? Named after two of the kindest, bravest men we know. William Daniel McGarrett, meet your family." She looked up at Danny and smiled.

"It's an honor, Jax," Danny murmured. He kissed her cheek as he picked up the baby, tucking him against his shoulder, his hand covering most of his back.

"They're so tiny," Grover marveled. "I didn't know they came this tiny."

The babies were carefully passed around and snuggled, fingers and toes counted, noses bopped gently with fingertips. Kono was holding Billy when he scrunched up his face and made a wet, gassy sound in his diaper.

"Oh, that's our cue," Kono said, depositing the baby back into Danny's arms. "There's a lot of us in this room, and Steve and Jax, you both look completely axed."

"It's okay," Danny assured Billy, who was furious at the situation in his diaper. "Uncle Danny's not afraid of a little baby poo."

"Kono is right, though," Chin said. "We need to clear out, you guys obviously need to rest. Call us, day or night, anything you need."
"Is it day or night?" Jax asked, blinking. "I've lost track."

"It's time for you to sleep, that's all that matters," Grover said, kissing her on the cheek. He shook Steve's hand carefully, a dark look passing through his eyes at the injuries not quite hidden by the bandages. He looked at Steve. "Like Chin said - anything, anytime. You need to talk . . . that cafeteria keeps coffee going twenty-four seven."

"Thanks, Lou," Steve said. "Thanks."

Chin kissed Jax and gave Steve's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry about a thing, just concentrate on your family. We've got things well in hand at the office, and Mary allowed us to send aunties over to help her take care of things at the house. They've said that no other new parents will ever come home to such comfort."

Mary flushed with pride at Chin's words.

"Thank you," Jax said. "I didn't have any idea . . . ."

"And that's why Mary came," Kono said, hugging Mary first and then Jax. "But when the babies are ready to surf, I'm your girl."

"Infants can learn to swim," Steve said excitedly. "I read about it -"

"Amazing," Danny grumbled. "Did you read about changing diapers? Because this is a situation here."

Grover, Chin, and Kono laughed as they slipped out of the room.

"Well?" Danny asked, looking back at Steve.

"Might need you to talk me through it the first time," Steve admitted. He carefully eased out of the bed, kissing Jax on the temple as she winced. "You need pain relief?"

She waved him off. "Want to see how these tiny diapers work, it can wait."

Under Danny's watchful eye, Steve changed Billy's diaper without incident. When it was Annie's turn, though, his hands were shaking.

"She's just so tiny," Steve whispered. "How am I not hurting her? I feel like I'm hurting her. She's crying."

Jax carefully got out of bed and padded over to the bassinet. Her small hands handled the diaper more easily, and Danny showed her how to swaddle the tiny, squirming form. By this time, both babies were fussing, smacking their tiny fists helplessly against their faces.

"They're hungry," Mary prompted. "I know how these bottles work, the Millers used these the whole time I babysat for them." She expertly assembled a plastic lined bottle and filled it with formula, then watched as Steve and Jax repeated the process with a second bottle.

"Nothing to it," Danny assured them. "You've given Charlie plenty of bottles. Same procedure, just . . . smaller. Why don't Mary and I go grab you guys some food, while you feed our namesakes?"

"I - I'm actually starving," Jax said, surprised. Steve nodded in agreement, and Danny and Mary slipped out of the room.

"Okay, how do - which one -" Jax stopped and looked up at Steve. "Your hands are - and I'm -"
"We can do this," Steve said. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Okay, we're going to get you comfortable and I'll hand you Annie and her bottle. Then I'll pick up Billy, and his bottle, and sit in the chair. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Jax said, nodding. She sat on the edge of the bed, wincing as she tried to swing her legs up.

"I've got you," Steve murmured. He slipped a hand behind her knees and helped her get settled, wincing a bit himself.

"Geez, we're a pair," Jax said. She reached up and stroked gentle fingers across his bruised jaw.

He captured her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Yeah, we are. Okay. One little tiny Annie Hart coming up." He picked Annie up and handed her carefully to Jax, making sure they were settled.

"It's working," Jax whispered. "She's - look, her little fingers are stretching out. She's making starfish fingers, like Pupule makes starfish paws."

Steve grinned and picked up Billy, who was working up to a full-blown fuss. He settled into the chair with him, and soon the fussing settled into contented slurping.

"Holy shit, we have babies," Jax whispered. "And they're wearing clean diapers and eating and . . ."

"We did have some help," Steve said.

"Yeah, but still. It's just our first day and we're pretty beat up," Jax pointed out. "I think, all things considered, we're pretty badass."

Danny and Mary had quietly deposited wrapped sandwiches and fruit and tiptoed back out, not willing to risk interrupting the precious first bottles. Each had waved their cell phones, indicating that they were heading home. Both babies had been fed, and burped. Their diapers were clean. But the fussing was getting impressive. Even Annie's tiny mewls were increasing in volume.

"We could call the nurse," Steve said reluctantly. He cradled Annie against his chest with one hand, and leaned over Jax, holding the furiously squirming Billy, to press the call button. He felt Annie give a little hiccup and sigh. Jax looked down as Billy settled into a shaky, shuddering whimper.

"Do you think . . ." Jax said, looking up at Steve.

"I'm thinking, yeah . . . " he said. He stood up and backed a couple of steps away from Jax. Annie's face scrunched up.

"Of course," Jax murmured, looking down as Billy wound up for another squall. "You're worried about Annie, aren't you, why she's so far away."

"Here, let me -" Steve said, cautiously lowering Annie down to snuggle next to Billy on Jax's chest, her tiny head tucked under Jax's chin, close to Billy's head resting on Jax's shoulder. They watched in amazement as the little faces smoothed into contentment, and both babies drifted off to sleep.

Steve slipped onto the bed next to Jax, one hand resting over the babies. He cradled her head with his other hand, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple. She closed her eyes and leaned into him.

He hadn't realized that he'd drifted off to sleep until a soft knock at the door woke him up. He
glanced down to see Jax soundly asleep.

"Hey," he said quietly, "come on in."

The door opened carefully, and a nurse appeared. "Looks like you guys are rocking it, for first time parents. Of twins, no less."

"We are figuring it out as we go along," Steve said.

Jax stirred, and blinked sleepily. "Oh. What'd I miss?" she asked.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you," the nurse said. "But you're way overdue for your pain medication. Can you tell me, on a scale of one to ten, what's your pain level?"

Jax shrugged. "It's okay, I've had worse."

The nurse dimpled in a smile. "Mia said that you would say that, and she said to make sure you understand that is not the point. So. Number?"

"About a seven," Jax mumbled.

"Shit, Jax," Steve murmured. "I should have called for the nurse when we were doing the diapers. I knew you were hurting . . ."

"Let's try not to let the pain get above a four," the nurse suggested. She flipped through Jax's chart. "Mia brought my attention to a very specific drug protocol that was prescribed for you on a previous visit to Tripler. We'd like to use that tonight."

"It knocks me out," Jax said, shaking her head.

"And the problem with that would be?" the nurse asked. She put a hand on her hip.

"The babies might need me," Jax said. Steve recognized the stubborn set to her jaw.

"You're not nursing," the nurse pointed out. "So, we can let them sleep all night in the nursery. I assure you, we're great at diaper changes and bottles."

Steve started to protest, but the nurse interrupted him with an upraised finger, which she then pointed at his wrists and various visible bruises.

"She has a point," Jax said.

"She didn't even say anything," Steve grumbled.

"Think of it in terms of putting your own oxygen masks on first," the nurse said. "You need to take care of yourselves so you can take these babies home. Commander, I know that where you've been and what you've been doing is classified, and above my paygrade. But it doesn't take an intelligence officer to suss out that you're injured, and exhausted. And Jax . . . a C-section is major surgery, without twins, and without complications. Please. Let us take the babies for the night, and you two take some time for each other, and some solid sleep."

Steve tucked Jax's hair away from her face. She was pale, her face drawn with pain, dark circles smudged under her eyes.

"I think she's right," he said quietly.
"Sleep deprivation is no joke," the nurse added softly.

Jax's eyes widened, and Steve nodded. "Yeah, we know," he said. He brushed the back of his finger over Jax's cheek. "They can come get me if the babies need one of us."

"Okay," Jax whispered. She kissed the tops of the babies' heads and let Steve pick them up and nestle them together in one bassinet. They each yawned adorably and batted a fist aimlessly in the air.

"I will get the babies settled, and I'm sending a nurse back to check your dressing and set up another round of IV antibiotics. We aren't taking any chances with you, given your previous splenectomy," the nurse explained. "Oh, and you should definitely eat something. I could send for - oh, I see your friends have taken care of that."

"Sandwiches," Jax said.

"If it sounds good to you and doesn't upset your stomach, go for it," the nurse said. "If it's too heavy, let me know. I can bring applesauce and jello. Okay, little ones, let's give mommy and daddy some rest, shall we?"

The room was quiet - too quiet - after the nurse left. Steve pulled the tray table to Jax's bed and set out the sandwiches and cups of juice, then propped his hip on the bed and looked at Jax.

"You feel like eating?" he asked. His own stomach was growling.

Jax took a generous sip of apple juice and then nodded. "Yeah. Our blood sugar is probably all over the place." She started with a small bite of the sandwich.

Steve's sandwich disappeared quickly. Jax laughed and pushed half of hers toward him. "Here, I can't eat all of mine. I'm the patient, I can get applesauce and jello if I get hungry."

Steve grinned and lifted the sandwich, taking another generous bite. Her eyes fell on the thick white bandages around his wrist, which still didn't hide the swelling and bruising around his thumb.

"What else?" she asked softly.

"Hmm?" he mumbled, mid-bite.

"Where else are you hurt?" she asked. "Concussion, blunt force laceration over your eye. Swelling and bruising on your jaw. Wrist and hands ... what, abrasions? Restraints? You're guarding your ribs, I can see it in the way you move."

"Jax, I'm okay," he said. "I'll grab a Motrin, I'll be fine. They're being extra cautious where I have a little broken skin, that's all, because you just had surgery." He thought of Nick, goading and provoking their captors, trying to protect him. He couldn't meet Jax's eyes.

"Don't," Jax whispered. "Please don't shut me out. I have no idea what went on, what happened -"

"Hey, there's time for that later," he said. "The important thing is, I'm back, and we aren't looking over our shoulder for WoFat. The rest is paperwork. The international community is dealing with WoFat. It's over."

She reached up and cupped his battered jaw. "Is it?" she asked softly. "Is that how it works?"

"Well, in theory," he said, smiling ruefully.
A soft knock interrupted them, and another nurse appeared.

"Sorry, believe it or not, this is us actually trying to give you guys some privacy," she said. "I'm Katie, your night nurse. I'm going to check your incision, and then set you up with some long overdue pain medication. How about a trip to the bathroom first?"

"Can I take a shower?" Jax asked. She eased out of the bed gingerly and started shuffling toward the bathroom.

"No, not until morning," the nurse apologized. "You're going to be more wobbly than you realize. But you can wash up, brush your teeth, whatever you want, just as long as one of us is close by. I can come back in -"

"I won't be but a couple of minutes," Jax said. "Pretty low maintenance. Would you mind - I don't have my penlight . . . his concussion . . ."

"Jax," Steve protested, but Jax cheerfully closed the bathroom door in his face.

"She's likely equal parts concerned about you and wanting a little privacy," the nurse said. She pulled a penlight out of her pocket and gestured to the chair. "We'll listen for her, we're right here if she needs us. How are you holding up, Commander? Scuttlebutt is you barely made it back from a mission in time for your babies."

"I'm fine," Steve said, even as he winced in pain at the light in his eyes.

"Ummhmm," the nurse said, dubious. "I'm really glad that you all took us up on the suggestion to let the babies sleep in the nursery. I know, they're so cute and you're so excited, but both of you look in pretty rough shape."

"I'm fine," Steve repeated.

"Well. You're not, but you're here, and I know your family is very happy about that. You need Motrin?" she asked.

"I'm sure there's plenty in his bag," Jax said, hobbling out of the bathroom. "Steve, your sister - she packed up the most amazing bags for us, we have everything we need."

Steve rushed to Jax, ready to scoop her up into his arms despite his still aching shoulders.

"Don't let her trip, but do let her walk," the nurse said. "It seems cruel but it's important for you to be up and moving around."

"Yeah, not my first rodeo," Jax panted, nodding. "Although walk seems a generous description."

"In the morning, you can walk down to the nursery," the nurse said.

"And take a shower," Jax reminded her, as Steve helped her back into the bed. "But you can take a shower, if you want, while the nurse checks my incision. Mary sent your bag. And take some Motrin."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Let her fuss over you," the nurse laughed. "Looks like someone needs to. Go ahead, I'm right here, she's in good hands."

Steve grabbed his bag from the tidy closet and headed into the bathroom.
The nurse scrubbed her hands and pulled over the tray with the supplies for a dressing change. Jax closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the pillow.

"Let the pain get away from you?" the nurse asked sympathetically.

"Yeah, I was really feeling it, but then, the babies pooped, and then they were hungry, and then they were pissed off because they were separated and . . ." Jax shrugged.

"Let's get drugs going first, then, before -"

"No, please, go ahead and do this," Jax said. She glanced at the closed bathroom door.

"You're reluctant to let him see the incision," the nurse said quietly.

Jax shrugged. "I've had a lot worse. He's seen a lot worse."

"An interesting point, but you didn't disagree with me," the nurse said.

Jax shrugged again, looking away as the nurse carefully lifted up her gown and tended to the incision.

"It's a very small incision," the nurse said. "There won't be much of a scar at all. Not like - I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

"Rebar," Jax said. "And then wood fragment. And it's not rude, no worries."

The nurse snapped off her gloves and tossed them, along with the old bandage, into the red hazardous waste bin. She started to say something more to Jax, but Steve was exiting the bathroom.

"Everything okay?" he asked, reading the tension in Jax's face. He stowed his bag back in the closet and came to stand next to her, brushing a big hand gently over her curls.

"Hate to admit it, but I'm really looking forward to that pain relief," Jax said quietly. She fidgeted with the sheet.

The nurse nodded and made a note in the chart. "I'll be right back with that," she said, and slipped out the door.

"Jax, what's wrong?" Steve murmured, bending and kissing her cheek. "What's -"

"I just really let the pain get ahead of me," she said, "and I'm so tired."

"Of course you are," he said. "Big day." He smiled down at her.

"You're going to sleep, too, right?" she asked anxiously. "Or should we take shifts?"

"I think it's safe for both of us to sleep," he said.

"The nursery, it's secure?" Jax asked.

"Very," he assured her. "Danny checked it out, and I did too."

The nurse slipped back into the room with a new IV bag and Jax's pain medication.

"Your babies, and you, are very safe," she said, as she set up the IV and expertly added the additional drugs. "All of the same vetting processes and protocols as the emergency department, plus
extra security for the nursery. You are in good hands, and you really, really need to sleep."

"Won't have any choice," Jax mumbled. "Not with that stuff."

The nurse dimmed the lights as she slipped out of the room. "You have a call button, I expect you to use it, Commander, if anything seems the slightest bit of concern to you. Understood?"

Jax sighed and shifted, wincing as she tried to get comfortable.

"What can I do?" Steve asked quietly. "Need another pillow? The bed adjusted?"

"I'm not sure," Jax said. She felt shaky and wrong, and everything hurt.

He eased a hip onto the bed, careful not to jostle her, and took her hand in his.

"I think maybe they put me back together wrong," she blurted. "Everything feels weird. I didn't expect it to hurt this much."

He wrapped her carefully in his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, ku'uipo," he whispered. He felt her hands fist in his shirt as she fought for control. "Hey, I've got you. You're amazing, you know that? There's nothing to prove here, Jax. It's okay. I've got you."

She tucked her face into his neck and he held her until he felt her relax slightly.

"Drugs kicking in?" he murmured.

"Hmm," she sighed. He eased her back onto the pillows and lowered the head of the bed slightly. "Feet are cold," she mumbled.

He rummaged in the well-stocked bag that Mary had prepared, and came up with a pair of fuzzy socks. She sighed in contentment as he slipped them on her feet, and he smiled. Her eyes drifted closed, but her hand patted absently at the mattress next to her.

"Don't go away," she said.

"I better sleep in the chair," he said, tucking the blanket around her. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I don' want . . . wake up, not know where . . ." she said. She was drifting, but her hand moved restlessly toward him.

He carefully shifted her a bit further to one side and slipped in next to her. She instinctively curled toward him, and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, holding her.

"Annie and Billy . . . they know, right . . . nurses," she mumbled. "Together, right?"

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "They know to keep them together. Shh, sleep, Jax, I've got you. The babies are fine."

"Don't leave," she whispered.

"I'm not leaving," he promised. "I'm right here. I'm right here, Jax. I'm home."

Chapter End Notes
Well. This was about the point at which I realized I'd written myself into a bit of a
corner, and I will admit that from this point to the end (which is, I predict, within about
ten chapters? I think? At the time of posting I'm not *quite* finished) I'm writing more
to fulfill promises and respond to reader requests and less out of inspiration. Apparently,
my muse doesn't take kindly to writing happy endings.
Warning for non-graphic mention of post-partum realities.

Jax was barely awake but keenly aware of three things: the urgent need to go to the bathroom, the unrelenting pain low in her abdomen, and the smell of coffee. She desperately wanted the coffee, but it would have to wait until after the trip to the bathroom, which seemed daunting, given the situation with the pain.

Steve stood next to the bed, holding the cup of coffee in one hand and brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheek with the other.

"Coffee?" Jax croaked out, her voice gravely with sleep.

"Yeah, your favorite Kona," Steve said, smiling down at her. Thanks to the pain medication, she'd not only slept through the night, but through his shower and brief conversation with the team just outside the door to her room. "Kono brought it for you."

"Bathroom," she mumbled, trying to summon the strength to force herself up.

Steve pressed the controls and angled the head of her bed up, slowly. She winced and pressed a hand to her belly, wincing more as she brushed against the incision.

"Shit," she hissed out between gritted teeth.

"I'll get a nurse," Steve said. He reached for the call button, but her small hand on his stopped him.

"No, I'm supposed to get up and move around," she said. "I'll be okay. I'm just stiff from sleeping so long." She used her elbows to push herself awkwardly out of the bed and then shuffled toward the bathroom.

"Your bag is -" Steve paused as she unceremoniously shut the door in his face. "On the counter," he finished quietly, shaking his head. He stood by the door, ready to take action if she fell. Aside from some mumbled cursing, all of the sounds seemed routine.

"Really want a shower," Jax said, coming out of the bathroom a few minutes later. "But first, coffee?"

Steve chuckled and wrapped a hand around her elbow, steering her toward the bed.

"I want to sit in the chair," she said. "Please, I'm so tired of being in bed."

"Seems reasonable," he said. He deposited her in the chair and handed her the cup of coffee with a flourish.

Jax wrapped her hands around the cup and inhaled the aroma, sighing happily. She took a sip and closed her eyes.
"That good?" Steve asked, smirking. "Do I need to give you a moment?"

"Possibly," Jax said. "Do we need to go get Annie and Billy from the nursery?"

"In a few minutes," Steve said. "The nurses are giving them a bath and a diaper change. They said that seriously, we needed to let them do all the heavy lifting right now, and until you're discharged, all we need to do is feed the babies and hold them. That way you'll heal faster and be stronger when you get home."

"I want to go home today," Jax said.

"Yeah . . . they said three or four days," Steve said.

"Seems so unnecessary," Jax grumbled.

"About twenty-four hours ago, I got kicked out of the delivery room while your doctor and nurse fought to keep you from bleeding to death," he said quietly. "I don't think spending a few days here is unnecessary."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "I'm a little homesick, though."

"I'm sorry, ku'uipo," he said. His eyes lit up and he went to the closet, emerging with her favorite quilt in his hands. "Mary really did think of everything. Does this help?"

She smiled as he spread the quilt on the bed, but her expression turned solemn as she realized he was moving with obvious pain and stiffness.

"Steve," she whispered. "How bad?"

He stilled his movements, hands smoothly absently over the quilt, not looking at her.

"Not as bad as Nick," he said quietly. She could read it in the slump of his shoulders, the guilt and frustration.

"You would have done the same," she said. "He just beat you to it this time. Come 'ere."

He took the few steps toward her as she gingerly levered herself to her feet. His arms went around her, tight, trying not to hurt her but unable to stop himself from clutching at her, one hand tangling in her hair and cradling her head against his chest. He felt her small hands move in soft, soothing strokes over his ribs, around his back-

"You're checking for broken ribs," he mumbled, his face buried in her hair.

"And swelling over your kidneys," she said.

"I thought we were having a nice moment," he protested.

"A nice moment and a quick check for broken ribs and possible signs of late-presenting internal injuries are not mutually exclusive concepts," she said.

He chuckled, the grip of tension that had been squeezing at his heart since he was sent on the mission starting to loosen, just a bit.

"Fair enough," he said. "Want to go see the babies get their bath?"

"Can I bring my coffee?"
"This is the most I've seen of you in months," Rachel teased, smiling at Danny over the rim of her tea cup.

"It's because both Steve and Jax are safely detained at the hospital," Danny said. He signed the homework page that Gracie had neatly placed next to the coffee maker as a reminder. "I'm sorry, babe."

"This man . . . he was behind so much of everything, yes? The men who tried to make you think you'd killed that child, the attempt on the governor's life . . . all of the horrible things that have happened to Steve and Jax?" Rachel asked.

"Directly or indirectly, yeah, much of it's connected," Danny said.

"And Steve . . . let him live?" Rachel asked quietly, a careful glance to ensure that Grace was out of earshot.

"I know," Danny said. "Steve . . . I have no doubt he wanted to, I have no doubt he was capable. But at the end of the day, his training is going to take over and . . . he has lines that he doesn't cross. That's what makes him, God help us all, one of the good guys. That's what makes him a Navy SEAL instead of a mercenary."

"But it's over?" Rachel asked.

"It's over. Steve's going to come into the office today to brief us, but yeah," Danny said. He filled his travel mug with coffee. "WoFat has been turned over to the International Criminal Court. The Hague. He's in the Netherlands, babe, and he's not going to be able to hurt them, or anyone else, again."

"They smell good," Steve whispered. They'd arrived at the nursery just in time to help with the bathing process. Aside from Steve's alarm at the umbilical stumps, it went well, and now the babies were in clean, fresh diapers and onesies. A second comfortable chair had been placed in Jax's room, and they each had a baby and a bottle.

"They weren't impressed with getting scrubbed up," Jax said, lightly stroking Billy's cheek with her finger.

"They'll like it better when we can put them all the way in the water," Steve said confidently. He gently placed Annie on his shoulder and tapped her back with two fingers, and was rewarded with a surprisingly loud burp.

"Nice one," Jax said. She repeated a similar process with Billy.

"Now what?" Steve whispered, craning his neck around to look at Annie. Her eyes were unfocused, and she was blinking slowly.

"I think they're sleepy," Jax said. Billy was snuffling against her collarbone.

"Let me put her down and then I'll get him," Steve said. He stood up carefully and placed Annie in the bassinet, then retrieved Billy and snuggled him next to her. The infants squirmed, then settled.

"It almost seems too easy," Jax said. "Did we forget something?"
"Bath, diaper, bottle . . . no, I think that's it," Steve said. "But the nurse said that as tiny as they are, they're probably going to want to eat constantly."

"Shower," Jax said emphatically. "If I don't have much of a window, I want my shower. The nurse promised . . ."

"Okay, what can I do to -"

"Watch the babies," Jax said quickly. "I'm fine."

She made her way into the bathroom, shuffling a bit, and closed the door behind her. Steve heard a soft knock on the door to the hallway. He opened it to a smiling Danny.

"Hey, buddy," Steve whispered. "Come on in."

Danny slipped into the room and glanced around, his eyes falling on the sleeping babies.

"Nice work," he murmured, peering down at them.

"Bath, booty, bottle," Steve said, shrugging. "You were right. It's not rocket science."

"Jax?" Danny asked.

"She's in the shower," Steve said.

"Wait, what's with - what's that face?" Danny demanded. He put a hand on Steve's shoulder and looked at him intently.

"What? I don't have a face, Danny," Steve said.

"You, my friend, have a face," Danny insisted. "Hurt and Worried face. What?"

Steve sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "She . . . she won't let me anywhere near her, Danny."

"Yeah, well, I warned you about that," Danny said, smiling.

"It's not that, it's . . . you know we both have excellent training, we've always checked dressings and sutures and -"

"Convenient, saves you practically living in the doctor's office," Danny said. "Plus we all think you both have a not-so-secret scar fetish. But go on."

"She waited until I was out of the room and let the nurse change her dressing last night," Steve said. "It's just - I don't understand. What happens when we get home? She's never shut me off like this before, it's just . . . it's different."

Danny thought for a moment, chewing on his lip.

"Well . . . maybe that's just it," he said, finally. "It's just different. This wasn't an injury, this was delivering the babies. It's new territory, for both of you. What did she say when you asked her about it?"

Steve pulled another, more familiar, face.

"Ah. You've not talked to her," Danny chided. "Steven."
"Okay, okay," Steve muttered.

"Yes, okay," Danny said. "So, how'd it go last night?"

"Jax slept well, thanks to the drugs," Steve said. "We left the babies in the nursery, but the nurses said they did great."

"Good, good," Danny said. "Steve, you gotta take care of yourselves, you and Jax. That was a good call. One baby, under ideal circumstances, creates a zombie situation. Two babies, after everything you guys have been through? I can't imagine. You're going to need help. Probably even more than just Mary. This thing where the two of them are sleeping at the same time? It's beautiful, but I gotta tell you, I'm not sure you can count on it."

"I know," Steve sighed. "The Harts are coming, when Jax and the babies come home. And it's great, I appreciate it but at the same time . . ."

"You want your life back," Danny said.

Steve looked up at him, surprised.

"Hey, I get it," Danny said. "You don't need to apologize for feeling that way. Just - okay, so remember, Jax wants to get her life back and she also wants to get her body back. So, you know. If she's acting a little weird, just . . . that's probably why."

Steve nodded slowly, their conversation interrupted when his phone buzzed. He took the call.

"Governor Jameson," he said. Danny waited as there was a long pause. "Yes, ma'am, thank you," Steve said. Another long pause. "I understand, ma'am, but there are many reasons why that would be counter productive, not only for the task force, but for the global intelligence community. Yes, ma'am, I'd be happy to."

Steve sighed as he hung up the phone. "Looks like I'll be meeting with the governor before I come in to the office today. She's confused as to why 'Hawaii's Five-O Instrumental in Capture of International Arms Dealer' isn't today's headline."

"Oy. Well. At the end of the day, she is a politician," Danny said.

"A politician who's going to have a hard time getting re-elected, once word gets out that she had a murdering sex-trafficker as her lieutenant governor," Jax said, coming out of the bathroom as Danny spoke. Her voice was hard, with a brittle edge that belied the gentle wave of her damp curls and her soft, worn gym shorts and the beloved Annapolis t-shirt.

"Hey, look, civvies," Danny said, smiling at her. "Not that the hospital gown wasn't a good look on you."

She managed a forced, half-hearted smile.

"Jax," Steve said. "It's okay. I've got this. I'll smooth things over with the governor. You okay? You're hurting."

It wasn't a question, and she didn't bother to argue. He was at her side in two long steps, hands around her shoulders, guiding her toward the bed. Danny pressed the call button for the nurse while Steve tucked Jax in.

"So, meds before shower next time, yeah?" Steve murmured, brushing a kiss against her temple.
"It's not that bad," she said.

"Maybe not relative to rebar or shrapnel," Steve said, "but pain is pain, ku'uipo, and there's no reason for you to tough it out."

"I hate this," she muttered. "I want to go home."

Steve sighed and cupped her face in his hand. "Soon, okay?"

There was a knock at the door, and Danny opened it to allow the nurse to come in. She had a tiny paper cup in her hand, which she held out to Jax. Danny poured a cup of water and put it on the tray table.

"What is it?" Jax asked, eyeing the contents of the paper cup.

"Tylenol three. Standard post-section pain management," the nurse said. "And you should have taken it almost an hour ago."

"I don't do well with narcotics," Jax said. She was trying to keep her voice polite and calm, but Steve could see her hand fisting in the quilt. "Could I please just have regular Tylenol?"

"For post-operative pain?" the nurse retorted. She was a bit exasperated. "Your chart has you as having taken narcotics last night. I'm not sure what the problem is."

"It's a specific protocol, and it didn't include codeine," Jax said.

"If codeine makes you sick, it should be noted in your chart," the nurse said, grabbing the chart from the foot of the bed.

"It's not that it makes me sick," Jax started. Steve could see tears of pain and frustration in her eyes. He'd had enough.

"May I speak with you in the hallway, please?" he said tersely, addressing the nurse. He nodded at Danny, confident that he could calm Jax.

Danny acknowledged Steve's nod with one of his own, and slipped onto the stool next to Jax's bed. He took her hand in his as Steve followed the nurse into the hallway.

"Hey, babe," Danny said, squeezing her hand. "Talk to me."

"I'm fine, Danny," Jax said.

"If you asked Rachel what she remembers most about bringing babies home from the hospital, it would be the haze of sleep deprivation, painkillers, and irrational crying," Danny said. "Maybe we should have warned you. In fairness, it was in the books."

"I thought they were exaggerating," Jax said. "I have a very high tolerance for pain. I didn't think I would feel -"

"How do you feel, Jax?" Danny asked.

"Terrible," Jax whispered. "I can deal with the pain, but -"

"What? What is it?" Danny prompted.

"Everything feels all shifted around, and I still look pregnant, and there's... even though I had a c-"
section there's a lot of blood, and stuff, and - don't tell Steve," Jax said, her words tumbling out in a rush. She hiccuped back a sob.

"Oh, babe," Danny sighed. He wrapped his arms around her in a gentle hug. "Oh, honey, all of that is normal. It will go away, in about six weeks."

"Holy shit, I'm going to be like this for six weeks?" Jax sobbed.

"No, no, listen - you'll get steadily better and better, until about six weeks from now you'll feel almost back to normal," Danny said.

"Danny, everything looks awful," she whispered. "Not just the incision, it - everything. I used the cream, just like Rachel said, and I'm sure it helped - oh God, it could have been worse, that's terrifying -"

"Stop, stop." Danny said. "Jax, it's okay. This is normal. Rachael went through the same thing. Twice. You're young, healthy, in fantastic shape . . . everything will be fine, you'll see."

They could hear raised voices in the hallway.

"Uh oh," Jax said, wiping at her eyes. "Go look. Tell me everything."

Danny opened the door a crack and peeked out.

"Steve is looming over that nurse," Danny whispered. "It's like he's trying to intimidate the suspect. All that's missing is those funky halogen lights and it would look just like rendition."

"Was I being a bitch?" Jax asked. Her voice was still shaky.

"Absolutely not," Danny said. "She wasn't paying attention to what you were trying to say. Oh, wait - oh, here comes your nurse, Mia. Damn, she made me." Danny waved sheepishly at Mia and closed the door.

"I don't know how you made detective," Jax said, shaking her head. "You're not very subtle."

#*#*#*#*#

"What seems to be the problem?" Mia said, folding her arms and staring at Steve and the other nurse.

"The mom is being difficult about meds," the nurse said.

Steve shook his head and looked at Mia. "She doesn't want to take codeine," he said. "She has problems with most narcotics."

"She took plenty of them last night," the nurse muttered.

Mia put herself physically between Steve and the nurse. "Unless you want to experience the wrath of a special forces operator, new father, and protective husband fresh back from a mission," she said quietly, "you will stand down and change your tone."

The nurse took a step back. Mia held out her hand and the nurse handed her Jax's chart.

"She did well last night?" Mia asked, flipping through it.

"Did great," Steve said. "She slept through the night, no problems with pain, no other issues."
"We could give her the same protocol, but she'd be pretty gorked all day," Mia said. "Not ideal - we want her getting plenty of help but she does need to be able to spend time holding the babies. Hmm . . . let me speak with Captain Bluedorn and the pharmacist. Let's go ahead with a hefty dose of Tylenol and some cold packs for starters. We can piggyback something once it's prescribed."

The other nurse nodded and headed toward the pharmacy room. Mia sighed and looked up at Steve.

"Sorry. I ran late this morning, had to drop my idiot dog off at the vet's," she explained.

"Jax is not trying to be difficult," Steve said. "Neither am I, we just - she doesn't do well with codeine. The nurse didn't really give us a chance to explain . . . okay, in fairness, Jax is reluctant to admit that it triggers flashbacks."

Mia held Jax's chart up. "If that nurse had taken the time to even glance through the chart, you wouldn't have needed to explain. From Jax's physical medical history alone, it's easy to put trauma and trauma together and come up with PTSD. This is a military hospital, for God's sake. PTSD and combat related trauma are the rule, not the exception. A few nurses just don't get it. They usually don't last long, either."

The other nurse approached, cold packs and a new paper cup in hand.

"I'll take those," Mia said calmly. "McGarrett is my patient."

"She was on my roster this morning," the other nurse started.

"She isn't now," Mia said. With a nervous glance back at Steve, the nurse hustled away.


"Oldest of six children," she laughed. "I'm a civilian, Commander."

"Well, you're a damn good one," he said.

"Before we go in . . . I know Jax is fine, she's with Danny at the moment, he's feeding her intel on our conversation . . . tell me, honestly, how she's doing. What do I need to know?" Mia said.

Steve shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Look, I already know something's up, or you wouldn't have been out here intimidating my staff," Mia said.

"She's in a good bit of pain, but I assume that's normal," Steve said. "She's . . . on edge. I can tell. Sometimes when she's having to try this hard to hold it together it . . ."

"Doesn't work," Mia finished. "There is a great deal of generalized anxiety and mood swing that is within normal limits postpartum. Lieutenant Allen wants to see her before she's discharged. We'll let her weigh in before we allow ourselves to become alarmed. Seem reasonable?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it does, thanks," Steve said.

"Excellent," Mia said. "Now, let's get her a little more comfortable, shall we?"

###

Steve stood in his office, contemplating his mini-fridge.
"That bad?" Danny asked, leaning in the doorway. "Thinking of taking up day drinking?"

"Politics," Steve sighed. "Always hated them, always will. As part of our briefing today, I'm to remind us that we work for the state of Hawaii. Specifically, we are the governor's task force."

"Yeah . . . well, the governor baited you with finding your father's killers in order to convince you to take on the job, right? Seems to me that's exactly what we've been doing," Danny said.

"Well, apparently we need to start doing it in a way that reflects positively on the governor's office," Steve said.

"You mean, in a way that reflects positively on Governor Jameson, because elections are on the horizon," Danny said.

"Something like that," Steve agreed. He shook off his frustration and melancholy. "But look - regardless of how the governor feels about the headlines, the fact remains that WoFat is no longer a threat to the islands of Hawaii, or to our families. Now we need to talk about what comes next."

They made their way to the smart table, where Kono, Chin, and Grover were already gathered.

"I'll tell you what I can about the capture of WoFat," Steve began. He paused, opened his mouth, closed it again, and shook his head, laughing. "WoFat is captured. He's in the hands of the international criminal court, where he'll be tried on multiple charges of war crimes."

"Come on, boss," Kono whined. "You skipped all the good parts."

"Classified," Steve said. "And . . . you know, not so good."

Grover nodded soberly. "We're glad to have you back in one piece. Can't say as I like it when the Navy borrows you. They don't always return you in good condition."

"Thanks to Nick, I'm in much better shape than I have any right to be," Steve said.

"With WoFat in maximum security prison on the other side of the globe, what did you mean by what comes next?" Danny asked.

Steve nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "You've all heard the phrase, cut off the head -"

"And three grow in its place," Chin finished.

"Exactly. With WoFat out of the picture, we have two very serious situations," Steve said. "First, we know that WoFat utilized the Yakuza to do his work here on the island, and in Asia. The Yakuza is world-wide, but there's a definite concentration here in Honolulu. We can expect increased - and highly unorganized - activity."

"The kind that catches innocent civilians in the crossfire," Grover said.

"Exactly," Steve nodded. "We already know that MS13 and The Company are jockeying around the Yakuza - competing for position, trying to create alliances. It's why we brought Grover onto the team. We can expect to have a significant focus on gang violence. I'd like to go a step further - I'd like to explore some anti-gang initiatives."

"Keep kids like Travis out of gangs to begin with," Kono said. "I'm in."

"Good," Steve said, grinning, "because I think offering surfing as an alternative to gangs would be a great place to start."
Kono threw a fist into the air in celebration, and Chin laughed.

"I'm gonna get to surf on the clock, I can feel it," Kono said.

"There's no doubt - these kids are looking for a sense of belonging - a group, a tribe," Chin said, nodding slowly. "Surfing can definitely provide that. Count me in. And Malia, I'm sure of it."

"All of us," Danny sighed. "I'll stock up on sunscreen. Okay, what else?"

Steve paused. "There's the matter of my mother, and of Joe White. Both are unaccounted for at the moment. Joe was tracking my mother. I think . . . she either got away from WoFat, or he sent her away . . . she left some intel where Joe could find it. I've given it to the SAD."

"The hell -" Danny protested.

"Tracking my mother and Joe around the world is not - even if the governor would approve it, which she wouldn't now, not when obviously she's not going to get credit for it - tracking them is just not the best use of our resources," Steve said. "This task force was formed to serve the people of Hawaii. I, for one, will be glad to get back to doing that. I think I've had enough international intelligence and terrorism work to last me a lifetime."

"That's true," Grover said, smiling broadly. "You're a family man now."

"Speaking of," Danny said, "shouldn't you be headed back to the hospital?"

"Yeah, I will," Steve said. "I wish Jax had let me send for Mary when I left. But I guess . . . it has been a lot, the last couple days. I can respect that she wanted - needed - some down time. You think she'll mind me coming back?"

Danny laughed. "I don't think she'll mind. Go, babe, you look like you could do with another nap yourself. Snuggle a baby, get some rest."

They are absolutely precious," Stephanie said, bending over the bassinet. "So tiny."

"They sleep and eat and poop," Jax said. "It's awesome. They just . . . they're doing just what babies are supposed to do."

"You're not used to things going according to plan," Stephanie said. It wasn't a question.

"I guess not," Jax said. "Getting them here safely, that didn't go to plan."

"I heard things got dicey," Stephanie said. She picked up her coffee and sat on the rolling stool, facing Jax in the ubiquitous hospital recliner. "You want to talk about it?"

Jax shrugged. "Scared Steve more than it did me. I'm fine."

"Steve told your nurse that you were very guarded regarding your incision," Stephanie said. "He's a little worried about how that's going to go down once you get home."

"I can reach it just fine," Jax said. "I'm more worried about his injuries. I don't think he's told me everything."

"Sounds like the two of you need some real privacy and a real conversation," Stephanie said.
"If I'm ever released," Jax said.

"That's an interesting term for it," Stephanie observed. "Released. You mean discharged?"

"Yeah. I guess . . . I love working, you know, in the emergency department. But I've never been good at being held in a hospital."

"You mean being admitted," Stephanie said quietly. "Though . . . no, I don't think that's what you mean, at all. I think you do mean 'held'. As in, against your will."

"Mia is fantastic," Jax said. "Most of the other nurses, they try really hard but . . . if they knew, if they really knew about the . . . one of them tried to give me codeine today. They're just doing their job but . . . they tell me what I can and can't do. They . . ." she stopped and took a shaky breath. "They bring me everything. My meds, my food . . . even my babies. Everything is . . . controlled."

"Like it was with WoFat," Stephanie said.

Jax flinched and then nodded.

"Okay. I can see how that's a problem for you," Stephanie continued. "Again, once you and Steve have some privacy . . . I think this is something you need to let him in on."

Jax looked over at the babies and smiled. "I'm not sure how much privacy we can expect in the near future. But I guess we don't have to start spelling things out, not quite yet anyway."

"I understand you have Mary staying with you for a while," Stephanie said. "That should help you and Steve find some down time. And the Harts?"

"Hmm, they came in this morning," Jax said. "We fixed up a parking pad and boardwalk for the Airstream. Kind of like a guest cottage. I hope they like it."

"I'm sure they will, and I'm sure they are going to be thrilled when they find out that you named Annie after their family, their son." Stephanie paused, fixing Jax with her calm, no-nonsense gaze. "Jax. What about your parents? Do you think they should know that you're married? That you have children?"

"I - " Jax looked at the babies again. Billy was awake, and trying to work his tiny fist out of the swaddled blanket. "Maybe. When we get settled, when . . . maybe. Maybe sometime, before too much longer."

"Okay," Stephanie said easily. "This is going to be an adjustment for you, Jax. You're recovering from a physical trauma - no, don't argue. You had a C-section and some complications, that's trauma by any definition. And you'll be out of work for a while, at home, with two infants who are completely dependent on you and their other loved ones. It's a lot to deal with - and that's without the hormonal fluctuations."

Jax rolled her eyes.

"Just because you've always been 'one of the guys', it doesn't mean you can cheat biology," Stephanie said quietly. "You're comfortable with your decision to bottle feed?"

"Absolutely," Jax said. "I don't think we could convince Steve to give up feeding the babies even if I wanted to."

"Good. That means you can rest when you need to," Stephanie said. "Take advantage of having the
help. Don't try to be the hero.”

"Copy," Jax said. "It's easier. The - okay, the pregnancy? Harder. The whole c-section and stuff - much, much harder than I'd imagined. But, the babies? Annie and Billy . . . so far, it's easier than I thought it would be. I guess . . . maybe I do have some instincts, or something."

"Of course you do," Stephanie said, standing up. "Look at how well you do with sick and injured patients, Jax. The only person who ever doubted you - was you. You can do this. You're going to be a great mom."

She stopped at the bassinet again. Billy had managed to free his fist, and was aimlessly smacking his hand into Annie's cheek. She protested with a loud squeak, and he flailed his hand, startled at the sound. Stephanie chuckled and tucked his hand back into the blanket.

"A great mom with her hands very, very full," she added, smiling at Jax as she left.

She ran into a very concerned looking Mia in the hallway.

"Lieutenant Allen, I'm so glad you were able to fit in your visit," Mia said. "We have a problem."

Steve was still standing at the smart table when his phone rang.

"It's the hospital," he said, quickly answering the call. The team watched anxiously as their leader's hand white knuckled his cell. "Of course, I'll be right there. No, it's fine - we have so many people willing to help, and - yes? Oh. Shit. Yeah, that makes sense. I'll come right now. Car seats? Yeah, I'll make sure I have car seats."

Steve thumbed off the phone and slipped it into his pocket. Danny noticed that his hands were shaking slightly.

"Babe, what's going on?" Danny said. He grabbed Steve's arm to steady him.

"They want to send Jax and the babies home, right now," Steve said. "There's a possibility that another patient on the floor has a staph infection; and if so, Jax is safer at home. Also she . . ." he hesitated and took a shaky breath. "She's not doing well, with being . . . she told Lieutenant Allen that she wasn't doing well with being 'held' at the hospital."

"Shit. Shit, I didn't even think - I thought it was all postpartum hormones, I didn't think of how it might remind her . . ." Danny said, shaking his head.

"Doesn't matter, I get to bring them home," Steve said. He was starting to smile. "I just need to get the car seats installed in the truck real quick."

Steve looked at Danny and Grover in confusion when they laughed softly.

Steve drove home carefully. Very carefully. Jax shot him an incredulous look from the passenger seat.

"The babies are strapped down like nuclear warheads," she said. "You can take a curve going over ten miles an hour, you know. They'll be fine."

"And you?" he asked softly.
"Piece of cake," she scoffed.

"Nothing about this was a piece of cake," he said. "I'm serious, Jax. You shouldn't even be home yet, you should still be in the hospital. You have to take care of yourself. If you push it . . . you could get an infection. You need to let me take care of you."

He reached over and wrapped his hand around hers. She stroked gently over the bandages still on his wrists.

"And you? Are you going to let me take care of you?" she asked softly. "Are you going to tell me, really tell me, what happened? Are you going to tell me why your breath catches every time you move, and don't tell me it's your ribs. It's more."

He was silent for a beat. "Yeah. Yeah, ku'uipo. We'll talk, really talk, and I'll tell you everything I can. Now's not the time to start keeping secrets. We said we wouldn't. Which is why I . . . what have you been holding back? You didn't tell me how you felt about being in the hospital."

It was Jax's turn to take a moment to think. "I don't think I realized it. Not until I talked to Stephanie."

"That's fair," Steve nodded. He looked out the window, left, as he made a turn. "Are you going to quit hiding from me? Literally?"

"I'm not -"

"Before you even knew my middle name you let me change the dressing on your knife lac, standing in my kitchen, days after . . . you trusted me. You said you trusted me, Jax," he said quietly. "And I've changed every dressing and taken out every set of stitches since, and now . . . you have an incision, from a c-section to deliver our babies, and you won't let me anywhere near you."

"I can reach it," Jax said. "I've got it under control."

Steve sighed. "That's not my point. I don't understand . . . never mind. You know I'll never force you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable, Jax."

She nodded silently as he turned the truck onto their street. As they pulled into the driveway, Jax brushed impatiently at her eyes.

"You okay? What's wrong?" Steve asked, reaching over and resting his hand on her knee.

"Damn hormones," she mumbled. "I told you, I was homesick. I'm . . . we're home. Out of the hospital. Home."

He squeezed her knee as he put the truck into park. "Stay put until I come around for you," he said. "I'm surprised the Harts and Mary aren't standing in the driveway. Maybe they're out back."

Jax rolled her eyes but waited, unfastening her seatbelt as she watched Steve step gingerly out of the truck and come around to her side.

"You're hurt, too," she pointed out, when he opened her door and started to reach for her. She cupped her hand around his face, her thumb rubbing absently over the still livid bruise on his jaw.

"I don't have strict post-op instructions," he said. "I'm terrified that Mia is going to show up here and take you back if I screw up."
Jax laughed as he helped her find her footing on the running board, and then his hands were wrapped around her hips as he placed her gently on the driveway.

"You good?" he murmured, kissing the top of her head. When she nodded, he continued. "Okay, I'm going to hand you Annie, and then I'll go back around for Billy."

"You worked this out on the drive, didn't you?" she teased. "Logistics."

"Exactly," he said. He opened the back passenger door and unlatched Annie's harness. "I think, honestly, this whole thing with taking care of the twins? Logistics. It's going to be a matter of assessing each situation as it arises, and responding accordingly."

Jax chuckled as he deposited Annie into her waiting arms, and then jogged back around to repeat the process with Billy. Within moments, they were standing in front of the truck looking at the house.

"Holy shit," Steve breathed. He wrapped his arm around Jax's shoulder and pulled her gently to him, holding Billy against his shoulder easily with one big hand. "We're home. With babies."

"I want to show them the water, first," Jax said. "Wait, is that silly?"

"No. No, that's not silly, that's amazing," he said. "Just watch your footing on the sand, okay?"

He kept one hand on the small of her back as they walked around to the back of the house, and made their way down to the chairs. Jax tilted her face up toward the sun and took a deep breath.

"It really got to you, didn't it?" Steve asked quietly. "Being in the hospital."

She nodded, tucking her face down to kiss the top of Annie's head. Carefully, she shifted the baby so that she faced the ocean.

"Look, Annie Hart," Jax said softly. "You're home. This is your backyard. Pretty amazing, hunh?"

Annie gurgled and waved one tiny fist. Steve shifted Billy around, holding him in the crook of his arm. His little feet started to kick.

"Yeah? You like the looks of that, hunh?" Steve said, laughing. "Ready to swim."

Billy started to voice his disapproval. They'd learned quickly that he preferred being held upright, unlike Annie, who was content to be snuggled in any position. Steve shifted the baby back to his shoulder, but he continued to fuss.

"Turn around so he can see?" Jax suggested.

Steve turned so that Billy was facing the water again. Tiny feet kicked furiously against his chest, and the noises turned happy. Steve looked down at Jax and shook his head.

"What?" Jax demanded.

"He's got your temper," Steve said.

"No, he's got your fixation with the ocean," Jax retorted, grinning up at him.

The back door of the house opened, and Mary came out, along with Fred and Maureen.

"Wondered where you guys were," Steve said, smiling and waving at them.
"We wanted to give you a few minutes, but then we couldn't stand it any longer," Maureen said, hurrying toward them. She reached out and wrapped Jax and Annie in a gentle hug, as Fred gave Steve's shoulder a firm squeeze. Mary grinned, bouncing on the balls of her feet, trying to refrain from demanding a niece or nephew.

"I wouldn't tell them the names," Mary said.

"Yes, and we're just about fed up with calling them the boy twin and the girl twin, so out with it," Fred said.

"Well, let me introduce you to William Daniel McGarrett," Steve said. He placed Billy in Fred's hands. "Billy only likes to be horizontal if he's sleeping or eating, we've discovered."

"Likes to be ready for action," Fred said, chuckling. He propped the baby expertly onto his shoulder. "And this itty bitty darling?" Maureen asked, stroking a finger over Annie's tiny cheek.

"This is Ann Hart McGarrett," Jax said softly.

"Oh!" Maureen gasped. Her eyes filled with tears as she reached for the infant.

"We should have asked -" Steve started, but then Fred was hugging him, slapping his back with the hand that wasn't holding Billy.

"Nonsense," Maureen said, trying to hug everyone at once, while Annie squawked in protest.

Mary pulled out her cell phone and demanded a picture of the Harts with the babies.

"And now one of you and me together, holding Annie Hart," Maureen said, putting an arm around Mary. "I know she's named for her Auntie Mary Ann, too."

There were more pictures and laughter, until Steve noticed Jax's breath hitching.

"Hey, you're overdue for pain meds and you definitely need to get off your feet," he said, tucking her against his chest.

"Yes, my goodness, we're supposed to be here to help, not wear you out completely," Maureen said. "Steve and Jax, you'll be astounded at the preparations Mary has made . . . the babies' room is completely stocked with diapers and wipes, and there's enough bottles and liners and formula to outfit a small nursery."

Mary blushed and shrugged as Steve reached out and chuckled her gently under her chin.

"Thanks, Mare-bear," he said softly.

"I used your credit card," she said, ducking her head. "It was no big deal. Danny and Rachel told me what to get."

"It is a big deal," Jax said, "because if I had to go to the store right now, I think I would collapse."

"I think you're going to collapse either way, so into the house with you," Maureen said, making a shooing motion with her free hand. "Fred, Mary, and I outnumber these little darlings three to two, and they're too little to have any sort of separation anxiety. So, you two - yes, Steve, before you drop also, don't think we don't see those bruises and God only knows what's under those bandages - you go up and have a nice rest. Shower, nap, whatever you need. I took the liberty of checking the freezer and it looks like Jax was doing some serious nesting . . . I've thawed out some delicious
looking soup and when you've had a nice rest, you come on back down and get something to eat, and we might - might - let you hold the babies again."

Jax looked hesitant.

"Just for a little while," Steve murmured. "Wash the hospital off us, what do you say?"

She nodded at that, and with a quick kiss on each of the babies’ noses, let Steve nudge her gently toward the house.

"They don't have sunscreen on," she said, over her shoulder.

"Good point," Maureen laughed. "We'll see to their diapers and bottles. Go on, you'll hear us yell from the bottom of the stairs if we need you."

Jax nodded and brushed impatiently at a sudden and inexplicable rush of tears.

"Oh, darlin'," Maureen said, catching up to her and squeezing her hand. "Fatigue and pain and hormones - it's a perfect storm, isn't it?"

"I should take care of the babies," Jax said. "But I'm so tired. And I'm so glad you're here to do it. And that makes me feel like a terrible mom."

"No, sweetheart, that makes you a very tired mom," Maureen said, "one who by all rights shouldn't even be home from the hospital yet. Now, the problem would be if you didn't relax and let us enjoy the great privilege of helping you, and overdid it and landed yourself back in the hospital with some sort of horrible infection."

"Put your own oxygen mask on first," Fred said, with a pointed look at Steve, surveying him with a practiced eye. "And we'll talk later."

"Yes, sir," Steve said quietly.

They could hear the Harts and Mary bustling about happily in the kitchen and nursery, fixing bottles and changing diapers, cooing at the babies.

"Take it slow on the stairs," Steve murmured. "Or would it be better if you didn't go up at all?"

"I want my own shower, though," Jax said. "And my own pillow. And bed. And the windows that let in the breeze and the sound of the waves." She went up the stairs one at a time, trying not to hunch over, and mostly - sort of - succeeding.

Pupule was pacing at the top of the stairs. He sniffed at Jax's feet, hesitantly, and then rubbed his big head against her shins. He repeated the process with Steve.

"Hey, buddy, good to see you," Steve said, bending to scratch his head. "You can go down and check out the new kittens."

Pupule made a grumbling noise and then turned and collapsed on his bed.

"Or not," Jax said.

Steve closed their bedroom door behind them, quietly, and then pulled out several prescription bottles from the depths of his cargo pockets.

"Antibiotic, non-narcotic pain med for now, your Tripler-approved-special for later," he said, smiling
down at her. He went into the bathroom and filled a cup with water. Taking her hand carefully, gently, in his own, he tipped out the correct dosage of tablets into her palm.

"Thank you," she whispered. She took the cup of water he pressed into her hand, and expertly downed the tablets.

"You want a shower first?" he murmured, brushing her hair back from her face.

"You promised," she whispered, taking his hand in hers, and hesitantly touching the bandage. "Let me see. Tell me."

He hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Okay, but you're getting off your feet," he said. He propped her pillows against the headboard and nudged her toward the bed, helping her get settled. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, and let her take his hand once more. At her questioning look, he nodded, and she slowly unwrapped the thick layers of gauze around his wrist.

"Shit, Steve," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears as the angry broken skin and bruising was revealed. She reached for his other hand and repeated the process. "Tell me."

"Jax, does it matter?" he asked softly. "I'm here. I'm okay."

She nodded stubbornly. "I need to know."

"It's classified. I can't tell you everything," he said.

"I understand," she said softly. "What you can. Tell me what you can."

"First part of the mission went well," he said. "We... hit a snag. I woke up -"

"Regained consciousness?" Jax guessed. "You had a concussion when you got to the hospital. I remember. How?"

Steve weighed his words carefully. "Blunt force trauma to the back of the head. The usual."

Jax almost smiled as her fingers reached for him. He obediently ducked his head down, closing his eyes and sighing as her strong, slim fingers probed gently for the still-present swelling at the base of his skull.

"Rifle stock," she guessed.

He shrugged. He couldn't confirm or deny.

"Okay, you regained consciousness..." she prompted.

"Wrist bound, overhead," he said. Her fingers trailed up his arms, pressing gently against the muscles of his forearms, then his biceps. She lingered over the ink, tracing the familiar patterns with the pads of her fingers, before sliding her hands under the sleeves of his shirt and carefully, gently, checking his shoulders.

"There's some swelling," she said. "Anti-inflammatories?"

"I'll take some Motrin," he promised.

"Ice, and heat," she said. "Later. Physical therapy?"

"Ku'uipo," he said, capturing her hands in his. "Nothing a little swimming won't fix. Okay?"
"WoFat?" she whispered.

"Not at first," he said. "But yeah. At one point."

"Your mom?"

He shook his head. "No sign. Joe is searching."

She tugged the hem of his shirt carefully out of his cargo pants. He hissed as the fabric pulled against the burns.

"Show me," she whispered.

He reached back and grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled it over his head in one smooth motion. Her fingers traced over the spectacular bruising on his ribs.

"Nick?" she asked.

"Much worse," he said. "Broken. Mine are just bruised. He took the brunt of it." He winced again. The rougher fabric of his cargo pants was now rubbing over the burns, just below his waist.

"What else?" Jax demanded softly.

"Jax . . . you need to rest," he said. "It can wait."

"The hell it can," she said. "What. Else."

He sighed and stood up, slowly unfastening his belt and undoing the first few buttons of his cargo pants. He gingerly pushed the waistband down a few inches.

Jax gasped and covered her mouth with her hand as the perfectly circular burns came into view.

"Too big for a cigarette," she said. Her hand hovered over one of the raw circles of flesh. "Way bigger than a taze . . . what the hell?"

"Cigar," he said softly. "It's okay, Jax."

She sobbed softly, pressing her fist against her mouth.

"Hey, it's okay," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her and holding her carefully against him. "I'm okay. I'm right here. You know what? I didn't even play it tough. I let it cover the fact that I was dislocating my bad thumb. You know, the one you jacked up your first day on the island?"

"What?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. He held out his thumb in demonstration. It was still bruised.

"Joint's been a little weak, ever since," he said, smiling at her. "Good thing, too. I was able to slip it out, get my hand free of the rope. Things got better after that."

"WoFat . . ." she whispered the name.

"Came close to ending him," Steve whispered. "God, I could taste it. Joe stopped me. Last I saw of WoFat, he was being taken for medical treatment in preparation for transport to The Hague."

"Medical treatment?" she asked.

Couple of superficial burns."

He couldn't stand the haunted look in her eyes, so he continued.

"Nick and I were treated on a Naval hospital ship," he said. "My nurse reminded me of Gus. N'Ick's nurse was a pretty little blonde. Catherine will eat her for breakfast."

Jax snorted a laugh. "How bad?"

"Broken ribs, kidney was badly bruised . . . he'll be okay, Jax," Steve said. "Hey, tomorrow, we'll set up a secure call. Check in with them, okay?"

Jax nodded. Her fingers traced, feather light, over his injuries. "You need fresh bandages. And antibiotic cream."

"Yeah, I guess," he admitted. "I'll take a quick shower first, then take care of that. You okay? Not sick or dizzy or anything?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'll stay put."

He kissed the top of her head. "Be right back."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against the pillows as she heard the shower start. Suddenly, she remembered the stash of bulky pads that Mia had sent home with her - the likes of which she hadn't seen since junior high school, but which were essential at the moment. She was halfway to the door when the shower turned off, and not back to the bed when Steve appeared, a towel slung low around his hips.

"You said you'd stay put," he reminded her.

"Antibiotic cream," she said. "For your burns?"

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Yeah, I know where we keep it, Jax." He disappeared into the bathroom again, and she could hear him opening and closing the medicine cabinet.

"I wanted to help," she said, her voice small and uncertain.

He came back out of the bathroom, supplies in hand. "Okay," he said softly.

She was still sitting on the edge of the bed, easily able to reach the burns scattered on his hipbones. He stood patiently while she dabbed the cream on, and covered each burn with a large square bandage.

"Thanks," he murmured, slipping a hand into her hair. "I hadn't bothered . . . that feels better. Much better. You need to wash your hands, though. I don't want to risk -"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. There was nothing for it - she was going to have to ask him to retrieve her bag. She bit her lip, hesitating. "Could you, um . . . my overnight bag, from the truck. Could you get it, please?"

"Sure," he said, reaching for a clean pair of gym shorts. "Of course I will, ku'uipo . . . be right back up." He grabbed a t-shirt and eased it on, then slipped quietly out the door and down the stairs.

By the time he returned, her bag in hand, she'd resorted to combat breathing to try to gain control. It wasn't working.
"Jax, what the hell -" he said, alarmed. He dropped her bag and crossed the room in three long strides as she put her hands over her face, her slim shoulders shaking as she tried to hold back the tears. "Do I need to take you back to the hospital? Are you hurting? What is it?"

He knelt in front of her, feeling completely helpless, and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned into him, tucking her face into his neck.

"Hey, I've got you," he murmured, cradling her head with his hand. He could feel hot tears splashing onto his neck. "What do you need?"

"I have to go to the bathroom," she mumbled.

"Ohhh-kaaay," he said slowly. "We've lived together long enough that this actually comes as no big shock to me, Jax."

"I want to take a shower," she said. "And I'm not supposed to lift my bag, will you put it in the bathroom?"

"Yeah, of course," he said.

"Sorry," she mumbled again. "Mrs. Hart is right, my stupid hormones are all over the place. A shower and a nap, I'll be fine, I promise."

"All right," he said. He rubbed her back gently. "And then maybe some coffee?"

She sniffed and nodded enthusiastically, and he chuckled.

"Now we're talking," he said. "Okay, let me help you up -" He froze, mid-sentence, as he helped her to her feet. There was a small but unmistakable smear of fresh blood on the sheets where she'd been sitting.

"What -" she started to ask, and then her eyes followed his. "Oh, damn it to hell," she said, tears of frustration starting up again.

"Jax, we have to get you to the hospital," he said. "Wait, no, I'll call an ambulance. Queens. Should you go to Queens? I can call Malia -"

"No, stop," she said, sighing. "It's . . . it's normal. There's . . . it's normal. This is normal. To add to the indignity of still looking six months pregnant, I also have to waddle around with . . . this happening." She gestured helplessly at the soiled sheet.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, this is that postpartum . . . it was in the book. The book, we got as far as what to expect the first week. Sorry, I didn't mean to panic, it just -"

"I thought it would be - well, I don't know what I thought it would be like, but I didn't think it would be like this," Jax mumbled.

"Look, you know I've made tampon runs," Steve said. "Not just since we've been together, either. For Kono, even. I'm not squeamish, or helpless. What do you need?"

"The god-awful stuff the hospital sent home for me," she said, covering her face with her hands again.

"Okay. In your bag," he guessed. "I'll put it in the bathroom for you, then. What else?"

"That's all. I'll feel better after a shower," she said. "Sorry."
He hugged her gently and kissed the top of her head. "You've no reason to apologize. You okay to shower? Don't fall, please."

"I've got it," she assured him. "I won't take long, I promise."

"I'm going to respect your privacy but if I hear a crash all bets are off," he warned her, as he put her bag onto the bathroom counter.

She nodded and shuffled into the bathroom. As soon as he heard the water start, he yanked the sheets from the bed and shoved them into the hamper. He pulled a fresh set from the closet and expertly remade the bed with perfect, crisp corners.

"Thanks," Jax said softly, standing in the door of the bathroom.

He turned, and his breath caught. She was standing there, wearing a fresh pair of soft gym shorts and an FDNY t-shirt. In one hand, she clutched a tube of antibiotic cream, and in the other, a handful of gauze bandaging material.

"Deja vu," he murmured, smiling at her. "The first night you stayed here, you came out of the bathroom downstairs, and into the kitchen. Holding first aid supplies. I took one look at you, standing there . . . I wanted nothing more than to wrap you in my arms and protect you."

"I do trust you," she said, her lip trembling. "It's not that I don't trust you, it's - you're all - and now I'm all - and it's not fair."

"Ah, geez, I know, and I'm so sorry -"

"No, it's not fair to you," she said. "For me to be all . . . messed up."

"Jax, you are not messed up," he said. "You are pale, though, and shaking. Please . . . please, come get in bed before you pass out, and I really do have to take you back to the hospital."

She shuffled to the bed and let him help her get settled. He took the supplies from her hands and placed them on the night table.

"Do you want me take care of the incision?" he asked carefully. "Or I could get Mary, or Maureen -"

She shook her head. "You may as well," she said quietly. "I mean, eventually . . . I'm going to want to swim. Or, you know. Eventually."

"Six weeks," Steve whispered, grinning. "Mia threatened to cut off my balls otherwise. I think she'd do it, too."

Jax let out a giggle, and Steve's face lit up. "There's my girl," he murmured. "Okay, let's see what we've got here . . ."

He gently lifted the hem of her t-shirt over her still-swollen belly.

"The incision is perfectly neat," he said. "I bet it will barely scar." He carefully dabbed antibiotic cream over the stitches.

"I know, it's . . . everything else. Looks awful . . . like . . . partially deflated and . . ." she trailed off, frustrated. "My belly button looks wrong."

"Jax," he said, covering the incision with a long, narrow bandage, "I don't know what you expected, but this doesn't shock or surprise me in any way."
"It doesn't?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "Physics. Mass . . . displacement . . . you know. There were babies in there, I saw Captain Bluedorn pull them out - before all hell broke loose - so yeah. I mean, the last time we were in this room, Annie and Billy were still inside you, Jax."

She thought about that a moment, and glanced down at her stomach dubiously.

"And your belly button is absolutely perfect," he assured her. "What about that stuff you used, that smelled like cocoa butter?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to help . . . after," she said. "I guess it can't hurt to try. I think I'm still going to have stretch marks."

Steve reached into her drawer and pulled out the small tub of cream that he'd noticed her using during the pregnancy. He opened it and dipped his fingers in, carefully, and began to rub the cream onto her tender skin.

"You started bleeding, Jax, after they delivered Annie. And they couldn't get it stopped. You went into shock. You were cold. You were cold, to the touch. They kicked me out of the room and I didn't -" he stopped, shaking his head and blinking furiously. "And here you are, safe and sound, in our own bed. And our babies are downstairs, healthy. Perfect. If you think for one minute that I give a flying fuck about a scar, or ten scars, or any number of any kind of marks . . . then you don't even know me. But you do know me. Right?"

Jax nodded slowly. "Yeah. I do know you."

"Okay then," he said, pulling her shirt back into place. "Then the only thing left to discuss is you telling me when you need that bandage changed, or when you want more of that cream. Copy?"

"Copy," Jax whispered.

Steve tucked her in, just the way she liked, and then cracked the windows open so that she could hear the waves. He slipped into the bed next to her, careful not to jostle her. His hand splayed on her hip, his thumb tracing absently over the long-healed scar there, as he kissed the back of her neck.

She sighed and closed her eyes.

"You made it back in time for the babies," she murmured. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it back. At all. But you did."

"I did," he said. "And WoFat is locked up in maximum security. We're going to sleep, because I don't think I could even recite my service number at this point. And then, we're going to go downstairs, and we're going to hold our babies. We'll count their fingers and toes again. We'll give them their bottles and burp them, and watch them sleep."

"And poop," Jax murmured, drifting off to sleep.

"And poop," Steve agreed. "And then we'll change their tiny, tiny diapers."

"And coffee," Jax sighed. "We'll have coffee. Real coffee. As much as I want . . ."
A baby was crying. She could hear it, faintly. She slipped her hands down to her stomach, wincing as they caught on the incision. Caught between waking and sleeping, she felt panic bubble up in her chest and struggled to remember why.

WoFat.

WoFat had been here, had threatened the babies. And now the babies were here and she was in the room alone and -

"Hey. Jax, you with me?"

She struggled awake, leaning instinctively into the calloused hand cupped gently around her face. Blinking slowly, she focused on familiar hazel eyes, crinkling into a smile.

"Hey," she whispered.

"There you are," Steve murmured. He was kneeling next to the bed, his face level with hers. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I was . . . I'm okay," she said. "Annie and Billy?"

"They're fine. Woke up from a nap just a few minutes ago, Colonel Hart and Maureen are giving them bottles. Mary's resting, too," Steve said, smiling at her.

Jax closed her eyes, tight, her breathing still ragged. Steve's hand carded carefully through her tangled curls.

"Little bit of panic?" he asked quietly.

She nodded.

"I understand. Right? You know I understand. I've got you. Take your time," he said.

"WoFat -"

"Maximum security, on the other side of the world," he reminded her. "NATO has him. He's done. Jax. It's over. This is the part where we get to breathe again; where we get to enjoy everything that we never let ourselves think we would get to have. Okay?"

She nodded again, taking a shuddering breath.

"I brought you some coffee," he whispered.

She cracked one eye open, and he laughed. Wincing, she struggled to sit up, but his hands were there, steadying her, and then pressing the steaming mug of coffee into her grip. She took a sip and sighed happily.

"Hi," she said, fully awake and grinning up at him.

"Hi," he said back, a broad smile on his face.

"We're home," she said. She took another sip of coffee and a deep breath. "We're home, the babies
are okay . . . you're okay . . . holy shit. We made it.

He sat down next to her, carefully, and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face into her hair.

"You made it," he murmured. "You scared me."

"And you scared me," she said. "Let's not do that, any of it, not for a long long time. Deal?"


She shook her head. "Another shower. No more meds."

He started to argue with her, but she pressed a finger against his lips.

"Maybe some regular Tylenol, I'll piggyback it with Motrin," she said. "Steve. This is - I've had worse. Much worse. I don't want to miss this. I don't want to walk around in a haze."

He nodded reluctantly. "Tonight, though?"

"If I have trouble sleeping," she said. "I'll think about it tonight. Okay? Now, get out of my way so I can shower and go count baby toes again."

"Still ten each," he said, kissing the top of her head and laughing. "Just counted."

#*#*#*#*#

The first week went by in a blur.

Diapers, bottles, baths . . .

"We outnumber them five to two," Steve said, yawning, standing bleary-eyed in front of the coffee pot. "Five to two. You know, in a firefight, those are . . . those are great odds. We have the strategic advantage. I don't understand."

Fred Sr. chuckled and shoved past Steve to pour a cup of coffee. The palest light of morning was just filtering into the kitchen. "Son, these babies don't play by the rules. That diaper of Billy's - that was biological warfare, straight up."

Jax shuffled into the kitchen and made a beeline for the coffee pot.

"You should be sleeping," Steve said. "I told you, the colonel and I had the night shift. It's barely oh six hundred."

"You woke me up, gagging," Jax said. "Which one was it?"

"Billy," Steve said. "Again."

"You're such a lightweight, McGarrett," she teased. "Go on, get some rest. I'll catch up on Sportscenter. Mary and I have the next shift."

"I should go for a run," Steve said, fighting another yawn.

"Oh, I'd advise against that," Fred Sr. said. "You should grab some bunk time while you have the chance. Besides, isn't Danny bringing his family over this evening to visit?"

"Yes, while you and Mrs. Hart take a well-deserved evening out," Jax said firmly.
"Yeah, guess you're right," Steve said. "They laughed at me. Danny, and Grover. I said I thought I'd be back in, full time, by the end of the week, and they laughed at me. Now I know why . . ."

Jax and Fred Sr. laughed as Steve shuffled toward the stairs.

"He healing up okay?" Fred Sr asked softly, topping off Jax's mug, and then his own. "He's still guarding those ribs."

Jax nodded, staring into her mug. "Bruised, badly . . . one or two, maybe even cracked. He has -"

Fred Sr tilted his head at her, waiting patiently.

She cleared her throat. "Burn. Cigar burns. Those aren't healed yet."

"Shit, I'm sorry, darlin'," Fred said.


"He won't talk about it," Fred Sr. guessed.

"Been kinda busy," Jax said, managing a smile.

"Yeah, that's for damn sure," Fred Sr said. He reached out and covered Jax's hand with his own. "You don't let him bottle all that up, okay? And if you need me to beat it out of him, you just say the word. Now, why don't you go on up, get a little more rest? We just put the babies down, they should be good for another hour or so at least. Go on, I'll read the paper and keep an ear out for them."

"But I -"

"But you, young lady, are barely ten days out from delivering twins. And still, if I'm not mistaken, not quite finished looking over your shoulder for the man who tried to destroy your family. Still seein' him as a feature in your nightmares, judgin' by those dark smudges under your pretty eyes," Fred Sr. said. "So, discretion bein' the better part of valor, and all - go on. Guarantee you Steve'll rest a bit better with you next to him, anyway."

Jax ducked her head with a grin, then nodded in agreement. She rinsed her mug and placed it next to the coffee maker.

"Yeah, no sense putting that away," Fred Sr. said. "You'll need it soon enough. I'll set up a fresh pot. Go on."

Jax made her way slowly back up the stairs, and silently into the bedroom. Steve forced his eyes open.

"Hey," he rasped. "Everything okay?"

"Sleep," she said, as she slipped under the covers next to him. "Annie and Billy are both still asleep. Colonel Hart is going to keep an ear out for them." She snuggled next to him, wincing a bit as the movement pulled on her stitches.

"Careful, be careful," he murmured, but he stretched his arm out so that she could tuck her head onto his shoulder. "You okay? Not hurting you?"

She shook her head, not that she'd have cared anyway. Her fingers traced lightly over the bruising on his ribcage, and he hummed in appreciation.
"I'm fine, Jax," he mumbled automatically, closing his eyes. Her fingers traced feather-light over the bandages covering the burns.

"Bullshit," she whispered. "But you're here."

He grunted softly, too tired to argue with her, and knowing she was right. Instead, he let the familiar scent of her shampoo soothe him, while his fingers rubbed absently over the soft cotton of her t-shirt.

"Missions . . . hell week .. . " he muttered.

"What?" she whispered, her eyes drifting back closed.

"Trying to remember when I've ever been this tired," he said. Suddenly, it seemed funny, and he laughed quietly.

His laughter was contagious, and Jax found herself giggling, too. "A stake-out," she said. "Last time I was this exhausted, it was a stake-out. Lasted for over a week, just four of us, rotating shifts in pairs . . . eventually, we were so full of caffeine that we couldn't even sleep when we were off shift . . . just sort of wandered around, like zombies."

"Can you imagine, if Mary and the Harts weren't here?" he sighed, his hand moving up to her hair. He wrapped a curl around his finger, back and forth.

"We'd have moved a mattress to the floor of the babies' room," she said. "Lived on MREs. We'd have bunkered down, managed."

"Yeah, we would have," Steve said.

"Glad we -" she broke off with a yawn "- didn't have to."

A gentle whuffling sound was the only response.

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Steve didn't quite manage to hide a wince as Gracie flung her arms around him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Uncle Steve," the little girl cried out, starting to pull back. But Steve wrapped his arms around her and held on tight.

"Gracie, honey, it is so good to see you, you can just hug me as tight as you want," Steve assured her. "I don't care one bit."

"Danno said that bad man, the one who took Auntie Jax, tried to hurt you and 'Mander Taylor," Gracie said.

"He did. But my team, they didn't give up on us, just like Five-O doesn't give up," Steve said. "They came and helped us, and everything turned out fine."

"And you got back before the twins," Gracie said. "Mommy said it was a bloody good thing."

"Grace," Rachel chided, hiding a smirk.

"I wouldn't have wanted to miss it," Steve agreed. "Would you like to see them?"

"Sure," Grace said. "Stacey Olsen's mom had twins. Both boys. I'm glad one of yours is a girl. There's enough boys."
"Remember that when you're fifteen," Danny grumbled. He plopped Charles Nolan unceremoniously on the floor of the nursery, allowing him to explore in the relative safety of the room. He babbled happily and scooted around, trying to pull up on the cribs.

"Wow," Steve said, looking down at him.

"This stage goes so quickly," Rachel said, gesturing at the twins. "Try to enjoy it. Before you know it, they'll be climbing the walls. Literally."

Danny carefully disengaged Charlie from where he'd already shimmied a few inches up the rail.

"Another monkey," Danny laughed. "Go on, Gracie, check out the babies."

Grace was just tall enough to look over the edge of the crib, her hands wrapped around the top. Her eyes widened.

"They're way smaller than Charlie," she said, looking up at Rachel who had joined her.

"Twins are sometimes smaller," Rachel said. "It's okay, they're healthy and strong, just tiny. You were smaller than Charles Nolan as well, you know. He was kind of a big baby."

Grace reached out a hand and then pulled it back quickly.

"No, it's okay, Gracie, you can touch them," Steve encouraged. "We've discovered they don't break."

Grace laughed softly and reached out to stroke tiny cheeks. "Billy has a lot of hair," she observed. "It's dark like yours, Uncle Steve, but it sticks up funny."

"Yeah, it does," Steve laughed.

"Annie doesn't have much hair yet," Grace said. "I hope she gets some."

"I am quite sure that she won't be bald, darling," Rachel assured her.

"Why are they both in this crib?" Grace asked.

"They were together so long in Auntie Jax's tummy, honey, they don't like being very far apart now," Danny said.

"Where is Auntie Jax?" Grace asked.

"She'll be down in just a minute. I think she might have lost track of time taking yet another shower," Steve said. "I'll run and check on her, if you'll watch the twins for me, Gracie."

Grace nodded enthusiastically and planted herself firmly by the crib, with Danny by her side.

Steve made his way up the stairs, taking them still just one at a time, a bit stiffly. Pupule took advantage when he opened the bedroom door, and bounded in, determined to claim some quiet time in the house full of visitors.

"Hey, buddy," Steve said, rubbing between his ears as the big cat turned in circles on the bed, trying to get comfortable. "Lot going on, hunh?"

Pupule let out a raspy meow and flopped down, covering his eyes with his tail. Steve chuckled, looking around the room for signs of Jax. He heard her, moving things around in the closet.
"Jax?" he called softly. "You okay?"

She stepped into the room, scowling.

"My clothes still don't fit," she said. "The babies are, like, pushing two weeks old, and I'm still wearing maternity clothes. Maternity clothes, Steven."

His eyes flicked over her, wearing the familiar denim shorts and the blue batik print tank that accented her strong shoulders and soft curves.

"First, the babies are still closer to one week than they are two. Because trust me, I'm keeping very close track of weeks, here. Second, I was hoping that shirt would stay in the regular rotation because . . . damn," he said, shaking his head. "You look fantastic."

She ducked her head, smiling.

"Danny and Rachel and the kids are here," he said.

"Shit, sorry," Jax said. She quickly bundled up her hair in a loose ponytail, several wayward strands escaping in curls around her face.

Steve couldn't resist wrapping one soft curl around his finger, tucking it behind her ear.

"I mean it," he said softly. "You are beautiful, ku'uipo. If you don't believe me, look at our kids."

"Our kids," she said. "Holy shit."

"I know," he said. He laughed. "Let's go enjoy the first of many McGarrett - Williams family nights. I think Gracie made a playlist."

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Mary typed in the security code, then slipped in the front door and closed it quietly behind her. After all of the chaos and exhaustion of getting ready for the twins' arrival, and helping out in the first flurry of days at home, Steve and Jax had insisted that she take the evening out with new friends she'd met through Kono and Brian.

"But the Harts are going out, too," she'd argued.

"And we've got Danny and Rachel coming," Steve had said. "We still outnumber the babies. We'll be fine, Mare. You've done so much, and we appreciate it. You need some time out, time for yourself."

"It would be nice to wear something that didn't smell like baby formula," Mary had admitted.

So, she had met up with the group at Sidestreets, and from there, they had enjoyed a long walk on the beachfront, stopping for shave ice. Now, she stood in the living room, smiling fondly at her brother and sister in law, snuggled together on the couch, each of them with a baby in their arms. Steve had one arm around Jax, her head tucked securely on his shoulder. She was holding Billy - upright, as he had made his preference clear - one hand under his bottom and the other between his shoulder blades, her fingers cradling his head. Annie was tucked into the crook of Steve's elbow, her little feet propped up on his wrist. Mary slipped her cell phone out and snapped a picture.

"Hey, Mare," Steve murmured. He didn't blink or open his eyes.

"Should have known," Mary said. "No self-respecting SEAL would let someone sneak in the front
"Damn straight," Steve said. He finally opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Have a good evening?"

"I did," she whispered. "You guys?"

"It was unmitigated chaos," Jax said, smiling. "It was awesome."

"I didn't mean to wake you," Mary said. She put her bag down and sat down next to Jax.

"Please, no self-respecting SWAT officer would let someone sneak in the front door," Jax quipped.

"Will there ever be a point at which you guys don't primarily identify as a SEAL and as SWAT?" Mary asked.

"I don't think so," Steve said.

Jax was silent for a moment, stroking Billy's head. "Maybe," she said slowly. "I wasn't SWAT for very long . . . I think, someday, I'll think of being a medic, before I think of being SWAT."

Mary leaned over and kissed the top of Billy's head.

"And don't forget, you're also a mom and dad, now," Mary said. "I mean, pretty much the most kick-ass mom and dad ever, in the history of mom and dads, but still. You're not just a SEAL and a medic, either. Okay, I'm grabbing a shower and going to bed, but I'll keep an ear out to help with the munchkins tonight."

"Night, Mare," Steve said, as she kissed him on the cheek. His phone buzzed as she headed down the hall. He looked at it, breaking into a big smile and angling the screen toward Jax before he thumbed the icon to accept the call.

"Smooth Dog?" Nick's voice, slightly raspy, came over the speaker.

"Bullfrog, man, it's good to hear your voice," Steve said. "How's it going? You out of the hospital yet, or are you still making those nurses miserable?"

"Not so much," came Catherine's voice. "Hey, rumor has it there are two more McGarretts on the scene - we were hoping for a video call?"

"Yeah, but we wanted to ask first," Nick said. "I've served enough missions with you, Dog, that I don't want to risk seeing that ass of yours any more. Enough is enough, you know?"

"You're such a jackass," Steve said fondly. "Yeah, you've actually caught us in a calm moment, video is great. Hold on." He glanced at Jax, who nodded, smiling, and he pressed the buttons on the phone to switch to video.

Nick and Catherine's faces filled the small screen.

"Shit, Nick," Steve said, shaking his head. Nick had lost an obvious amount of weight, and still had dark circles under his eyes. A livid bruise still colored his jaw. "Shit. Nick, I'm so -"

"Sorry? To be there with your beautiful wife and children? Better not be, you idiot," Nick said. "I'm fine, Steve. Seriously. They let me out a couple days ago . . . I've got Catherine here while I recover . . . it's all good, I mean it. Now, angle that phone, I don't need to see up your nose, brother, I want to see those babies."
Steve propped Annie up a little higher and she opened solemn eyes, blinking and yawning. She shoved a tiny fist against her mouth.

"This is Ann Hart," Steve said. "We call her Annie, though."

Nick swallowed hard. "Named for Mary Ann and . . . and for Freddie," he said quietly. "Damn, guys, that's beautiful. She's beautiful. She gonna have Jax's red hair?"

"If she's lucky," Steve said. He angled the phone toward Jax. "And this is William Daniel. Billy, obviously, after Jax's brother."

"And when he's in trouble - and he will be, he's your kid - that's a good name for yelling down the beach," Catherine laughed. "William Daniel McGarrett. It's lovely, really. And look at all that hair! Oh my."

"Danny's already suggesting hair gel," Jax said, rolling her eyes.

"Jax, you look well," Catherine said hesitantly. "I'm . . . we heard, from Chin, that things got a little dicey. We were so relieved to hear that everything turned out okay."

"Thank you for getting Steve home," Jax said. "It wouldn't have been okay, not without him. Thank you, both of you."

"We did it," Nick said quietly. "WoFat . . . he's done. So many governments want a piece of him."

"Is he going to give up his suppliers, his buyers?" Steve asked. "Because otherwise . . ."

"He might, to get . . . more comfortable accomodations," Catherine said carefully. "I'll keep you posted as I get reports. It's out of the Navy's hands at this point; he's been turned over to NATO. He was an international criminal."

"Navy's taking the credit for the take-down, though," Nick said. "We'll get another medal or some such."

"Well, that's one I might actually show up for," Steve said. "I could stand next to you and get pinned."

"About that," Nick said, rubbing his hand over his face. "We're being stationed - well, deployed really - here. To the base here, in Japan. If WoFat's base of operation was North Korea, and if Joe is tracking Shelburne in this area . . ."

"Shit. It makes sense but . . . we'll miss having you close," Steve said. "Catherine?"

"I asked for the transfer," Catherine said. "The SAD used me long enough . . . but I developed skills in the process. I think I can make a difference here, tracking down WoFat's closest connections. We need to stop the next WoFat before he starts."

Jax looked at Nick's hands, wrapped around Catherine's, his thumb caressing her knuckles. She smiled into the screen.

"You'll find it's well worth it," she said. "Going. Staying."

Catherine smiled, then, genuinely and without hesitation. 'Yeah?"

"Oh yeah," Jax said. She turned serious. "And Steve's mom?"
"We'll do what we can to keep you posted but... nothing yet," Catherine said. There was a voice in the background, and she turned. "Look, we have to go. Congratulations, the babies are precious and you both look happy. Tired, but happy."

"Pretty much sums it up," Steve said. "Thanks guys, you be careful."

They ended the call in a flash of static and white noise. Billy snorted and lifted his head, then nestled back against Jax.

"Your first international military call, and you slept through it," Steve said, chuckling. "Both of you."

"My arm's going to sleep," Jax whispered. "Trade?"

"Yeah, absolutely," Steve said. He grinned and shifted Annie easily, taking Billy and propping him on his chest, as Jax took Annie and laid her on her lap, wiggling her little feet and hands.

"Do you wish you were with them?" Jax asked quietly. She smoothed her hand over Annie's rounded belly, the lavender cotton onesie soft under her fingers.

"Do I - what? No, Jax, I don't. I don't wish I was with them," Steve said.

"You could be... at one point, you could have been," Jax said.

"Yeah, maybe, before Five-O, before I came back home, made a life here," Steve said.

"I don't want you to feel trapped," Jax said. "With me, and the babies. I don't want you to end up hating us."

Steve shifted on the sofa to face her, holding Billy against his chest easily. "Jax, what - never. I would never hate you and Billy and Annie - God, I can't even imagine - no, ku'uipo."

"We could go," Jax said, looking up at him. "I would go. I'm a Navy wife, Steve, and if -"

"Jax," he said, cupping his free hand around her face. "I don't want to go back to active duty. I don't want to go be stationed with Nick and Catherine. I want to be right here, with you and the babies, and Mary. With Five-O, with Danny, Chin, Kono, and Grover."

"I don't want you to regret..." Jax said.

"I gave up active duty to take on Five-O," Steve said. "Before I even met you, Jax. I didn't know about you until after I made Danny my partner, and Kono reminded him of you, and he started with the stories. Jax, I was out of the teams before I even heard your name. Okay?"

She nodded slowly.

"Listen, I - when Freddie told me that he and Kelly were getting married, having a baby... I was so happy for him, Jax, I was almost jealous," Steve said. "But even then, it didn't occur to me that it was something I was going to be allowed to have. Do you understand that? This - this, right here - this was the ultimate, the thing I thought would never happen. Someone who would get me, who could deal with all the - the nightmares, and the bullshit, and the rest of it. And a kid? God, I love kids. Kids are awesome. I didn't dare let myself hope for one, much less two. This... Jax, I want this. I think I wanted it the day you showed up at Five-O."

"You're sure?" she whispered.

"Damn sure," he said. "Jax, are you sure? I know this is overwhelming. Lieutenant Allen said, it's..."
not unusual for new moms to really struggle . . . I know you had to give up so much, during the pregnancy . . . but I promised we'd work everything out, and we will. We haven't . . . it's been so crazy, just keeping them fed and changed and . . . God, Jax, I'm so sorry, I haven't really asked -"

"Steve, I'm fine," she said. "I mean, yeah, I'm a little - okay, so I'm not just showering because I feel gross and awful, it's also because, out of nowhere, I feel like crying, and . . . I don't want to bring everybody down, so I sort of get it out of my system in the shower, and I hate it, I hate not feeling in control but . . . Rachel said that's perfectly normal, she did that with both kids. I asked her tonight, while you and Danny were building a sandcastle with Gracie. And . . . Billy and Annie, I - no one ever said, the books didn't talk about how - God, I'm so stupidly in love with them, I can't even -"

"I know," Steve whispered, a wide smile spreading across his face. "I keep sneaking down the stairs to look at them sleep."

"I know, you goof, because you wake me up every damn time," Jax said, grinning. "And I can't hobble up and down the stairs that much."

"We could move down -"

"Nah," Jax said. "This is nothing. When I left the hospital after 9/11, I was in way worse shape than this, and I had a third story walk-up."

Steve's face darkened. She tossed the information out there so casually, it clearly didn't occur to her that she never should have been put in that position. He watched her now, for any sign that she was visiting the past in her memories, but her eyes were fixed on Annie still, marveling over the impossibly tiny fingers and toes. When she looked up at him, she was smiling.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. So . . . you're happy? You're okay?"

"Yeah . . . really and truly," she said.

He leaned forward and wrapped a hand around her neck, and kissed her gently, his thumb tracing over her jaw. The moment was interrupted with an unmistakable, wet squirting sound from the vicinity of Billy's diaper. Steve glanced down at his son, and then back at Jax, his eyes mournful.

"You know the rule, you're holding him," Jax said, smirking.

"I know, but . . . we just traded, like, a minute ago," Steve argued.

She pretended to ponder the situation, her eyes sparkling. Steve put on his best sad puppy face for her benefit.

"Tell you what," she said, sighing dramatically. "You and Annie make me some coffee, and I'll deal with Billy's blow out."

"It's late," he said. "You sure about the coffee?"

"They've been asleep for about two hours," Jax said. "All hell is going to break loose any minute now. Billy's already awake. And we told the Harts that we'd only call for them if we were in deep shit."

"Yep, coffee, good plan," Steve said. He reached for Annie and held her, snuggled next to her brother, while Jax gingerly extricated herself from the sofa. "You good?" he asked, when she was
standing, steady on her feet.

She reached for Billy, who was starting to protest his situation.

"Really good," she said, looking down at him.

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Steve gauged his distance from the house and decided to start swimming back. It had been good to get in a swim. He could sense the beginning of a return to routine, now that the babies were almost three weeks old. The Harts had left the day before, with promises to return for a weekend in about a month.

"The babies will be a little over six weeks old by then," Maureen had said, winking at Jax and making her blush. "We'll come and stay overnight. Maybe let the two of you take a night at one of these lovely resorts, a little get-away. Late Valentines day celebration."

"Maureen, could you be any more obvious?" Colonel Hart had teased, while Steve ducked his head and avoided eye contact with the woman he considered a second mother.

Steve smiled to himself now, as he cut smoothly through the placid low-tide water. These first few weeks had blurred by in a state of exhaustion and euphoria, their attention completely wrapped up in Annie and Billy, simple snuggling more than enough to satisfy them as their bodies healed. His ribs and burns were a mere nuisance now, and Jax had been scratching absently at her healing incision. He suspected the next three weeks would be a little more . . . difficult. Maybe he should follow up on Maureen's suggestion, book a simple suite at the Hilton. The views wouldn't rival their own, but room service . . . Jax would be cleared to use a hot tub or jacuzzi by then . . . Maureen was a genius, really. Brilliant. The distance back to the stretch of beach behind his house was covered quickly as he mused on ideas, and soon he was angling toward the shallower water parallel with the familiar yard. He stood, brushing the water out of his face and shaking himself, and spotted Jax standing at the water's edge, one of the babies in her arms.

He moved as quickly as he could toward her.

"Hey, everything okay?" he called softly, closing the distance between them.

"Annie was fussy," Jax said. "I thought, a change of scene . . . as much as you and I love the water, maybe . . . it worked. Look."

Annie was snuggled in Jax's arms, her wide eyes solemnly gazing out at the water. She gurgled happily, shoving a fist at her mouth and managing to wrangle her thumb between her rosebud lips. She blinked in confusion, and then settled in happily to suck at her thumb, looking up at Steve.

"Hey, baby girl," Steve murmured. "I'd hold you, punkin, but I'd get you all wet."

Jax laughed. "She'll dry. Here."

Steve took Annie from Jax, his big hands wrapping around her body easily. He snuggled her against his chest and she nestled against him, seemingly unconcerned about the dampness. Her thumb stayed firmly in her mouth and she let out a tiny sigh of contentment. The early morning breeze ruffled through her wispy hair, and Steve smoothed it down with a finger.

"You think her hair is going to stay this color?" he wondered. "I guess I assumed she'd have red hair, like yours, but it looks brown."
Jax was too distracted by the sight of their child cuddled against Steve's strong chest, the water darkening the ink on his biceps and dripping down to disappear into the low-slung waist of his swim trunks.

"Jax?" he prompted.

"Hunh?" she replied, blinking up at him. He smirked at her. "Shut up," she said.

"Didn't say anything," he pointed out.

"Just shut up," she said again, stepping closer to him. Her fingers traced over the swirling tattoos, and then one of his arms was around her shoulders, pulling her close to him.

Mary held Billy at the kitchen window.

"See, kid? I swear to God, they're going to be embarrassing you with public displays of affection your entire life," she sighed. "Shameless. Look at them, making out, squishing your sister in between them. Second thought, don't look. Here, look at the bottle Auntie Mary just made for you."

Steve hustled off the elevator and into the Five-O office suite.

"Sorry I'm late, guys," he said, as the rest of the team stood gathered around the smart table. "It was harder to leave than I had anticipated."

"Sorry to cut the baby-moon short, man," Grover said. "But we need you on this one."

"It's no problem. Jax says I'm starting to smother and hover What have we got?" Steve asked.

"We've got a dead Naval officer," Chin said soberly, as he started to flick documents and photos onto the plasma screen.

"That's NCIS's jurisdiction," Steve said.

"It is," Danny agreed, "but the victim is theirs. Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Graff. She was found in her parked vehicle, inside her garage, by her partner this morning. Special Agent Mark Dillinger. He started CPR immediately, called for a bus . . . she was pronounced dead on the scene. First glance, of course . . . could be suicide, but it's way too soon to tell."

"The special agent in charge of NCIS Pearl Harbor conferred with Sec Nav, reached out to us," Grover explained. "It would be like . . . well, it would be like us trying to work the case if Kono or Jax were the victim. There's zero objectivity, and frankly, the entire department is just in shock."

Steve nodded solemnly. "Yeah, of course. What do we know?"

"Not much, yet," Kono said. "They're sending a courier over with every open case file of Graff's."

Steve studied the photos on the screen, his arms crossed over his chest. "Who has the body?"

"NCIS," Chin answered. "Autopsy scheduled for this afternoon."

"No. No, I want Max on the autopsy," Steve said decisively. "Their ME can come, observe, as a matter of professional courtesy, but if they want us on the case, everything goes through this office. If Graff had a car, why was her partner at her house this morning?"
Danny shrugged. "Why do you and I ride in to work together half the time? We each have our own vehicle."

"It's the car rides that keep the bromance alive," Kono sighed.

"Okay, but still - we start with him. Danny, with me, we'll go interview. Chin, would you please coordinate with Max and the NCIS ME?" Steve asked. "Kono, reach out to Caviness - if we find out this is case related, we may have witnesses in danger. And then you and Grover, start pulling financials. Any questions or concerns from NCIS or the Sec Nav, put them through to me, I'll talk to them."

"I missed this," Danny said, gesturing to Steve behind the wheel of the Camaro.

Steve grinned at him. "Aww, you missed me. That's nice, Danny, really."

"Don't let it go to your head," Danny said. "You just have a way of shortcutting that the rest of us haven't quite mastered, and so . . . okay, I'm going to admit, sometimes things get done faster with you around. Because you're reckless and have a complete and utter disregard for procedure and protocol."

"You missed me," Steve repeated, still smiling.

"Let's not belabor the point," Danny said. "How are Annie and Billy?"

"Man, they are awesome," Steve said. "Sleeping for about three hours at a stretch, both of them, so we're getting decent sleep."

"Wait, three hours at a time, you call that decent?" Danny protested.

"Danny, I can go for a couple days on three hours of sleep, if I need to. We sleep for a few hours, we get up, give them bottles, change them, and sleep for a few more hours," Steve said. "It's great. Mary helps with one of the night-time feedings, so Jax is getting five, six hours at one stretch."

Danny shook his head. "I'm glad that works for you, babe. Five or six whole hours."

Steve started to say something, shot Danny a look, and then stopped.

"What?" Danny demanded.

"Nothing, Danno," Steve said. Little lines of tension appeared around his eyes.

"No, it's not - oh. Oh, geez," Danny said, rubbing his face. "Five or six hours a stretch, that's probably the most you and Jax ever get."

"Yeah," Steve said. He rubbed a hand over his face. "Yeah, Danny. That was . . . when Jax was pregnant, she was sleeping seven or eight hours - that was unusual. It's okay, partner, we just - sleep isn't something that comes easy for us."

Danny was pensive for a moment.

"You guys been doing okay, since your last run-in with WoFat, and Jax's close call with the delivery?" Danny asked quietly.

Steve barked out a laugh. "Shit, I don't know, Danny. The last few weeks have been such a blur, I -
Jax wakes up disoriented sometimes, has to double check to be sure the babies are here, and that it's me downstairs with them and not WoFat."

"Steve . . ." Danny sighed. "And you?"

"I'm fine, Danny," Steve answered quickly.

"Appointments with Lieutenant Allen?" Danny asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, we are. We will," Steve said. "It's . . . scheduling stuff is a little tricky right now, ya know?"

Danny chuckled. "I do, in fact. You've got plenty of us to help, though, you know that."

"We appreciate it," Steve said. "We're good, Danny, thank you for worrying, but . . . seriously, we're wandering around stupidly goofy just . . ."

"Besotted," Danny suggested.

"Yes, besotted," Steve agreed. "Absolutely besotted with Annie and Billy. They're just . . . God, they're so tiny, and cute. Annie started sucking her thumb. Is that okay?"

"Sure," Danny said, gesturing expansively. "I mean, by the time she goes to kindergarten, you'll encourage her to stop but, you know. I don't see any harm in it."

"I had no idea . . . I get why you dropped everything and followed Rachel and Gracie to Hawaii," Steve said. "I absolutely can't imagine . . . four weeks. They've been here four weeks and already I can't remember, can't imagine my life without them."

Danny laughed softly. "It's hard to explain."

"It is impossible to explain," Steve said. "That day I came to your apartment -"

"Excuse me, invaded my apartment, you home-invasioned my apartment -"

"Home-invasioned? That's not even a word, Danny," Steve argued. "Your place was shit, boxes everywhere, that miserable pull-out sofa, and right in the middle of it, the one thing that didn't look like absolute crap, was that framed picture of Grace."

"And the fact that you picked up on that immediately was the one thing that gave me hope that you were more than a muscle-bound pretty recruitment poster boy for the Army -"

"Navy, Danny, the Navy -" Steve interjected. "Muscle-bound pretty recruitment - is there something you would have liked to have told me, because it's too late now. We're both very happily married with two children."

"Very funny."

"Which, by the way, if we were keeping score - which we're not - we're even," Steve said smugly. "Two and two."

"We're - what the hell is the matter with your brain, you - keeping score -"

"I said we weren't, though, we aren't keeping score," Steve said. "I'm just pointing out that, if we were, you have two kids, I have two kids."
"And you do realize, that had absolutely nothing to do with you, right? Twins are a maternal phenomenon. We learned that in high school biology," Danny said.

"I was better at chemistry," Steve said. "Anatomy and physiology, which all made sense and came back to me when I did my SEAL medic training. But biology . . . " He broke off and wagged his hand back and forth.

"Which is precisely why we tried to make sure you were caught up to speed and informed, you know, before the babies were born," Danny sighed.

"In our defense, we didn't know about the pregnancy until almost the second trimester, and then we were kinda busy, Daniel, what with taking down an international arms dealer," Steve said.

"Don't get testy with me, I know, I was there, remember?" Danny said. "Geez, you don't have to remind me. I see it in my dreams sometimes too, you know? Jax, on the damn video screen with WoFat . . . and you, not knowing where you were and if you were going to make it home and -"

Steve was silent for a long moment. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Danny."

"Yeah, well, prove it, and stop putting yourself in such ridiculous situations," Danny said.

"I plan to call for backup more often," Steve said.

"You - okay, I will accept that, gladly," Danny said. "Fatherhood, see? It makes us more rational, more appropriately cautious individuals."

"Jax will kill me if I'm not around to help her with the twins," Steve said seriously.

"Kill you if - you'd already be dead, numbnuts," Danny said.

Steve looked at him. "She'd probably find a way to revive me, just so she could kick my ass."

Danny nodded. "I wouldn't put it past her. You're right. So, backup, more backup. And Steve, you'll talk to Lieutenant Allen? You and Jax both? If Mary isn't available, you know Chin and Kono have an entire network of aunties and cousins that would love to hold McGarrett ninja babies."

"Yes, Danny, what - do you want me to pinky swear or something?" Steve asked. Danny was nothing if not persistent. A fine quality in a detective, a sometimes troublesome quality in a friend.

Danny very seriously held out his pinky.

"What, I have a nine year old?" he demanded. "You said pinky swear, now pinky swear."

Steve linked his pinky through Danny's until Danny nodded in satisfaction.

"Can we please talk about the case now?" Steve asked.

"Talk - who's stopping you? I'm not stopping you," Danny said. "I can tell you're already suspicious of the partner. Why? What about this person has warranted your paranoia, oh Super SEAL . . ."
"I've got this," Jax insisted.

"You could call -"

"Mary. It's an interview with the company first on your list," Jax said. "This is fantastic. I've got this. You've been amazing, and we couldn't have managed without you, seriously, but I am absolutely fine."

"They are really good babies," Mary said, kissing Billy on the top of his head. "Okay. Here, go see your mom, kid. Auntie Mary has to go get suited up in grown-up clothes."

Jax nestled Billy in the crib next to Annie. They looked up at her, waving tiny fists at the race car mobile. Billy scrunched up his face and yawned, starting to squirm and fuss. Jax's hand on his tummy soothed him, and he closed his eyes. Annie maneuvered her thumb into her mouth and sighed, closing her eyes as well. Jax stood, watching them, unable to resist stroking her fingers over their soft cheeks.

"You're so good at this," Mary said softly. Jax turned to see her standing in the doorway. "Being a mom. You're, like, really good at it. Not that I'm surprised, I've seen you with Gracie and Charlie but . . . anyway. And you're right, you've got this, I know you'll be absolutely fine. I think I'm the one that's terrified."

"Mary, you studied hard and got almost perfect scores on all of your tests," Jax said. "And look, you pulled off getting everything ready for us to come home with the babies - that's a skill set, Mare. And you look fantastic."

Mary smoothed down her simple navy pants suit and tucked her neatly brushed hair behind her ears. It waved around her face in sun-kissed curves.

"I've never - I've nannied, and waited tables . . . this is completely different," Mary said. "Okay, wish me luck. Mind if I take the Supra?"

"Of course not. Keys are on the table," Jax said. She tucked a blanket around each of the sleeping infants. "I swear, I'll get your VW running before I go back to Tripler."

"What if you have an emergency and need to go somewhere?" Mary said, as Jax followed her out of the room.

Jax laughed. "The Marquis will hold car seats, but I'm sure I'll be fine."

"You should just get a mini-van," Mary taunted.

"You should wash your mouth out with soap," Jax said. "Mini-van my ass."

Mary laughed, then took a deep breath. "Okay, this is it. I'll send you a text when I'm done, let you know how it went."

"Absolutely," Jax said. "Good luck, Mary. They're gonna love you."

Jax stood at the window and watched until Mary left the driveway. The house was quiet, and empty, a soft breeze blowing in the open window, carrying with it the scent of plumeria. She'd already
caught up on the laundry from the Hart's visit . . . everyone would be content with simple rice and stir fry for dinner, which wouldn't be for hours . . . and the babies were due to sleep for at least an hour, probably two.

Pupule sauntered down the stairs and wound around her ankles, then meowed up at her.

"Yeah, now what?" Jax asked the golden cat.

She forced down a feeling of uselessness and panic and took a deep breath. Walking through the kitchen, she poured a cup of coffee - pausing to inhale appreciatively before her first sip, the novelty of unlimited caffeine still not worn off - and then continued through to the lanai. She left the back door open, so that she could hear the babies through the screen. The ocean stretched out beyond the gentle slope of the yard, and she closed her eyes and imagined swimming, feeling the gentle burn of pushing herself to keep up with Steve. He usually paced her for a while, until his own need to push himself, to test his limits, sent him rocketing ahead. She didn't mind. Both of them enjoyed - needed - the solitude of swimming, too, and some days she was waiting for him with coffee when he finished. Other days, she pushed herself longer, and he caught up to her before she finished, both of them grinning, having burned off some of their mutual restlessness.

"Like you're trying to outrun demons or something," Danny had groused quietly once, waiting impatiently for them to reach that ambiguous point of enough so that they could start the grill and have dinner. Steve had tossed Jax a towel and then grabbed one for himself, rubbing it over his face and shrugging.

"Yeah, might be," he'd said.

And Danny's eyes had gone all soft and fond, looking at the two of them.  

"Well, then. That's good," he'd said, beaming. "Now. Cook me a steak, I'm starving."

Jax smiled at the memory, and sighed, looking at the clear water sparkling in the mid-day sun. Even if she were medically cleared to swim now, she couldn't, not with the twins inside, sleeping. She frowned in concentration. They'd have to take turns swimming now, she and Steve. He could swim in the morning, as usual . . . she could swim in the evening when he got home, on nights that he came home at a decent time. She thought about it a moment - taking turns, and if it would work . . . thought about him holding Annie the other morning after his swim.

Oh yeah. That would work.

As if on cue, her phone buzzed and she fished it out of her pocket, the screen lighting up with a picture of Danny's smiling face.

"Danny," she said, her heart skipping. "Is everything okay? Is Steve okay?"

"Fine, babe," Danny said.

"Hey, Jax, we're good," Steve said quickly. "Driving back from interviewing a witness, just wanted to call and check on you and the twins."

"On Danny's phone, on speaker," Jax chuckled.

"Well I'm driving, it's safer," Steve said. Jax could hear Danny chuffing a laugh in the background. "How are you, everything okay? Babies okay?"

"We're fine," Jax said. "Your sister got called in for an interview. Just me and the twins here; they're
sleeping, I'm sitting on the lanai, thinking about swimming."

"Soon, ku'uipo," Steve said, his voice warm. "I know you miss it. We'll have you back out there soon."

"I just realized, I'll have to wait for you to get home before I swim," she said. "Can't leave the babies unattended."

"You can count on it, Jax," Steve said. "We'll figure it out, okay? We'll figure everything out."

"Yeah," she said, and she realized that she believed it. Of course they would figure it out, they had so far. "Yeah, absolutely. And the hospital has a gym facility for employees, too. And -" she hesitated a beat, "and, um, they even offer yoga. I was thinking about it."

Steve glanced at Danny.

"Rachel did yoga after Charlie," Danny said. "She loved it, said it was a great way to recover. Sounds good, babe."

"Hey, I hear Annie," Jax said. "You guys have a new case?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you about it in just a little bit, I'll be home soon," Steve said. "We're waiting for financials and warrants, won't be late tonight. Tomorrow, maybe."

"See you soon," Jax said. She smiled, hanging up the phone, and looked out over the water once more, as Annie's cries started to become indignant.

Soon, she thought. Soon, she'd be cutting through the water once again, the sun warm on her shoulders, her heart steady in her ears. Steve holding the babies, or inside with them, giving them a bottle, maybe. It really would work out.

###

"She sounds great," Danny said. "Okay, I believe you now - that is, indeed, the sound of a happy new mom. And . . . yoga? I thought . . ."

"I know," Steve said, smiling. "She's tried it a few times, even during the pregnancy - the obstetrician said it would be great but -"

"Too many associations," Danny said quietly. "Sounds like she's ready to try again. That's good, Steve. And if it's at the hospital . . ."

"Yeah. It's her happy place, after all," Steve chuckled.

"Trauma centers and practice ranges," Danny grumbled. "The two of you, a matched set, I always said so."

Steve smiled broadly. "It's good when couples share common interests, Danny."

"Guns, explosions," Danny started ticking things off on his fingers. "Swimming with sharks, camping in the wilderness . . ."

"Hey, with the Airstream you guys gave us, camping is a luxury vacation," Steve argued. "Speaking of which, the Harts suggested coming to keep the babies and that I, um, book a nice suite or something in a few weeks. Take Jax on a little get-away, you know . . . some place with room service and stuff. She loves taking the camper but I'm thinking, someplace where she doesn't have to
lift a finger. Is that - that something that - you think that's a good idea?"

Danny stared at him a moment, processing. He opened his mouth to say something, and closed it again.

"You're worried about Jax not enjoying it?" Danny asked, eyeing Steve.

"Well, a little," Steve said. "You know how it is, Danny, we're both homebodies. We like our privacy. But . . . she loved that resort, you know, the undercover op?"

"Yeah, that place was something," Danny said. "Hey, take her back there. It was low-key. Quiet."

"Good idea," Steve said, nodding. "So, it's - it's okay, right? To go that far?"

"You're worried about leaving the babies," Danny said, nodding. "Totally, babe. I mean, we couldn't, because Rachel was nursing but . . . yeah. You know the babies will be absolutely fine with the Harts. Everything you and Jax went through, right before the babies were born . . . you haven't had any time, just the two of you, to regroup. I think it's great. That time together, that would be great."

"Yeah, it will," Steve said. He flexed his hands back and forth on the steering wheel and cleared his throat.

"Oh. OH," Danny said. "You're ah . . . I get it. You're worried about . . . resuming intimacy."

"That's - actually, that's a very classy way to put it, Danny, thank you," Steve said.

"Of course, that's what a college education will do for you," Danny said.

"Danny. I graduated from the United States Naval Academy. Annapolis. It's one of the best colleges in existence," Steve said.

"And then subjected yourself to countless explosions and head trauma, which is why you're a Neanderthal animal," Danny said. "But I digress."

"Yes, you do," Steve said testily.

"We were talking about . . ."

"You know what, we don't need to," Steve said quickly.

Danny put his hands up in surrender. "Okay, big guy, whatever you say. You've got this."

Steve nodded abruptly and they rode in silence for a while.

"Okay, except -" Steve started.

Danny looked at him.

"I don't want to, you know . . . there was . . . that was . . . a lot happened, Danny," Steve said earnestly.

"Ah, yeah, babe, been through this twice myself," Danny reminded him. "In the delivery room both times. You definitely can't unsee it. But Jax had a c-section so . . ."

Steve shook his head. "Still, Danny, there was . . . I mean, that was . . . it was traumatic, okay?"
"I get that, Steve, I do," Danny said.

"And she's really, really touchy about the scar," Steve said. "Which is so weird. And she says her clothes don't fit right, and she's just kind of . . ."

"Hmm. She's always been insecure, even on a good day," Danny said thoughtfully. He nodded decisively. "Wine. A very big bottle of a very good wine."

"I'm not getting my wife drunk, Danny," Steve said. He looked at his partner in disbelief.

"You're not - of course you're not, Steve, you're not a schmuck," Danny practically yelled. "I'm just saying - you're anxious because - correct me if I'm wrong - you're afraid you're going to hurt her or something, and she's self-conscious because the miracle of childbirth does leave a few marks and - I never had conversations like this in Jersey, I'll have you know - I'm saying, candlelight, a nice glass of wine, everyone relaxes . . . it's all good."

"You don't have to yell," Steve said. Danny smothered a grin. For such a badass, Steve could be shockingly sensitive.

"Sorry," Danny said, managing to keep a straight face.

"So, booking a little get-away, you think that's a good idea," Steve said, checking just to be sure.

"I do," Danny said seriously. "Steve, you guys have been through hell and back. Take some time, just for the two of you. Enjoy it."

Steve nodded decisively. He'd call tomorrow.

#*#*#*#*#

"Oh, don't you look at her like that," Jax said, peering into the crib at the babies. Billy was observing a squalling Annie, and if Jax wasn't mistaken, with a bit of disdain. "You raise a fuss when you're hungry, too, just because she happened to get hungry first, today . . ."

Sure enough, by the time Annie had finished her bottle, Billy was working up to a cry.

"See?" Jax said, nestling Annie back in the crib and picking Billy up. She sat down in the beautiful rocking chair, a gift from Mamo, and settled Billy with his bottle. His chubby hands bopped ineffectively at the plastic.

There was the sound of a key in the door, and the gentle beep of the security key code, and Jax smiled to herself. It was a good sound, it was always a good sound when Steve came through the door, and she'd never take it for granted - but she'd done it. She'd managed, both babies, with relative ease.

His heavy footfalls brought him straight to the babies' room, and he stopped in the doorway, leaning against it, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Hey," he said softly. "How's it going?"

"Billy, here, was kind enough to wait for Annie to eat before he started fussing," Jax said. "So . . . it's going great, actually."

"She sleeping?" he practically whispered, and he moved - silently, this time, which never ceased to amaze her - over to the crib. "Hey, baby girl," he murmured. He lifted her out of the crib and
snuggled her against his chest, kissing the top of her head. She snuffled sleepily and squirmed around to get her thumb in her mouth, and then settled against him. He closed his eyes and breathed in the soft baby scent of her, and then looked down at her with such fond amazement that Jax felt her heart stutter.

He looked down at Billy with the same expression, reaching one hand down to stroke his tiny cheek.

"And you, what a little gentleman, waiting for Annie," he said softly. "That's my boy."

And then, he was looking at Jax, and she saw it clearly, unmistakably in his eyes - the same unqualified affection and joy, and then, as he smiled that slow, special smile that was just for her, a flicker of pure want and need . . . and she felt it settle around her, the weight of it like her favorite quilt when she was cold and tired.

"Oh," she breathed, as she finally let herself believe what he'd been telling her all along.

"Hmm?" He raised an eyebrow at her, tilting his head in question at the strange expression on her face.

"You - shit," she said, because she was a cop from Jersey, after all. "Really? I mean, the kids, but . . . me? Me."

He folded himself down, still holding Annie easily, until he was at eye level with her. His hand wrapped around her neck, his thumb tracing over her jaw.

"Yeah, ku'uipo," he said, his eyes searching hers. "Yeah, you. You're the only one that's ever doubted it. You done?"

She nodded, and he shifted Annie, just a bit, and then his lips were on hers, gentle at first, but then more insistent as he tilted her head, her lips parting under his. His hand slipped up, cradling her head as his fingers threaded through her hair, and he felt her last thread of doubt disappear. It reminded him of that night together in New York, when she'd accused him of holding part of himself back, and -

He pressed one more gentle kiss against her lips and then pulled back, carefully, searching her eyes again.

"You don't have to keep your guard up anymore, you get that, right?" he murmured. "Not anymore, Jax, and not ever again. Not with me."

"Yeah. I get it," she whispered, her voice hoarse around the lump in her throat. "I didn't mean - I was just afraid. It's always seemed too good to be true."

"I know," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I get that, I do. But . . . hey, Danny's Law."

She laughed, then, just as the bottle emptied. Quickly, she pulled it away from Billy, despite his protests.

"Okay, looks like we need to add another ounce to his bottle next time," she said. She handed the empty bottle up to Steve and propped Billy on her shoulder, patting his back until he let out a satisfying belch.

"How about a little walk before dinner?" Steve asked. He tilted Annie back so he could see her face. "What do you think, punkin? Go look at the water?"
She kicked her feet happily and gurgled at him.

"Pretty soon they'll weigh enough to use the carriers," Jax said. "We'll get our hands back."

"Hands are good," Steve said, laughing "You up for a short walk, feeling okay?"

Jax nodded, snagging a couple of light blankets off the changing table. They headed out the back door toward the water. Billy kicked as he felt the breeze on his cheeks, and Jax winced.

"I knew that was you before, you know, assaulting my bladder," she said. "Trade. Kick against your daddy's ridiculous abs."

Steve chuckled as they carefully switched babies, so that Annie was snuggled on Jax's shoulder, and Billy was cradled in Steve's hands, facing outward, kicking with all his might. They walked slowly, the sky turning orange and fuschia above them.

"Tell me about the case?" Jax asked.

"NCIS agent found dead in her garage," Steve sighed. "Her second-in-command, her partner, found her, inside her car . . . apparent suicide. The field office is reeling, so they called us in." He paused for a moment. "Danny thinks it's par for the course, that her partner would stop by her house early in the morning."

"Because it's par for the course for you and Danny," Jax said. She tucked a blanket around Annie, bopping her nose with her finger.

"Yeah . . . I don't know. But, I'm the only one of us that isn't a cop," Steve laughed. "We're looking at everything of course, but . . . I don't know. Danny's probably right. We don't have motive."

Jax raised an eyebrow at him. "Doesn't take much," she said softly. "Jealousy, for example. If your gut is telling you to look at the partner, look at the partner."

"I hope you're wrong," he said. "But thanks . . . that's helpful."

Billy yawned and batted tiny fists against his eyes.

"Look at that, nothing like salt air to make you sleepy, hunh, big guy?" Jax murmured.

They headed back into the house, and tucked the babies securely into their crib. Billy kicked his blanket away, and Annie grumbled until she secured her thumb, but in just moments they were sound asleep, tiny lips parted just slightly.

"I could stare at them for hours," Steve whispered.

"I did, today," Jax said. "It was amazing. I didn't get the laundry done, though."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, bending to nuzzle against her neck, his heavy stubble scratching deliciously against her skin. She sighed and leaned into him. His hand threaded into her hair and he tilted her face up to his.

"Are you happy?" he asked softly.

"So happy," she said.

"Then I don't care if you don't do anything, at all, besides stare at the babies," he declared.
"I want to go back to work, though, too," Jax said.

"Then you can go back to work, and stare at the babies when you're not at work," he said. "Deal?"

"Sounds good," Jax said. She stretched up on tiptoe, carefully, wrapping her arms around his neck. He grinned at her as he tilted his head towards hers, capturing her lips in a tender kiss.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he groaned in frustration, fumbling for it to silence it before it woke the babies. A pleased smile spread across his face as he stepped away from the crib and toward the hall, one hand wrapping around Jax's.

"Mary got the job," he said, once they were out of the nursery. "They loved her, she loves them - it's a good fit - lots of exclamation points - wants to know if we're okay if she meets up with Kono and her friends to celebrate."

"Of course," Jax said. She couldn't quite keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

Steve's fingers moved quickly over the phone. "Hey," he said, stopping to look at Jax. "Did you want to join them? You know they'd absolutely love it."

Jax smiled. "Not tonight. I think, while I still have stitches, a girls' night out - especially with Kono and your sister - might be pushing it. But . . . in the future? Yeah. Yeah, I would love that. I've missed that. Maybe . . . after I'm cleared, from my six week checkup."

He ducked his head, smiling slyly.

"What - wait," she said, "why are you looking at me through those ridiculous lashes? I'm suspicious."

"I was thinking about . . . speaking of your checkup . . . that resort, where we pulled the undercover op," he said. "You seemed to like it."

"It was beautiful," she said. "But so is our home."

He shook his head. "Nothing will ever be more beautiful to me than our home. But I think some time away would be good. Just the two of us."

She glanced behind him, into the babies' room.

"Two nights, max," Steve said. "The Harts have offered to come."

"I guess . . . a couple nights, completely uninterrupted sleep -"

Steve smirked.

"Okay, a couple nights, completely uninterrupted not-sleep," Jax amended. The way his hand was resting at her waist, his long fingers rubbing absently against the small of her back, she was starting to warm to the idea.

He bent and kissed her again, pulling away reluctantly and leaving her breathless.

"You want to make the reservation, or you want me to call?" she asked. "And stop with the smirking . . ."
"Financials and phone records come back clean, boss," Kono said, as they stood clustered around the smart table. "No red flags. Graff retired from the Navy with the rank of Lieutenant Commander, impeccable service record, and joined NCIS just three years ago."

"Kinda like your friend Hanna," Danny said.

"Yeah, except I don't think Agent Hanna turned down an offer from the JAG Corp in order to become a cop," Chin said.

"Tells us she was damn good at what she did, and not ready to settle into a desk job. What do we have from the ME report?" Steve asked.

"One item of significance," Chin said. "Special Agent Graff suffered a blunt force trauma to the base of her skull, within hours of her death."

"So, someone took her out with a blow to the head, and staged the body in hopes that it would be assumed she committed suicide," Grover offered. "Thought they could get away with it, maybe?"

Steve folded his arms over his chest and studied the information on the screen.

"Or," Danny said, holding up a finger, "she fell in the shower, didn't realize she'd given herself a concussion, got in her car to go to work, and was more disoriented than she realized. Or passed out just after starting the car, before she opened the garage door."

"Max said that the carbon monoxide poisoning was definitely the COD," Chin said. "So your theory is . . . plausible, I suppose."

"Not so much a theory, really," Danny said, "more of a devil's advocate scenario."

"So you're not buying accidental death or suicide, either," Steve said.

"Not yet," Danny said. "But accidents do happen."

"Sometimes when you hear hoofbeats, it's just horses, not zebras," Grover added.

Steve laughed. "Well, I say we rule out the zebras, just to be sure. The partner, Agent Dillinger, was vague on the details of their current open case. In the absence of any other leads, I say we start there and work our way back."

Kono nodded and sent more images to the plasma. "They were working an internal investigation, a supply of prescription opioids unaccounted for when the U.S.S. Halsey pulled back into Pearl six months ago."

"Now, see, Dillinger didn't mention that," Steve said, pointing at the screen. "I served on the Halsey, caught a ride from Coronado to the Persian Gulf back in 2008."

"How much of a supply are we talking?" Chin asked.

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars in street value," Grover said.

"Motive," Chin said.
"I want everything, absolutely everything," Steve said. "And we're going back to interview Dillinger again."

NCIS Special Agent Mark Dillinger paced in his tiny studio apartment. He had regretted taking the transfer to Pearl almost from the moment he'd arrived on the island, not that anyone understood. The pay differential should have been enough to allow him a more comfortable standard of living, but of course, the pay differential didn't take into account the cost of his Vicodin habit.

He was screwed, no matter which way he looked at it. He hadn't killed Elizabeth - not that Five-O would believe him. And he hadn't ratted out his supplier - not that he would believe him, either. No, he'd just managed to get himself caught in the middle with absolutely no way out.

He stopped pacing and took a deep breath, trying to steady his racing heart and shaking hands. Off the island. He had to get off the island, first of all, because it was too damn small and at this point, it was just a question of who would get to him first.

His bug-out bag was in the trunk of his car. He'd grab it, call a taxi, and leave his phone in the trunk of the car. If he was lucky, he could get to the airport.

The banging on his front door told him that his luck had already run out.

"Yeah, Chin, what have you got?" Danny asked, as Steve drove faster than strictly necessary toward Agent Dillinger's address.

Steve glanced over as Danny thumbed his phone to speaker.

"Guys, HPD was just called to the apartment complex where you're headed, with a report of suspicious activity," Chin said. "Someone called in shouting, sounds of an altercation . . . could be coincidence, but . . . "

"Yeah, because anytime there's violence in our vicinity, that's coincidental," Danny said. His hand gripped the door handle as Steve accelerated even more. "Can we assume that HPD is on the way, at least?"

"They are, and so are we," Chin said. "Kono's driving."

"Oh, goody, she's even crazier than Steve, you might beat us there," Danny said.

Within moments, Steve was angling the Camaro into the cracked and unkempt parking lot.

"It doesn't look any more promising today," Danny grumbled.

"It reminds me of your first dump," Steve said, as he climbed out of the car. His hand went to his sidearm immediately. "Danny, Dillinger's door is open."

Steve started to take off toward the building.

"Steven, vest," Danny hissed at him. He was pulling his own vest on over his head with one hand, and tossing Steve's at him with the other. Steve caught it one-handed and struggled into it as he walked across the parking lot.

"No cover, no sense of self-preservation, the big idiot," Danny muttered under his breath. He slapped
down the last of the velcro and caught up to Steve.

They both drew their weapons and quietly ascended the staircase leading to the narrow landing outside the second story apartments. They could hear the sound of flesh striking flesh from the open door. Danny held his badge up in view of a neighbor anxiously peeking out of her blinds.

"She's probably the one who called it in," Steve murmured. "Glad she had sense to stay inside. Come on."

"Okay, but only because HPD is already en route," Danny whispered back. "You're waiting for back-up now, remember?"

"Aww, Danny, but you're my favorite back-up," Steve said, grinning. "On three?"

Danny nodded grimly, gripping his weapon firmly and crouching, training his focus on whatever might wait for them behind the door. They could hear shouting, now.

"You're a filthy cop," a voice said, followed by the dull thud. "Who else is undercover? Give us names."

Steve counted down three fingers and then kicked the door the rest of the way open.

"Five-O!" he shouted, as the door crashed against the wall and bounced back. Three shots rang out, and Steve returned fire reflexively, instinct and training and muscle memory taking over.

Agent Dillinger was in a chair in the center of the room, blood pouring freely from his mouth and nose. Two bodies were on the floor on either side of him, their firearms still in their hands. Steve winced, preparing for a thorough tongue-lashing from Danny on paperwork and protocol.

In fact, Danny was quiet.

Too quiet.
Kono put the car into park and was out of the door before the engine completely quit turning. She and Chin could barely hear the sirens in the distance. HPD was on the way.

That was a small consolation at the moment.

"Second story," Chin said. "Looks like -"

"I see them. God, Chin, he has Danny," Kono said. She slipped to the back of her car and pulled out the sniper rifle, her hands moving swift and steady.

Don't think, she told herself. Don't think, just breathe.

#*#*#*#*

"Toss your gun on the bed," the gunman snarled. He pressed his Glock against Danny's temple, his arm around Danny's neck.

"Look," Steve said. He had his SIG trained on the gunman but held one hand up, trying desperately to convey calm and control. "The place is about to be crawling with cops. Let's work this out right now, while it's quiet. Just me and you. Come on, you have a shot at getting away clean, right now. Once you hear sirens, it's over."

How the hell? How did he get the drop on Danny?

The gunman hesitated.

"Shoot him, Steven," Danny said. His voice was strained.

"Shut up, Danny," Steve said. Their bickering was automatic, instinctive, and he felt something in him settle and calm. It didn't change the fact that he didn't have a shot. Of all the people to use Danny as a human shield, it had to be some asshole who was roughly Danny's size, just an inch or so taller.

Danny rolled his eyes and tried elbowing his captor, his vest riding up.

Oh. Oh, shit. That's how he got the drop, Steve realized, as he saw the darkening stain spreading just above the edge of Danny's pants. His eyes flicked back up to Danny's, panicked, and Danny gave a little what-are-you-gonna-do shrug.

"Put the gun down, Paxton, you have no way out," Dillinger said. "You'll go down for dealing. I'm going down with you. Come on, man, don't make this worse."

"I - I'm going to make demands," Paxton said. "I have a hostage. I'm going to make demands."

Steve gripped his SIG more firmly and rolled his neck. This Paxton, whoever he was, was going to make a mistake, soon. He might have a split second, and he had to be ready to use it.

"Your hostage is injured, though," Steve said, "and that doesn't work to your advantage, trust me. At this very moment, all I have on you is suspicion of drug-related activity and assaulting an officer. Arguments are going to be made that you didn't even know the identity of the man you're holding, there. At this moment, things are still okay for you. You can still work with this."

Paxton hesitated, and then the sound of sirens pierced the air, and he glanced, wildly, toward the
parking lot.

There was a crack, and so much blood, that for a horrifying moment Steve thought that it had happened, that Paxton had pulled the trigger. Danny's body was tangled with Paxton's, a jumble of limbs, and there was a dull thud as both bodies fell to the floor. Steve's hands were shaking as he quickly holstered his SIG, rushing to kneel next to Danny.

Chin and Kono materialized, Kono slinging the rifle on her back. Steve glanced up at them for a split second before turning his attention back to Danny, his big hands wrapping carefully around Danny's shoulders, trying to ease him free of Paxton..

"Shit, oh, shit no," Kono said, her eyes wild as she fell to her knees next to Steve.

Danny was still and quiet and there was so much blood, but then Steve finally - finally - rolled Paxton's limp, mangled body to the side, and Danny twitched..

"Kono, you magnificent creature," Danny groaned. "Oh, holy shit, Rachel's going to be furious."

Steve rocked back on his heels, closing his eyes and swallowing convulsively.

"I'm 'kay, babe," Danny grunted out, reaching for Steve, and Steve snapped back into control, his hands steady now, as he peeled away Danny's vest.

"Thank God," Kono said. She dashed into the bathroom and came back with a clean towel, tossing it down to Steve, phone to her ear, calling for an ambulance.

"Chin, can you -" Steve said, tilting his head toward Dillinger. "Book 'im, for Danno."

"You've got it," Chin said. "Take care of Danny, we'll handle the rest."

"Hang on, Danny," Steve murmured. His fingers ghosted over Danny's side, as he muttered about entrance and exit.

"Graze," Danny gritted out. "Just a graze - caught - caught me just under the vest."

Steve nodded and glanced around. He tilted his head at the metal doorframe, now sporting a sizeable dent.

"Ricochet," he said. "Danny, I'm sorry, we shoulda -"

"Nah, for once - for once I thought we had it under control," Danny said. He chuckled, his face contorting in pain. "The cavalry was already on the way."

Grover was thundering up the stairs, Duke on his heels. They stopped in their tracks at the blood-soaked scene in front of them.

"I'll call Max," Grover said. "This is . . . this is a hell of a mess, even for you, McGarrett."

"Kono took the shot," Steve said quietly, looking up at Grover. They both looked for her then, spotting her in the parking lot, waving the ambulance in.

"Lou, follow me and Danny to Tripler, give me a ride back to the palace?" Steve asked. "Chin, you and Kono book Dillinger and get him to Queens, let Malia check him out. Then you keep him under wraps until we get this sorted. There may be more people gunning for him now. You stall NCIS, you understand? We've got one agent dead and one nearly killed. If there's a breach -"
"Got it," Chin nodded. He helped Dillinger out of the chair. Handcuffs didn't seem necessary for a man who could barely shuffle.

"And Chin," Steve added quietly, "keep an eye on Kono."

#*#*#*#*#

Gus was waiting at the double doors of Tripler's emergency department, her hands on her hips.

"You yahoos again," she said, as Steve unnecessarily helped push Danny's gurney through. "We were having a good run, there, Commander. I haven't seen any of your people in a while. What, you get bored?"

"It was a ricochet," Steve protested. "And back-up was already on the way and everything."

"Okay, we do we got?" Gus sighed, pen poised over the chart. "Anything change enroute?"

"Yes, his BP -" Steve started.

"The patient's blood pressure has dropped since we called in," the EMT interrupted, while Gus glared at Steve. "He's mildly shocky, but overall still stable. Reports pain at an eight. Wound has not been cleaned or debrided, we focused on controlling bleeding. Scene was definitely a source of contaminant."

"Okay, Trauma 1, I'll get Dr. Marks," Gus said. "Family been called? We expect the usual Five-O entourage?"

"I called Rachel and Jax," Grover said, coming in behind them. He had Steve and Danny's go-bags held easily in his big hands.

"Thanks, Lou," Danny said.

Gus snapped her fingers and pointed at the bags. "Commander, go to the staff locker room and - for the love of God, please tell me all that is not Detective William's blood?"

"No, ma'am," Steve said, taking his bag from Grover.

"We got more incoming?" Gus demanded.

"No, ma'am," Steve said. She picked up on the grim satisfaction in his voice and nodded.

"Okay, then go, you are a walking biohazard and I won't have you dropping biological all over my department," she said. She pointed and then scurried after the gurney, which was being wheeled into the trauma room.

"Thanks for calling Rachel and Jax," Steve said.

"Called Renee, too," Grover said. "She's going to meet up with us here, offer to help out with Charlie. Gracie's in school, of course. Jax said Mary was still at the house, hadn't started work yet, so she's on her way. How's our boy? That paramedic said something about shock. Thought it was just a graze."

Steve started to rub his hand across his eyes, frowning when he realized it was still covered in blood . . . mostly Danny's. He wiped it absently on his shirt instead.

"It was a graze, but . . . a ricochet, it was more like shrapnel. I couldn't see the edges of the wound, I
have no idea how deep it is, it just . . . they're going to have a time, getting it cleaned up and stitched," Steve said. "Damn it, you'd expect this to happen to you or me, the vest coverage isn't the best, but Danny . . . I can't believe this happened."

"Hey, McGarrett," Grover said, his voice firm. "It coulda happened to any one of us. Go on, get cleaned up, man, you're . . . Lord almighty, what a mess."

"You heard from Chin or Kono?" Steve asked. "She had to take a head shot, man, that's . . ."

"I'll check on 'em," Grover said. "Go, before Rachel and Jax get here. They don't need to see this."

"Holy shit," Jax's voice came from behind Grover.

"How'd you -" Grover gaped at her.

"Lights and sirens, I still have a badge," Jax said, shrugging. "What the hell, Steve? Grover said Danny got grazed, you're - oh my God, is that Danny's?"

"No, ku'uipo it - guy had Danny, gun to his head, I couldn't get a clean shot," Steve said. "Kono flanked him, had to take a head shot, it was the only way. If she'd winged him, he might've -"

"Okay, well, Grover's right, this would freak Rachel the hell out," Jax said, gesturing at him helplessly. "Go, get - I'll check on Danny."

"Trauma 1," Steve said. He wanted to reach for Jax, hold her, smooth his thumb over the worried lines between her eyes, but that would have to wait. She rushed past him and pushed through the door of the trauma room.

"McGarrett," Gus said. "You are not signing in, I do not have you back on payroll."

"I'm just here for Danny," Jax said. She deftly stepped around Gus and positioned herself at Danny's shoulder. "Hey, Danno, you zig when you shoulda zagged?"

"Something like that, babe," Danny said. He tried to manage a smile.

Dr. Marks was probing the edges of the jagged wound. "Detective Williams, the good news is that nothing vital was damaged. The bad news . . . this is a disaster of a wound. No clean edges, you've got fiber and God only knows what else contaminating . . . we'll debride and I'll get someone from plastics to do the sutures. You'll need to have an IV antibiotic and then a ten day course to follow up."

"Shouldn't he stay overnight?" Jax asked.

"Hell no, he should not," Danny said.

Another nurse knocked on the door and poked her head into the room. "Detective Williams' wife is here."

"Come on in, Ms. Williams, just for a minute," Gus said, "and then we'll get you settled in family waiting while we do the debridement and sutures."

Rachel came into the room, holding Charlie in her arms. She bit her lip and surveyed the room. Danny's bloodied clothes had been cut away and were still in a heap in the corner. His hair was matted with blood spatter. Discarded gauze trailed from the edge of the narrow gurney down to the floor. She paled as her eyes fell on his side, bleeding through the most recent dressing.
"I can't do this," she said softly. "I simply can't be here, with Charlie, I -"

"Let me take him," Jax offered again. "We can switch keys, I can take him back to my house, take your van and drive Charlie there. Meet up and switch back later."

"No. I don't - I can't do this, I simply can't," Rachel said, her voice breaking. "I'm sorry, Danny, I thought it would be different. I thought I could be different. I'm sorry."

She fled the room, leaving Danny shocked and staring after her. He fist the sheet in his hand in frustration.

"Can we please get me patched up, quickly, so that I can go home?"

Steve barged into the room.

"What's going on? How bad - Rachel just blew by us in the hall without a word - what the hell -"

"She got spooked," Danny said. "Steve, I'm fine. You - go interview Dillinger. Go. Go do the thing, please, just - can I just get sewn up here? Jax, you too, I know you left the twins."

Steve crowded in behind Jax as Dr. Marks and Gus set up on the other side of Danny.

"Danny, I'm sorry," he said, reaching around Jax to squeeze Danny's shoulder. "Soon as they're done, we'll get you home. Take as much time as you need for Rachel . . ."

He wrapped his arms around Jax and pulled her close to him for a moment, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

"I gotta go," he murmured. "Billy and Annie okay? Mary's got them?"

"We're all good," Jax said. "Go, do what you need to do. I'll let Danny fill me in on all of your exploits."

Dr. Marks murmured instructions to Gus, and she busied herself setting up Danny's IV.

"You'll feel much more comfortable in just a few minutes," Gus said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "We're giving you the good stuff. I'll be back in to debride. Dr. Marks is going to go find a suture whiz." She gave his shoulder a gentle pat.

Jax situated a rolling table and stool next to Danny's shoulder, then filled a basin with warm water and grabbed some washcloths. She sat down and dipped a cloth into the basin and wrung it out.

"Whose blood is this?" she asked, as she started dabbing away the blood spattered on his face.

"So, our NCIS agent, the partner," Danny said. "Turns out there's a shit ton of opioid - prescription opioid - missing. Dillinger . . . somehow, he was mixed up in it. We got to his apartment, couple thugs were trying to beat information out of him. They fired on Steve, he returned fire, put them down, but not before one of their rounds bounced off the door frame into yours truly here. There was a third guy, though, we didn't - I felt this god awful pain in my side, then next thing I know, I'm in a choke hold with a gun muzzle at my temple. Steve couldn't get a shot . . . next thing I know, I'm in a pile of dead guy. Kono managed to flank him, take the shot."

"Head shot," Jax murmured.

"I shoulda got cleaned up a little more before Rachel showed up," Danny said. "No wonder she freaked out."
"You've got . . . ugh. You've got perp in your hair, Danno," Jax said. "You're right, we should have thought that through a little better. Sorry."

"Not everyone can just rush in to a trauma scene and handle it," Danny said. "You know, I could have chosen a different career path."

"Yeah? Like what," Jax asked. She emptied the water and refilled the basin.

"I could have . . . been a teacher," Danny said. "I have a degree. Coulda gotten my teaching certification, taught high school econ or poly sci."

"Mr. Williams, high school teacher?" Jax asked dubiously. "What, a two story in the suburbs? Family vacation at the shore?"

"Hey, there's worse things than a couple weeks in a rental cottage in Bradley Beach," Danny said. "Tomato pies at Vic's . . ."


"Nothing compares to Vic's, anybody knows that," Danny said. He closed his eyes. "I could have made a different choice."

Steve paced in front of Dillinger, the halogen lights of rendition casting their odd glow over his scowling features. Grover stood against the wall.

"So, let me get this straight," Steve said. He jabbed a finger toward Dillinger. "Agent Graff had identified the dealers, and she was going to send someone in undercover to buy the drugs, try to find out who was involved in getting those drugs off the Halsey."

"Yeah," Dillinger said. "Look, I'm not proud of this, okay? I got injured - line of duty, I might point out - got hooked on Vicodin. Graff stumbled on my source, she didn't know. Didn't have any idea. I - I tipped them off."

"You tipped them off," Steve repeated.

"I didn't want to lose my supply," Dillinger said. "I thought . . . I thought they'd . . ."

"You thought they'd give you their undying gratitude and a customer loyalty discount?" Grover asked dryly.

"They pegged me for law enforcement," Dillinger said. "Paxton sent a couple of his guys to get started on me, try to get me to tell them if someone was already undercover. Couldn't tell them anything, of course, because no one was undercover, not yet."

"Paxton arrives, panics, grabs Danny," Steve said. "Wasn't enough to kill your own partner, you had to almost get mine killed, too?"

"I didn't kill Liz," Dillinger shouted. "God, I could never have -"

"She's dead, just the same," Steve shouted back, leaning over and getting in Dillinger's face.

"I went to her place . . . I was going to come clean," Dillinger said. "I was going to tell her everything. She was in her car . . . I tried CPR, I tried everything but . . ."
"Yeah, no, I don't buy it. I think maybe she found out you were buying drugs from the very people that she was trying to take down, confronted you, you killed her, and thought you could stage it to look like a suicide," Steve said.

"Come on, man, I'm NCIS," Dillinger said. "I know you can't fake that, you can't stage that. You think I've never heard of forensics? The last time I saw Liz alive, she was fine."

"Liz," Steve said. He stopped pacing and crouched in front of Dillinger. "You mean Special Agent Graff? Former Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Graff?"

Dillinger met his gaze without wavering.

"She was more than that to me," he said quietly. "I don't expect you to understand."

Steve scratched at his eyebrow with his thumbnail and looked up at Grover, who shrugged at him.

"Okay. Walk us through your last time seeing Agent Graff alive," Steve said. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed. All the time in the world.

"She convinced me to come surf with her," Dillinger said. "We met at a quiet spot, near the North Shore. Away from the office."

"So there's no one who can vouch for this meeting," Grover said.

"We weren't ready to go public with our . . . relationship, or whatever it was," Dillinger said. "So no. No one would have recognized us; that was pretty much the point."

"So you surfed. Then what, you drove back to her place?" Steve pressed.

Dillinger shook his head. "Surf got rougher than I was willing to try. I wanted to call it. Liz is - was a damn adrenaline junky, she wanted to keep going. I was irritated, to be honest, that she was choosing surfing over me. I got pissed, left. Couldn't sleep . . . got to thinking, what reason had I given her to chose me, you know? I hadn't told her how important she was to me, how much she meant to me. Hadn't come clean to her about my addiction; hell, I'd blown her case. Next morning, I decided to go to her house, come clean about all of it - the drugs, the case . . ."

"Say we buy that," Grover said. "So you go over there, come clean, she's gonna arrest you for obstruction of justice. You argue, things get out of control, you push her. Maybe you didn't mean to, but she hits her head on the counter. You see an opportunity, stage her in the car, turn on the ignition. Even if you cared about her . . . you're not having to look at her, you know she dies easy, no pain. You get off."

"Her complex has security cameras. Check the footage," Dillinger said. "You're going to see my car pull into her driveway, you're going to see me banging on her door, then looking in her garage, then -" He swallowed hard and looked away.

Steve nodded slowly and exchanged a glance with Grover, who shrugged and nodded back.

"Okay. We're gonna do that, we're gonna look at the footage," Steve said. "And if you're telling the truth, then we start looking in another direction for her killer. And we turn you back over to NCIS, and they prosecute you for the other charges."

Dillinger nodded and sighed, resigned.

Steve and Grover walked out of the room, Steve pulling his phone out of his pocket as he went.
"Chin, can you get us security camera recording from Graff's apartment building, starting five pm day before she was found?" he asked. "Yeah, thanks. Looking for her car in and out, and Dillinger's car in and out. You got the plate numbers for him? Perfect, thanks. Hey, Chin - how's Kono? Where is she, she okay?"

Grover waited as Steve listened intently.

"Normally I'd agree, that going over to see Danny would be good, but -" Steve stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's in pretty rough shape, actually, and Rachel - she's not taking it well. I'm not sure that seeing him would help Kono. Just tell her that he's not even getting admitted, that he's getting fixed up and sent home. Maybe - yeah, get her to help with the footage, thanks. Keep her close, okay?"

"Reviewing the footage will take at least an hour, probably two," Steve said. "Look, any way we look at it, Dillinger is screwed sideways, his career is over. I'm still not sure about his story but - if he is telling the truth, leaving him sitting there with half-busted ribs is just . . . get him secured in a holding cell, will you? Make sure he has something to eat, drink . . . last thing we need is for him to keel over on us. I'm gonna go check on Danny until Chin and Kono have something definitive from that footage."

"Okay, can do. Steve. Steve, no, son, look at me," Grover said. His heavy hand came to rest on Steve's shoulder just as he was about to dash to the stairs. "Kono is going to be fine. Danny is going to be fine."

Steve took a deep breath, then another, and then leaned against the wall, bent over, his hands on his knees. Grover's hand stayed steady on his shoulder.

"Danny shoved my vest at me. I got out of the car, headed toward Dillinger's apartment - Danny snagged our vests out of the trunk, tossed mine at me. HPD was on the way, Lou. You guys were on the way, I knew you were coming, and we - we could hear them, working Dillinger over, we just -"

"You just did what any one of us, what any one of HPD would have done," Grover said.

"I took them down, figured, hey, Danny was behind me. Out of the line of fire. They didn't get but maybe three shots off. I dropped them, didn't hear Danny yell, nothing. Thought he was in the clear, and then I turn around and - I didn't have a shot. We have an id on that guy yet? The one who had Danny? The one Dillinger called Paxton?" Steve asked, standing upright.

Grover shook his head. "Not yet. Max has all three bodies."

"He knew, he knew exactly what he was doing," Steve said. "I didn't have a shot. That whole time, even when Danny tried to give me a shot, I couldn't get a shot. When Kono - I thought, shit, I thought that was Paxton, I thought he'd taken Danny out."

"Headshots are messy," Grover said quietly.

"I wish I had - I wish it wasn't Kono," Steve said. "God, she'd bust my balls but . . . I don't wish that on anyone."

"I know." Grover did know. He'd served long enough as a SWAT captain to know.

"But I especially don't wish it on Kono," Steve sighed. "Not so soon. Not so damn close."

"I know, Steve, but you tell me - you think me or Chin coulda made that shot?" Grover asked.
"Not from where she did," Steve said. "Not from the staircase. Closer, but you would have spooked Paxton."

"So it had to be Kono," Grover reminded him. "And she'll be okay. We'll all make sure she's okay."

"She thought she'd hit Danny," Steve said. "I could see it in her eyes, when I was pulling the body off Danny. She thought she'd hit him. Lou . . . for a few seconds today, Kono thought she'd killed Danny."

Grover patted Steve sympathetically on the shoulder.

"It's been a rough day," he said. "But none of it is your fault. We're all doing our jobs, here."

Steve nodded, but he didn't look convinced.

"Go check on Danny," Grover said. "You'll get a call if anything breaks loose on this end. And we've all got Kono's back, you know that."

"I know," Steve said. He relaxed a little, thinking about how Grover had managed to subtly mother-hen Jax . . . how he'd managed to convince him to start dealing with some of his own issues. "Yeah, okay. Sounds good - you keep me posted."

Grover nodded in satisfaction as Steve straightened his shoulders and headed for the basement exit. He wasn't back to his usual swagger, not quite, but neither did he look like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Grover hummed to himself as he shot off a quick text to his wife, then headed back to get Dillinger settled.
Rachel brushed angry tears out of her eyes as she drove. Charlie was babbling in the back seat, grabbing for his chubby toes, the confusion and frustration of not being handed off to his beloved daddy already forgotten.

She stopped at a red light and glanced down at her phone. There was a text message from Renee. Simple, to the point.

I'm home, if you need to talk.

Rachel took a deep breath and switched her turn signal from right to left.

#*#*#*#*#

Steve paused at the coffee truck outside of Tripler - excellent product placement, he thought idly, reaching for his wallet. He found Jax pacing in the hallway outside of Trauma 1, still, and handed her a huge cappuccino.

"God, I adore you," she said.

"Because I bring you coffee?"

"Please, I'm not that shallow. It's not just coffee. You also have a remarkable ass."

"How's Danny?"

Jax took a long sip of her coffee before answering. "The injury is similar to what I had, with the pallet shrapnel from that shoot-out on the docks. So, he's gonna feel like crap for a while."

"Shit," Steve said, leaning against the wall.

"He's getting cleaned up. He'll be sidelined for a while," Jax said. "So . . . today was a clusterfuck?"

"Putting it mildly," Steve said.

Jax slipped her arm around his waist, and he took a moment to pull her against him, reveling in the feel of her soft curls under his chin.

"You smell like baby lotion," he said.

Jax laughed. "Could be worse things, I hope? If Mary hadn't been home today . . . I don't know. I need to come up with back-up plans, you know? But, after their first round of vaccinations, Annie and Billy can be checked in to the Tripler day-care. So, just a few more weeks. It'll work out, right?"

"Yeah, it'll work out. I can wait here to drive Danny home, Jax, if you want to -"

"That won't be necessary, but thank you." Rachel's unmistakable accent interrupted their conversation.

They turned, surprised, to see her standing in the hallway behind them.

"Rachel, hey," Steve said. "You okay?"
"All the business of the supposed British reserve? Highly exaggerated, at least in this case," Rachel said. "I'm sorry . . . what you must think, me dashing out of here like the bloody hounds of hell were on my heels. I'm just not accustomed to . . . that," Rachel said. She gestured gracefully toward the door of Trauma 1. "I handled it poorly, I admit but . . . I'm only human. I'm a civilian, I believe is how you would put it."

Gus slipped out of the room and gave Rachel an appraising look, then nodded.

"Well, come on, then," she said, not unkindly.

Rachael turned to Steve and Jax.

"Thank you, for being here," she said. "It . . . it is different, this time. In New Jersey we didn't have - I didn't have what I have here."

"So . . . you're good?" Jax asked cautiously.

"You mean, can I be trusted to tend to Danny and not go completely barmy? Yes," Rachel said. "I'm sure both of you have things to do?"

"We're being dismissed," Jax said.

"We are," Steve said. He took her by the elbow before she let her temper get the better of her, and steered her toward the door. He looked back over his shoulder at Rachel. "You need anything, you call any one of us, okay?"

"You took care of Danny all that time that she was being horrible," Jax muttered.

"Yeah, but I didn't kiss his boo boos, and I'm pretty sure he's going to prefer that," Steve said.

"Fine," Jax said. "See you tonight?"

He stopped on the sidewalk and turned to face her, sliding his hand into her hair and bending down to kiss her, soft and gentle.

"Late," he said. "We're running down leads, running through footage . . . this case is taking some weird turns. And hurting my people. But we're going to settle it, and then you and I . . ."

He trailed off, smiling that slow, special smile that she recognized as exclusively hers.

"We're going to . . . hmm, what are we going to do?" she pretended to ponder. "Oh, yes, inventory diapers and restock the formula cabinet."

"That, too," he said, kissing her forehead, "and then we are going to go away, just the two of us, away from international criminals and dead NCIS agents and . . ."

"Away from Annie and Billy," she added. "We'll miss them."

"I miss them right this minute," Steve said. "So I'm going to go back to work so I can get home to them, and to you. Drive safe."

"Sure."

He pointed at her. "Crisis is over, you do not have cause to use lights and sirens on the way home."

###
Danny looked up as the door opened.

"Rach?"

"Hello, Daniel."

His eyes scrunched together in confusion. "Where's Charlie? Don't you have to pick up Gracie? What's . . . you're not here to tell me you're taking the kids, please, God, Rachel -"

"No, Danny!" She rushed to his side. "No, I'm not . . . I'm sorry, for dashing out, I just - I never dealt well with this part, you know that."

"I do. You left me for another man and took my daughter halfway around the world because of this part, " Danny sighed. He struggled to reach for his bag, and she picked it up and placed it gently on the bed.

"Are you going to keep punishing me for that?" she asked.

"I don't know, Rach, are you going to keep doing it?" Danny was tired, and hurting, and he couldn't believe they were back at this again.

"No. No, I'm not. I'm here, at this moment, to help you get dressed and drive you home, where I plan to tuck you onto the sofa and spoil you stupid until you insist on going back to work, much too soon, and then I will be there when you drag your exhausted and hurting arse back in the door. And we'll repeat the process ad infinitum, until you retire," Rachel said.

"Oh." Danny was momentarily speechless.

"You're justifiably wary," Rachel said. She opened his bag and started pulling out clean clothes, thankful that his bloodied clothes had been tidied away - hopefully bound for the incinerator. "When I left here, Grover must have contacted Renee. She suggested I stop in to chat with her."

Danny winced as Rachel helped guide his arms into his shirt.

"She reminded me of a few things," Rachel said, smoothly taking over the buttoning. "The honor of being a cop's wife, the fact that I'd signed on for another tour, fully aware of the consequences . . . but mostly, of the fact that this isn't New Jersey. And then she took Charles, arranged to pick up Grace from school, and keep them both overnight. She'll drop Charles back after she deposits Grace at school tomorrow, with Samantha and Will."

"Wow, that's very generous," Danny said. He bit back a groan as he slid off the gurney and tried to shove his feet in his shoes.

"Indeed. I should advise you, we will have Samantha and Will for Lou and Renee's anniversary weekend, coming up in a few months - but you mustn't tell Lou, it's a surprise trip," Rachel said. "Daniel, are you quite sure you should even leave the hospital?"

Danny was clammy and pale, his breath coming in sharp gasps.

"It's a graze, Rachel," he said. "Just . . . hurts more than it did a decade ago, you know? Let's go home. I really, really want to go home."

#*#*#*#*#

"What have you got?" Steve asked, exiting the elevator to find Chin, Grover, and Kono standing
"Dillinger's timeline checks out," Chin said. "Security camera footage has him arriving at her apartment just five minutes before the 911 call. He never went inside. Rang the bell, apparently tried to text and call her, then . . . looked in through the garage window. Nearly managed to get his fist through it, before making the call."

Chin pressed a button, and grainy footage began to play on the plasma: Dillinger, hands cupped around his eyes, peering into the small garage window, then frantically beating on it, shouting, before grabbing at his phone and yelling into it.

"He looks genuinely distraught," Grover said. "Matches his account. Definitely explains the superficial cuts and bruising on his hands."

"So, if he's telling the truth about that . . . " Steve paced in front of the table, hands on his hips, then stopped. "Let's assume he's telling the truth about surfing, the evening before. That the surf got too rough, he wanted to call it quits, she didn't, and stayed."

"That would make anyone else surfing possibly the last to see her alive," Grover said.

"Dillinger said that they were at the North Shore," Steve said.

"Not much by way of security equipment out there," Kono said. "Maybe something on one of the bath houses, but salt water corrodes everything as fast as they install it."

"North Shore tends to have a pretty stable group of regulars, though," Chin pointed out. "And it's getting close to the time Dillinger said they started."

"I'll go interview," Kono said.

Steve made a split second decision. "I'm going with Kono. Lou, Chin, you double back on the missing drug angle. Even if Dillinger is innocent of her murder, he's mixed up with these dealers. It's still our best lead to find out who killed Graff, and close her last open case."

"I don't need -" Kono started to protest.

"Let's go," Steve said, speaking over her with quiet authority.

The drive to the North Shore was long enough that Steve didn't feel rushed. He let the scenery flow by them for a while, windows down, the air blowing Kono's hair away from her face. He waited until he sensed her relax and settle a bit before he spoke.

"You made an excellent shot today, Kono," he said. "I couldn't see your position, but based on what I could see, you set up, what, on the third or fourth stair? Used the top step to stabilize?"

"Yeah."

"That's how I would have done it. Did you go for the apricot, try to avoid the chance of reflexive trigger pull?"

"His finger moved off the trigger," Kono said. "When he heard the sirens. He moved his finger, and that's when I took the shot."

"Even better," Steve said. "It was a good shot, Kono. It was exactly what I would have done."

"Thanks, boss," she said. She turned her face away from him and looked out the window.
He watched her out of the corner of his eye, and just about the time he thought maybe he'd misjudged her, her hand flew to her mouth.

"Pull over," she mumbled. "Now. Pull over, damn it -"

He eased the bulky truck off the road, into the grass, and she flung the door open, practically falling out of it. By the time he put the truck in park, exited, and got to her, she was on her knees, retching into the grass. He knelt behind her, holding her hair back with one hand and letting the other rest lightly between her shoulder blades, until she seemed to be finished.

"M'sorry," she muttered, wiping the back of her hand across her mouth.

He took her elbows in his hands and lifted her gently to her feet.

"Don't apologize," he said, as he turned to grab a towel and water bottle out of the back seat of the truck. He handed both items to her.

"For one thing, you missed the truck," he started, eliciting a chuckle from her. "I was starting to worry. No one in their right mind would take a shot like that and be unaffected."

"You thought I was a psychopath, boss?" she asked, after rinsing her mouth out and spitting into the grass. She took another small sip of the water, the dumped some into her hand and splashed it on her face.

"Nah, just for a second there. If It were easy, Kono . . . well. It isn't easy, and we don't want it to be. You made the right call. There was no talking him down, and with HPD closing in, the odds of him killing Danny - even unintentionally, in a blind panic - were increasing exponentially. I'm sorry you had to be the one to do it. If I'd had a clean shot, I would have taken it. I would have preferred to spare you that."

"You saying I can't handle it?" Kono asked.

"No. You can handle it. This - this is part of handling it. This is a normal response. A little delayed, but that's also normal," he said. "Come 'ere."

He opened his arms and she stepped into them, letting him fold her into a hug.

"I thought I'd killed Danny," she whispered. She hadn't let herself say it out loud, couldn't, until her face was tucked safely in his shoulder.

"Close range, it's bad," he said. "I'm sorry, Kono. I know that feeling. But you didn't. You saved Danny's life."

"When he went down, when Danny fell with him, and there was so much blood and . . . I thought I'd missed. I thought I'd killed Danny," she said.

"I know. I was scared, too, Kono. But I didn't doubt you. I thought Paxton had managed to get a shot off, until he fell," Steve said. "I thought Paxton had killed Danny."

She pulled back and looked at him, skeptical.

"I swear. It never crossed my mind that you would take a shot and miss, Kono. Maybe I haven't told you enough, or maybe you just haven't been on a large enough force to realize . . . you're exceptional. I'm the only other person on the team that could have made that shot," he said. "With training, you'll be better than me. There's no doubt in my mind. But if you don't ever want to pick up
a rifle again, I'll understand, and respect that."

She pressed her lips together. "But I do want to. Is that bad?"

"No, that's not bad. That's what it takes to be a world-class sniper," he said. "When this settles, when
you're ready, we'll train more. Okay?"

She nodded.

"Alright, let's go interview surfers," he said.

"We should have brought our boards, brah," Kono sighed. "Wasting a perfectly good drive to the
North Shore . . ."

Danny shuffled out of the bathroom and toward the sofa.

"Feel better?" Rachel asked, as he eased himself gingerly down to the cushion. She consulted the
sheaf of papers containing his discharge instructions, and then carefully tipped out a dose of pain
medication and his antibiotic.

"Definitely an improvement," he said. He glanced around their unusually quiet family room.

"What is it?" Rachel asked. "Water - let me get you a glass of water . . ."

"It's not that, it's -" Danny sighed as she disappeared around the corner.

She came bustling back in with a glass of water and a plate of cheese and crackers.

"Your instructions say to take your medication with food."

"Rachel. Please, would you just - thank you, really but - would you sit down? Please," Danny said.
He gave the sofa cushion next to him a gentle pat.

She sat down in the chair across from him.

"Rachel. I'm fine. Look, they didn't even keep me overnight," he said. He smiled at her over the rim
of his glass as he tossed back his pills with a sip of the water.

She swallowed hard.

"There was so much blood, Danny," she said softly. "You were - it was smeared, everywhere, and
your clothes were . . . I was terrified."

"Come'ere," he said, patting the cushion again.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said, but she crossed the room and sat down next to him. He put his
arm around her and tucked her into his good side.

"Honey, that wasn't my blood," he said. He watched, giving her a minute to process the information.

"That was - oh. Oh, my," she said, touching her fingers to her mouth.

"I'm sorry it scared you," he said.

"I'm sorry for how I reacted, just bolting like that but - Daniel, I'm not like Jacqueline, or Steven,"
she said. "I just not accustomed to - to all of that gore, and blood, and - I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry for everything that they've witnessed, that they've endured, that's left them able to handle it so easily, but I've not been through it, and I'm not like them."

Danny wrapped his hand around hers. "Rachel, no one expects or wants you to be accustomed to blood and gore. We don't expect civilians to deal with it easily. Chin, Kono, and I don't handle things the same way that Jax and Steve do. But Rach, you gotta understand - they deal with it because of extensive training that none of the rest of us have. Least of all you."

"I don't like the sight of blood," Rachel said. "I don't like hospitals. And you get hurt, so often, Danny. I understand more, now, I'm better about the long hours, and the middle of the night phone calls, and . . . but I'm afraid I may never be able to just waltz into an emergency room with aplomb. And I forbid the children to be exposed to it, Daniel. I refuse."

"Okay, so . . . don't come to the emergency room," Danny said, shrugging. "If I get sent home, it's not bad enough to go through all that trouble. If I get admitted, then come in when I've been settled into a room. By that time, everything is more under control. Cleaned up."

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "No one would understand, Danny, they would think -"

"I don't care, Rachel, first of all," Danny said. "And give my - our - friends some credit. This, right here, this is the part I missed while we weren't together. You may not be great at emergency rooms. But you're great at taking care of me, of our family, especially when we're hurt or sick. It so happens -" Danny pretended to glance around, and lowered his voice to a whisper - "I like a little pampering when I'm hurt or sick."

"Oh, that's no secret," Rachel laughed. She stopped, and looked at Danny. "Oh, Danny . . . when I was with Stan, how - who -?"

"Well, I had Steve," Danny sighed. "And he did his best, he did. But, he didn't kiss me to make it better."

"Ah, that's the secret?" Rachel asked.

"I think that's the secret," Danny said, his eyes twinkling at her.

She turned, carefully, in his arms, and cupped his face in her hands, and proceeded to demonstrate her healing powers, until a pained grunt escaping Danny brought them both up short.

"Sorry," Rachel murmured. "Let's move the pampering to the bedroom, shall we? Get you all propped up and comfy for the night."

Danny let her give him a hand up from the sofa. He smiled at her, and tucked her hair away from her face.

"Rachel, you made the call about the kids today, and I support you in that, one hundred percent," he said. "But . . . I'm a cop, Rach. That's not going to change. And I think the kids would be fine with me being a little banged up."

"I don't like it, Danny," she said. "I don't like them being exposed to this."

Danny sighed. "I think . . . okay. Let's table this for now but . . . we're going to have to come to an agreement on this, Rachel. Something that works for all of us."

She nodded, and slipped her hand into his.
"In the meantime, a foot massage?" she suggested.

"Yeah, Steve never did that, either," Danny said.

Chapter 27: Safe at Home 5
By the time Steve got home, it was dark. He could see a warm light glowing in the baby's room, and he sat in the truck, staring at the house, thinking about the early months, back on the island, when he came home every night to darkness and emptiness.

He could hear Danny's voice in his head.

Well, get in there, don't sit out here like a schmuck, what's wrong with you?

His long strides carried him from the driveway to the front porch and up the steps. As he opened the front door, he could hear muffled sounds coming from the nursery. He made his way to the room and stopped in the doorway.

Jax was holding Annie in the crook of one arm, her bottle propped under her chin, and holding Billy's bottle with the other hand reaching into the crib.

"Need a hand?" Steve asked, grinning.

"I need eight," Jax said. She looked at him through a tumble of curls that had fallen over her eyes.

He chuckled and crossed to the crib quickly, slipping a hand under Billy's back and taking the bottle from Jax, his fingers brushing against hers. Billy protested loudly until he was cradled against Steve's chest, and then he resumed working busily on his bottle.

"Hey," Steve whispered. He smiled down at Billy, then kissed the top of his head.

"Take the chair," Jax said, tilting her head toward the rocker. "You look dead on your feet. How's the case?"

Steve sank into the rocker and propped his elbow on the arm, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He moved back and forth slowly as he answered.

"Kono and I interviewed the regulars at North Shore," he said. "Graff and Dillinger were there; she stayed, he didn't. Turns out they distinctly remember her having an epic wipeout, her board caught her on the back of the head. We've checked all of the hospitals and walk-in clinics, and there's no evidence that suggests she got it checked out."

"No shit," Jax said. "So . . . accidental?"

"Max is going to have forensics go over everything, but yeah, looks like," Steve said. "Preliminary finding is post concussio syndrome, and related accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. She must have passed out after starting her car, before she hit the button on the garage door."

"She might have been disoriented," Jax mused. "And Dillinger?"

"His career is over," Steve said. "Obstruction of justice, and . . . " He stopped and rubbed his hand over his face. "I think he had feelings for Graff, maybe was in love with her, even. If he'd just come clean with her, maybe . . . I don't know. We solved the case but I don't feel any better about it."

"I hate those," Jax said. "Would a couple of sandwiches and a beer help?"

"Yes," Steve groaned. "Yes, that would help so much."
Billy finished his bottle with a wet gurgle, and Steve propped him up, patting between his tiny shoulder blades. He was rewarded with a resounding burp and a blob of formula on his neck.

"Dude, unnecessary," Steve said fondly. Billy gurgled at him. The blob ran down the inside of his shirt.

"I'll finish up here, you can go shower," Jax laughed. "I'll bring you a sandwich, we can sit outside."

"Perfect," Steve said. He deposited Billy back into the crib, wiping his tiny mouth with the hem of his shirt. He bent and kissed the top of Annie's head, and then brushed his lips gently across Jax's cheek on his way to the hall.

He lingered in the shower, letting the hot water ease the tension in his shoulders, the ache that had been there since that morning, his muscles still tight from holding his gun trained on Paxton, hands clenched around the grip. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the water, and almost immediately saw it play out again, the spray of blood, Danny falling . . . he opened his eyes quickly, the sting of shampoo bringing him back to the present, grounding him. He finished up and dressed quickly, suddenly wanting nothing more than to go back downstairs and hold Annie and Billy.

A sliver of light was visible under the door of the nursery. He opened it quietly and looked in.

Jax looked over her shoulder at him, one hand firmly on Billy's tummy as he squirmed on the changing table.

"There are no sandwiches yet," she said, "because I have been assaulted by poop. This - it is a literal shitstorm in here, I'm not kidding. Close the door, I don't want to wake up Mary, tomorrow is her first day at her new job."

Steve slipped in the room and closed the door behind him.

"Okay, what do you need me to do?" he asked, coming to stand behind her. "Did all of that come out of him? Holy shit."

"Nothing holy about this," Jax said. She gave up on the wipes and grabbed a towel. "This is beyond - I'm just going to give him a bath."

There was an ominous squelching sound from the crib.

"I've got Annie," Steve said. "Go, deal with . . . that."

Jax carried a squirming and insulted Billy to the bathroom. She had managed to get the situation largely under control when a bewildered looking Steve appeared in the doorway. He was holding Annie, wrapped in a towel, her bare legs kicking happily.

"It's everywhere," he whispered. "It got in her hair. How did it get in her hair?"

Billy smacked tiny fists into the water, soaking Jax's shirt.

"Okay, I'm almost done with him, we'll trade," she said. She rinsed the shampoo from Billy's hair and wrapped him in a clean towel. "I'm sorry . . . after the day you had, this is . . ."

His eyes met hers in the mirror over the sink, and he smiled.

"After the day I had, this is exactly what I needed," he said. "Okay, trade. I'll get him settled in the other crib, the one is just . . . it's everywhere."
Pupule eyed them suspiciously from the doorway, watching as Jax handed Billy off to Steve and took Annie, starting the process of filling the deep sink with fresh water.

"Hey, buddy," Steve murmured, stepping over him.

Pupule craned his head up to try to see what was happening in the sink. Curiosity overcoming him, he jumped to the counter.

"You couldn't take it anymore, hunh? Had to see what the fuss has been all about," Jax murmured. "It's a baby, see? Tiny."

Pupule sniffed cautiously at Annie's toes, and then looked up at Jax in alarm when they disappeared beneath the sudsy water. He batted at the suds with a huge paw. Annie made a sound of protest as Jax dampened her hair, and Pupule's ears flipped forward.

"Mrrooww," he offered.

Jax quickly sudsed and rinsed Annie from head to toe and wrapped her in a clean towel. Pupule sniffed at her cheek and gave it a delicate lick.

"She's clean," Jax promised.

Satisfied, Pupule jumped down from the counter with a solid thump and stalked off to the kitchen. Jax carried Annie into the nursery, where Steve was bundling up the soiled sheets. She diapered and dressed Annie and tucked her into the clean crib.

"They're barely ten pounds between the two of them, how they could make such a mess boggles the mind," Steve murmured, standing behind Jax and looking down at the twins. Annie squirmed, getting her thumb into her mouth on the third try, as her eyes drifted closed. Billy gave one more enormous yawn and closed his eyes as well, turning his his instinctively toward his sister.

"Start the washer, and I'll make you that sandwich?" Jax suggested.

"Yeah," Steve said. Neither of them moved for a long moment, watching the babies.

"They're so freaking cute," Jax whispered.

"I know. You don't think they're sick, do you? With all the -" he gestured toward the pile of soiled linens.

"I don't know," Jax said. "They seem okay, they don't have fevers or anything. I think maybe it's not that unusual. I mean, people gave us a ton of onesies and extra sheets and towels, seemed to think we would need them. So probably, this happens."

"Shit happens," Steve said solemnly.

Jax snorted back a giggle. "That wouldn't be so funny if I wasn't so tired."

"Same," Steve admitted. He turned, reluctantly, and grabbed the dirty laundry. Jax followed him, padding into the kitchen and quickly putting together a sandwich while he started the washer in the laundry room. Her stomach growled and she hesitated, then made another half sandwich for herself.

She was placing the sandwiches on the kitchen island when he came into the kitchen.

"Oh, good, you're eating, too," he said, smiling at her as he collapsed onto the kitchen stool. He grabbed his sandwich and took a huge bite.
"I shouldn't, I . . ." she trailed off, glancing down at her stomach, still swollen under her damp FDNY t-shirt. She filled a glass with tap water for herself, snagged a Longboard for Steve, and put them on the island.

Steve swallowed, reached out, and gently took her wrist, tugging her to sit on the stool next to his.

"You should," he said firmly. "If you're hungry, you should eat. What is this, is this corned beef?"

"Pastrami," she said. "Grover found it, actually, this great little butcher shop. It's not a New York deli, but . . . it's not bad."

"S'delicious," he said, around a mouthful. "Ws'starving."

She grinned and took a bite of her sandwich. They munched happily, Jax's foot brushing gently back and forth against Steve's calf as her feet dangled off the kitchen stool.

"I think . . ." she wrinkled her nose, sniffing. "I think you might have . . . I smell -"

Steve glanced down at his shirt. "Um, yeah," he said. "I think - yep. She got me. Which means, sorry, but -"

He leaned back and looked at the back of Jax's shirt.

"No way," she said, craning her neck around. "Our lovely little moment, looking down at our sleeping children?"

"Yep, I transferred baby shit to the back of your shirt," he said.

"Laundry room," she said. "I don't want this smell in the hamper upstairs."

They made their way quietly to the laundry room, moving softly past the nursery and Mary's room. Steve grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled it off in one fluid motion, tossing it into the utility sink. He turned in time to catch Jax admiring the strong line of his shoulders and back, and grinned down at her.

"Let me help - it'll get in your hair, hold on," he murmured. He smoothed her curls against her head with one hand, and tugged gently on her shirt with his other, lifting it over her upstretched arms.

His fingers trailed gently over her collarbone until his hand came to rest on her shoulder, his thumb caressing the scar still evident from her first interaction with WoFat.

"I wanted to torture him," Steve said softly. "I wanted - God. I wanted to hurt him. Slowly. For what he did to you, to my family."

Jax shook her head. "It's not who you are, Steve. I don't want you to be that person."

"Maybe I am that person. I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, I could taste it."

"But you didn't," she said, her hands drifting over the ink on his biceps, fingers tracing the swirls of color and pattern.

"Because Joe stopped me."

Jax laughed. "You let Joe stop you. If you'd really . . . come on. Joe couldn't have stopped you, unless you let him. We both know it. You could have put Joe down hard, done what you wanted."
He nodded slowly. "Maybe. I don't know . . . if Joe hadn't been there, if it hadn't been Joe . . ."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close and tucking her head under his chin.

"But he was there, and WoFat is halfway across the world, and he's not going to hurt you again," she mumbled against his chest. "That's what matters."

He tilted her head back with one hand and bent down to kiss her, his other hand curving around her waist. After a moment, she sighed and pulled away, reaching for a clean shirt in the basket on top of the dryer.

"Hey," he said, turning her face gently back to him.

"I'm all - everything's still - I look just -" she gestured helplessly.

"You look just amazing," he said.

"I look like someone who just had twins," she protested.

"Exactly. And that's amazing," he repeated. "What you did, what you sacrificed, what you're still sacrificing, to bring our babies here safely . . . you are strong, and amazing, Jax, and yeah, that is damn sexy as far as I'm concerned. Okay?"

"Yeah?" she whispered.

"Oh, hell yeah," he said. He threaded his fingers through her curls again, and she stood on tiptoe, wrapping her arms around his neck as he kissed her tenderly. He felt her breath hitch as he deepened the kiss.

A thin, reedy wail drifted across the hall.

They stopped, holding their breath.

A second cry joined the first.

"They're hungry," Jax said, smiling ruefully up at Steve. "They're both hungry."

"How is that possible?"

"They pooped everything out, now their tummies are empty," Jax said. She grabbed the discarded shirt and started pulling it on, while Steve groaned and rummaged in the basket for one of his own.

They heard the door to Mary's room open, then she was standing in the hallway, arms crossed, looking at them.

"I heard the babies, and then I saw the light in the kitchen and . . . oh my God, you were making out. In the laundry room," Mary said. "Seriously?"

"Go back to bed, Mare, we've got it," Steve said, pulling his shirt down.

"You're sure," Mary said skeptically. "You don't, like, need a minute to pull yourself together, there, stud?"

"No, seeing my sister standing in the door took care of that, thanks," Steve said. "It's like ninth grade all over again, geez." He pushed past her and headed to the kitchen.
"Six weeks," Mary said to his retreating back. "I know what the nurse said, she said six weeks."

Steve flipped her off over his shoulder and kept walking.

"Tomorrow's your first day, Mary, we've got this, seriously," Jax said. "Thanks, but go on back to bed."

"You're awfully anxious to get rid of me," Mary said. "Why does it smell funky in here?"

Jax groaned. "You have no idea. We've got it under control, Mare, I promise."

Okay, yell if you change your mind or if you need me to come throw a bucket of water on my horn dog brother or something," Mary said. She yawned and shuffled back toward her room.

Jax found Steve in the babies' room, picking Annie up out of the crib.

"Hey, little girl, I gave your brother a bottle earlier, you want me to give you your bottle? Would that be good? I think that would be good," he murmured, tucking her tiny body securely against his chest and picking up one of the two bottles he had placed on the changing table.

Jax smiled at the sight as she collected Billy, propping him on her shoulder.

"Want to sit on the sofa with them?" Steve asked.

Jax nodded, yawning. They settled in comfortably, a tangle of limbs and pillows and babies.

"Bet when you went into BUD/s, this was the furthest thing from your mind," Jax said.

Steve nodded slowly. "Yeah, actually. A family . . . kids. Never gave it a passing thought. Until Freddie told me that he and Kelly had a baby on the way . . . in that moment, God, I knew. I knew I wanted that, someday. Then, with everything that happened . . . I put it out of my mind, you know? And then watching Danny with Gracie . . . I knew I wanted it, someday. Don't ever doubt that I wanted this, Jax."

He stroked Annie's cheek with his finger as she stared at him, eyes wide and solemn, over the edge of her bottle. Billy had finished, and Jax was burping him cautiously. He gave a satisfying belch and settled against her shoulder, sound asleep.

"I didn't know I wanted it," Jax said softly. "But now . . . I can't imagine it any other way."

Annie's bottle emptied, and Steve lifted her to his shoulder, tapping gently on her back. It took a few moments until she finally burped, and then he felt her tiny fist brush against his neck as she worked her thumb into her mouth.

"She's so cute with that thumb," he murmured, looking over at Jax.

Jax was sound asleep, her head at an awkward angle against the back of the sofa, Billy propped securely by the pillow. Steve quickly deposited Annie in the crib and came back for Billy. Jax's hands tightened around him, instinctively, as Steve lifted him out of her grasp.

"I've got him, ku'uipo," Steve murmured. She sighed and relaxed her hands, listing sideways on the sofa.

He tucked Billy in with Annie, covering them with a light blanket and turning on the nightlight before he closed their door quietly and returned to the living room. Jax was half sitting, half lying on the sofa.
"Hey," he whispered, taking her hands in his. "Let's go to bed."

"M'already a'seep," she mumbled.

He slipped one hand behind her knees and the other behind her shoulders, lifting her easily. Her head lolled against his shoulder and she sighed in contentment. Pupule appeared, soundlessly for a change, and shadowed them up the stairs. He circled twice in his bed and settled with a flump, flicking his tail over his face. Steve nudged the bedroom door open with his elbow and closed it with his foot, still holding Jax in his arms.

She woke, momentarily confused, as he deposited her in their bed.

"I was going to make you a sandwich," she said. "When you got home. Because you had a bad day. Danny. Danny's okay?"

"Shhh, Danny's fine and you made me a sandwich," he said, pulling the covers up and slipping into the bed beside her. "Babies have been fed - twice - and they're sound asleep. So are you, really."

She curled toward him, resting her head on his shoulder and slipping her arm across him.

"You don't want your big pillow?" he murmured.

"'S'is better," she sighed.

Steve grinned in satisfaction and wondered, briefly, if he should wait until Danny was feeling better, or if it would be okay to go ahead and torment him by mentioning that Jax had abandoned the hateful giant body pillow, but before he could decide, he was fast asleep as well.

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Max shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but there's no question about it. The fatal shot was from Kono's rifle."

Gracie looked up at her, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Why was Gracie in autopsy? This was wrong . . . they should never have let Gracie into autopsy, it was no place for a child, especially with her father on the table. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Danny's blood. It was on her hands, too. Danny's blood was on her hands.

"Kono. Kono, shhh, you're okay," Brian murmured, over and over again, holding Kono against his chest and rocking her gently. "Danny's fine, he's home with Rachel. It was a dream."

Kono sobbed, soaking his t-shirt.

"There you go," he said, rubbing her back.

"I thought I'd killed Danny," she sobbed.

"In your dream?"

"No. Today, when I took the shot . . . they both fell. He fell on top of Danny, and there was so much blood, and I thought I'd missed. I thought I'd killed Danny," she gasped.

"I know, I know you did, but that's not what happened," he said. "You didn't even graze Danny. It
was a good shot, and you very likely saved at least Danny's life, and possibly Steve's, and the agent's. You made the right call, and you made the shot."

She nodded, her hands fisting in his t-shirt. "I'm sorry."

"Shhh, don't apologize," he said. "It's normal for something like that to shake you up."

"Thank you for being here tonight. I know I wasn't very good . . ."

"You were exactly what you needed to be tonight, Kono, which was someone who needed some time and space to decompress after a hell of a day," he said. He smoothed her hair with his hand until she stopped shaking. She wiped at her eyes, and he reached over to the night table and grabbed a water bottle and offered it to her.

"Thanks," she said, taking a sip.

"You're welcome," he said, smiling at her. "Think you can get back to sleep?"

She shrugged. "Maybe?"

He shifted back down into the bed and held his arms open to her in invitation. She snuggled against him, her long limbs tangling with his. He could still feel the tension in her body.

"How about a story?" he suggested.

"A bedtime story," she said. "Okay, can't hurt."

He cleared his throat. "Once upon a time, there was a devilishly handsome cowboy who found himself assigned to a herd on an exotic island. While on the island, he met a beautiful . . . hmm. Not a princess . . . a beautiful sheriff."

Kono snorted.

"She was a good sheriff, brave and strong. The cowboy's job was to protect his herd, in fact, he had to cast many spells to make them invisible. But the sheriff, she protected her herd by putting bad people away. The cowboy was very, very impressed with the sheriff. So impressed, that he turned down a much bigger herd on the mainland, so he could stay with his beautiful sheriff."

Kono tilted her head up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

"One day, the cowboy realized . . . that as strong and brave as the sheriff was - and always would be - sometimes, she needed the cowboy to chase away bad dreams. And he thought . . . this business of living on separate ranches . . . this makes it harder to chase away the bad dreams."

Kono's breath caught.

"In fact, the cowboy knew that sometimes, he needed the sheriff to chase away his bad dreams, and what if, when he had a bad dream, they were each on their own ranch, instead of together? Would he send a telegraph? How would that help? So the cowboy thought . . . maybe, if he could convince the sheriff . . . maybe they could share a ranch. And chase away each other's bad dreams."

Kono sat up, turning in bed to face Brian.

"Are you . . . are you asking me to move in with you?" she whispered.

He sat up, leaning against the headboard.
"I'm asking . . . if you would consider living together. My place, your place . . . a different place. No pressure. But . . . yeah. I'd like to always, always be here if you have a bad dream. Or a good dream, or -"

Kono cut him off with a kiss, tossing one slim leg over his lap and twining her arms around his neck.

"That a yes?" he mumbled, tangling his hands in her thick hair.

"It's an I'll consider it, I'll seriously consider it," she said.

"Okay," he said. "Can I attempt to be even more convincing?"

"Go for it, cowboy."
By the time Steve got home, it was dark. He could see a warm light glowing in the baby's room, and he sat in the truck, staring at the house, thinking about the early months, back on the island, when he came home every night to darkness and emptiness.

He could hear Danny's voice in his head.

Well, get in there, don't sit out here like a schmuck, what's wrong with you?

His long strides carried him from the driveway to the front porch and up the steps. As he opened the front door, he could hear muffled sounds coming from the nursery. He made his way to the room and stopped in the doorway.

Jax was holding Annie in the crook of one arm, her bottle propped under her chin, and holding Billy's bottle with the other hand reaching into the crib.

"Need a hand?" Steve asked, grinning.

"I need eight," Jax said. She looked at him through a tumble of curls that had fallen over her eyes.

He chuckled and crossed to the crib quickly, slipping a hand under Billy's back and taking the bottle from Jax, his fingers brushing against hers. Billy protested loudly until he was cradled against Steve's chest, and then he resumed working busily on his bottle.

"Hey," Steve whispered. He smiled down at Billy, then kissed the top of his head.

"Take the chair," Jax said, tilting her head toward the rocker. "You look dead on your feet. How's the case?"

Steve sank into the rocker and propped his elbow on the arm, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He moved back and forth slowly as he answered.

"Kono and I interviewed the regulars at North Shore," he said. "Graff and Dillinger were there; she stayed, he didn't. Turns out they distinctly remember her having an epic wipeout, her board caught her on the back of the head. We've checked all of the hospitals and walk-in clinics, and there's no evidence that suggests she got it checked out."

"No shit," Jax said. "So . . . accidental?"

"Max is going to have forensics go over everything, but yeah, looks like," Steve said. "Preliminary finding is post concussion syndrome, and related accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. She must have passed out after starting her car, before she hit the button on the garage door."

"She might have been disoriented," Jax mused. "And Dillinger?"

"His career is over," Steve said. "Obstruction of justice, and . . ." He stopped and rubbed his hand over his face. "I think he had feelings for Graff, maybe was in love with her, even. If he'd just come clean with her, maybe . . . I don't know. We solved the case but I don't feel any better about it."

"I hate those," Jax said. "Would a couple of sandwiches and a beer help?"

"Yes," Steve groaned. "Yes, that would help so much."
Billy finished his bottle with a wet gurgle, and Steve propped him up, patting between his tiny shoulder blades. He was rewarded with a resounding burp and a blob of formula on his neck.

"Dude, unnecessary," Steve said fondly. Billy gurgled at him. The blob ran down the inside of his shirt.

"I'll finish up here, you can go shower," Jax laughed. "I'll bring you a sandwich, we can sit outside."

"Perfect," Steve said. He deposited Billy back into the crib, wiping his tiny mouth with the hem of his shirt. He bent and kissed the top of Annie's head, and then brushed his lips gently across Jax's cheek on his way to the hall.

He lingered in the shower, letting the hot water ease the tension in his shoulders, the ache that had been there since that morning, his muscles still tight from holding his gun trained on Paxton, hands clenched around the grip. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the water, and almost immediately saw it play out again, the spray of blood, Danny falling . . . he opened his eyes quickly, the sting of shampoo bringing him back to the present, grounding him. He finished up and dressed quickly, suddenly wanting nothing more than to go back downstairs and hold Annie and Billy.

A sliver of light was visible under the door of the nursery. He opened it quietly and looked in.

Jax looked over her shoulder at him, one hand firmly on Billy's tummy as he squirmed on the changing table.

"There are no sandwiches yet," she said, "because I have been assaulted by poop. This - it is a literal shitstorm in here, I'm not kidding. Close the door, I don't want to wake up Mary, tomorrow is her first day at her new job."

Steve slipped in the room and closed the door behind him.

"Okay, what do you need me to do?" he asked, coming to stand behind her. "Did all of that come out of him? Holy shit."

"Nothing holy about this," Jax said. She gave up on the wipes and grabbed a towel. "This is beyond - I'm just going to give him a bath."

There was an ominous squelching sound from the crib.

"I've got Annie," Steve said. "Go, deal with . . . that."

Jax carried a squirming and insulted Billy to the bathroom. She had managed to get the situation largely under control when a bewildered looking Steve appeared in the doorway. He was holding Annie, wrapped in a towel, her bare legs kicking happily.

"It's everywhere," he whispered. "It got in her hair. How did it get in her hair?"

Billy smacked tiny fists into the water, soaking Jax's shirt.

"Okay, I'm almost done with him, we'll trade," she said. She rinsed the shampoo from Billy's hair and wrapped him in a clean towel. "I'm sorry . . . after the day you had, this is . . ."

His eyes met hers in the mirror over the sink, and he smiled.

"After the day I had, this is exactly what I needed," he said. "Okay, trade. I'll get him settled in the other crib, the one is just . . . it's everywhere."
Pupule eyed them suspiciously from the doorway, watching as Jax handed Billy off to Steve and took Annie, starting the process of filling the deep sink with fresh water.

"Hey, buddy," Steve murmured, stepping over him.

Pupule craned his head up to try to see what was happening in the sink. Curiosity overcoming him, he jumped to the counter.

"You couldn't take it anymore, hunh? Had to see what the fuss has been all about," Jax murmured.
"It's a baby, see? Tiny."

Pupule sniffed cautiously at Annie's toes, and then looked up at Jax in alarm when they disappeared beneath the sudsy water. He batted at the suds with a huge paw. Annie made a sound of protest as Jax dampened her hair, and Pupule's ears flipped forward.

"Mrrooww," he offered.

Jax quickly sudsed and rinsed Annie from head to toe and wrapped her in a clean towel. Pupule sniffed at her cheek and gave it a delicate lick.

"She's clean," Jax promised.

Satisfied, Pupule jumped down from the counter with a solid thump and stalked off to the kitchen. Jax carried Annie into the nursery, where Steve was bundling up the soiled sheets. She diapered and dressed Annie and tucked her into the clean crib.

"They're barely ten pounds between the two of them, how they could make such a mess boggles the mind," Steve murmured, standing behind Jax and looking down at the twins. Annie squirmed, getting her thumb into her mouth on the third try, as her eyes drifted closed. Billy gave one more enormous yawn and closed his eyes as well, turning his his instinctively toward his sister.

"Start the washer, and I'll make you that sandwich?" Jax suggested.

"Yeah," Steve said. Neither of them moved for a long moment, watching the babies.

"They're so freaking cute," Jax whispered.

"I know. You don't think they're sick, do you? With all the -" he gestured toward the pile of soiled linens.

"I don't know," Jax said. "They seem okay, they don't have fevers or anything. I think maybe it's not that unusual. I mean, people gave us a ton of onesies and extra sheets and towels, seemed to think we would need them. So probably, this happens."

"Shit happens," Steve said solemnly.

Jax snorted back a giggle. "That wouldn't be so funny if I wasn't so tired."

"Same," Steve admitted. He turned, reluctantly, and grabbed the dirty laundry. Jax followed him, padding into the kitchen and quickly putting together a sandwich while he started the washer in the laundry room. Her stomach growled and she hesitated, then made another half sandwich for herself.

She was placing the sandwiches on the kitchen island when he came into the kitchen.

"Oh, good, you're eating, too," he said, smiling at her as he collapsed onto the kitchen stool. He grabbed his sandwich and took a huge bite.
"I shouldn't. I . . ." she trailed off, glancing down at her stomach, still swollen under her damp FDNY t-shirt. She filled a glass with tap water for herself, snagged a Longboard for Steve, and put them on the island.

Steve swallowed, reached out, and gently took her wrist, tugging her to sit on the stool next to his.

"You should," he said firmly. "If you're hungry, you should eat. What is this, is this corned beef?"

"Pastrami," she said. "Grover found it, actually, this great little butcher shop. It's not a New York deli, but . . . it's not bad."

"S'delicious," he said, around a mouthful. "Ws'starving."

She grinned and took a bite of her sandwich. They munched happily, Jax's foot brushing gently back and forth against Steve's calf as her feet dangled off the kitchen stool.

"I think . . ." she wrinkled her nose, sniffing. "I think you might have . . . I smell -"

Steve glanced down at his shirt. "Um, yeah," he said. "I think - yep. She got me. Which means, sorry, but -"

He leaned back and looked at the back of Jax's shirt.

"No way," she said, craning her neck around. "Our lovely little moment, looking down at our sleeping children?"

"Yep, I transferred baby shit to the back of your shirt," he said.

"Laundry room," she said. "I don't want this smell in the hamper upstairs."

They made their way quietly to the laundry room, moving softly past the nursery and Mary's room. Steve grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled it off in one fluid motion, tossing it into the utility sink. He turned in time to catch Jax admiring the strong line of his shoulders and back, and grinned down at her.

"Let me help - it'll get in your hair, hold on," he murmured. He smoothed her curls against her head with one hand, and tugged gently on her shirt with his other, lifting it over her upstretched arms.

His fingers trailed gently over her collarbone until his hand came to rest on her shoulder, his thumb caressing the scar still evident from her first interaction with WoFat.

"I wanted to torture him," Steve said softly. "I wanted - God. I wanted to hurt him. Slowly. For what he did to you, to my family."

Jax shook her head. "It's not who you are, Steve. I don't want you to be that person."

"Maybe I am that person. I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, I could taste it."

"But you didn't," she said, her hands drifting over the ink on his biceps, fingers tracing the swirls of color and pattern.

"Because Joe stopped me."

Jax laughed. "You let Joe stop you. If you'd really . . . come on. Joe couldn't have stopped you, unless you let him. We both know it. You could have put Joe down hard, done what you wanted."
He nodded slowly. "Maybe. I don't know... if Joe hadn't been there, if it hadn't been Joe..."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close and tucking her head under his chin.

"But he was there, and WoFat is halfway across the world, and he's not going to hurt you again," she mumbled against his chest. "That's what matters."

He tilted her head back with one hand and bent down to kiss her, his other hand curving around her waist. After a moment, she sighed and pulled away, reaching for a clean shirt in the basket on top of the dryer.

"Hey," he said, turning her face gently back to him.

"I'm all - everything's still - I look just -" she gestured helplessly.

"You look just amazing," he said.

"I look like someone who just had twins," she protested.

"Exactly. And that's amazing," he repeated. "What you did, what you sacrificed, what you're still sacrificing, to bring our babies here safely... you are strong, and amazing, Jax, and yeah, that is damn sexy as far as I'm concerned. Okay?"

"Yeah?" she whispered.

"Oh, hell yeah," he said. He threaded his fingers through her curls again, and she stood on tiptoe, wrapping her arms around his neck as he kissed her tenderly. He felt her breath hitch as he deepened the kiss.

A thin, reedy wail drifted across the hall.

They stopped, holding their breath.

A second cry joined the first.

"They're hungry," Jax said, smiling ruefully up at Steve. "They're both hungry."

"How is that possible?"

"They pooped everything out, now their tummies are empty," Jax said. She grabbed the discarded shirt and started pulling it on, while Steve groaned and rummaged in the basket for one of his own.

They heard the door to Mary's room open, then she was standing in the hallway, arms crossed, looking at them.

"I heard the babies, and then I saw the light in the kitchen and... oh my God, you were making out. In the laundry room," Mary said. "Seriously?"

"Go back to bed, Mare, we've got it," Steve said, pulling his shirt down.

"You're sure," Mary said skeptically. "You don't, like, need a minute to pull yourself together, there, stud?"

"No, seeing my sister standing in the door took care of that, thanks," Steve said. "It's like ninth grade all over again, geez." He pushed past her and headed to the kitchen.
"Six weeks," Mary said to his retreating back. "I know what the nurse said, she said six weeks."

Steve flipped her off over his shoulder and kept walking.

"Tomorrow's your first day, Mary, we've got this, seriously," Jax said. "Thanks, but go on back to bed."

"You're awfully anxious to get rid of me," Mary said. "Why does it smell funky in here?"

Jax groaned. "You have no idea. We've got it under control, Mare, I promise."

"Okay, yell if you change your mind or if you need me to come throw a bucket of water on my horn dog brother or something," Mary said. She yawned and shuffled back toward her room.

Jax found Steve in the babies' room, picking Annie up out of the crib.

"Hey, little girl, I gave your brother a bottle earlier, you want me to give you your bottle? Would that be good? I think that would be good," he murmured, tucking her tiny body securely against his chest and picking up one of the two bottles he had placed on the changing table.

Jax smiled at the sight as she collected Billy, propping him on her shoulder.

"Want to sit on the sofa with them?" Steve asked.

Jax nodded, yawning. They settled in comfortably, a tangle of limbs and pillows and babies.

"Bet when you went into BUD/s, this was the furthest thing from your mind," Jax said.

Steve nodded slowly. "Yeah, actually. A family . . . kids. Never gave it a passing thought. Until Freddie told me that he and Kelly had a baby on the way . . . in that moment, God, I knew. I knew I wanted that, someday. Then, with everything that happened . . . I put it out of my mind, you know? And then watching Danny with Gracie . . . I knew I wanted it, someday. Don't ever doubt that I wanted this, Jax."

He stroked Annie's cheek with his finger as she stared at him, eyes wide and solemn, over the edge of her bottle. Billy had finished, and Jax was burping him cautiously. He gave a satisfying belch and settled against her shoulder, sound asleep.

"I didn't know I wanted it," Jax said softly. "But now . . . I can't imagine it any other way."

Annie's bottle emptied, and Steve lifted her to his shoulder, tapping gently on her back. It took a few moments until she finally burped, and then he felt her tiny fist brush against his neck as she worked her thumb into her mouth.

"She's so cute with that thumb," he murmured, looking over at Jax.

Jax was sound asleep, her head at an awkward angle against the back of the sofa, Billy propped securely by the pillow. Steve quickly deposited Annie in the crib and came back for Billy. Jax's hands tightened around him, instinctively, as Steve lifted him out of her grasp.

"I've got him, ku'uipo," Steve murmured. She sighed and relaxed her hands, listing sideways on the sofa.

He tucked Billy in with Annie, covering them with a light blanket and turning on the nightlight before he closed their door quietly and returned to the living room. Jax was half sitting, half lying on the sofa.
"Hey," he whispered, taking her hands in his. "Let's go to bed."

"'M'already a'seep," she mumbled.

He slipped one hand behind her knees and the other behind her shoulders, lifting her easily. Her head lolled against his shoulder and she sighed in contentment. Pupule appeared, soundlessly for a change, and shadowed them up the stairs. He circled twice in his bed and settled with a flump, flicking his tail over his face. Steve nudged the bedroom door open with his elbow and closed it with his foot, still holding Jax in his arms.

She woke, momentarily confused, as he deposited her in their bed.

"I was going to make you a sandwich," she said. "When you got home. Because you had a bad day. Danny. Danny's okay?"

"Shhh, Danny's fine and you made me a sandwich," he said, pulling the covers up and slipping into the bed beside her. "Babies have been fed - twice - and they're sound asleep. So are you, really."

She curled toward him, resting her head on his shoulder and slipping her arm across him.

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Max shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but there's no question about it. The fatal shot was from Kono's rifle."

Gracie looked up at her, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Why was Gracie in autopsy? This was wrong . . . they should never have let Gracie into autopsy, it was no place for a child, especially with her father on the table. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Danny's blood. It was on her hands, too. Danny's blood was on her hands.

"Kono. Kono, shhh, you're okay," Brian murmured, over and over again, holding Kono against his chest and rocking her gently. "Danny's fine, he's home with Rachel. It was a dream."

Kono sobbed, soaking his t-shirt.

"There you go," he said, rubbing her back.

"I thought I'd killed Danny," she sobbed.

"In your dream?"

"No. Today, when I took the shot . . . they both fell. He fell on top of Danny, and there was so much blood, and I thought I'd missed. I thought I'd killed Danny," she gasped.

"I know, I know you did, but that's not what happened," he said. "You didn't even graze Danny. It
was a good shot, and you very likely saved at least Danny's life, and possibly Steve's, and the agent's. You made the right call, and you made the shot."

She nodded, her hands fisting in his t-shirt. "I'm sorry."

"Shhh, don't apologize," he said. "It's normal for something like that to shake you up."

"Thank you for being here tonight. I know I wasn't very good -"

"You were exactly what you needed to be tonight, Kono, which was someone who needed some time and space to decompress after a hell of a day," he said. He smoothed her hair with his hand until she stopped shaking. She wiped at her eyes, and he reached over to the night table and grabbed a water bottle and offered it to her.

"Thanks," she said, taking a sip.

"You're welcome," he said, smiling at her. "Think you can get back to sleep?"

She shrugged. "Maybe?"

He shifted back down into the bed and held his arms open to her in invitation. She snuggled against him, her long limbs tangling with his. He could still feel the tension in her body.

"How about a story?" he suggested.

"A bedtime story," she said. "Okay, can't hurt."

He cleared his throat. "Once upon a time, there was a devilishly handsome cowboy who found himself assigned to a herd on an exotic island. While on the island, he met a beautiful . . . hmm. Not a princess . . . a beautiful sheriff."

Kono snorted.

"She was a good sheriff, brave and strong. The cowboy's job was to protect his herd, in fact, he had to cast many spells to make them invisible. But the sheriff, she protected her herd by putting bad people away. The cowboy was very, very impressed with the sheriff. So impressed, that he turned down a much bigger herd on the mainland, so he could stay with his beautiful sheriff."

Kono tilted her head up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she whispered.

"One day, the cowboy realized . . . that as strong and brave as the sheriff was - and always would be - sometimes, she needed the cowboy to chase away bad dreams. And he thought . . . this business of living on separate ranches . . . this makes it harder to chase away the bad dreams."

Kono's breath caught.

"In fact, the cowboy knew that sometimes, he needed the sheriff to chase away his bad dreams, and what if, when he had a bad dream, they were each on their own ranch, instead of together? Would he send a telegraph? How would that help? So the cowboy thought . . . maybe, if he could convince the sheriff . . . maybe they could share a ranch. And chase away each other's bad dreams."

Kono sat up, turning in bed to face Brian.

"Are you . . . are you asking me to move in with you?" she whispered.

He sat up, leaning against the headboard.
"I'm asking . . . if you would consider living together. My place, your place . . . a different place. No pressure. But . . . yeah. I'd like to always, always be here if you have a bad dream. Or a good dream, or -"

Kono cut him off with a kiss, tossing one slim leg over his lap and twining her arms around his neck.

"That a yes?" he mumbled, tangling his hands in her thick hair.

"It's an I'll consider it, I'll seriously consider it," she said.

"Okay," he said. "Can I attempt to be even more convincing?"

"Go for it, cowboy."
Steve heard the front door close, softly and carefully.

"Shit," he mumbled, reaching for his phone. Jax's head was still heavy on his shoulder, the fact that the door hadn't woken her testament to her exhaustion.

He fumbled at his phone, squinting. Eight am, which was the time Mary would need to leave to be at her office well before nine, on her first day. Which meant they'd slept for almost seven hours straight and -

He sat up abruptly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Jax was instantly awake.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eight am, it's eight, which means -"

"Seven hours? Did you get up with them?" Jax asked, frantically untangling herself from the sheets. "They don't sleep for seven hours."

"I know, maybe Mary did?" Steve tossed over his shoulder. Jax was on his heels as he rushed down the stairs.

They hesitated in the doorway of the babies' room. It was quiet. Steve took a deep breath and tiptoed to the crib. He wrapped his hands around the railing and sagged with relief.

"They're fine," he said, holding his arm out for Jax. She stepped in close, allowing him to hold her tight as she looked into the crib.

Annie regarded them placidly, her fist firmly in her mouth. Billy had squirmed around and was gumming away at Annie's toes. Steve chuckled as he snapped a photo on his phone.

"They're okay," Jax breathed. "I was so scared . . ."

"Me too," Steve said. He kissed the top of her head, breathing in the comforting and familiar scent of her shampoo. "Come on, let's fix their bottles and take them out on the lanai."

"You'll be late for work," Jax said.

Steve smiled and sent a quick message and the photo he'd just taken to Chin as they made their way to the kitchen.

"Somehow, I think they'll forgive me," he said.

Danny walked off the elevator slowly, smiling as Kono came around the edge of the smart table to greet him.

"Danny!" she said, wrapping her long arms around him, hugging him gently. "It's good to have you back. It's been way too quiet around here for the last few days."

"Good to be back," he said, squeezing her tight on his good side. "And you? You're good?"
"I'm good," Kono said. "Thanks for letting Brian and I come over the other night. I just . . . I needed to know you were okay, you know?"

"I get it. And thanks for bringing over that bar-be-que, that was amazing. We just finished the last of it last night," Danny said.

"Danny, hey," Steve said. He came out of his office and wrapped a hand around Danny's shoulder. "Doc cleared you to come back? You're sure you don't need more time?"

"Cleared for desk duty, anyway," Danny said. "Besides, I need to get up to speed before you head out of town."

"We could reschedule, Danny," Steve said earnestly. "I don't want -"

"No, what no one wants is to be stuck with you and Jax here when you're supposed to be off for the weekend," Danny said. "So, catch me up on what I've missed . . ."

Danny nodded in satisfaction and tossed his legal pad and pen gently on Steve's desk. The others had said their goodbyes and headed out of the office, leaving it quiet in the softly fading light. Danny stood up, wincing slightly, and helped himself to a water from Steve's office fridge, handing one to Steve as well.

"You're sure you're healing up okay, Danno?" Steve asked.

Danny sat down on Steve's sofa, stretching his legs out in front of him and sinking into the cushion.

"Yeah," he said. "To be honest, my knee's bothering me more than my side at the moment. I twisted it, you know, when we went down."

Steve took a long swallow. "One of the scariest moments of my life."

"Mine, too," Danny said wryly. He took a sip from his bottle and then fidgeted with the label.

"Something on your mind, Danny?"

Danny looked up quickly. "I should let you get out of here, get home to Jax and the twins. Sorry, I didn't mean to keep -"

"Danny." Steve stood up and came around to the front of his desk and leaned against it.

"That obvious?"

"Only to someone who knows your tone," Steve said.

"My tone," Danny laughed. "Fair enough. It's just . . . Rachel, you know, she got spooked in the ER, but she came back."

"Yeah, we were glad," Steve said. He turned a chair around and sat down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and giving Danny his undivided attention.

"And she was great, Steve, she really was," Danny said. "Except . . . she's got it in her head that she doesn't want Gracie and Charlie exposed to this part of the job. Injuries . . . it's . . . it's one of the issues we had back in Jersey. I thought she was past it. I mean, she let Gracie spend time with Jax, even, when Jax was pretty beat up. And you. But it's like . . . I don't know, maybe with Charlie, it hit
her harder again. Ah, hell, I don't know."

"Shit, Danny, I'm sorry," Steve said. "I should have realized there was a third."

"No. No, this is not on you," Danny said. "Back in Jersey, I knew the job was ruining my marriage and... I let it. I just thought that she knew what she was getting into this time, which, in fairness to her, she didn't the first time."

Steve rubbed at his eyebrow with his thumbnail.

"You thinking about leaving Five-O?" he asked softly.

"Leave - no. No, Commander Abandonment Issues, I am not thinking about leaving Five-O," Danny said. "I'm thinking counseling. You know, marriage counseling. I was thinking, if you didn't think it would be too weird, maybe seeing Lieutenant Allen."

"She's good," Steve said. "She's really good, Danny."

"I know, she's made you less of a Neanderthal," Danny said. He smiled at Steve, his eyes crinkling with unmistakable fondness. "So, you wouldn't mind? It's just, there's so much overlap, and I figure, she already understands how Five-O works..."

"It's fine, Danny," Steve said. "Lieutenant Allen is a professional. She's not going to betray any confidences, and yeah, she gets that Five-O isn't traditional military or law enforcement. What else can we do? How can I help, Danny?"

"Eh, just try not to get me shot in the next month, if you can manage it," Danny said. "Look, this isn't your problem, really. This is between me and Rachel. We gotta work it out, figure it out. You, my friend, gotta go home and pack for this little get-away. When are the Harts coming?"

"Tomorrow, late morning," Steve said. He went back to his desk and started to shut down his laptop, restoring his desk to its usual immaculate state. "After Jax's checkup."

"Hmm. You're worried," Danny said.

"That obvious?"

"Only to someone who knows your faces," Danny said.

Steve chuckled. "Fair enough. Yeah, I guess I'm... I don't know, Danny, maybe I'm feeling a little like Rachel. I just want Jax to be okay, you know?"

"I do know," Danny said. "I also know that I haven't seen Jax look this healthy since her first week out of the academy. Tired, sure, but that's to be expected. I'm sure everything is fine, Steven."

"Danny's Law," Steve said, grinning.

"Damn straight," Danny said. "Why are we still at the office talking about our beautiful wives and children instead of at home with them?"

"You needed my advice," Steve said smugly.

"I need - oh ho ho, no, babe, that is so not how it went..."

#*#*#*#*#
It was quiet in the waiting room, the early morning light filtering through the blinds. Steve was hiding his nervous pacing by conveniently pushing the twins' stroller back and forth. A door at the end of the waiting room opened, and Mia smiled at Jax and Steve, making her way toward them.

"Well, both of you look a far sight better than when I last saw you," she said. "And look at these babies. Good morning, Annie and Billy. Look at you guys, all snug in your stroller. Okay, Jax, come with me, and Commander McGarrett, you can chill out here with your babies. You're outnumbered, are you going to be okay?"

"I can handle it," Steve laughed. He kissed Jax on the cheek and she followed Mia.

"Has he looked that smug for the entire six weeks?" Mia asked, gesturing at an open door of an exam room.

"Extra smug today for some reason," Jax said. "We haven't taken the babies out much. I think he likes showing them off."

"As well he should; you both should," Mia said. "Okay, you know the drill; gown up and hop up on the table. Captain Bluedorn and I will be back in a few minutes. Are you sure you don't want Steve here? We can get a nurse to sit with the babies."

"No, I'm good," Jax said. "Thank you, though, Mia. For everything, really. I don't think we would have managed without you."

"You would have," Mia said firmly. "You absolutely would have - but I'm glad that I was able to help."

Steve looked up in surprise when Jax returned to the waiting room. It seemed like she'd only been gone for moments. They made their way out of the office and into the hallway, smiling at everyone who glanced down admiringly at the babies while they waited for the elevator. No one stepped on with them. He wrapped his hand around hers as the elevator doors closed.

"Everything okay?" he asked softly. "What did Captain Bluedorn say? You're okay? Everything's okay?"

"Well. I am apparently the picture of health. Cleared to resume normal activity," Jax said. "You know, swimming, jogging . . . work."

Steve beamed at her.

"So . . . all your, ah, normal activities?" he asked, trailing a finger up her arm.

"Hmm. But we have to be really, really, very careful," she said. She schooled her face into a solemn expression.

"Careful," he repeated, his brow furrowing in concern. He cupped a hand around her face and tilted it up, looking into her eyes.

"Careful," she said. Her eyes started to twinkle. "Because, according to Captain Bluedorn, there's absolutely no reason to think that I couldn't get pregnant again. I got a shot. Pills are - things are crazy, my schedule, your schedule . . . this way, there's no forgetting, no risk of antibiotics interfering . . . So, careful."
There was a squelching sound from the stroller.

"Buddy, seriously," Steve said, shaking his head at Billy. He glanced back at Jax. "Okay, yeah, careful. Careful sounds like a good idea."

The Harts arrived as Steve was swapping out the car seats and stowing small overnight bags in his truck. He waved at them enthusiastically as they pulled into the driveway.

Maureen threw her arms around Steve in a quick hug.

"Good to see you, honey, where are the babies?" she demanded.

"We just gave them a bath, Jax is getting them settled for a nap," Steve said.

"Then I better hurry inside so I can kiss them before they fall asleep," Maureen said. She bounded up the front steps.

Fred looked after her, smiling. "In case there was any doubt as to how happy we are to give you and Jax a weekend away," he said, gesturing after his wife's retreating form. "Let's go ahead and get those seats installed in our car, yeah?"

"Yeah," Steve agreed. They each hefted one seat in hand and moved to the Hart's car. "We really appreciate this, sir. The babies are awesome, they really are, but Jax especially is running on fumes."

"It's our pleasure, and I mean that," Fred said. "Where are you headed?"

"Small resort called the Royal Kona, on the Big Island. We had a case there a while back, and we liked it. It's quiet... low-key," Steve said. "All of the contact information is on the fridge in the kitchen, if for some reason you need us and can't reach us on our cells. We can be back here in no time if there's a problem."

"From the Big Island?" Fred asked. He pulled the seat belt tight and checked the car seat.

Steve grinned as he did the same. "I wrangled a helo. Jax doesn't know it. She likes flying, and I've always wanted to take her up, show her the island. This is the first chance I've had to do it. Plus, it will make her feel better. She's a little worried about how long it would take us to get back here if there was a problem."

"New moms, they worry," Fred said. "We understand. Though, with WoFat in maximum security, I take it you're sleeping a little easier at night?"

"It's been a blur, honestly, sir," Steve said. He leaned against the trunk of the car, his arms crossed. "My team took WoFat into custody just as things took a turn with Jax. I raced back here just in time for the delivery - barely."

"And you've had your hands full since then," Fred said. "Still. You know that I won't assume anything, son. We'll keep a sharp eye out."

"I know you will, sir. Appreciate that," Steve said.

"Well, let's get you and that pretty wife of yours sent on your way, then," Fred said.
Maureen pulled the nursery door closed behind her, latching it softly.

"Jax, darling," she said, wrapping her arms around her. "They are just precious. And they sleep at the same time? How'd you manage?"

"I have no idea," Jax said. "We are so lucky. They seem to just be . . . in sync with each other, you know? But I'll warn you, that includes massive diaper blow-outs. They seem to coordinate those, too."

"Nothing we can't handle," Maureen assured her. "You look wonderful, honey. So healthy. I know you're tired, but that's to be expected. I take it your check-up went well today?"

"It did," Jax said. Her eyes sparkled and she ducked her head.

"Oh, no need to be embarrassed," Maureen laughed. "You and Steve may be parents now but you're still the same people, madly in love with each other. You need and deserve some time for the two of you. And don't you waste any of it worrying about these babies. Have fun, and rest."

"I'm not that tired, really," Jax said. "Mary was wonderful - she's working now, she has a new job that she loves, but she'll be here this weekend - and Steve and I, we're used to not getting much sleep."

"Ummhmm," Maureen nodded. "Because you do what you have to do, and you make the best of it. But mark my words: once your body realizes you're not on baby alert, it's going to demand the rest it's been denied. My advice is to go with it."

"Yes, ma'am," Jax said.

"Besides, I suspect that nice hotel bed is going to look plenty tempting," Maureen teased. "Plenty."

Steve smiled indulgently at Jax as she peered out the window of the helo, finagled through the governor's office and on loan from Pearl Hickam.

"I've been wanting to do this," Steve said. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long."

Jax stared, unashamedly entranced, at the lush landscape unfolding beneath them as Steve curved them effortlessly in a lazy sweep over the island. He pointed out significant features: Diamond Head, the North Shore.

"It's even more beautiful than I realized," Jax said. "How is this possible? How do I live here? Holy shit."

"Not a pineapple infested hell-hole?" Steve asked, laughing.

"I was afraid Danny wasn't going to forgive me for loving the island immediately," Jax said.

"I was afraid Danny wasn't going to forgive me for loving you immediately," Steve said. "Hey. You wanna fly this thing?"

"Oh, hell yes."

"Welcome back to the Royal Kona, Commander McGarrett, Mrs. McGarrett."
The owner had come to personally greet them and check them in.

"Thank you," Steve said. "We appreciate the shuttle from the airstrip."

"The Royal Kona will always be indebted to Five-O," the owner said. "It is our pleasure. We're honored that you returned for a visit. I understand that congratulations are in order for expanding your ohana?"

"Twins," Steve said proudly. He held out his phone, displaying the picture of Annie sucking her thumb and Billy gumming Annie's toes. "Annie and Billy."

"Yin and yang. Delightful. Come, let me show you to your room."

Steve hefted their two small overnight bags easily, and they followed the man to the elevator. He smiled at them as he pressed the button for the top floor.

"We took the liberty of placing you in the honeymoon suite," he said. "My wife and I remember those early days of parenthood. We wanted you to be as comfortable and . . . undisturbed as possible. So you can rest, of course."

Steve smirked and wrapped his hand around Jax's.

#*#*#*#*#

Jax wandered onto the balcony as Steve stowed their bags. He stepped behind her, his fingers slipping under the edge of her tank, caressing her shoulder.

"You remembered I like this," he murmured. He bent and kissed her shoulder, his lips grazing over the scar there.

"That, and I'm still all . . ." Jax gestured at her stomach, still softly rounded.

"You're still all curvy and sexy as hell? Yeah," he said, brushing feather-light kisses up her neck. Her breath hitched as he worried the delicate skin behind her ear with the tip of his tongue. "So, there's the whole resort at our disposal. What do you want to do?"

Jax paused. Steve was an insanely active person; she'd known that before she met him. Danny's had told her of how Steve had filled his lonely weekends with hiking, surfing, taking Gracie to the zoo, teaching them to paddleboard. The last six weeks had passed in a blur of diapers and bottles. She was sure he was probably going stir crazy by now, itching to get out and burn off some nervous energy.

She was also sure that she was not ready to face the world in swimwear.

Quick, think of something not-swimming, her brain suggested.

"We could check out the hiking trails," she said. "Or the gardens, it's shady, and you could run."

His fingers ghosted down her arms and wrapped around her waist, and he nuzzled his face into her neck.

"This balcony is shady, and it has lounge chairs," he said, murmuring softly into her ear. "I promised Maureen I would make sure you took a nap."

She leaned back against him and his arms tightened around her, holding her securely.
"I'm exhausted," she admitted.

"Then why did you suggest hiking, ku'uipo?" he asked. "What, I ask you what you want, and you try to guess what I want?"

"Um . . . maybe?" Jax responded. She was too tired to really follow his logic.

"Yeah. I don't want you to do that," he said. "Let's try that again. What do you want to do, right now?"

"Sleep," Jax said. She was surprised at the hint of desperation in her own voice. "I'm so fucking tired."

He chuckled.

"Let me tell you a secret," he whispered. "I'm fucking tired, too. Come 'ere."

He stepped back, wrapping his big hand around hers and tugging her gently to follow him. His other arm went around her waist, and his foot hooked around her ankle. A tug and a twist and they were both toppled gently into the plushly cushioned lounge chair.

"Glad to see you putting your SEAL training to such good use," she said. "There are two chairs, you know."

"Unh. Too far away," he mumbled. He sighed contentedly and settled into the cushion.

She snuggled against him, nestling her head in the just-perfect juncture of his shoulder. Her practiced hand pressed gently over his ribs, the fabric of his t-shirt soft beneath the pads of her fingers.

"You're okay, though?" she asked quietly. "Your ribs still tender?"

His hand rested gently on top of hers. "I'm okay, ku'uipo."

A breeze drifted across the balcony, tossing Jax's curls over her face and making her shiver. Steve brushed her hair away then reached back over his head, snagging the oversized beach towel that was draped across the back of the lounge. He snapped it open, draping it across them.

"Comfy?" he murmured.

She sighed in contentment, that little sound that he absolutely adored.

"I love that sound," he whispered. "You make that sound when I hand you coffee. I noticed it right away. Made me wonder . . . made me want to be the one to get that sound out of you. Made the mistake of mentioning that to Danny . . ."

"Oh, no," Jax groaned.

Steve laughed. "I was right, though," he said. He kissed the top of her head, his fingers trailing up and down her arm.

She chuckled and relaxed against him, falling silent. He thought perhaps she'd fallen asleep, until she spoke.

"I was so afraid," she said quietly. "I was so afraid I was going to have to do it without you."

"Have the babies?"
She nodded, her pert nose rubbing gently against his neck. "Deliver them, raise them . . ."

"You don't have to," he said.

She pulled back and turned her face up to his.

"You know you can't promise that," she said.

He kissed her, slowly, tenderly, one arm wrapped around her, resting on her hip, and his other hand coming up to cradle her face gently in his hand.

"I promise I will always do everything in my power to come home to you," he said. "To you, to Annie and Billy. I can promise that. Is that enough?"

"It has to be," Jax said. "It isn't, but it has to be. That's the best you can promise."

He kissed her again, unhurried, as if they had all the time in the world. Her eyes drifted closed and stayed that way. He chuckled low in his throat and tucked her head back into the crook of his neck.

"M'sorry," she mumbled. "Did'n mean to ac'shly fall asleep - not when we - it's -"

"Shhh," he said, his long fingers stroking idly over her shoulder. He tugged the oversized towel up around her back, as the breeze started to pick up and turn cooler with an approaching storm. "We have an entire weekend. Sleep."

He stared out at the waves for a bit, as always, hypnotized and calmed by the gentle roll of surf. The gentle, even puffs of Jax's breath, soft and warm against his neck, pulled him the rest of the way under.

#*#*#*#*

She was aware, first, of the sound of his heart. Racing . . . pounding.

She blinked awake, her arm instinctively tightening around him. His hand gripped her hip and he mumbled, a distressed incoherence, the sound reverberating as her head rested against his chest.

"No . . . sweep for . . ." he murmured.

She heard thunder, blinked more, rubbed a hand over her face. The sky was dark, a streak of lightning cutting through the distant clouds.

"Steve," she said, "you with me?" Her lips brushed the syllables over the pulse point in his neck.

"Jax." He sighed, pulling her snug against him. She felt his heart slow, his chest rising and falling in slower, measured breaths. "Hey."

"Y'okay?" she mumbled.

Thunder rumbled again, low and rolling.

Thunder, Steve processed. Not heavy artillery.

"I'm good," he said. He kissed the top of her head, his fingers brushing gently up and down her arm.

She stretched contentedly in his arms, her toes brushing against his calf. He shifted, tangling a hand in her hair and tilting her face up to his, his thumb stroking over her jaw.
"Hey," he said, smiling softly at her.

She grinned back at him, running her fingers over the heavy scruff on his jawline. "Hey, yourself. How'd I miss this new silver, hunh?" Her fingers wandered into the soft hair at his temple.

"We've been a little preoccupied the last six weeks," he said. He kissed her gently, still cradling her face in his hand.

"And before that -"

"Before that, we took down WoFat, and he's locked away," he murmured. "That's what matters."

"You came back to me," she said. "That's what matters."

She closed the distance between them, her slim hand wrapping around the back of his neck as she kissed him. Her fingers tugged on his hair.

"Hair's out of reg," she teased.

"Like I said, busy," he said, smiling and brushing another kiss over her lips.

"I like it," she whispered, carding her fingers through his hair, rubbing absently at his scalp.

Thunder rumbled again, closer, and lightning danced across the darkening sky. Steve sat up, his big hands wrapping around her hips and shifting her easily to straddle his lap. Her hands rested on his shoulders, then slid down, fingers trailing over his biceps and tucking underneath the edge of his shirt sleeves to brush over the ink.

"Guess we won't hit the beach this evening," he murmured. He wrapped one arm around her waist and reached up to cup her face in his hand again.

"Pity," she said. "We so rarely have beach access."

"I knew it. You only love me for my ocean front property."

"Our ocean front property, thank you very much, Commander McGarrett."

"I like the sounds of that. I stand corrected, Mrs. McGarrett."

"That still sounds weird," she said.

He kissed her, pulling her close.

"Jax," he whispered, his lips brushing over hers, and then grazing down her neck.

Fat raindrops started to pelt at them, the wind driving them sideways onto the covered balcony. Steve stood, easily shifting Jax's weight against him, as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Holy hell, woman," he murmured.

"I know, I still weigh -"

He stilled and raised an eyebrow at her, grinning wickedly.

"Definitely not what I was getting at," he said, his voice dropping a register as he deliberately pulled her body flush with his.
"Oh," she breathed.

He carried her easily into the bedroom, one arm firm around her waist while his other hand tangled in her hair, tilting her head back and kissing her soundly. Thunder clapped, closer, startling her. She tightened her grip around him, and he groaned quietly in response.

"Jax - shit - please," he murmured, pressing a frantic kiss against her neck.

"You don't have to ask -"

"Yeah, yeah, I do, because I have to know that you're okay," he said. His lips brushed against her neck, across her collarbone.

"The doctor said -"

"No," he paused, took a shuddering breath. "You have to say, Jax. Just because the doctor said -"

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine, Steve," Jax answered. Her lips found the soft patch of skin behind his ear and brushed against it as she whispered yes, over and over, tickling him and making him laugh softly.

He deposited her gently on the edge of the bed and stepped back, reaching a hand overhead and grabbing the back of his shirt, yanking it over his head with one smooth motion. Jax deftly unbuttoned and unzipped his cargos, smirking up at him when he let out a huff of relief. The spark in her eyes made his heart stutter almost painfully in his chest, and he knelt down in front of her, cupping her face and kissing her again, gently.

"God, I've missed this," he whispered.

"I'm sorry -"

"No, ku'uipo," he said, pulling back and smiling at her, brilliant and open and so full of joy that she couldn't help but smile back. "No, no, it's - my God, we had babies, you had babies, it's fine, it's fucking amazing and six weeks - six months - whatever, I don't care. They're amazing, they're healthy and you - you're okay, you're healthy and okay and -" He stopped, swallowing hard.

Her hand wrapped around his neck, soft and warm. "I know. I know, Steve. Until you walked into the delivery room, I didn't let myself believe that - I was preparing myself for the worst, I was - I still can't believe it. Sometimes I'm afraid that I'm dreaming, that it's not real."

"It's real," he said. "I'm right here."

Her arms looped around his neck as he toyed with the straps of her tank, his favorite, the blue batik print still setting off her golden skin, exposing her strong shoulders. He slipped his hands under the fabric, to the waist of her shorts, slipping the button open.

She ducked her head, biting her lip.

"I'm not even back in regular clothes, yet," she mumbled. "I need to - when I start back to work, I'll go to the gym, I'll work with a trainer, maybe, I'll -"

"Jax, look at me," he said. She tilted her head up and he tugged her bottom lip out with the pad of his thumb. "I told you, a long time ago, there would never be a time that I wouldn't want you, and nothing has changed."
"I've changed," she said. "My body has changed, and I -"

"Yeah, okay," he said. He slowly, carefully, pulled her tank over her head and tossed it aside. She leaned back on her hands as he looped an arm under her knees, lifting her and easily pulling her shorts down, slipping them over her feet and tossing them behind him with a grin.

"You have changed," he said, brushing his fingers reverently over the ink on her hip. "You added this. For me." He slid his fingers against the waistband of her simple cotton underwear. "You went through months of being tired, feeling sick, giving up - God, your career - risking your health - your body changing, yeah. You're . . . softer. And stronger. And more beautiful to me than ever."

He slid a hand back under her knees, and behind her shoulders, and placed her gently in the center of the bed, following her body down and covering it with his own.

"Let me show you," he whispered. "Let me show you just how beautiful you are to me, how much I will always want you . . ."
Steve pressed soft kisses between Jax's shoulder blades, smiling fondly at the way she was sprawled on her stomach. She stirred and mumbled.

"Shhh, sleep," he whispered. "You look comfy."

He tucked the sheet around her and wandered onto the balcony. It was early still, the beach empty save for a few dedicated runners. He let his mind drift, in the way that only happened when he was watching the ocean.

It's over, he thought. The man behind my father's murder and my mother's disappearance is locked away. The man who threatened my wife . . . my children.

The enormity of it crashed over him like a wave.

"Steve."

He glanced up, surprised and confused. Jax was kneeling in front of him, carefully taking his shaking hands in her own.

"There you are," she said, smiling at him. "Breathe, sailor. Four in, hold, four out. You know."

He followed her instructions instinctively, the white noise and tunnel vision that he hadn't even been aware of starting to clear.

"Come'ere," she murmured, pulling him forward and wrapping her arms around him. He tucked his face into the crook of her neck, nuzzling through her unruly mass of curls, the collar of his button up shirt that she'd tossed on soft under his cheek.

"Shit," he whispered.

"It's okay, you're okay," she said. "You lost a few minutes, that's all."

"I didn't hurt you?" he asked.

"Nah," she said. "Delayed stress reaction."

"I know."

"You never took a breath, did you? From losing Freddy, that phone call . . . starting the task force, tracking WoFat . . . this is the first time you've really stopped to breathe, Steve. It's perfectly understandable. It was bound to catch up to you at some point."

"I know. I hate it."

She chuckled. "I know."

He pulled back and kissed her gently. "You do know. God, Jax, you . . ."

"Saw this a lot after 9/11," she said simply. "I think . . . I think as much as I loved being a cop, as
much as I loved my brief stint in SWAT . . . maybe taking care of people after is what I'm really meant to do, you know? Maybe all of that was so that I would know, really know."

"It's . . . over?" Steve said uncertainly. "And everyone is okay and . . . there shouldn't be a reason for you to have to take care of me now."

"Come on, you know better," she said softly.

"He killed my dad," Steve said.

Jax slipped into his lap and he held her fiercely, tucking his face back into her shoulder. She rubbed her fingers through his hair.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured.

"I think . . . " He sighed into her hair. "I think maybe my mom is - okay, I know she isn't who she said she was, all those years, but now . . . Jax, I think my mom might not be loyal. To the Navy, the CIA. The country."

Jax was silent for a long moment. "Maybe there's a reason, an explanation . . . "

"I was Navy intel. This is what I know, and . . . I can't create a scenario that plays clean for her."

"So . . . what are you saying? What does that mean?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know."

"And that's okay, Steve. It's okay not to know."

She kept up the gentle movement of her fingers against his scalp until he relaxed, his grip around her still secure but less frantic.

"He killed my dad, Jax," he said again. "I knew . . . I knew taking WoFat down wouldn't bring my dad back, but . . ."

"You thought it would feel different than this."

"Yeah. This is . . . the first time it was personal, you know? And it was the right thing to do, it had to happen but . . . it put everyone in danger, I almost - WoFat could have -"

"But he didn't. He didn't, Steve."

"It's crazy, when they were patching me up, me and Nick, I . . . I kept thinking I should ask for a phone to call my dad and tell him, and . . . when I was running into Tripler, I knew Danny would be with you, but . . . I don't know, I had this fleeting thought that my dad would be there, too. Crazy, right?"

"No, it's not crazy," she said. "When I was coming around, in recovery, I thought maybe Danny and Billy were with the babies. Just for a moment. Until I remembered."

He held her close and relaxed back into the chair.

"Lieutenant Allen has job security," he said. "Indefinitely."

Jax laughed, snuggling against him.
"I love you, ku'uipo," he whispered.

She twisted around and cupped his face in her small hand. "And I love you."

"Would you be terribly disappointed . . . " he started, then hesitated.

She smiled, her eyes lighting up. "If we went home?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This is lovely, and last night was . . . "

He looked at her, smug grin and hooded eyes, and she smacked him lightly on the shoulder.

"Shut up," she said. "Let's go home."

He stood up, fast, and she wrapped her limbs around him with a startled squeak.

"Home," he said, striding determinedly toward the bed. "We'll leave . . . in an hour."

She left a trail of soft kisses up the side of his neck, pausing to nibble delicately at his earlobe.

"An hour . . . maybe two . . . "

Chapter End Notes

I had an image in my head, just a scene, a snippet, in December of 2015. I’ve fallen in and out of love with ideas, with characters. I’ll admit, I laughed and cried at a few rare snippets that lived up to my own vision and expectation. I’ve learned so many lessons … how to fix the glaring, obvious, identified problem with my writing, unfortunately, still eludes me. So, 933,805 words later, my little snippet gasped it’s last. I’m equal parts disappointed – it’s not what I wanted it to be, and it didn’t flourish there at the end, it withered – and pleased – I did my best to give the readers everything they asked for, I fulfilled my promise to at least attempt a completion, of sorts, a resolution. Mostly, I’m relieved, which is why I know it was long past time to wrap it up and move on to other projects. My first story, really. I don’t think it grew up, so much as I outgrew it. It’s a little bittersweet, leaving it behind.

End Notes

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