M.A.D
by Adrenalineshots

Summary

Just your regular, normal day?
Chapter 1

M.A.D.

They just wanted to ask the man a few questions. Simple questions, not that much of a big deal. Ordinary questions, like where did his roommate usually hangout that late in the day and whether he had happen to see a huge pile of wooden crates with the words 'EXPLOSIVES' written on the outside. Normal, regular, non-threatening stuff.

The guy, however, was running like a scared rabbit the second he saw their car park on the other side of the street, like he could smell Federal agents or something.

“That's new,” Deeks pointed out, watching with a smirk as their suspect tripped over a fruit stand, two women AND narrowly avoided a street lamp in his mad rush to escape from the deli. “Usually they take off after we say something.”

Kensi tried to hide her smile at the comment. Leonard Portland had no criminal record apart from a few parking tickets and, other than a poor choice in roommates, who just happened to be a known terrorist, he should have no reason to run from them. Specially when he was that damn clumsy at the actual running part. “I'll cut him off at the end of the street,” she called over coms, jumping back into the driver's seat. “Try to avoid any rabid dogs this time, will ya?”

The LAPD detective resisted the urge to roll his eyes in a very unmanly manner. One time! A dog had eaten his shoe and half his pants ONE TIME and he was never going to hear the end of it. “Leonard! LAPD!” he called out, running down the street. “We just wanna talk!”

Leonard, however, was not in the mood to be chatty. He was also, fortunately, not the fastest of runners.

He raced across the street, angry car horns in his wake, and moved straight into the nearest pitch-black alley, pausing only briefly to throw a pile of trash-filled boxes and pull a container in the way.

“The! Just stop! You'll only make things worse for yourself if I get crap on my new shoes!” Deeks called out, trying his best to jump over the obstacle course the escaping man had laid down for him. However, the meager street lights that managed to seep into the alley were not enough to allow Marty to succeed unscathed, something he quickly realized as his foot landed on something squishy. “Seriously man! That's just nasty!”

The loud screech of car tires pulling at the end of the alley made both men stop on their tracks as a large car came to a stop, cutting off the exit, front lights flooding the dark and effectively blinding them both.

“Kense, tell me that's you,” Deeks whispered even as he drew out his gun.

Kensi’s concerned warning of ‘I see the car Deeks-- that's not me! I repeat, that is not a friendly!” came almost at the same time as the deafening sound of the rapid volley of an automatic weapon being discharged into the alley.

TBC
Chapter 2

Spotlighted by the car's white, incandescent headlights, Leonard's body resembled a macabre version of a twitching puppet, surrounded by a spray of red mist. He was dead even before his body hit the ground.

Marty let out two shots in the dark before taking cover behind the trash container. There were at least two perps in the vehicle, one behind the wheel and the other behind the bright flash of gunpowder from the gun. While he could see neither of them, the LAPD detective was pretty good at educated guesses, sending a shot in each direction.

A second volley spread across the small alley, the loud sound competing with the continuous shout of a car horn. It would seem that he had completely missed the shooter, but, if Marty were a gambling man, he would say that he had nailed the driver, who's head was now, most probably, responsible for ear-splitting noise of the blasting horn.

“DEEKS!” Kensi's voice sounded too loud inside his head, which meant this wasn't the first time she had tried to reach him. In fact, given the concern in her voice, she'd probably been trying for some time and he had failed to hear her until now. “Deeks, do you copy? I'm nearly there!”

Marty opened his mouth to reply and give his partner some peace of mind, but his mouth seemed unable to form the words. He felt out of breath, like he'd just finished a serious workout session with Sam... under water... while wearing weights. “Copy... that,” he finally managed to push out, annoyed that his body would betray him like that. There was an annoying twitch in his side that shouldn't be there as well, given that he had only raced a couple of feet chasing Leonard. Maybe he needed to up his cardio exercises.

It was bad enough that the others already saw him as the team's weakest link, less proficient in warfare and somewhat lacking in combat training. However, while Marty was the first to admit that he was no badass soldier like Sam and Kensi, or some super-secret agent like Callen, the detective still had his LAPD training and years of experience on the force.

Hell! This was far from being his first time under fire and, save for the very first time he had someone shooting real bullets at his ass, Marty had never panicked or had his breath stolen from him by fear. Never.

Without risking a bullet between his eyes, Deeks raised his hand and fired blindly at the shooter, hoping to draw his attention long enough for Kensi's arrival to go unnoticed.

Kensi's arrival, however, was impossible to go unnoticed. If anything, his partner sure knew how to enter with a bang! Behind the cover of the trash container, Marty could only smile and picture in his head the scene as he heard the booming crash of metal on metal, as Kensi decided to waste no more time and simply drove their car straight into the perps' vehicle.

It was deadly effective. The machine gun stopped spitting fire and Deeks risked looking up from his cover. A big smile spread across his cheeks as he saw the result of kickass Kensi in action. The door on the driver' side was bent in half, barely hanging from the car frame. The headlight on that side was hanging loose, the other had dimmed its light down to half and the hood was bent in an odd 'W' shape. There was a body on the ground, on the passenger side of the car.

“Stay down!” Kensi blared, already out of the car with her weapon drawn on the man on the ground as she made her way over. “You okay?” she asked, sending Deeks a quick look.
The detective nodded, keeping his gun aimed at the fallen man until the NCIS agent kicked the perp's weapon away and kneeled down to cuff him. “You?” he asked, making his way towards Leonard, ignoring the lingering twitch on his side. A planned car crash was still a car crash and Marty knew how bruising those things could get.

“I'm good,” Kensi let out, grunting in effort as she pulled the perp up. The man was mostly upright, the left side of his face already bruising from having a car smashed into him. “Leonard?”

“I don't think he's gonna tell us where his roommate is,” Deeks said, his voice sad as he look down at the dead man. His chest was a mess of bloody holes.

“I don't think we need him to,” Kensi voiced, taking a better look at the dead man behind the steering wheel. “It looks like Arthur Hinds was the one driving the car,” she pointed out turning her attention to her partner. “Nice shot, by the wa--”

The rest of her words faded away at the same rate as color leached from her face. “Eric!” Kensi let out, switching out to coms, “We need an ambulance here, right now!”

Deeks looked at her in confusion, wondering why the urgency in getting medical aid there. Both the driver and Leonard were beyond help and the shooter didn't seemed all that bad. But she was too busy hastily cuffing the shooter to the door frame to give him more details.

Marty's gaze turned down, even as his brain tried to inform him that Kensi’s concerned look had been directed straight at him. In the dark, the wet stain spreading from the right side of his ribcage towards his pants seemed almost black.

It took the detective a second or two to realize that it was blood. His blood.
Seeing his own blood pouring out seemed like the missing clue Deeks' mind and body needed to realize that he had been shot. It was all it took for the twitch at his side to blossom into mind-blowing pain, for his legs to turn into wet noodles and the ground into quicksand.

He went down fast and hard, his face impacting the cold ground as even his arms refused to obey a simple command.

“Deeks!”

Kensi's presence came in the form of a sense of warmth and safety that Marty would forever associate with his partner. Her hands, however, were ice cold as she turned him over and grabbed his neck to pull his head into something soft and warm.

“Open your eyes,” she commanded. “Hey, Deeks! Help's on it's way... you just need to hold on for a couple of seconds more, ok?”

Marty did open his eyes, mostly out of annoyance at his own body, because he had not been consulted on the whole 'closed eyes' matter. Kensi's face was just inches from his, her breath fresh on his cheek, hair pooling down around face, tickling is ears. A sly smile spread across the detective's face as he realized that his head had to be on her lap, a thousand unappropriated quips at the tip of lips, even if he said none. His elation lasted only a second, as a new wave of pain assaulted his body, muscles spasming in protest and his eyes closing once more without consulting him. Yup, he was pretty sure that his lovely partner had just pushed a hand down on his wound, which hurt. Really. Really. Bad.

“Hey!”

Right, Deeks recalled. The eyes opened thingy.

“There you go,” Kensi let out, her face contorted in an odd semblance of a teary-eyed smile, the kind of expression that was meant to be brave but ended up shouting to everyone that things were really bad. “What did I tell you about getting yourself killed?”

Deeks blinked a couple of times, trying to focus his sight. Between the water covering Kensi's eyes like a glass filter and the darkness of the alley, he could barely really see all the different colors in her iris. He loved all the different colors in her eyes. “I...” he had made her the most foolish of promises, one that no one could hope to keep, one that felt like he was going to break soon. “Cryoge... genesis it is... then,” he replied with a lopsided smile, because humor was their common, safe ground and if that was gone, then they were really in trouble.

Kensi did not looked amused. “I don't want your dead, frozen ass gathering dust in my living room,” she replied, perhaps a little too serious for the nonsense she was saying. “I much rather have it unfrozen and alive, parked in my couch.”

Deeks closed his eyes once more, the smile on his lips for once not forced. “Knew... you liked my ass.”

Kensi realized what she had said the second after the words had left her mouth. Any other time, she would kick herself for supplying her partner with free ammunition to make fun of her face. Not today, though. A talking Deeks was a living Deeks, no matter what crap either of them was saying.
Even if he was right. About the ass part. “Eric, where the hell is that ambulance?” she growled into comms, even as her eyes flickered to her watch. Six minutes. It seemed impossible that only six minutes had passed since Deeks had left her car to chase Leonard.

“ETA’s about a minute,” Eric sounded from far away, his voice clipped and watery.

“How bad?”

Callen's strong, steady voice was a welcomed surprise in her ear. He and Sam had been staking out Arthur and Leonard's house, just in case the tip on Leonard's whereabouts didn't pan out. Eric had probably notified them the second she had alert OPS about Deeks being hit.

Kensi looked down at her partner, taking notice of the colorless cheeks and pale lips. The combination of skin too cold to the touch and the fine sheet of sweat covering his face had her insides twisting in knots, as Kensi knew all too well that shock was setting in, fast. “Bad enough,” she replied, trying to keep emotions out of her tone. It seemed utterly foolish, but if Deeks didn't hear how bad it was, maybe he wouldn't notice the huge hole on his side and be okay.

Everything was too sharp and clear around her, too intense. There were sirens at a distance, finally coming closer. The hand over the jacket she had balled up and was using to keep pressure on his wound felt warm, sticky and wet; the ground beneath her knees was wet but cold and the perimeter was not secure.

The perimeter was definitely not secure.

As soon as the sound of gunfire had ebbed away, people had started to gather around, peeking from the other end of the alley, morbidly curious about what had happened, disgustingly excited with the presence of bodies on the ground. She could hear them talking and could only pray that Deeks was too out of it to understand what they were saying. The ones that were talking about him, they all assumed that he was dead as well.

She tried to protect Deeks from the spectators' gaze as best as she could, using her hair as a shield to conceal both their faces. There were people taking pictures, for Christ sake!

The constant burst of flashes eventually attracted Deeks' attention, his head rolling sideways to look for the source of the bright light. “Hey! Hey, look at me,” Kensi urged, gently turning his face up. His eyes kept rolling around, unable to focus on a single spot, but on the odd chance that he was aware enough to see what was going on, the last thing Kensi wanted was her partner taking the image of those awful people taking pictures of his bloody self into unconsciousness.

“Hey,” he whispered, his voice rough and faint. Out of the corner of her eye, Kensi could see his hand moving, feebly raising a few inches from the ground. She grabbed his hand, closing her eyes as he squeezed hard.
Kensi stared at the form in her hands, the printed words blurring in to dark smudges of ink that meant absolutely nothing in none of the languages she mastered. She was supposed to be filling it with Deeks' medical details and insurance number, but her mind seemed hell-bent on focusing on just about everything but the bureaucracy surrounding her partner's fight to stay alive.

The doctors already knew about Deeks allergies and blood type, the race from the ER’s front doors to the Trauma room nothing but a blur of passing faces and blared questions that she automatically answered the best she could.

Now, in the relative silence of the waiting room, randomly broken by a too loud sound system spitting out names of strangers she had no interest in, Kensi could only focus on other random things that really didn't matter at all.

Like the dry blood underneath her nails, still there despite the number of times she had already washed them.

Or the guy sitting in the corner, with phones in his ears and not-so-silently mouthing the words of whatever song he was listening.

The NCIS agent blinked, surprised to feel a string of tears escaping her eyes. She hurriedly wiped them away, for some reason furious at the display of weakness in a room filled with strangers. Not that any of the other occupants gave a crap about her, each lost in their own world.

Apart from the tone-deaf annoying guy, there was an an old man sitting two chairs away to her left, his head resting against the wall, his eyes closed and mouth hanging open, prosthetic teeth rattling against his gums each time he snored.

The young couple sitting in front of her, to the left, both positively green around the gills, were snuggling together, with the guy's hand laced around hers, her arms firmly wrapped around her middle.

Beside the couple there was a young woman, about Kensi' age, with two small boys flanking her. They were staring straight ahead, looking terrified of their surroundings.

The middle age woman sitting to her right looked white as chalk, her eyes nervously flickering between the digital watch on the wall and the blue doors that separated them from the 'medical staff only' part of the ER. There was a clipboard on the chair next to her, fully filled, even if the woman had failed to remember that she was supposed to deliver it back to the front desk.

Kensi followed the woman's gaze to the blue door, like her both wishing and dreading the return of someone bearing news. The clock on wall told her, in bright, blood red digits, that it was ten past three in the morning. It wasn't even midnight when they had arrived.

Returning her attention to the form in her hands, Kensi took a deep breath and decided that it was utterly silly to fail at filling out a couple of easy questions.

This was her partner after all. A man she knew for over three years and spent all of her waking hours with.

“Ok... date of birth,” she whispered. Despite herself, Kensi could feel her cheeks darkening as she realized that, while she knew the correct day and month -now- she knew it now, because the whole
situation on his last birthday had been way too embarrassing—she had no idea on the year. Taking an educated guess, she wrote 1980.

Moving forward, she started scribbling 'partner' where it asked about her personal relationship with the patient. Partner was a very dubious word that, offered without context, could mean a number of very different things. Deeks was her partner at work, true, but he was also her kind-of-partner outside of work—if they ever managed to actually talk about the matter—and so much more than a working partner. Kensi angrily scratched the word and wrote 'friend' instead.

“Known medical conditions and past hospital visits,” Kensi mumbled to herself, resisting the urge to ball up the paper and just toss it to the floor. Did bullet holes counted as a chronic, recurring condition?

Kensi stared at the paper, looking for something, anything that she could fill without falling into some kind of heart-aching trap or urge to scream.

Name.

Okay. That one was easy enough.

Martin A. Deeks.

M.A.D.

Just like the man himself, she admitted with a smirk, making a note to throw that to his face as soon as he was better. How perfect was it that Deeks' name actually described the first impression he caused on just about anyone who met him, her included?

“Alexander,” Hetty's voice supplied out of nowhere, causing the usually calm and poised agent to nearly jump three feet up. “The A. stands for Alexander.”

For a moment, Kensi thought that she had forgotten to take her comms device from inside her ear, but looking up she could see that the small woman was indeed there, in person. Standing right in front of her was Henrietta Lange, hands stretched in front of her, fingers clasped around the straps of a black gym bag. “I brought a change of clothes,” she offered as a greeting.

Kensi looked at the bag in confusion.

“You're scaring the little children, Miss Blye,” the small woman added with a sad smile.

The agent peeked at the kids in front of her, finally dawning on her that Hetty was being quite literal with the expression. The two boys weren't terrified of the ER waiting room; they were terrified because she looked like a serial killer fresh out from her last murder scene.

“Have you heard anything?” Kensi asked, instinctively trusting the older woman to have some pull wherever she went and be informed about everything.

“Still in surgery, I'm afraid,” Hetty supplied, taking a seat next to her. “Go change, I'll take care of this.”

For a second, hope blossomed inside Kensi's chest, as she childishy believed that Hetty meant the whole situation. But she wasn't a child anymore, and Hetty was not a whole-powerful being that could right all wrongs.

Kensi released her hold on the admission forms and grabbed the bag, leaving Hetty to filled them
more efficiently than she ever could.
"So, what do we have here?"

The woman clad in green scrubs was in her early fifties, greying brown hair hidden beneath a yellow cap decorated with little black kittens. She extended her arms as one of the nurses pulled a disposable blue coat over her scrubs, tying it at the back.

One of her interns, a young man with a lush red beard carefully contained by his mask, grabbed the file from the table. “GSW to the upper, right quadrant of the abdomen, no exit wound,” he read. “Victim is 30 years old and otherwise healthy. No allergies, no chronic conditions. EKG in sinus tach on screen and BP refusing to leave the double digits but holding at 80 over 50.”

The head surgeon looked at the young man on her table, taking in the clammy paleness of his skin under the harsh OR lights. There was some dark bruising beginning to form around both eyes, extending sideways from his nose, making him look like a poor, lost raccoon. His hair was mostly contained beneath the thin, green elastic cap on his head, an errant blond curl having escaped confinement somewhere during transference from the gurney to her table. A thick cloth of a darker shade of green had been extended over his torso, leaving nothing visible but a small square of exposed skin around a jagged looking wound, sluggishly oozing blood.

“ER started the transfusion?” she asked, eyeing one of the multiple bags hanging to the side of the table, the dark red line snaking from the pole before disappearing under the green cloth. “We better have a couple of bags of gelofusine at hand, just in case.”

“Two bags, coming up,” one of the nurses called out, moving to a short fridge inside the room.

“So, Dr. Robertson... Beethoven or Shore?”

Woman looked over the edge of her mask, the smile clear in her grey eyes despite the hidden lips. “Let's go with a bit of Mr. Shore today.”

The first harmonic chords of 'An unexpected journey' filled the room as the surgeon picked up the electric scalpel. “What's his name?” she asked, looking at the taped-shut lids of her patient, reassuring herself that he was deep under anesthetic effect.
“Deeks,” the intern supplied after a quick check. “Martin Deeks.”

“Well, Marty,” she said kindly, one gloved hand gently grabbing her patient's right shoulder. “Let's get you all fixed up, shall we?”

There was a woman with wild eyes, tussled brown hair and a blood smeared cheek staring back at Kensi from the other side of the bathroom mirror. It took her a good moment or two to realize she was looking at her own reflection.

Supporting her weight on extended arms, hands gripping the edge of the sink, Kensi let her head hang low, shoulders rolling in a futile attempt to release the stress from her muscles. She was behaving like a civilian, like someone who had never been been in a firefight before; like a person who had never seen another human being with a bullet hole in them. Someone who had never used her own bare hands to stop a fellow soldier from bleeding to death.

She had done all of the above, more than once even, but for the life of her, Kensi could not comprehend why she was reacting so badly to Deeks being hurt.

It wasn't like it was the first time her current partner had been hurt, or even shot, for that matter.

Granted, the first time she hadn't actually been there for the gory, bloody part, catching up with Deeks after surgery, the damage already treated and hidden from sight under innocent looking white bandages.

This time, however...

Her hands trembled against the white porcelain as the special agent recalled the feeling of helplessness as she held Marty in that alley, waiting for help to arrive. It damn nearly drove her insane, the notion that there was nothing that she had been able to do other than hold his hand and pretend that everything was going to be alright. The other hand, the one she had kept pressed against the bullet hole in his side, wasn't really doing anything for the bleeding other than causing Deeks even more pain. It had felt like she was trying to hold a breaking dam with her pinky finger.

Taking a deep breath, the agent pulled herself together and started to peel off the blood-soaked
clothes from her body. The shirt, as well as her jeans, were ruined beyond salvation; even her bra was stained red on one side.

Using a wet paper towel in the faint hope of wiping it clean, it finally dawned on Kensi why her emotions were playing havoc with her composure, why her training as a soldier had been so casually flying through the window since the moment she had seen Deeks fall down in that dark alley.

She could lose her partner that night.

Deeks could die in that operating table and she would never be able to tell him...

If he died that night, all hopes and endless possibilities for a future together that both of them had been secretly entertaining without ever addressing, would be over. Just like that, before they even had a chance to begin.

....NCISLA....

There was a small woman with short, blond hair sitting right next to Hetty. She was standing too close to be a stranger and her lack of any sort of uniform ruled her out as being a part of the hospital's personnel.

Intrigued and more than slightly alarmed, Kensi made her way back to the waiting room, casting a look towards the closed blue door, in the faint hope of catching a glimpse of her missing partner over the glass portion of the double doors.

As she neared the two women, the special agent could see the wet tear tracks on the blond woman's cheeks, her hands clasped tightly around the purse in her lap. The woman looked up, sensing that someone was standing in front of her and Kensi gasped as she found herself looking into very familiar blue eyes.

“Ms. Blye,” Hetty's gravelly voice called out, “this is Mrs. Deeks, Martin's moth-”

“You're Deeks' mom,” the brunette found herself stating the obvious, mainly because Hetty had just told her who the woman was, but also because the resemblance between the two of them was so striking that it was utterly impossible for her to be anyone else.
“Please, call me Roberta,” the woman offered, using one hand to swiftly wipe the wetness from her eyes while she extended the other to hold Kensi's free hand. “You're Marty's partner, am I right? He's told me a lot about you.”

Kensi blinked, holding on to the gym bag in her hand for dear life. Deeks had told a lot about her, but to Kensi, she was staring at a ghost.

The special agent could remember in perfect clarity when Deeks had told her about his father, who he was and what had happened. It had been the night after he had being discharged from the hospital, in the twilight between the painkillers wearing off and the effect of single beer he'd drunk kicking in. The way he had spoken, emotionlessly and in clipped, concise sentences, one would think that he was discussing some random old case, one of the many that had passed his desk in his years as a cop.

It had been the way his gaze had avoided her for the length of the confession and the deep breaths he had struggled to get at the end of every other sentence, that told Kensi how hard it was for Deeks to talk about his childhood, how much the very memory of that man still hurt him.

Kensi had never actually asked Deeks about his mom, not after something like that. And Marty never brought the subject of his mother into any conversation, so Kensi had just sort of assumed that his mother was dead as well. After all, if she had still been around, someone would have contacted her about her son being in the hospital the last time he was shot.

“Mrs. Deeks has been living in Europe with some relatives,” Hetty informed, as if she knew exactly what was going on inside Kensi's head... which she obviously did. “She has just recently returned.”

“I wanted to surprise Marty,” Roberta confessed, her eyes filling once again. “My life was never... easy,” she let out with a long sigh in search of some measure of composure, another trait that she seemed to share with her son. “I waited for as long as I could... the last thing I wanted was to abandon my son after... after everything,” she went on, wringing her hands in distress. “My parents still had some relatives in Norway, a cousin who was willing to take us in, help us start a new life. Marty -he was always such a too-old for his years boy- was very understanding of my need for a fresh start, but it was hard for him to leave his country behind, so after he joined the police academy, L... I just went.” The dry, humorless chuckle at the end of her words was filled with angst. “You know, I don't think Marty ever expected to see me again... You should've seen his face when I showed up at his door a week ago.”

Kensi had no need to use her imagination to picture the scene. In her mind, she could recall in perfect detail the teary-eyed look of surprise on her own mother's face when Kensi had showed up at her
doorstep, after years of estrangement. It was all too easy to replace her mom's image with Deeks.

“I wasted so much time away from my boy and now... this is my punishment...”

While she understood the woman's actions, Kensi found herself growing angry at Roberta's words. The way she was talking, one would think that she wouldn't have the chance to be with her son ever again, like Deeks was already dead. Like she'd already given up. “Deeks' a fighter,” she pointed out rather fiercely.

The smile on Mrs. Deeks face was one Kensi had seen in her partner's lips too many times to count. That lopsided sad grin that didn't quite reached his eyes, the pull of facial muscles that seemed too painful to use.

“That he is,” the older woman agreed, taking hold of Kensi's hands in hers and pulling her to sit on the chair to her right. “Always so strong and brave, my sweet boy. He'll conquer this battle too, I know that,” she said, pride filling her every word. “Besides, it's easy to see how much he has worth living for,” she added, a knowing look taking over her kind eyes.
Chapter 6

The empty, discarded medical supplies packages, blood-saturated gauze and gloves, the congealed blood mixing with the trash littering the ground, it all gave a strong sense of ‘déjà vu’ to the whole scene. Quite honestly, it was getting on Sam's nerves.

It had barely been a year since he and Callen had walked into another crime scene in the wake of Deeks getting shot. Either the man had some weird magnetism that seemed specifically directed to attract bullets or there was some serious bad karma hanging over his shaggy, surfer head.

This, however, was nothing like the ambush at the convenience store, the former SEAL was well aware of that. That time, Deeks had slipped up on his security measures, becoming predictable in his daily routines and had effectively planted a target on his back.

This time, the blame laid on all of them.

It could be said that no one could have seen this one coming, but it was their damn job to predict what no one else could see and be prepared for it.

They had not been prepared for a simple, few questions to turn into a massive shootout. And from the amount of bullet holes that he could see in that alley, Sam was pretty sure that a massive shootout was exactly what Deeks and Kensi had stumbled into.

Of the whole list of people involved in the matter of the missing explosives, Leonard had been the least threatening one. A harmless bystander that might have had, or not, stumbled across something important.

“Found anything?” Sam called out, catching the intense look on his partner's face as Callen crouched by Leonard's body.

“I think this guy was the real target,” Callen concluded, pulling the white sheet back over the dead body. “Too many bullet holes in him to blame on friendly fire. They were aiming straight at him.”

“And Deeks just happened to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time,” Sam finished the thought, his gaze lingering on the one red puddle in the alley that lacked a dead body. It made his gut churn, knowing that all of that blood should be inside Deeks, not spilled on the ground.

For some reason, the sight of the detective's blood, slowly mixing with spilled beer and putrid food, in a place that smelled strongly of urine and crap, made both agents want to beat up someone, preferably the guys responsible for this. Unfortunately, Kensi and Deeks himself had beaten them to it.

“Yeah, if it weren't for bad luck, Deeks would have no luck at all,” Callen whispered, his face as grim as his partner's.

“Think he would mind if we superglued a Kevlar vest to his hide?” Sam suggested, only half-joking. Even if this was just a simple questioning that had required no tactical gear, if the younger man had been wearing his vest, Deeks would have a nasty bruise right now, not an all-included visit to the OR.

Callen sent him a look. “Have you met Deeks?” he asked, the hint of a smile on his lips.

Sam smiled back. Callen was right. That guy could find trouble inside a milk carton. “Anything
“useful there?” he asked, eyeing the cellphone in Callen’s gloved hand.

“Leonard's last phone call was to our terrorist pal, Mr. Dead-guy number two over there,” the agent informed, the faint light from the screen casting a bluish glow on his face. “There's a couple of text messages in here as well,” he kept talking as he scroll down, “looks like he was trying to get Arthur Hinds to pay him a pretty sum to keep quiet about the explosives.”

“Smart,” Sam hissed, shaking his head at the ever-present evidence of human stupidity. “Blackmail the terrorist, because that's the way to a long life.”

“Hinds arranged for Leonard to meet him at the convenience shop,” Callen went on, his eyes raising from the phone to map the route from the shop to the alley. “How much do you wanna bet that Leonard was actually running from Hinds and not our guys?”

The former SEAL looked at the crime scene in its whole, trying to picture what had happened there. Leonard had called his roommate, probably to tell he was at the meeting point and ask where the other man was. He had spotted Hinds' car, caught a glimpse of weapons and started running only to find himself trapped in the alley he had escaped to. Deeks and Kensi's presence had probably never registered with the man. “No point in taking losing bets,” he said, agreeing with Callen's theory. “Anything in there on the explosives' location?”

Callen shook his head. “I'll send this to Eric, see if he or Nell can dig any else,” the agent informed, handing the evidence to a uniformed policeman. “The car is too mangled to get a good look inside, so I'm having it towed to headquarters.”

Sam nodded absentmindedly, as he neared a bulled ridden dumpster. There was a smear of red on the opposite side to Hinds' car, along with several empty bullet shells. He stooped down, picking one of casings with the tip of a pen, confirming his suspicion about the familiar caliber. Deeks' gun.

Looking over the cover of the dumpster, the special agent tried to picture the alley without the police tape and emergency lights, with the car's headlights pointing straight at him and bullets flying everywhere in that confined space. Deeks had managed to shoot Hinds under those circumstances, an impossible feat that only a handful of hard-seasoned agents could brag about achieving. And the detective had done it, with a bullet in his side.

Somehow, saying that he was 'just' a cop had started to sound like a massive understatement a long time ago.

Sam grabbed the edge of the dumpster as he got to his feet, feeling the whole thing shift with the small amount of pressure he had used. Scrunching his nose, the special agent opened the lid, confirming his suspicions. The container was all but empty on one of the side, all the garbage pressed against the other as the dumpster had been pushed to the middle of the alley.

Sam closed his eyes, letting the lid drop back in place with a soft bang. Had the thing been full, Deeks wouldn't have been hit at all, the trash inside providing all the cover he would have needed. But with nothing but two sheets of thin plastic between him and a machine gun, it was a wonder the detective was alive at all. “No luck at all,” he whispered to himself.

....NCISLA....

“Martin Deeks?” a petite woman in white shirt and pants called out as she entered the waiting room, looking up from the clipboard in her hands as the words left her mouth.

Kensi was on her feet the second she recognized the name, quickly followed by Hetty and Roberta.
“Yes?”

The woman, Megan according to her name tag, looked at the three women in front of her and offered a tight lipped smile. “You're all Mr. Deeks' family?”

The special agent was about to flash her badge and blow right through hospital rules when Hetty beat her to the punch. “Yes, we are,” the small woman replied straight face. “How is he?”

“I'm afraid I can't answer that question.” Megan supplied, clutching the clipboard to her chest. “I'm just here to escort you to the fifth floor.”

“Please, I need to know,” Roberta cut in, stepping closer to the woman. “Is my son alive?”

The hospital employee swallowed hard, avoiding the worried mother's eyes. “Ma'am, if you please come with me, a doctor will talk to you shortly.”

“Oh, God! He's dead, isn't he?” Deeks mom let out in a faint whisper, tears quickly filling her eyes.

Hetty grabbed the poor grieving woman on one side, looking at Kensi to do the same on the other. “We don't know that,” she reminded her. Even without looking at the papers in Megan's clipboard, the older woman knew for sure that this was merely a messenger. The young hospital employee looked completely at lost on how to deal with the situation as it was; if she knew any concrete information, she would have gladly given it up, if only to appease the pain in Mrs. Deeks' voice and escape the silent wrath in Kensi's eyes. “Fifth floor you said, dear?”

“Humm... yes, Ma'am,” she nodded rather quickly. “Elevator's to the left. Dr. Robertson will be there to talk to you.”

The ride in the elevator, while fast, felt like the longest in Kensi's life. The racing thoughts inside her head were not helping in making the trip any shorter.

The last time she had been in a similar situation with Deeks, she had been able to sneak her way to the OR's door, clutching Deeks' badge in her hand, standing guard, waiting for his gurney to wheel past her. The doctor at the time had been very understanding of the situation and had put her mind at rest the second she had laid eyes on her unconscious partner.

This time around, there seemed to be a tight-lipped policy to the entire staff that was getting on Kensi's nerves. Didn't they know that it was within human nature to assume the worst when no information was provided?

She could hardly blame Deeks' mother reaction as they were sent upstairs. Her own heart felt tiny and constrict inside her chest, her mind doing a particular vicious good job of remind her of how badly her partner had looked the last time she had seen him.

The elevator dinged, announcing their destination. There was a woman in green scrubs leaning against the nurses' station right in front of the doors, causally flipping through a case file. The ID card hanging from the waist band of her pants identified her as Amanda Robertson, M.D.

The doctor looked up as the elevator whooshed open. “You're here for Martin Deeks?”

“How is he?” The question was out before any pleasantry could be exchange.

Dr. Robertson, clearly used to deal with worried-sick relatives, took it in stride. “Martin is doing as well as it can be expected, under the circumstances.”
“And what does that mean, exactly?” Hetty asked, the cold levelness of her voice hardly reflecting the concern in her eyes.

“And you are?” the doctor prompted, eyeing the three women surrounding her. While one of them possessed enough resemblance with the patient to be easily pegged as Deeks’ relative, the other two did not.

“Henrietta Lange,” the shortest of the women said, extending her hand for a firm handshake. “I am listed as Mr. Deeks legal next of kin. These are Mrs. Deeks, his mother and Ms. Blye, his partner,” she said, pointing to each women in turn.

Kensi almost smiled as she noted the sly manner in which the older woman conveniently used the term ‘partner’ without actually specifying the origin of the relation, allowing the doctor to assume whatever she chose.

“Very well,” the doctor said, a comforting smile gracing her lips and warming her grey eyes. “If you’d all follow me somewhere more private than this hallway, I will tell you everything you need to know about Martin’s current condition.”

They didn't have to walk long as Amanda led them to an empty waiting room to their left. “Please, have a seat,” she offered, taking one herself. Four hours on her feet had not been kind to her legs. Seeing the three anxious sets of eyes staring back at her, she went straight to the point. “The bullet entered Martin’s abdomen, between the seventh and eighth ribs on his right side. The bullet shattered on impact with bone, one fragment going up and causing a pneumothorax and two others going down, one into his liver and the other nicking his large intestinal wall.”

“Oh, God!” Deeks' mother let out, her sobs barely hidden by the trembling hand covering her mouth. “Is he going to be okay?”

Amanda sighed. She would love if things in medicine were always as straightforward as people wanted them to be. Unfortunately, they were not. “The situation is still very delicate. We've managed to save most of his liver, so he should experience no lasting effect from that...”

“But...” Hetty pressed, her eyes nothing but slits in her face.

“But... in order to keep his lungs as stress free as possible as the pneumothorax heals, we've opted to keep Martin in an induced comma with assisted ventilation,” the doctor pointed out. “The large intestinal damage, while successfully repaired, causes some concerns as infection can become an issue, so we need to keep a close eye on that.”

Kensi closed her eyes. A small part of her firmly believed that the doctor was going to receive them with an open, relieved smile and tell them that everything was going to be fine, that they could take Deeks home the following day. It was the smallest of hopes, but even that had now been utterly squashed by reality. The doctor didn't have to say what could happened if Deeks developed an infection in his fragile condition. They all knew it all too well.
Chapter 7

The doctor had explained at length how big of an exception she was opening by allowing one of them to seat with Deeks inside the ICU. But of the unit's four beds only two were currently occupied so, as long as the person inside stayed out of the way of the ICU’s personnel, she was willing to turn a blind eye.

Roberta had been allowed inside, as Kensi and Hetty reached a silent agreement that the distraught woman should be at her son's side.

From outside the room, they could see little more than the bulge of Deeks' feet under the thin sheet covering him, a grey curtain hiding the rest from view. It made it look like he was just taking a nap, the illusion only breaking whenever the automatic doors' opened and the hissing and clicking from the ventilator reached outside.

Deeks' mother only made it as far as the foot of her son's bed. She had taken one look at him before her hand flew to her lips, fingers covering a silent scream as she fell to her knees.

Two nurses rushed to her side, gently picking up the crying woman and helping her outside, her face ashen.

“Go,” Hetty said quietly, watching the scene unfold with a frown. “I'll keep Mrs. Deeks company, see if I can get her to get some fresh air, maybe even a nice cup of tea.”

Kensi nodded, clenching her hands in to fists, as if preparing for battle. Roberta's reaction had scared her more than the special agent cared to admit.

She had no way to tell what she would encounter behind those curtains, but seeing Deeks' mother unravel so fast at the sight of the injured man had made her already growing fear gain claws and teeth, ripping Kensi from the inside out.

As she neared the edge of the bed, the young woman took a deep breath, allowing the constant bipbip-ing and whooshing of machinery wash over her. The air smelled of antiseptic and filtered air, clean scents that still managed to make her feel sick and uneasy.

Looking at her unconscious partner, the only thing that Kensi's mind seemed able to focus was the fact that the round plastic tube going inside Deeks' mouth looked obscene and painful and just plain wrong. It made him look like he was sucking the business end of a vacuum cleaner.

Kensi pressed her lips, keeping the deeply inappropriate burst of laugh on the inside. There was absolutely nothing funny about the whole situation, except for her own nervousness trying to make a fool out of her.

Keeping a tight leash on her emotions, the special agent reached for the chair next to Deeks bed, and sat stiffly, lost on how to react to the situation.

She couldn't help but remember another time when she had sat by Deeks' hospital bed, waiting for him to wake up after surgery. Back then, other than the lines of pain occasionally marrying his sleeping features, Deeks had looked like Deeks, with nothing more than a bandage and an innocent looking IV attached to his arm.

The person lying on that bed looked nothing like her partner, making her feel like an intruder in someone else's life.
Deeks was sea breeze and salt water, sun-kissed skin and laughter. The man trapped beneath all those bandages, tubes and countless wires, was none of those things. He looked lax and deflated, limps laying heavily over the sheets, like Deeks had shed his own skin and left it behind, finding no more use for it.

Kensi forced herself to look at Deeks' face, past the tube pressing against his lips. His nose was scratched raw, the redness contrasting with the dark bruising stretching underneath his lids. With his eyes closed, Deeks' face seemed diminished, lacking in joy and life. A light bulb devoid of electricity.

Even without saying a word, her partner had the ability to make her smile with just a mischievous wink of those eyes. Selfishly, Kensi wondered if she would ever have that back.

The white sheet covered most of his torso, leaving his arms and shoulders exposed. Deeks had always been a California boy to his core, unashamedly complaining at length every time the temperatures dropped from the vicinity of smoldering hot. He had to freezing cold in that sterile room, but as Kensi reached out to touch Deeks' shoulder, her fingers were met with warm skin. Too warm skin.

....NCISLA....

Callen wrinkled his nose as the strong smell of antiseptic hit his nose. He hated hospitals. He hated them even worse when the reason to be in one was a hurt friend.

Saying that he and Deeks were friends would surprise many, sometimes even himself, but Callen had to admit that the younger man had slowly grown on him. Like a cactus, thriving even under the harshest conditions.

It said a lot about a person's mindset when they refused to back down when faced with a less than welcoming reception, as the detective had been met with when he first arrived at their headquarters. Usually, it meant that such person was either too dumb to understand how very unwelcome they were, or that it was used to being treated as a punching bag by others since a very young age.

And Deeks was far from being dumb.

The special agent in charge, being in charge, had read the liaison's LAPD file, detailing his whole career from Public Attorney to detective. It read like a boy-wonder resume, except for the part where Deeks seemed to always piss off the wrong people, enough of them to slow down his fast rising and, otherwise promising, career.

Deeks had slowly become one of the pack within the NCIS group of stray wolves and Callen soon realized that he was... fond-ish of the young man. In an oddly lopsided manner, the blond detective kind of reminded Callen of himself when he was young. Wild, cocky and unable to trust anyone.

He too had worn a mask for most part of his days, hiding who he truly was from just about everyone. Callen had done it for so long that, somewhere along the way, he had forgotten what his personality was like without the masks.

Deeks wore a mask as well. Where Callen had hidden behind an aloof and acerbic personality, the younger man had opted to be the class clown.

But some times, on very rare and exceptional times, they were able to catch a glimpse of what laid beneath Deeks' masks. It was impossible not to, when they spent 24/7 together, living on each others back pockets.
And what hid beneath the masks of goofiness and lazy laid-back persona the detective tried so hard to keep, was as blemished and complicated as Callen himself.

Callen's partner was being a bit more... difficult in his acceptance of the detective. Somehow, despite his brilliant tactical mind, when it came to Deeks, Sam stubbornly refused to see past the carefree surfer attitude and the open disregard for rules. Most times, Callen was sure that Deeks only broke those rules to see how far he could push the former SEAL, testing the limits of how far he could go before the bigger man lost his temper and turned violent.

That being said, both agents felt in equal measure the cold, hard touch of fear as they approached the ICU doors, just in time to see a bed being wheeled out in a hurry. As the group of hospital staff rushed past them, a mop of blond, unruly hair was the only thing that either could identify. Still, it was enough for Sam and Callen to know that Deeks had been in that bed.

Dumbfounded, Callen looked away from the speeding bed and back to the ICU doors. Kensi was standing at the threshold, arms wrapped around herself like she was trapped in the middle of a Siberian storm.

“What the hell happened?” Sam voiced, looking as confused and worried as his partner. “Was that Deeks? Where’re they taking him?”

The female agent, the one amongst the team who could keep the most cool and level-headed in the heat of battle, the formidable sniper, kickass Kensi, badass Blye, looked up at her teammates completely at loss. She opened her mouth to reply, but words seemed to have abandoned her.

“Kensi?” Callen asked more softly, carefully closing the distance between them. When he was close enough to touch her, the special agent pulled Kensi into a hug, feeling her tremble against his body.

“He... his temperature was rising really fast,” she finally managed to answer, her words muffled against his shoulder. “They said that... they took him back to the OR. It had to be now or--” she stopped, a dry sob escaping her lips. “They had to do it now, or Deeks wouldn't make it through the night.”
Chapter 8

Even with his eyes closed, he could see the ocean. That unmistakable sound of waves swelling up, rolling into themselves just before they came crashing down against the sand like thunder. There was a rhythm to it, a pulse, like a beating heart.

Despite the salt and water covering his skin, he could feel the sun beating down on his shoulders, burning away. He knew that, even with the amount of protective goop he had put on before entering the water, his skin would be red later. He would regret it then, when all he could feel was the fevered heat of sunburned skin, keeping him from sleeping through the night. But right now, he dared not move.

The perfect wave was forming, he could feel it.

Marty opened his eyes and took in the blue vastness in front of him. He smiled, feeling at home, right there, stranding his board, feet dangling in the water. Weightless, nothing standing between him and the sea but a surf board.

The water sifted, a sudden depression opening beneath him, like the entire ocean was nothing but a bathtub filled with water and someone had pulled the plug from the bottom, emptying it.

Heart racing, Marty started paddling towards the shore, his arms burning with the effort. But no matter how hard he pushed himself, the shore kept its distance, far away. Too far away.

He could see people standing on the sand, familiar faces. His mom. Hetty and the guys. Kensi.

They were all in a panic, frantically pointing at the ocean, shouting at the top of their lungs, even if he couldn't make out the words.

A shiver raced down his back, the kind of hair-raising feeling that most called instinct, and Marty forced himself to looked over his shoulder.

Gone was the gentle, blue ocean and cloudless sky. In their place, there was nothing but a wall of angry water, going up as far as the eye could see.

Marty could see it starting to roll, folding over itself, like an hungry monster with foam teeth.

It was a wave the size of the sky... and it was coming down to crash over him.

....NCISLA....

Marty came to gasping for air.

The sunlight was beating down on him, its glare forcing his eyes closed as soon as he opened them. Marty half expected to find himself wet, salt crusting his lids closed, sand coating his fingertips like a second skin. But there wasn't any of that.

The world felt turned upside down, inside out, with no beginning or end, twirling like a out of control ferris wheel. Marty closed his hands, looking for something to hold on to, an anchor to keep him from drifting away.

There was thin cloth underneath his right hand, bed clothing. His left hand was surrounded by something soft and warm, tender ridges and patterns, fingers. He held on tightly, afraid that a tsunami
would come back to get him.

“You're awake.”

The voice was familiar, a warm and soft tone that instantly made the detective feel safe. Like gentle sunshine against his skin.

He decided to take a gamble and try to open his eyes again, now that he was fairly certain that he wasn't on the beach and the bright light had definitely not been the sun. From the smell of antiseptic in the air, he was pretty sure he was in a hospital.

“It's okay, I dimmed the lights,” the same voice reassured him, apparently reading his thoughts with ease. “Come on, Marty... open your eyes.”

Marty.

That word was so surprising that he forgot all about offending lights and opened his eyes, being greeted by a world of white walls, a monitor hanging above his head and his partner standing by the side of his bed. Kensi hardly ever called him by his first name. That information, combined with where he was, meant that things must have been really bad if they were on first names basis.

His lips felt like someone had scrapped them raw with sandpaper, skin peeling off as he pulled them apart. “Always so... bossy,” he rasped out. He sounded more like Batman than himself, which was so ridiculous it made him smirk.

Kensi was leaning over the bed, one hand wrapped around his while the other grasped the edge of the bed-railings. She looked worn out and deeply worried. “You're smiling,” she pointed out with a frown. “I'm just gonna go... call someone.”

Deeks grabbed her hand before she could make her retreat. It both surprised and scared him how little strength there was on his grip. “Stay,” he asked, his eyes trying to convey everything that he was too tired and confused to say.

He didn't want to be alone, afraid consciousness escaped from his grasp as soon as he was left to fend for himself. He had just woken up and was not in the mood to have doctors surrounding him like vultures, poking and probing, awakening pain and misery that he was sure to be lurking. For now, all that he could feel was numbness, and Deeks wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. And Kensi holding his hand. It felt disturbingly right and familiar, like their fingers had been made to fit together. “What happened?”

Kensi licked her lips, eyes looking down for a second before focusing on his face once again. She was considering lying to him, which rose all sorts of alarm bells on Marty's mind. There was no such thing as pitiful lies; there were just lies that people told when the truth was just too hard to face. “Am I dying?” he asked, a sense of déjà vu at the pit of his stomach.

Last time when he had asked that very same question, Deeks had been met with a warm chuckle. He had been only half joking then, feeling the need to ease some of the tension from Kensi's face.

Now... now he was honestly curious. And Kensi was not laughing.

He couldn't quite remember what had happened, why he was in the hospital, but he could tell some time had gone by just from the pull of facial hair around his mouth as he talked. His beard was thicker, almost double than the soft scrub he usually kept, which meant that at least a week had passed.
The detective could feel all of his limbs still attached, so that was good. There was, however, an odd pressure on the right side of his stomach and chest, one that he couldn't quite define but had the feeling that should be hurting like hell. Adding to that, it was uncomfortable to breathe, something that was very jarring, as he liked to breathe and kind of did it all the time.

“How’re you feeling?” Kensi asked, sitting back down and very purposefully not answering his question. The hand gripping the bedrail moved to his forehead, pushing his hair out of the way until she could lean the back of her hand against his skin. “You don't feel warm anymore,” she said with a smile, completely disregarding of the intimacy of the gesture, like it was something that she was used to do all the time.

Deeks frowned. It wasn't like he didn't like it or even -secretly- looked forward to her gentle touches, but that simply was not who they were, not as far as he could remember. Had he lost more than a week? God! Had he really lost his memory this time around? His mom had always warned him not to joke around with serious issues... “Kensi... what the hell happened?” he asked again, a growing sense of uneasy inside his chest.

She looked down again, her hand drifting away from his hair to sit in her lap, as Kensi finally seemed to realize what she was doing. “What do you remember?” she asked back, leaning back against her chair, unconsciously widening the distance between the two of them.

It was a damn good question, even if his partner still had the annoying habit of answering his questions with questions of her own.

“Odd bits and pieces,” he answered in all honesty. “I remember being... somewhere really smelly... some guy... running across the street like a dumbass... were we chasing him?”

Kensi nodded, a sight escaping her lips as she realized that he didn't really remembered much.

“The guy we were chasing was Leonard Portland--”

“Was?” Deeks cut in. It came out sounding like a question, but he already knew the answer to that one. The image of the running man, now lying on the ground covered in blood and bullet holes, came to his mind. “Did we... shoot him?”

“No, his roommate, Arthur Hinds, shot him. And you in the process,” she added, her eyes drifting to his right side.

So, that explained the not-yet-pain on his side. “I got shot, again?” Deeks complained. It wasn't quite a whine, but it came close enough. “Wasn't it... Sam's turn or something?”

“Don't joke,” Kensi reprimanded, her expression stormy. “It was... it was bad, Deeks Really bad,” she let out, elaborate words failing her. “You scared the hell out of me.”

Deeks was just about to ask exactly how bad, when he made a very poor choice and decided to move a little, hoping to find a more comfortable position. The sleeping monster on his side awoke with a roar, leaving the detective gasping in pain as all breath escaped him.

“Breathe,” Kensi's voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. “Breathe!”

It was really good advice, and Deeks would absolutely follow it, if his lungs weren't currently held hostage inside his chest, all muscles locked up and frozen, denying everyone of his commands to move.

Alarm bells sounded again, this time not inside Deeks' mind, but from the monitor above his bed.
'Sonofabitch!' Deeks let out with all his might, even if he was the only one who could hear it.

....NCISLA....

Kensi backed away as several medical staff came rushing into Deeks' room, a doctor with a red beard leading the way. He was one of Dr. Robertson's team, but for all of her special agent training, she could not remember the man's name.

What she could remember was the meaning of the word hypoxia. That had been the first thing out of his mouth as he looked up at the monitor, a word that had been thrown around Deeks enough times during the past week for Kensi to know that his breathing was acting up again.

Marty had been off the ventilator for two days. Just two days.

It had been hard enough to sit by his side day after day, watching a machine breathe for her partner. And now, so soon after he had finally awoken, she feared its return.

It felt like hours since she had been kicked out of the room, the door closing on her face and the curtains pulled, cutting her off from everything that was going on inside.

It was not fair. The doctors had all assured her that the worst part was over, that Deeks had managed to overcome the infection and that his right lung had recovered enough for them to pull him off the assisted ventilation and ween him out of the induced coma. They had rekindled her hope, their words so optimistic that Kensi had found herself, for the first time since it had all begun, daring to dream about a tomorrow where her partner was alive. And now this!

When she heard the door finally opening, Kensi nearly jumped the man coming out. “What happened in there? He couldn't breathe!”

“Mrs. Kensi,” the doctor called out gently, careful not to fuel her volatile emotions. “While I understand that something like that was very difficult to witness happening to a loved one, I can assure you that it was perfectly normal and expected.”

Kensi blinked, the words slowly registering through the mist of her concern. She took a step back, realizing how close she stood from the doctor's face, who, to his credit and even knowing that she was a Federal agent, had stood his ground.

She wanted to contest his comment about 'loved ones', but after that little display of irrationality, she could hardly deny it. Somewhere along the line she had become very protective of her partner, perhaps more than what was expected from working partners.

“So, what happened?” Kensi asked, quieter now, her emotions in control. “We were just talking and then he--”

“Mr. Deeks suffered a lung lesion, along with some damage to his ribs and breathing muscles on his right side,” the doctor explain. “With any one of these situations, it is expected some degree of breathing difficulty. It was one of the reasons why we placed him on assisted ventilation in the first place.”

“Is he... did you have to put it back?” she asked, not daring to peek inside the room.

“No,” the doctor offered with a caring smile, knowing perfectly well to which 'it' she was referring to. “Mr. Deeks suffered a simple muscle spasm. We gave him a muscle relaxant to help him rest and some instructions on what to do to ease his breathing. We'll send a physical therapist later on, so he can start working on some breathing exercises and eventually regain his full pulmonary function.”
Kensi breathed in relief, feeling slightly guilty that she could do it effortlessly while Deeks could not.
Yet. “Is it okay if I go back inside?”

“Go right ahead,” the man offered, standing out of her way. “I'm sure he will appreciate a friendly face to replace all of our nasty mugs,” he added with a wink.
“We found the explosives.”

Even though he hadn't spoken all that loud, Sam's deep voice sounded imponent inside the otherwise quiet room, startling the woman sleeping on the couch by the bed. Deeks, deeply asleep, didn't even stir.

“Humm...what?” she let out, struggling for coherence. Her hair, after a few hours of struggling with the denim jacket that had doubled as her pillow, was standing up in all directions. “You found what?”

The big man was taken aback by the woman's unexpected presence, even if he could venture a pretty good guess on who she was based on nothing else but hair genetics. Deeks, it would seem, have never stood a chance.

He had called before coming to the hospital, wanting to know how the detective was doing and hoping to share the good news with both Kensi and Deeks. She had told him that there was no need to hurry because she was planning on spending the night at the hospital. Despite all the assurance that the detective was finally out of danger, Kensi was still having some trouble in letting the injured man out of her sight. Until now, it would seem. “I'm sorry, Ma'am. I thought Ken-”

“Did you just say explosives?” there was a barely hidden edge of panic to her voice as she looked towards her sleeping son, probably already making plans on how to get him on a chair and wheel him out of there as fast as she could.

Sam had to smile. She actually reminded him of his own mother, sweet looking but deeply fierce. “We're perfectly safe here, Ma'am,” he assured her, extending his right hand. “Sam Hanna. I work with your son.”

Panic mostly squelched, she looked carefully at him. The raised eyebrow at the way he introduced himself was oddly familiar. “Just work, hum?” she pointed out, before smiling as she shook his hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Sam. And I'm no one's Ma'am, just Roberta,” she added with a wink.

Her handshake was firm and fearless, giving Sam the impression that this was a woman used to get things done on her own.

“I imagine you were expecting to see Kensi here, right?” she asked, receiving a nod in reply. ”The poor, sweet girl was exhausted. I begged her to go home and get a decent night of sleep; promised that I would stay with Martin until she came back.”

“How's he doing?” Sam asked, nodding towards the door so that they could speak more freely without disturbing the sleeping man. There seemed to be a bit more color to Deeks' cheeks, which was a big improvement from the last time Sam had seen him.

Roberta couldn't help but glimpse over her shoulder before following him, reassuring herself that Deeks was still peacefully resting. The look in her eyes was one that Sam easy recognized, as he had seen it in Michelle's face a thousand times, looking at their kids. It was a mix of love and fierce protectiveness that mothers seemed to have brought down to damn near perfection and no one else could copy.

“He's still the same Marty,” she answered cryptically. Looking at Sam's confused face, she explained. “He always keeps up a brave face for me, hiding the pain and misery he's in, protecting
me instead of letting me protect him for a change. Even as a little boy, he did it.”

The former SEAL nodded politely, even if the statement did little to clear his confusion. The picture she was painting was far from what he had imagined for the detective. Deeks had always struck him as someone whose life had always been too easy and laid-back, like the man himself. Growing up with a loving mother and father, house with a white picket fence, pancakes and whipped cream on Sundays, the works.

Nowhere in that scenario could Sam picture a young boy hiding his hardships from his mom. Or having to experience them, for that matter. Which only made him more curious about exactly why Deeks’ mother wanted her shot at protecting him.

“God... I could kill for a smoke,” Roberta let out with a heartfelt sight, effectively cutting through Sam's musings. “You don't happen to be a fellow smoker, do you? I'm trying to quit, but... you know...” she pointed out, her gaze lingering to Deeks' room.

Sam shook his head.

“Figured...” she let out with a shrug, pulling in a long breath, as if the lingering smell of disinfectant could make for the lack of nicotine in her system. “So, how long have you been working with my son?”

“Four years,” Sam answered, quickly doing the math in his head and finding himself surprised at the number. It felt like only last month that he'd been picking on the younger man over where he could sit in the bullpen.

Roberta nodded, pursing her lips. “Four years, hum? So, you, Kensi, Henrietta and that nice fella with the shaved head, you all work together?”

Sam smiled at himself. G., never failing to impress the older ladies. Deeks was going to love that.

“Callen, and yes Ma-- Roberta, we do.”

Deeks' mother nibbled at her lip, hands shoved deeply inside her jeans pocket, making her look more like a little girl rather than the mother of a grown man. “He doesn't tell me much about what he does, but I know it's not regular cop work,” she let out, not meeting Sam's eyes. “I mean, not that regular cop work isn't dangerous as hell, which is why I hated it when Marty chose that profession for himself in the first place, especially when he could have just made a living for himself as a lawyer and not have people shooting at him, but what I mean is... what you guys do is extra dangerous, isn't? Like, ‘finding explosives' dangerous, right?”

She was rambling, words tumbling out of her mouth almost as fast as Sam had witness Deeks do on his worst days. But, while on the younger man they had always assumed it to be a part of his annoying personality, now Sam could see that it was much more than that. It was a tell. A nervous trait that neither mother nor son seemed able to stop.

“Most of what we do is classified,” Sam confessed, knowing that there was very little he could tell that would console the worried woman. Truth was, what they did was very dangerous and the probability of one, or all of them, not making it through the day, was very high. But he couldn't say that to her. He could barely say that to his own wife, and she was an experienced agent as well.

“What I can tell you is that what we do matters,” he eventually let out, meeting her watery gaze unflinching. “Your son saves lives, helps other people every single day he's on the job... and he is very good at what he does.”

Sam figured that there was no harm's done in boosting a mother's morale just a little bit, given that
her son was lying in the room next door, recovering from a gunshot wound. But even as the words left his mouth, the former SEAL was pressed to admit to himself that he wasn't stretching the truth as much as he would imagine it.

Granted, Deeks was probably the least reliable person who Sam worked with, but even he had to admit that the detective was very good at what he did, almost as good as an agent and, if the shaggy-headed surfer were open to allow someone to mentor him on the things that he lacked, Deeks could even become a phenomenal agent.

Roberta smiled, a grim stretch of her lips that didn't really reached her blue eyes. “He always told me that he wanted to protect those who couldn't protect themselves, that he was going to be to others the person he wished someone had been to us when he was a little boy,” she let out, silent tears rolling down her face. “I always hated that, you know? I know it's selfish of me, but God! I hated the fact that, even though his father was a drunken bastard who almost killed him, he still managed, one way or the other, to shape the kind of man that Martin grew up to be.”

Sam blinked, sure that he had somehow misheard what Roberta had said. Deeks' father tried to kill his own son?

“Promise me,” Roberta went on, clueless on the effect her words were having. “Promise me you’ll keep him safe out there?”

It was not a promise that Sam wanted to make. He would gladly give his life for any member of the team, Hetty, Eric and Nell included; that was not the issue. It was, however, a promise that Sam was not sure he could keep, not with their line of work, and Sam was a man who prided himself on always honoring his promises. “I will do my best, Roberta,” Sam said in all honesty. “That's all I can promise you.”

The small woman smiled kindly, her fingers lightly brushing against the special agent's big biceps. “Somehow, Sam, I know that your best is better than what any mother could ever hope for.”
"It is good to see you back on your feet, Mr. Deeks!"

The fact that he currently resembled less a man and more of a desert lizard, basking in the sun, was because that was exactly what he was doing. It had been over a week since Deeks had been allowed outside to breathe some fresh air. The warmth of the sun felt like a long overdue lover's touch against his skin.

The detective opened his eyes, squinting against the sun-glare until he could glimpse Hetty's face, standing right in front of him. Damn the woman, she could move silently!

“I wouldn't exactly call this one my feet,” he pointed out, giving the wheelchair an aggravated nudge. “But nurse Brenda insisted and you know me, could never say no to a beautiful woman,” he added with a half-hearted smirk.

“Nurse Brenda,” Hetty pondered for a second. “Is that the rather large lady, the one who used to play football in college?”

Deeks looked around, pretending to make sure they were alone. “Yes,” he whispered. “She scares the bejesus out of me!”

Hetty smiled. “I'm sure she has only your best interest in mind,” she pointed out.

The detective nodded, forced to concede the point even if it pained him to admit the truth: had it not been for the wheelchair, he wouldn't have made it all the way to the hospital's yard. Honestly, he had been exhausted just from getting up and putting on some sweatpants, not to mention the absolutely lovely and disgustingly nostalgic moment when his mother had to help him get his sneakers on, like he was two years old again and couldn't do it himself. Which he couldn't, but that was beside the point.

“And speaking of your best interests,” Hetty went on, looking around. “Where are Ms. Kensi and Mrs. Deeks?”

“It's Miss and she prefers Roberta,” he offered with a smile and a wink, knowing the older woman would easily recognize her own words. “Mom was starting to go stir crazy inside that room, so I kind of begged Kensi to take her home and get some rest.”

Hetty nodded approvingly, taking a seat besides Deeks' parked chair. “I imagine it cannot be easy for a mother to see her son lying in a hospital bed.”

Deeks nodded, playing with the edge of his robe. “She had more than enough practice, before Gordon left the house,” he let out with a sad smile. “I think it's the memories it drags back that's giving her a hard time.”

Hetty nodded again, her gaze lost in the distance. Deeks doubted that she was looking at the dry fountain that decorated the center of the yard. He wondered if she could actually imagine what it had been like then.

For most days, the bruises had been easily enough to hide beneath his clothes, finger marks and knuckle punches that his teachers wouldn't be able to see unless he took off his shirt.

On occasion, it was bad enough that his mother had no other choice but to take him to the hospital,
excusing the broken bones on a hyperactive kid with too much time on his hands.

And then, there had been that one time when his bruises had actually made it to the local news. Granted, his mother had been a little over creative with the whole snake story, but at the time saying that a python had tried to kill her son had seemed like a better choice than to actually tell the truth.

Sometimes, Deeks wondered what his life would have been like if his mother wasn't so imaginative at hiding the abuse they suffered at home.

“She regrets not having acted sooner,” Hetty pointed out, almost as if she knew where his thoughts had drifted to. “Do you share her opinion?”

Deeks blinked, the question catching him off guard. Whenever the topic of his childhood came around, most people wanted to know about his feelings towards his father and the repercussions of the man's actions on Deeks' life, and by most people, he meant the court ordered psychiatrist and the school's councilor.

Neither had ever question Deeks' thoughts on his mother's actions. In fact, the idea of questioning his mother's choices at the time, had never even crossed the detective's mind. She had been a victim, same as he, nothing more.

“She did the best that she could, under the circumstances,” Marty replied all too quickly. The answer sounded flat and institutionalized even to his ears. “How do you usually go about your regrets, Hetty?” he asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from painful memories.

The older woman pursed her lips, turning around to face him. “Of all the words of mice and men, the saddest are, ‘it might have been’;” she replied with a knowing smile before returning her gaze to the dry fountain.

Deeks pondered her words for a second, smiling when he recognized the quote. “Vonnegut?”

Hetty's smile opened into a toothy one. “Very well, Mr. Deeks! Always had you pegged for a fellow fan,” she cheered.

“Doesn't really answer my question, does it?” he pointed out. Everyone had more than one instant in their past where they wondered what might have been had their choices been different, going from simple things like choosing strawberry over chocolate for they sundae ice-cream, to picking a career. It was an intrinsic part of basic human behavior to wonder about options and possibilities; it was something else entirely to mourn or feel guilty about making a choice.

“Neither did you,” she threw back without missing a beat.

Deeks rubbed his head, a nervous tell that he was well aware of but couldn't seem to avoid. “My mom got pregnant really young, barely eighteen,” he said, more to himself than in answer to Hetty. The fact that she was looking away from him gave him a odd sense of privacy. “She told me she had been afraid of facing such a huge responsibility alone,” he added, closing his eyes. “She never actually said it in so many words, but I could tell that, at the time, her choice had been between marrying Gordon or not have me at all.”

“She chose wisely,” Hetty pointed out after a moment of silence. “The world would have suffered a substantial loss had she picked differently.”

Marty huffed a mirthless laugh. “Yeah, right,” he let out in self depreciation. “Me and Gandhi, two peas in a pod.”
Hetty chuckled at the comparison, probably imagining Deeks, surfing in a loincloth. Or maybe that was just his twisted mind. “Perhaps Gandhi isn't the most suitable example, given the violent nature of your line of work, Mr. Deeks,” she pointed out. “But I would agree that both have worked to make the world a better place, wouldn't you say?”

Deeks gave her a sideways glance. “Is this a pep talk? Did you seriously came here to give me a pep talk? Because after what happened, I was expecting more of a detailed course on 'how to dodge bullets', or perhaps 'top picks for cover during a shootout' or-”

Hetty's gaze and her hand on his arm stopped the detective on his long list of things he could have done differently. There was no point in denying that the shooting and the events that led to it had been weighing heavily on his mind. Particularly, where he had screwed up.

Since he had been coherent enough to remember what had happened, Deeks had been silently obsessing over what he could have done differently, how he had failed and what he could do to be better next time. Sam hadn't mentioned anything yet, but the detective was sure that the former SEAL already a couple of lectures ready to give him once he was back on his feet.

“Martin Alexander Deeks,” Hetty voiced very carefully, each word a speech in itself.

Despite his best efforts, the use of his full name never failed to make Deeks stand at attention, or as close as he could get with healing ribs and sitting on a wheelchair. Only his mom and the drill Sergeant at the academy used to call him that, and when either of them did, Deeks knew better than to ignore the call. “Yes, momma?” he asked sarcastically, hoping to cover his initial reaction. It would be extremely dangerous for Henrietta tiny-ninja Lange to realize the power of calling his full name. Very dangerous indeed.

“Don't be cheeky,” she scolded gently. “I want you to listen very carefully to what I am about to say,” she warned, waiting for Deeks full attention. “Do you remember the papers I gave you a few months after you joined us at OSP as a liaison?”

Deeks nodded. The file with both his resignation from LAPD form and application to NCIS were still carefully hidden at the bottom of his desk drawer, waiting for a time when it would feel right to sign them both.

“Do you know why I gave them to you?”

Deeks nodded, slower this time, as he wasn't exactly sure what kind of answer the older woman was looking for. “Because you were going on a suicide mission to help Callen and wanted to leave your affairs in order?”

“That is one way to see it,” she nodded. “But mostly, because I could not allow for my personal choices at the time to stand in the way of NCIS gaining a most valuable agent.”

“Hetty...”

“No... let me finish,” the short, yet imposing woman, asked. “The report on the shooting that Mr. Callen and Mr. Hanna delivered to me spoke of irreproachable decision-making in the middle of extreme danger and precision shooting in the most adverse of circumstances, to a level of expertise that I both value and expect of all my top agents,” she pointed out vehemently. “The fact that you were injured in the line of duty was unfortunate, Mr. Deeks, but, under the circumstances, unavoidable.”

Deeks could feel his cheeks reddening despite his best efforts. Grown-assed men did not blush in the
face of a compliment. Except that he, apparently, did. “Thank you, Hetty,” he offered sincerely, lost at words.

Truth was, the detective had become accustomed to being criticized for his work, no matter how hard he tried or how well he did.

Of course, his work choices had never been exactly conducive to high praise. No one liked public defenders, sometimes not even the people they defended; and the only thing that cops hated more than lawyers were lawyers who had decided to reach across and join the Police force. And last, but certainly not least, snitching on a fellow officer... that had earned him extra-cookie points as well! So, lawyer, cop-lawyer and telltale, the trifecta of making friends in the force.

Having his good work acknowledged by someone he held in such a high regard was... unfamiliar.

“Nonsense,” Hetty huffed, getting to her feet. “Just stating the facts and clearing some misconceptions. Speaking of which,” she went on, pursing her lips. “You should know that Mr. Hanna asked me for your file this morning.”

Deeks frowned. “Why?”

Hetty shrugged. “He gave me no concrete reason, just said he was curious about something,” she pointed out. “I gave him the... redacted version,” she assured. “Didn't think the full version was mine to give.”

The detective nodded, absent minded. He knew that, as a team leader, Callen had access to his LAPD file and he imagined that, had Sam shown any interest in the matter, his partner would gladly share that information. The fact that Sam had gone directly to Hetty meant that he was looking for something that wouldn't be in Deeks professional file.

Something Deeks wasn't sure he was ready to share with the rest of his team.
Sam wasn't exactly proud of what he'd done, and to be completely honest with himself, he wasn't all that happy with what he had learned either. In fact, he was pissed as hell.

The thing about working in an intelligence agency, any of them, was that no amount of information, no matter how big or small, or how well hidden it is hidden, staid hidden.

The conversation with Roberta Deeks had stuck with Sam, spiked his curiosity. And once that was done, there was no hell or high water that could stop the seasoned agent from finding what he set out to look.

More than being a Navy Seal, more than being an NCIS agent, Sam was a father. He loved his son and daughter more than anything on Earth, would do absolutely anything to keep both of them safe and happy. The idea of a parent, of any kind of person in charge of a child's life, trying to kill their own offspring sat all kinds of wrong in Sam's gut.

After Roberta's comment about Deeks' father almost killing his own son, Sam needed to find out the exact circumstances surrounding that event. He needed for it to be something tame, an accident or a misfortune decision that the man had regretted for the rest of his life. After all, even the most loving of parents could not be perfect 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Everyone made mistakes. Sam was well aware of that because he had just made a terrible one.

He knew nothing good could come out from his poking around. Looking at those old police files, seeing those evidence photos... it had painted in all too bright colors the sort of abuse Deeks and his mother had been put through for years, until a small boy had been forced to shoot his own father.

For what he knew and had assumed about Deeks, it was definitely not what Sam had expected. It certainly wasn't the sort of one-time mishap that he had hopped for.

In his mind, Sam couldn't help but imagine his older son going through the same ordeal, being born into a family where love and safety meant nothing at all, forced to grow up too fast, fearing for his own life at such a tender age. In his heart, Sam hoped that Aiden would have mustered the same courage and strength had he found himself in the same situation as Deeks.

Sam shuddered at the thought, silently praising Allah for the all the love and peace his family had been granted so far.

The former SEAL prided himself for being an excellent judge of character; he had to be, otherwise his career would have been a very short one. For example, it had taken him all of two days working with Callen to know that the aloof man was someone trust worthy and whose sense of honor and duty to his country could rival with the very best of the best.

It had taken Sam a week to know that Kensi was a force of Nature in herself, one that he was very grateful to have on their side. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that, no matter what, the young woman had their back.

Sam had been working with Deeks for four years and he still had some issues with the man, mainly trust issues.
The irony was, of course, that after Sam had gone behind Hetty and the detective's back to dig around his past, it was Deeks who shouldn't be trusting Sam at that point.

The big man sighed as he exited the elevator and walked towards Deeks' room. How was Sam going to face his teammate after what he had found out? After he had invaded his privacy?

With Callen and Kensi working undercover for the day on a special assignment and knowing that Roberta didn't drive, it had fallen onto him to pick up the young man from the hospital. In some twisted way, Sam was sure that this was all a part of Hetty's evil plan, to punish him for going around snooping what he had no business snooping.

Because now Sam knew.

Now he knew that Deeks' playfulness and humor were a shield against the world, against people who could hurt him. Like a poker player, Deeks played all of them like a master, bluffing his way through his insecurities and fears, putting up a show so that no one would even think to dig deeper and see the cracks underneath.

Now Sam knew who Deeks was running from every time he refused a hair cut or even a brush. The files he had found had an old picture of Gordon Brandel, former U.S. Marine Corps who had been caught on the tail end of Vietnam war. And while Deeks might have gotten his eye and hair color from his mother, his facial features were all Gordon's, a cruel spitting image that would turn all the more haunting if he wore the same close-cropped hairstyle his father had favored.

And now he knew that Deeks wasn't really trying to stay a kid for ever; he just never had a chance to BE a kid in the first place.

Now that Sam knew the truth, every action and behavior became so obvious that the senior agent couldn't help but feel angry at himself for missing the clues. Above all else, Sam was angry for failing to notice how similar Deeks and Callen really were, neither of them having had the privilege of a loving and supporting family growing up like he and Kensi were fortunate to have.

However, while G. had somehow triggered Sam's paternal instinct, since day one Deeks had simply annoyed him to the point that Sam had started to ignore the younger in all aspects that were not work-related. And that Sam knew to be his biggest failure.

The man in question no where in sight as Sam reached his hospital room. The bed was already stripped of sheets and the few personal items Deeks had scattered across the room were already gone. Even the ridiculously cute police officer teddy bear that Nell had given him.

“Excuse me,” Sam called out as he reached the nurses' station. “Can you tell me where I can find the patient from room 505?”

The young woman behind the counter adjusted her glasses before typing a few keys on the computer. “505 is currently vacant, sir. Perhaps you have the wrong room number?” she pointed out helpfully. “Can you tell me the patient's name?”

“Deeks, Martin,” Sam offered. “And I'm sure about the room, he's been in there since last week.”

“You're looking for Marty?”

Sam turned around, following the source of the voice. An orderly almost as big as himself was looking at him with a questioning, disapproving face.

Like any sophisticated computer, people's brains are programmed to analyze any given situation in
light of what they are used to deal with, what their personal experience tells them. Two different people, looking at the same abstract painting, will always see very different things, like a veterinary might see a cow while an architect might see a building.

Sam's brain would always be programmed for danger and the worst case scenario.

A strange man, giving him a stinky look and with that much familiarity with the injured LAPD detective rang all sorts of alarm bells on the former SEAL. Even though they had found no evidence of Arthur Hind having any form of associates, there was no guarantee that there wasn't someone out there hell-bent on taking revenge on the police officer who shot the terrorist. Always assume the worst, never be surprised by it.

After all, this whole mess had started because they had assumed that questioning Leonard would be an easy, milk-run assignment. Sam was not going to make the same mistake again and assume that Deeks was safe just because Arthur was dead and the case was closed. Already he was berating himself for not posting extra security outside Deeks' room.

“How do you know detective Deeks?” Sam demanded, narrowing the distance between him and the other man. “Did you see anything suspicious?”

The orderly had the good sense to take a step back, intimidated by the sudden intensity behind Sam's questions and the promise of danger in his eyes. “Easy man,” he said, his hand raised in the space between him and the agent. “Marty left, like, half and hour ago.”

“Who took him?” Sam hurried to ask, his phone suddenly in his hand, ready to set in motion all the resources NCIS had at their disposal. Whoever had taken the detective was going to be very sorry for their poor choices in life. “How many? Can you describe them to me?”

Both the woman behind the counter and the orderly gave Sam a very confused look, staring at him like he had completely lost his mind.

“No one took Marty,” the orderly finally said, taking his time to chose each word carefully, like he was talking to someone particularly slow or dangerously unstable. “That was the problem.”

Sam deflated. While he was relieved that nothing foul had happened to explain Deeks' disappearance, it still told a lot about the man himself that, in absence of Kensi, he had just assumed that no one would bother to come and pick him up from the hospital.

No, Sam amended. It wasn't so much about what the action told about Deeks but more about what it told about the rest of the team. While the detective trusted Sam or Callen to have his back in the field, he didn't expect the sentiment to extend to his personal life. Sadly, Sam had to admit that neither he or his partner had ever done anything to make Deeks think differently.

“Did he say where he was going?” Sam asked, forcing himself to be extra polite after almost losing it on the poor orderly.

The man gave him a look, like he was trying to gauge whether Sam was worthy of such information or not. “He didn't,” he finally confessed. “Just said he was going some place where it didn't smell like hospital,” he added with a smile. “Which, you know, can basically be anywhere outside a hospital.”
Sam smiled. “Yeah... basically.” He knew exactly where Deeks had gone.

...NCISLA...

Even with his eyes closed, he could still see the ocean. That unmistakable sound of waves swelling up, rolling into themselves just before they came crashing down against the sand like thunder. There was a rhythm to it, a pulse, like a beating heart.

If he sat there long enough, Deeks was sure he could set his own heart to the pulse of the sea. Whoosh... bang... whoosh... bang...

Deeks knew he should have given the cab driver his home address as he left the hospital. After all, Dr. Robertson had specifically told him that he could leave the hospital on the condition of doing nothing but rest for the following two weeks. She hadn't been very specific about where said rest should happen, so the detective had been slightly creative in his interpretation of her words. After all, once a lawyer, always a lawyer.

Deeks buried his fingers on the wet sand and tilted his head back, feeling the warmth of the sun against his face. He suppose he was resting, just like the doc had ordered. After all, he was still on the sand, rather than hitting the waves like he wanted.

After more than a week breathing nothing more than the smell of sickness, disinfectants and that particular nauseating odor of aseptic medical supplies, Deeks was desperate for something fresh and familiar.

Salt, seaweeds and sun-kissed skin. If anyone looked close enough, Deeks was sure they would find those three things in his DNA.

“I was just about ready to sic the National Guard on you.”

The deep voice, although familiar, startled Deeks out of his reverie and into moving without thinking. The sudden, sharp move of his torso as he turned back to look at Sam, was not appreciated by his still healing chest muscles. “Sonofabitch!” he hissed, punching the soft sand. Nearly two weeks, and he was still moving like a ninety year old.

“You okay?”

Deeks looked up to be met with Sam's dark eyes. The amount of concern he could see in the brown depths took him by surprise until he remembered Hetty's warning about the other man's investigations. “You found out,” he simply stated, knowing that there was no point in either of them pretending otherwise.

Sam's gaze narrowed, the only tell the former SEAL possessed when caught by surprise. Apparently, he wasn't expecting that particular cat to be out of the bag so soon. “I did,” he confirmed, quickly recovering. “I'm sorry.”

Deeks felt somewhat embarrassed, knowing that the rest of the team now knew about his past and what he had done. That they knew what sort of person he really was.

He had been so sure that he was all over feeling ashamed for the way he grew up, of feeling less than others because of the things he went through when he was a kid. But, apparently, all it took was for someone whose respect he craved to find out and all of those corrosive feelings Deeks had thought to have disappeared, come rushing right back.

As it had occurred before, more often than he cared to admit, anger was the detective's chosen
sentiment to deal with the situation. “I don't want your pity,” he hissed, turning his gaze away from
the other man and back to the sea. “Or Callen's, for that matter.”

He had come to the beach on an impulse. When he found himself sitting on the sand, watching the
ocean, Deeks hadn't been exactly thinking much further ahead, namely how the hell was he going to
get back up without passing out. Now, he was trapped under Sam's watching gaze when all the
detective wanted was to storm away and end the conversation before it had a chance to start.

From the corner of his eye, Deeks carefully watched the big man, hoping that Sam would take the
hint and leave. Instead, he watched as Sam folded his legs with more grace than a man his size
should muster, and planted himself next to him.

“When Aiden first started kindergarten, his best friend was a boy named Gary,” Sam said out of the
blue. Like Deeks, he wasn't looking at the other man but rather at the blue expense in front of them.
Neutral territory. “During that first year alone, Gary managed to show up with a broken wrist, a
broken arm and a concussion. Michelle, myself and a group of the other parents reported the situation
to Child Services, but because we could not prove the abuse, they did nothing.”

Deeks took a deep breath, slowly releasing it through his teeth, doing his best to ignore Sam's words.
The story, however, was hitting too close to home and he was beginning to seriously consider
crawling his way out of the beach.

“Gary never made it past third grade,” Sam whispered. “Later we heard that his mother had been
charged with voluntary manslaughter.”

And there it was. The punch line that felt more like a sucker punch. Actually, Sam's fists hit more
kindly than that.

Grinding his teeth, Deeks forced himself to look at the older man. His eyes, usually the same color as
the ocean in front of them, were nothing but two pieces of cold steel. “Is there a point to your sob
story?” he let out, reminding himself that stories like his and 'Gary' were, sadly, more common than
seagulls by the sea. As hurtful as it was, he could not afford to let his guard down whenever he heard
one more.

“I don't pity you,” Sam pointed out vehemently, looking straight at the detective. “I'm thankful that
instead of Gary's fate, instead of the fate that so many abused children suffer, you had the courage to
fight back. You're a survivor Deeks, and something like that can have nothing less than my profound
respect.”

The detective stared back at him, blinking, lost on what to say. It was hard to feel pride over the fact
that he had shot his own father, but Sam had a point. He had survived... he had made sure that his
mother survived. And that was something that he could be proud of without feeling shame.

“I said I'm sorry, not just because of what you went through, but because of my actions,” the older
man went on. “No matter how much I care about this team or considered it a part of my family, it
was not my place to invade your privacy like I did. And for that, I am truly sorry.”

Deeks looked down at the hand that Sam had extended towards him. Like him, the other man's
fingers were covered in sand. He smiled, grasping his teammate’s hand in a strong grip, wet grains
bidding them like blood. Like family.

“So, we cool?” Sam asked with a dimpled smile.

Hetty was the secretive one in their group, the one with multiple pasts, all of them more colorful than
the next. Deeks had never set out to be mysterious or the slightest cloth and dagger-y about his childhood or his father. And while it wasn't a subject matter that he sought out in casual conversations, it wasn't a secret either. “We're cool,” Deeks let out with a genuine smile. “So, that whole family speech... does that mean I can drive your car next time we're partnered?”

Sam's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits in his face. “Don't push it,” he said without real heat. “Come on, lets get you home before someone -Hetty- actually calls the National Guard,” he added, nonchalantly grabbing Deeks arms and gently pulling him up.

The detective figured he could always blame his suddenly flaming cheeks on the sun beating down on them rather than on the very awkwardness of having Sam, quite effortlessly, picking him up like he was one of his kids' toys.

“Quit your worrying,” Sam let out, bumping the other man's shoulder in a playful manner. “I've been there... broken ribs are a bitch to handle when it comes to certain movements.”

Deeks chuckled, certainly glad the other man was there to help. Otherwise, he would have had to throw his dignity in the wind and resign himself to crawl his way out of the sand. “Thanks, man,” he offered sincerely. “Jungle cat jokes aside, I was not ready to walk on all fours out of here. I've got a reputation to keep, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah. You're a regular Mr. Mistoffelees.”

The younger man couldn't help but burst out laughing. The idea of Sam, sitting through any musical at all was funny enough; him watching Cats long enough to know one of the main character's name was just hysterical.

“Shut your mouth!” Sam warned with a sly smile. “Michelle's a fan.”

---NCISLA---

His house was surprisingly clean, given the amount of time he had spent away from it. Deeks threw his keys over the coffee table and looked around appreciatively, secretly happy that he wasn't walking into a stale and dusty home.

His mother had offered her place for him to stay after leaving the hospital, but in all honesty, after having to endure a plastic covered mattress at the hospital for over a week, all Marty really wanted was the comfort of his house and sleeping on his own bed. And his shower. God! He could kiss his shower!

The refusal, apparently, had sent Roberta into a cleaning spree over her son's apartment, accompanied by an assortment of labeled containers of food on his counter and inside the fridge.

The detective smiled as he caught a large one containing his mom's lasagna, his stomach grumbling at the sight.

Sam had named him after the wrong cat. Deeks had more in common with Garfield than with Mistoffelees.

There was a folded note on his kitchen counter, carefully placed over one of the plastic containers. ‘Call me if you need more food. Oh, and don't worry about Monty, he's loving my place more than your ribs would love him right now. Love you, honey! Hugs and kisses!’

The injured man looked around at the amount of food she had left him and shook his head in amusement. It would take him roughly a month to eat all of that food, unless he called for
reinforcements. With that in mind, the detective picked up his phone to call Kensi before sitting down on his couch with a content sigh.

He was about to hit dial when he noticed the wrapped box carefully placed against a pillow beside him. “What the h--”

Bombs didn't usually come wrapped in colorful, blue and red balloons, shiny paper, but none the less Deeks picked the box up with a healthy dose of dread. There was another note attached to it, but instead of his mom's curly handwriting, this one bore the angry chicken-scratch that Kensi liked to call calligraphy.

'Not a bomb. Welcome back, partner!'

Intrigued, Deeks tore away the paper, clueless on what had possessed Kensi to buy him a gift. Maybe it was a team thing? Two bullets in the line of duty, you get a dinner coupon; lose a limb, you get a complete set of steak knives?

Well, the action figure inside the hard, paper box, was most definitely not a dinner coupon. It took Deeks less than a second to realize what he was looking at and bursting out laughing.

He pulled the figure out of the box and set it in the center of his short table, his fingers mapping the intrinsic and detailed design of the piece. Han Solo, trapped inside his carbonite prison, Star Wars version of cryogenics preservation. Under the character's feet, Kensi had carved three letters, just so there was no doubt in Deeks' mind on who that was supposed to be and exactly what she thought of the Deeks idea of decorating her living room in the event of his death.

M. A. D.

The end

Chapter End Notes

To all of you who read and enjoyed this silly tale, thank you so much for your attention and I hope this story has brought a little bit of fun into your lives!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!