Hunted
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/13971087.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: M/M
Fandom: Stargate SG-1, Stargate Atlantis, Spooks | MI-5
Relationship: Rodney McKay/John Sheppard, Daniel Jackson/Jack O'Neill
Character: John Sheppard, Rodney McKay, Jack O'Neill, Daniel Jackson, Anthony DiNozzo, Harry Pearce, Adam Carter, Ducky Mallard
Additional Tags: Character Bashing, Kidnapping, Murder, Canon-Typical Violence, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Complete
Stats: Published: 2018-03-14 Chapters: 2/2 Words: 90467

Hunted

by Daisy_May

Summary

Dr. Rodney McKay, Head of Research and Development at the UK’s top secret military research facility, has been kidnapped. MI5 Chief of Section Colonel John Fitz-Sheppard will lead the search for him, with the help of NCIS Senior Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, but it will take all the knowledge and skill of MI5 to keep their scientist alive and safe while the spooks try to discover who is behind the kidnapping and what they really want with Rodney.

Notes

This was my response to the Rough Trade challenge 'A Whole Other World' in November 2016. The challenge was 50,000 words. Hunted is 90,455. I guess I lost!

Massive thanks to Edronhia, my beta and cheerleader, without whom this would never have been finished.
Dr. Rodney McKay Ph.D., Ph.D., was having a bad day. His milk had gone off so he was forced to drink his morning coffee black, which he hated; his dog had been sick on the landing carpet and he’d stepped in it; and a group of masked men had burst into his kitchen and kidnapped him. Of these three events, the one that most concerned him was his dog being sick. The others were just plain irritating.

Rodney ruminated on this as he lay face down in the back of a van, hands tied behind his back, legs tied together and his head covered with a bag or sack of some sort. He was sure he was alone in the back of the van although he could hear voices, probably from the front. Being alone was good. It meant he could try to wriggle free of his bonds or at least roll himself over, but after a few minutes of squiggling and squirming he realised that his kidnappers were possibly better than he’d given them credit for being. His hands were still tied behind his back, he was still on his tummy, and all he’d managed to do was rub his wrists raw. Bloody police procedural TV shows! Now every Tom, Dick and Harry knows to use plastic ties rather than good old fashioned rope which at least gave the kidnapee a sporting chance to get free.

He sighed heavily and thought about his dog again, although strictly speaking Brian wasn’t his dog, he was John’s dog. He just looked after the mutt as John claimed it wasn’t fair to keep a dog in central London and Brian would be much happier living in the country with a large garden and fields to run in and Rodney should just shut up because John knew how much he doted on Brian while John was in London. There was a reason for paw-prints on the bedding and a bowl of water on the floor in the bathroom and surely Rodney wouldn’t have the gall to claim the bowl was there for himself and in any case, the way Brian liked to cuddle up to Rodney on the sofa in an evening was a dead giveaway. Rodney could have defended himself but telling John that cuddling Brian made him feel closer to John when John wasn’t there, wasn’t something he was ready to admit as yet, not even to himself, so he kept his silence and continued to let Brian sleep on the end of his bed and cuddle up with him on the sofa in an evening.

Brian had probably eaten something that disagreed with him, likely a dead animal he’d picked up in the field behind the cottage. It was just one pile of sick as far as Rodney had seen, as though Brian’s tummy was rejecting something it didn’t like, rather than a number of sicks which were a more likely sign of infection. Rodney made a mental note to ask Katie, Brian’s daily dog-walker, to watch out for Brian eating dead stuff that might upset his tummy. Garbage-gut, that’s what vets called it when dogs ate crap that made them sick. It was probably garbage-gut rather than anything more serious, although he would keep a careful eye on Brian who did take great pleasure in being a doggy dustbin especially for anything smelly and/or dead, preferably both.

The van came to a sudden halt and Rodney tensed, wondering what was going to happen. They hadn’t been driving for long so couldn’t be too far from home, and from inside the van he could hear faint sounds of traffic which indicated a more populated place than the area surrounding the village where he lived. Possibly Salisbury? That was the closest urban area to him. The van doors opened, the traffic sounds increased, and he was able to hear the chiming of bells marking the hour. Definitely Salisbury. The sound of its clock was unmistakable and Rodney cursed his mind which was giving him details of the clock. Didn’t it know that they’d been kidnapped and didn’t have time for this? Which caused his mind to laugh at the pun and Rodney moaned in frustration. Sometimes being the cleverest man in the world was downright annoying.
His kidnappers clearly thought he was moaning in pain and as they dragged him out from the van were careful to pull on the ties around his wrists, forcing the plastic to dig deeper into the raw flesh. Rodney struggled a little but it was mostly for show since he knew he couldn’t break free of his bonds and that he should conserve his energy for a more likely bid for freedom. His mouth though, wasn’t tied and he took advantage of this by cursing his kidnappers, questioning the legitimacy of their birth and generally making a loud noise in the hope of catching someone’s attention, aware that rescue - and the neutralisation of his kidnappers - would be preferable to escape, although he wondered how quickly his absence would be noticed. He tended to work alone in his lab with occasional visits from Radek and Miko to discuss a project they might be working on, and John wasn’t due down until the weekend although he might manage to come down the following evening if he felt he could cope with Friday night traffic. Didn’t October school half-term begin on Friday? That would make the roads much busier out of London and John might decide to wait until Saturday morning.

A blow to the side of his head stopped both his yelling and his thoughts, and he felt himself being dragged down some concrete stairs and thrown onto a concrete floor. He lay silent and unmoving for a moment, assessing his situation and wondering what would happen next. He’d been kidnapped for a reason and it was unlikely to be financial. He was certainly well off, rich by many standards, but was more likely to have been kidnapped for information he could provide. His senior role in the government’s defence programme gave him access to almost all of the research that took place at the Defence Laboratory at Porton Down, to say nothing of his own groundbreaking work in weapons development. He, along with Radek and Miko Zelenka, were almost certainly top of any list of ‘Scientists Doing Important Work’, at least in terms of weapons technology - both creation of and defence against. Their work, in one form or another, was in use almost every day by British Forces somewhere and some overseas military forces too, although the government were, thankfully, very careful with whom they shared their technology.

_Huh. I might be in more trouble than I thought._

Special Agent Tony DiNozzo was just getting himself comfortable at his desk and waiting for his monitor to warm up when he spotted Dr. Donald Mallard heading towards the bullpen. The frown on the Medical Examiner’s face was unusual to see and it was clear that something was bothering him. Tony watched him approach Gibbs’ desk and wondered if something had happened. He’d always thought the pair were old friends but revelations made while Gibbs was recovering from memory loss earlier in the year had shown that Gibbs had kept much of his personal history a secret. Tony knew this had hurt Ducky: he’d said as much to Tony during the months when they’d all believed Gibbs had retired. Anything was preferable to cold case files on a miserable Friday morning however and maybe Ducky was about to divulge something that would get them all out of the office. There hadn’t been a new case for a few days and Tony was starting to get cabin fever.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as Ducky spoke to Gibbs, but the frown remained on Ducky’s face as he turned to walk away; if anything it was deeper. Making up his mind, Tony slipped out from behind his desk and followed the ME down to Autopsy.

Ducky had retired to his rarely used office by the time Tony caught up with him, a further clue that the older man was concerned about something. Tony knocked gently on the open door and Ducky looked up and smiled at him although it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

‘Anthony, how nice to see you. Come in and take a seat, and tell me how I may help you.’

Tony smiled at the old fashioned courtesy of his friend. ‘Actually, I was wondering if I might be able
to help you.’

Ducky raised his eyebrows in question and Tony pushed on.

‘I couldn’t help noticing that you seemed worried when you spoke to Gibbs and whatever he said didn’t help. I just wondered if it was something I could help with. If you are worried about something, I mean, and if you can tell me what it is, I could, you know, maybe help, help you.’ He frowned at his own lack of clarity.

Ducky smiled. ‘A little confusing, Anthony, but I get the gist. I’m concerned about my young cousin who would appear to have gone missing. I shared my fears with Jethro but he thinks I’m overreacting as Rodney hasn’t been missing for 48 hours as yet.’

Tony raised his own eyebrows at the number of surprising things divulged, not least that Ducky had family other than his elderly mother.

‘You know just when your cousin went missing?’

‘I know he was at work on Wednesday and that no one has seen him since.’

‘And how do you know this?’ Tony felt himself slipping into professional mode.

‘I telephoned his place of work and finally managed to speak with a secretary who told me Dr. McKay left work at 7pm on Wednesday and hasn’t been in since then. When I asked how long he was likely to be away for, I was told they didn’t give out that sort of information.’

Tony frowned. ’But, Ducky, how do you know he’s missing and hasn’t just taken a few days off?’

Ducky frowned back. ‘Because Mother’s birthday was yesterday and Rodney didn’t call her. He simply wouldn’t forget to call her on her birthday.’

Tony shook his head, trying to clear it. There was more to this than met the eye, he was certain.

‘Ducky, he may simply have forgotten her birthday. I know I don’t call any of my relations on their birthdays. I’m not even sure when most of them are. If your only reason for thinking he’s missing is because he forgot his aunt’s birthday—’

‘Which is just what Jethro said when I asked him for help. Anthony, I appreciate your concern, but I know my cousin and I am certain he’s gone missing. If you won’t believe me then please, don’t let me waste your time.’

Tony sighed but remained seated even as Ducky gestured towards the door. ‘I’m sorry, Ducky. If you say your cousin is missing, you must have a good reason for it. I’d like to help if I can, so please, tell me the whole story.’

Ducky lowered his arm and looked a little mollified.

‘When he was 11, my cousin Rodney came to live with my mother. I won’t go into the whole story as it really isn’t relevant, but suffice it to say that Mother, to all intents and purposes, brought Rodney up. He went away to school of course, but his home was in Scotland with Mother and she and I are his only living relatives. He is in his thirties now, but he has never forgotten to call Mother on her birthday and he isn’t answering either his cell phone or his landline. I have spoken to a neighbour for whom I have a contact number and who has a key to his house and I asked her to ensure my cousin wasn’t laying injured somewhere. She reported that the house was empty, apart from Rodney’s dog, and his car was still on the drive. He’s not driven anywhere and there is no public transport in the village. I am absolutely certain that he has gone missing.’
Tony thought for a moment. ‘Is it possible he’s just not in his office? Could he be working somewhere else or be in a meeting or something?’

‘Anthony, my cousin is Chief Scientist at the UK’s main military research centre at Porton Down. If he is on site someone will know where he is, and his car is still on his drive.’

‘Perhaps I could give them a call and see if they’ll tell me anything that might help if I tell them NCIS need to know?’

‘Well, you may certainly try but do not be surprised if they refuse to tell you anything. Security is obviously extremely tight.’ Ducky stood and straightened his bow tie. ‘I shall go and make a pot of tea whilst you make the call.’

Tony thought for a short time before picking up the telephone. He needed to be sure just what he wanted to ask and he scribbled a couple of notes on Ducky’s blotter, smiling as he did so. Ducky was the only person he knew who still used a fountain pen.

———

Tony awoke and stretched out his legs and back, relishing the luxury and space of his seat. Beside him, Ducky was chatting to one of the stewards who had been so very attentive to the older man. Perhaps they saw Ducky as a possible sugar daddy, or even, crap no! His sugar daddy? Even as he thought this, the steward, wearing a badge that read ‘Shane’ smiled at him.

‘Can I get you some coffee, Mr DiNozzo? Some breakfast? We’re just over the Irish Sea and will be landing in about an hour’s time.’

‘Just some coffee, thank you. My body clock isn’t ready for food just yet.’

‘Dr. Mallard? Anything for you?’ the smiling Shane asked.

‘I’ll have coffee too, please.’

‘Coffee, Ducky? I thought you only drank tea?’ Tony teased.

‘Have you tasted airline tea, Anthony? Even in first class, I assure you, only ever ask for coffee.’

‘I’ll take your word for it. So. Changing the subject, do you know where we need to go when we land?’

‘Oh, I’m sure the car rental agency will be easy to find.’

‘I’m sure it will but I meant once we have the car. You said your cousin lived in a small village. Do you know how to get there? And will you be comfortable driving on the left? I’m happy to drive if you want.’

Ducky peered at him over his glasses and Tony felt a little uncomfortable. How did he do that? The ability of his friend to make him feel uncomfortable and even downright stupid at times astounded him. It was far more effective than a Gibbs head slap and a lot less painful. Tony grimaced at himself for mentally wandering off subject and turned his mind back to his colleague.

‘Okay, point taken. You grew up in England, didn’t you?’

‘I grew up in Scotland,’ Ducky corrected gently. ‘However, I was at school in England. And yes, I have visited my cousin’s home before. I brought Mother over for a visit four or five years ago.’
'Yes, you said your mother brought up your cousin. How did that happen?'

Ducky paused for a moment before answering. ‘My cousin was born and brought up in Canada but was offered a place at my old school. It made sense for him to be in my mother’s charge.’

Tony glanced at his friend. There was clearly much more to this story, but he accepted Ducky’s reluctance to gossip and was grateful when the still smiling Shane appeared with two cups of coffee and some fresh pastries. He thought for a moment of the people waking up in economy class, tired and cramped and being offered a slice of rubbery toast and he smiled happily. First class was certainly the best way to travel.

Tony was full of admiration as Ducky negotiated his way out of the airport and onto the motorway. He kept quiet, not wanting to distract his friend from the busy and unfamiliar roads. For all he had grown up in Britain, he didn’t drive here regularly and he was probably tired and certainly concerned about his cousin.

The call Tony had made to Porton Down had revealed that Dr. McKay was taking some leave due to a family death. It had happened very suddenly and Dr. McKay had emailed the previous day to explain just before he left for the airport, and no, the lady from HR couldn’t say who had died or when Dr. McKay would be back and could Agent DiNozzo tell her again why NCIS were interested in Dr. McKay?

Tony put the call on speaker-phone so Ducky could listen in after he chased the autopsy gremlin out for a coffee break. Neither man had spoken as Tony ended the call and they sat in silence for a moment. Finally, Tony took a deep breath. ‘The Director’s been nagging me to take some of my accumulated leave. I’ll speak to her about taking a couple of weeks off. Will you be able to arrange something?’

Ducky just nodded and Tony realised the man was close to tears. Even as he’d gone over all the reasons for his certainty his cousin was missing, there was always the possibility that he was wrong. This was the proof he wasn’t. The email hadn’t been sent from Rodney, or he had been forced to send it.

Tony almost suggested they speak to Gibbs again, given the new information, but the look of irritation on his face when Ducky had raised his initial concerns prevented Tony from speaking. Gibbs had returned from Mexico a very different man to the one Tony had known for almost five years and this strengthened his resolve. He would go with Ducky, see if his skills as an investigative agent could be of any use and glean any information from Rodney’s house. What happened after that was uncertain but he would support Ducky to the best of his ability. Ducky had been there for him while Gibbs was AWOL and he was having such difficulties with the other members of the MCRT and with Madam Director. It was now his turn to support his friend.

Tony opened his eyes to realise he must have fallen asleep. They were no longer on the motorway but driving through pretty countryside.

Good morning, Anthony.’ Ducky gave him a quick smile, his attention on the road ahead. ‘I wasn’t sure if I was going to have to wake you. We’re almost in Laverstock. It’s only a small village and I was quite surprised Rodney chose a house here when Salisbury is just a short distance away. Some English villages can be very…very small minded.’

Tony frowned at that. ‘Why would that matter to your cousin? I get that he’s a scientist but surely that wouldn’t matter to his neighbours?’
Ducky didn’t reply as he brought the car to a halt in front of a pretty stone built cottage. There was a drive to the side of the house with two cars parked on it.

‘That’s odd. The neighbour said Rodney’s car was on the drive but she didn’t mention any other cars.’

Tony reached for his sidearm before realising that he wasn’t carrying it and cursed silently. He looked around for a weapon of some sort, finally seeing some fallen branches in the front garden, probably brought down by a recent storm. He got out of the car and quietly closed the door, motioning for Ducky to do the same, and jumped over the low fence searching for a branch that wasn’t too rotten. He’d just found one he thought wouldn’t break if used to hit someone when he heard a dog bark and a door open. He looked up just in time to see a large hairy dog hurl itself at him, knocking him flat. As he flailed on the damp grass, he heard a well-spoken voice asking calmly,

‘May I help you gentlemen?’

-------

Chapter Two

John watched with interest as Brian hurled himself onto the stranger in the front garden and gave him an exuberant greeting, such as only a large and hairy dog could manage, then he noticed a much older man getting out of the car parked in front of the cottage who seemed rather familiar. ‘Dr. Mallard?’

Donald Mallard turned sharply as the man on the ground managed to free himself from Brian’s dubious affections and raise his head.

‘John?’

‘Tony?’

The three men looked between each other, all extremely surprised to discover that, somehow, they each knew the others. John stepped onto the lawn and offered a hand to pull Tony up from his recumbent position then gestured for the two visitors to enter the cottage, Brian bouncing along behind them, delighted to have new playmates. John led the men into a bright kitchen, complete with requisite pine table, filled a kettle with water and placed it on the Aga. He leaned back against the stove and surveyed his visitors who were still looking rather shocked.

‘I don’t think we need any introductions, but perhaps an explanation of why we find ourselves here would be helpful? Dr. Mallard, would you like to begin?’

‘My dear boy, or should I perhaps say Major Fitz-Sheppard?’

‘It’s actually Colonel Fitz-Sheppard, but you always used to call me John.’

‘And I did invite you to call me Donald, if I remember correctly. I think we last met when Rodney was awarded his Ph.D. from Edinburgh in the mid 90s.’

John nodded. ‘I had no idea you were coming to visit Rodney. He didn’t mention it, but then he didn’t mention being out this morning. And I have no idea why my dear cousin is with you.’
Tony had been turning his head between his friend and his cousin, a frown on his face. ‘Not that it’s any of your business, but I came to help Ducky—’

‘Ducky? How rude. I see some things don’t change.’

‘Ah, John, my dear boy. My friends and colleagues since school have called me ‘Ducky’ and I have to admit to being very fond of the name now. My mother, however, always calls me Donald and therefore so did Rodney when he first came to live with her.’

Since Tony was glaring at his cousin, Donald hurriedly continued. ‘I find it a very curious coincidence that you and Anthony should be related.’

John looked towards Tony, his eyes narrowed. ‘My father’s sister Eleanor married Tony’s grandfather which makes us second cousins, I believe. He really does take after his father’s side of the family though.’

‘Still the same snob you were ten years ago I see,’ Tony replied caustically.

John flushed and opened his mouth to reply equally caustically but Donald quickly cut in.

‘I’m sure you boys have much to catch up on, but our immediate problem is Rodney’s whereabouts.’

John looked up sharply. ‘Do you know where he is? I was expecting him to be here when I arrived this morning.’

The kettle began to sing and John turned to make tea.

Tony curled his lip. ‘A singing kettle and a stove. I guess the stories about Britain being five hours and forty years behind the States is true.’

John ignored him as he busied himself with warming the teapot and spooning loose tea into it.

‘Anthony, that was rude. Please behave yourself,’ Donald told him sharply and as John opened his mouth to speak, Donald turned to him. ‘Please remember your manners, John. I know you do have them.’

The two younger men both looked rather sheepish at the reprimand and after a moment’s hesitation John held out his hand. ‘I’m sorry, Tony. I was rude and I apologise. It’s good to see you again after so long.’

Tony took the outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake, but Donald must have seen a glint in his younger friend’s eye as he growled a warning.

‘Anthony!’

Tony dropped his cousin’s hand and suddenly found something very interesting to look at on the kitchen floor.

John was surprised to find himself examining the kitchen floor too and quickly tried to regain control of the conversation, reminding himself he was a fully grown man and no longer a naughty schoolboy being reprimanded by a master or a prefect.

‘So, Donald. Why are you and Tony here and what does it have to do with Rodney not being here?’

Donald was silent while he gathered his thoughts. ‘Rodney missed calling my mother on her birthday two days ago. I tried to call him, on both his cell and landline, but there was no reply. I
contacted his place of work and they informed me he left work on Wednesday evening and hasn’t been in the office since. Yesterday, we discovered he had contacted them by email saying he’d had a family bereavement and would be out of the office for a few days.’

‘But I didn’t think Rodney had any family other than yourself and Mrs Mallard.’

‘Indeed he doesn’t, and that, coupled with the fact he missed Mother’s birthday for the first time in over twenty years, led me to believe he’s gone missing, possibly kidnapped. Anthony agreed to come and help me see what we could find as he hadn’t been missing for 48 hours at that point, apparently the amount of time which must pass before a person may be classified as ‘missing’.’

John glanced over to his cousin. ‘Are you still in the police force? How do you know Donald? Do you work with him?’

Tony blinked as the questions were thrown at him. ‘Okay. So, no, I left the police almost five years ago and joined NCIS.’ He sighed at the puzzled look on his cousin’s face. ‘Why has no-one ever heard of NCIS? We’re the law enforcement agency of the US Navy. I’m the senior special agent for the Major Case Response Team, and Ducky is our Medical Examiner.’

John’s eyes narrowed. ‘What’s your role in this? I can’t see the British Government being terribly pleased with a US agent investigating one of their top scientists. Do they know you’re here?’

‘I’m not here in an official capacity. I had some vacation to take and I thought Ducky would appreciate both the company and a trained agent to cast his eye over a possible crime scene. If the British police want to take over the case, I’m happy to go home and spend some time on a beach.’

John could see that Tony wouldn’t be at all happy to have to leave, but he decided not to call him on it. His immediate problem was going to be how to begin the investigation into Rodney’s disappearance without giving away his own involvement in one of the intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom. As far as Tony knew he was still a Royal Marine although Donald probably knew he’d left the Corps. He wasn’t sure just how much Rodney had told his cousin and his aunt though so he covered his hesitation by pouring mugs of tea and handing them to his guests.

Tony pulled a face at not being offered coffee, but Brian came forward, tail wagging, hoping for a bowl of tea for himself. John smiled wryly. Rodney was insistent he didn’t give Brian tit-bits, but the way Brian appeared when food was being prepared or meals eaten was a dead giveaway and John shook his head even as he filled Brian’s bowl. The mutt had the entire household wrapped around his paw.

Still undecided about what to say to Donald and Tony, John decided to play for time. ‘I suggest I speak to Rodney’s closest colleague at DSTL and see if he can shed any light on Rodney’s disappearance before we involve the police.’

Tony’s head shot up. ‘I thought Rodney worked at Porton Down? That’s what Ducky told me.’

John sighed even as his brain stuttered over the name ‘Ducky’. He was well versed in the habit of giving and being given a nickname, but calling a gentleman at least thirty years older than one’s self ‘Ducky’ just seemed wrong. Still, he would try not to fall out with his cousin so he gave Tony a tight smile and explained where Rodney worked.

‘DSTL is the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, which is a part of Porton Down. That’s actually the name of the whole science park there. Rodney is the Head of Research and Development of the DSTL and his friend Radek is his deputy.’
‘Radek,’ mused Donald. ‘A chap from one of the old Eastern Bloc countries if I remember rightly? He married his co-worker I believe?’

John nodded, a little surprised at the depth of Donald’s knowledge about his younger cousin with regards to his co-workers. ‘Yes, Radek married Miko four or five years ago. Rodney headhunted them both so always takes the credit as their matchmaker. He’s also Godfather to their daughter Meredith who’s just coming up two.’

Donald smiled at the name of the little girl and John smiled wryly in return, knowing what he was thinking. Rodney loathed having the first name and used it as an example of how much his parents hated him from birth, yet was inordinately proud that his friends had named their daughter after him.

Tony looked from one to the other of them, clearly noticing the byplay between his friend and his cousin, but John continued. ‘Radek will know if Rodney’s just gone somewhere and simply lost track of time and missed Mrs Mallard’s birthday.’

‘But what about the email from him saying a relative had died?’ Tony asked.

John pulled a face, annoyed with himself for forgetting the email and annoyed that his cousin hadn’t. He realised he still held many prejudices against his cousin which stemmed from his father and his aunt disliking Tony’s father and, latterly, their conviction that Anthony DiNozzo Senior was responsible for the death of his wife, Clare. She began drinking heavily when Tony was around eight and although she didn’t drink while she and Tony spent time with her parents each summer, John remembered hearing the family discuss how ‘poor Clares unhappiness is driving her to drink’; the blame being laid firmly at the feet of her frequently absent husband.

Tony, of course, defended his father without really knowing what he was defending him against and the once close cousins developed increasing animosity towards the other. Tony’s visits to England ended after his mother passed away when he was only 11 - his father hadn’t wanted him influenced by anyone but himself - and the last time the cousins had seen each other was at the funeral of Tony’s grandparents, John’s aunt and uncle, who were killed together in a car crash. John had just completed his officer training and was conscious of his very new uniform and equally new rank of Second Lieutenant, with a tendency to look down upon his cousin’s career in the police. That attitude had quickly been knocked out of him in the Royal Marines, quite literally, and he winced now when he remembered it. Tony had been quite right to call him a snob earlier and John regretted that was his cousin’s memory of him.

Now, however, he simply gave a small smile. ‘Thanks, Tony. I’d forgotten that. I still think it’s worth calling Radek though. The DSTL are going to have to know at some point that one of their scientists is missing,’ and he grinned when Tony looked up at him.

‘Peter Ustinov, 1975.’

‘Based on…’

‘One of Our Aircraft is Missing, 1942, in which Peter Ustinov also appeared.’

‘Full marks to the American!’

The two cousins grinned at each other and just like that, John felt the years roll back and they were two inseparable boys each testing the other’s knowledge of the cinema, much to the disapproval of the Fitz-Sheppard family’s elderly Nanny who was of the opinion that young gentlemen would be corrupted by moving pictures.
Donald coughed to gain their attention and brought them back to the matter at hand.

‘You should make the telephone call while Anthony and I freshen up, then we must find somewhere to stay. Perhaps the Public House in the village lets rooms?’

‘No, absolutely not,’ John told the older man. ‘I insist, and Rodney will insist, you both stay here. We have two spare rooms although one of them is a little small, but there is ample room for you both and fortunately the master has an en-suite so there won’t be too much of a fight over the bathroom. I’ll show you up, Donald, if Tony will bring your bags in. You must just remember to keep your bedroom doors closed otherwise Brian’ll try to sleep on your bed. Rodney lets him get away with murder.’

Tony did as he was told and trotted out to the car, his mind whirling. Ducky’s cousin was a friend of his cousin, in fact much more than friends as it was obvious they shared a bedroom. John hadn’t changed at all except his hair was longer than it had been the last time they’d met. Longer and spikier. He remembered when they were children their nanny was always trying to get ‘Master John’s’ hair to lie flat, but no matter how much she wet and flattened it, within a couple of minutes it was always sticking up again.

Tony sighed. They’d had such fun as children, had been so close. He spent most of his time over at Grantworth Hall when his mother made her annual visit to her family home near York. The Paddington family pile was just over a mile from the Fitz-Sheppard home, and as there were no other children at Trent House, he’d been dispatched to his cousins who had horses to ride, a lake for swimming as well as tennis courts, but best of all as far as the grown-ups were concerned, the Fitz-Shepards had the elderly family nanny who’d brought up a couple of generations of young nobility and thought nothing of adding ‘Miss Clare’s boy’ to the mix. Thus, days were spent playing, swimming and riding, nights were frequently spent under canvas since all little boys love to camp, and summer holidays were long and always gloriously sunny.

Opening the boot of the car, Tony dragged their suitcases out and looked around at what he could see of the village. A village green? Check. A pond? Check. A pub with a thatched roof? Check. A chocolate box English village in bright October sunshine. Were those days of boyhood delight really so far away? His cousin was in the cottage behind him and though they were both much older now, were they so different? The last time they met had been a difficult occasion for everyone: the joint funeral of two people killed way before their time by a drunk driver. Tony had been bitter, his long anticipated career as a professional athlete wrecked by a broken leg earlier in the year and his career as a police officer very much a Plan B. John had followed the path laid out for him years before: public school, Cambridge, military - although he had bucked family tradition and opted for the Royal Marines rather than a prestigious Army regiment. He was impeccably dressed in his number 1A dress blues while Tony was wearing a suit he’d had since before University and which wasn’t just tatty but was both too short in the legs and arms and too tight. John clearly thought Tony couldn’t be bothered to dress smartly for the funeral, but the truth was that he’d struggled to raise the money for his plane ticket, let alone a new suit, since his father had ceased any financial support of him after he left school, indeed it had been years since he’d actually seen his father at that point. Both he and John had over-reacted and words were said, words that hurt both of them and left little chance of reconciliation. Was he, were they now both being offered an opportunity to reconcile?

Slamming the boot, he picked up the cases and walked briskly back inside. If this was a second
chance he was going to grab it with both hands.

As he entered the hall, Tony could see into the study just to the right of the front door where John was sitting at a desk speaking into a phone. John looked towards him as he closed the front door quietly and dropped the cases to one side, and beckoned to him. Pressing a button, John put the conversation onto speaker-phone so they could both hear the excited voice on the other end. Tony struggled to make out all of the words, spoken as they were in broken English with a heavy accent he couldn’t quite place, and after a short while he gave up trying, relying on John to give him a translation afterwards.

Footsteps on the staircase drew his attention away from the jumble of words and he saw Ducky coming down towards them. Tony motioned for him to join them in the study and as Ducky opened his mouth to speak, he put his finger to his lips and indicated John and the telephone. Ducky joined them in the very comfortable study and dropped into a wingback chair by the fireplace. They heard John say goodbye and he turned to face them.

‘That was Radek Zelenka. He said he’s been worried about Rodney for a couple of days but couldn’t find anyone at DSTL who would take him seriously. Rodney had arranged to babysit for Meredith on Thursday night and didn’t show up, and Radek couldn’t raise him on either his mobile or his landline, and he didn’t reply to any emails. I told Radek you two had arrived from the States and were concerned and he agrees we have a problem. He’s on his way over, but Miko said we wouldn’t want a toddler in our way, so she’s staying at home. They only live a few miles away so Radek should be here soon.’

‘I couldn’t make out a word he said,’ Tony admitted. ‘Where’s he from?’

‘He was born in Prague when it was still part of Czechoslovakia and came to England after the communists left in 1990. He speaks English fluently but does tend to lose it when he gets excited. He’s a great chap and is about the only person who can keep up with Rodney.’

It was clear John was fond of Rodney’s co-worker, but Tony was a little puzzled. ‘What do you mean ‘keep up with Rodney’? Is he an exercise freak or something?’

Both John and Ducky laughed and Tony realised he’d said something stupid.

‘Rodney does exercise, but only when I make him,’ John told them with a wry smile. ‘Rodney is probably the most intelligent person on Earth. He had an IQ of over 200 when he was tested at 17, although he’s refused to take an IQ test since. Einstein had an IQ of between 160 and 190, and Stephen Hawking is just below that. He really is a genius although I don’t tell him that very often. I don’t want him to get big-headed!’

Ducky threw in his two cents worth. ‘It was because he was so clever that he came to live with Mother. His school in Canada couldn’t cope with him and they suggested a boarding school might be better for him but his parents were struggling to find somewhere. Rodney’s mother and my mother were sisters, and when Mother heard they were struggling to place Rodney, she suggested they send him to her and she’d send him to my old school who obviously would cope with him and also stretch his mind.’
‘We were both King’s Scholars,’ John explained, to Tony’s mystification. ‘And although Rodney is two years younger, we became friends right from the start. There were only eight Scholars that year for some reason, so we were all pretty close friends.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Tony admitted. ‘I don’t know where you went to school, Ducky, and what are King’s scholars? What does that even mean?’

‘My apologies, Anthony. I thought you were aware I attended Eton College. Mother sent Rodney there and he thrived, both educationally and socially.’

Eyebrows in his hairline, Tony looked at John. ‘You went to Eton? Why didn’t I know this?’

John and Donald exchanged glances. ‘I thought you knew the boys in my family go to Eton,’ John told him. ‘David was at Eton while you were still visiting us.’

A knock at the front door brought the conversation to a halt as John went to let Radek in and introduce him. Donald stayed in his comfy armchair close to the fireplace while the other three men settled themselves around the large desk, Brian crawling under the desk to lay his head on John’s feet.

‘Would you like me to light the fire, Donald?’ John asked. ‘I know it’s much colder here than in Washington, although we don’t usually have snow until well into November, if not December. The stove is all laid, I just need to put a match to it.’

‘I’m afraid I have become accustomed to the weather in Washington and am finding autumn in England to be a little colder than I’m used to.’

John smiled and, moving Brian from his feet, went to the fireplace to light the stove. Brian immediately left his position under the desk to lay himself on the rug in front of the stove, settling himself down with a heavy sigh.

‘Well, that’s him settled for the rest of the day,’ John commented, looking wryly at Brian who had put himself as close to the fire as he possibly could without burning himself. ‘I swear Rodney has corrupted him.’

He settled himself back behind the desk and quickly briefed Radek on the very little they knew about Rodney’s disappearance. Tony watched him carefully. Some thought was trying to attract his attention but he couldn’t quite work out what or why. John’s briefing was thorough and succinct. There was no embellishment nor meandering, in fact it was very much like a briefing he himself would have given… And that was the thought that had been jumping up and down and waving at him. It was exactly as he would have given, but he was an experienced senior federal agent. John was a soldier, wasn’t he?

John could see the precise moment Tony realised who, or rather what, he was. Tony’s head shot up and he met John’s eyes head on. John gave an inward sigh. He wasn’t sure if this would help or hinder them but he pushed on, waiting to see what Tony would say.

Radek was explaining how he’d tried to make the powers-that-be at DSTL understand that Rodney was missing. An assistant within the Human Resources department kept insisting that Mr McKay
was fine and had simply requested some leave due to a personal bereavement and that Mr Zelenka should allow the man time to grieve and stop trying to force him back to work. She was sure that Mr McKay’s line manager would be angry when he knew Mr Zelenka was trying to get in touch with Mr McKay, as the DSTL had a strict ‘family first’ policy, especially during a family emergency. Radek had tried in vain to make her understand that Dr. McKay had no line manager as he was a member of the executive board, and in any case, had no family in the country to be bereaved. After almost an hour of getting absolutely nowhere, Radek gave up and tried instead to work out who might have taken Rodney. Miko had begun to delve into Rodney’s DSTL computer and look at what emails she could, but she didn’t have access to Rodney’s personal laptop.

‘Why didn’t you try to call me?’ John asked after Radek had finished detailing the education - or lack of - parentage, and general uselessness of HR departments and their belief that they were the essential members of the DSTL, the actual scientists coming way down any list they might make.

Radek glared at John, clearly adding him right underneath HR in a list of ‘people who ask the most stupid questions possible’. ‘I leave more than dozen messages on both mobile and landline. You fail to return single call.’

John ducked his head. He’d been on an operation until late on Friday night - the reason he hadn’t travelled down to Laverstock that night - and hadn’t looked at his personal mobile which was always left in a locked box on the Grid when he was working on a case. ‘I’d been so tired after eight solid days of tracking, capturing and then questioning a suspect, he’d simply grabbed his personal belongings, taken a taxi and fallen into bed fully clothed.

‘Ooops?’ he offered. ‘I’m sorry, Radek. I’ve been so busy I didn’t get chance to look at my phone, and then just fell into bed last night, I was so tired.’

A grunt was the only response Radek made, but John knew him well enough to know he wasn’t angry, just irritated and concerned for his friend so he continued. ‘We need to establish just when Rodney was taken. I assume he was taken from here as his car is still in the drive, although it’s possible he was kidnapped somewhere else and the car brought back to the cottage.’

‘Are the car keys here?’ Tony asked. ‘If they’re in their usual place, then yes, I’d agree he was taken from here, but what about the dog? Wouldn’t he have attacked anyone who tried to hurt or take Rodney?’

‘His keys are in the bowl in the kitchen we use for that sort of stuff and no, I doubt Brian would attack anyone who broke in, in fact he’s more likely to take them around the cottage and show them just where we keep any valuables.’ John told him, a wry smile on his face. ‘Bearded collies aren’t much use as guard dogs, although Brian could probably round up some sheep for you if you wanted. Probably. Possibly.’

‘Is that what breed he is?’ Donald asked. ‘I wondered what he was.’

‘They were used as sheep dogs, especially in the North. A couple of our tenant farmers still use them, but Brian didn’t make the cut as a working dog which is how I came to get him. He might lick someone to death, but the only serious damage he’s likely to cause is if a burglar, or kidnapper in this case, laughed themselves to death or possibly fell over him. An attack Beardie he isn’t.’

Right on cue, almost as though he knew he was being talked about, Brian rolled himself onto his back and lay, all four paws splayed out and his bits on show to anyone.

‘Rodney calls that his come-and-get-me pose,’ John said shaking his head, his affection for the dog evident in both tone and eyes as they rested on him. ‘Anyway. Keys still in the bowl and car on the
drive would indicate Rodney was taken from here, and the absence of a phone call to his Aunt Victoria suggests he was taken either Wednesday night or Thursday morning.’

‘If he was taken on Wednesday night wouldn’t Brian have been starving by the time you arrived this morning?’ Donald asked, his eyes still resting on the dog. ‘And what about his water bowl? I know Mother’s dogs drink pints of water each day and I remember her having—’

John cut in, sensing Donald was about to launch into one of the rambling reminiscences he remembered from their previous meetings. ‘We have a dog walker who comes in twice a day to walk Brian and she feeds him after his afternoon walk since Rodney sometimes doesn’t get home until late. Katie would have kept Brian’s water bowl topped up as well. She’s great with animals although a little dizzy sometimes.’

‘Is it worth asking her if she noticed anything different when she came in on Thursday or Friday?’ Tony asked. ‘We may be able to narrow the timeframe.’

‘Good thought, Tony. I’ll give her a quick bell,’ John said, reaching for the phone on the desk.

A quick call to Katie West, the dog walker, revealed that she had found a broken china mug on the kitchen floor when she came in on Thursday morning. She’d picked it up and mopped up the spilt coffee Brian hadn’t managed to lick up, thinking Brian must have knocked it off the work surface. Furthermore, both the back and front doors had been unlocked, which Katie had put down to Dr. McKay running late for work. When John asked her about the car she admitted she hadn’t really noticed. Recalling the frequent rants Rodney gave regarding the fluffy headedness of Katie, John wasn’t surprised that she hadn’t thought anything might be wrong when she discovered unlocked doors and the car still in the drive. Since Rodney usually left for his lab around 8am, they were fairly confident that Rodney had been kidnapped between 7am when his alarm went off and 8am when he would normally leave for work.

John now faced something of a dilemma. He knew the team at MI5 had the technology and expertise to track down the vehicle that might have been used to take Rodney, since there was no way out of the village by road that didn’t go on or cross the main roads which all had traffic cameras on them at some point. However, if he involved his team, it would almost certainly reveal his occupation and Tony already suspected John wasn’t quite what he seemed. But would revealing his line of work be such a problem? Radek already knew John worked for the security services in some capacity - the close friendship of he and his wife with both John and Rodney had meant a certain amount of disclosure had been necessary to avoid the sheer number and depth of lies required to hide it. The Zelenkas’ level of security clearance that came with their own positions at DSTL meant they could be told. Tony and Donald both worked within a US federal agency which no doubt gave them a high clearance level themselves, but…

John nodded to himself, his mind made up. ‘I need to speak to my boss but I’ll call him from the bedroom. I promise I’ll explain everything after I’ve spoken to him.’

Donald appeared surprised, but Tony gave him a calculating look. Radek simply waved his hand with a ‘get on with it’ motion and continued tapping away at his laptop, no doubt in contact with his wife who was still delving into Rodney’s work computer. John cringed inwardly in anticipation of Rodney’s ire when he discovered he’d been hacked by Miko, even if it was in an attempt to save his life: while they might have a plan to track down the kidnappers, they still had no idea why the kidnappers wanted Rodney.
John made his way up to the master bedroom to speak with Harry Pearce, Head of Section D: the branch of MI5 which dealt with threats of terrorism & espionage. Rodney’s kidnapping was almost certainly one or the other, or possibly even both since John knew Rodney had been working on a top secret weapons project, a project so advanced scientifically that no other country on earth would come even close to being able to reproduce it, which would make it all the more coveted when details were ultimately released. However, John also knew that the number of people who were even aware of its existence could almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. If Rodney had been kidnapped in relation to the project, someone had been speaking out of turn. John needed to speak to Harry Pearce.

At three o’clock on a Saturday afternoon in mid October John knew he’d either find Harry at home watching rugby on the television, or actually at a rugby match if Harlequins were playing at home. Either way, Harry would not be pleased to have his afternoon’s entertainment interrupted. As he dialled the number, John thought about what to say. **Hi Harry. Sorry to bother you, but Rodney’s been kidnapped and my cousin, a US federal agent, wants to help find him, and I suspect Rodney’s new, super top secret invention - the one we’re hiding from the rest of the world - is in danger of being stolen.**

Fortunately for John, Harry was at home, but the conversation didn’t last long and John spent most of it - bar the first minute or so when he explained the situation to Harry - listening to his boss letting out a stream of invective until he gave a huge sigh which echoed down the line.

Harry had agreed that their priority was to find Rodney, and if that meant revealing John’s position in MI5, so be it. He was going to contact the Home Secretary and inform him of Rodney’s suspected kidnapping and would leave it for him to tell the Secretary for Defence if he thought he should. John, meanwhile, would assemble his team and set them to work, and if he needed any extra hands, Adam Carter and his team would be ready to deploy the moment John called them.

**Right. Enough of that. You don’t need me to tell you what to do but remember Adam and his team are on first call this weekend if you need them. I’ll brief the Home Secretary - and won’t that be a fun call to make? He can decide whether or not to let the Secretary for Defence know, since the DSTL comes under his purview. I’ll see you on the Grid on Monday morning unless you need anything else.**

‘Yes, sir.’ John heaved a sigh of his own. ‘What about blowing my cover?’

*Both your cousin and Rodney’s cousin will need to sign the Act regardless so if you need to tell them where you really work, go ahead. If they both work for an American Agency - and just what the hell is NCIS? - they’ll understand the meaning of confidential. Now the Quins are in the lead so be a good chap and buzz off.*

John sat for a moment on the bed to gather his thoughts. He’d been looking forward to a nice quiet weekend with Rodney as they’d both recently been busy and hadn’t seen each other for a couple of weeks and they’d only spoken on the phone once or twice. Their careers were important to them both and they’d each agreed to support the other as much as they could, but damn it! John missed Rodney and was beginning to resent the time they spent apart. He sighed again and pushed those thoughts to one side. Before any decisions on their future could be discussed, he first needed to secure his geek!
He grabbed the laptop sitting on Rodney’s bedside table and trotted down the stairs. The small group of men were sitting just where he left them, although someone had put a couple more logs in the stove. He handed the laptop to Radek who took it and raised his eyebrows.

‘It’s Rodney’s personal laptop, well, his favourite. We know Rodney’s account was used to send the email to the DSTL. They most likely used his blackberry, since I haven’t been able to find it. That means—’

‘There will be copy on laptop when it synchronises with Blackberry, but that will not tell us where Rodney is.’ Radek was one step ahead of the rest of the room.

‘But the software that Rodney designed to link his laptop and his Blackberry will be able to tell us where he is,’ John explained.

‘I’ve never heard of that being possible,’ Tony frowned. ‘Although I can see how it would be useful. Have you come across it, Ducky?’

‘No, Anthony, I haven’t, but remember that we are dealing with the most intelligent man on the planet. If anyone could have designed such software, it would be Rodney.’

‘And we can just open his PC and we’ll be able to find him?’ Tony asked sceptically. ‘It just seems a bit too easy.’

‘Tony is correct, John.’ Radek was poking at the laptop he’d just been handed. ‘Rodney will have encrypted programme to prevent anyone from accessing it. Even Miko will have difficulty breaking through protection Rodney has created, and unless you know password, we will first have to break into laptop.’

John took the laptop back from Radek, thought for a moment and then entered a long series of letters and numbers.

‘Gotcha!’ He passed the laptop back to Radek. ‘Well, you’re in, but I have no idea if you’ll get into his programme.’

Radek concentrated on the laptop while the others else looked on in anticipation. After a couple of minutes, he looked up and glared at them. ‘Stop staring! It will not make me work faster!’

John and Tony turned away a little sheepishly.

‘How come you could guess Rodney’s password so easily?’ Tony voiced a question which had been puzzling him.

John laughed. ‘When you’ve been together as long as we have, you know how their mind works.’ He paused for a moment. ‘You did realise that Rodney and I are in a relationship, didn’t you?’

‘The fact you share a bedroom? Yeah, it was a bit of a clue, dumbass. But just how long have you been together?’

‘Well, we’ve been friends since I was 13 and Rodney was 11, but we only became a couple when Rodney finished his first Ph.D. in the US. He came back to the UK to begin his second one and decided to study at Edinburgh University so we would get to see each other occasionally since I was based at Arbroath and…’ He broke off when a stream of invective came forth from Radek, in a mixture of Czech and English. ‘Huh. I take it he did encrypt his programme?’

Radek simply glared at him.
'Okay then, I need to make another call.'

Deciding that this conversation could be made in front of the others since his role in MI5 would shortly be an open secret, John quickly called Section D’s resident technical wizard, Colin Wells.

‘Colin? It’s John. I need to access a highly encrypted programme on a MacBook Pro. Can you talk me through it?’

There followed a brief conversation as John was clearly told that no, Colin couldn’t talk him through it, but might be able to break in if he had the laptop in front of him. Within five minutes, John had arranged for Colin and his associate Malcolm Wynn-Jones to be brought by helicopter to Laverstock and they would also bring Ronon and Teyla: the other two members of John’s team.

‘So, John. Can I assume you’re not a Marine anymore?’

John sighed. ‘Firstly, I’m a Royal Marine, and you don’t ever stop being a Royal Marine. However, I did leave the service and I’m now a senior case officer in Section D.’

‘Section D? Is that a code name for MI5?’

‘No, it’s the division within MI5 in which I work. Section D is the counter-terrorism and counter-espionage branch of MI5. It’s headed by Sir Harry Pearce and I report directly to him.’

‘So you’re his XO?’

‘No, I’m one of his senior case officers. There are two of us and we both have teams which we lead in the field.’

‘And this Colin and Malcolm? Are they part of your team?’

‘What is this? Twenty questions?’

‘Hey! You’re the one who lied about what he does for a living!’

‘I never lied about what I do. I haven’t seen you for over ten years and our family isn’t actually known for exchanging Christmas cards.’

By this time Tony and John were both standing and glaring at each other. ‘I told you I was a federal agent.’

‘So?’

‘So you should have told me you were a spook.’

‘Why? And technically, I’m not a spook. That’s a word you Americans use for your CIA operatives.’

Ducky grabbed the fist Tony was about to raise, surprising him. He hadn’t even seen Ducky move from his chair.
‘Boys!’

The two cousins each glared at the older man.

‘That’s enough. Anthony, sit over there,’ and Ducky pointed to the armchair by the fire in which he’d been sitting. ‘John, sit back behind the desk.’

‘But—’ John began to speak, but Ducky interrupted him.

‘Now!’

Tony remembered hearing that Ducky had served in the military and if he’d been asked at the time, he’d have said he believed Ducky served as a medic, but now? Now he was fairly certain Ducky had been a Drill Sergeant because both he and John sat down as quickly as they could before they even realised what they were doing. And okay, he’d only been in the Police Force before he became an NCIS agent, but John? John had been a Colonel in the badass Royal Marines and even he sat down as fast as he could.

‘Right, you two. I’ve let most of the bad tempered sniping between the pair of you go today since you each clearly have issues with the other that have only festered over the years and will no doubt take a long time to heal, but we are here to find and, hopefully, to rescue Rodney, and this is not the time for petty squabbles and rivalries, and it ends now. Do you both understand?’

‘Yes, sir!’ they chorused from their separate seats and Tony hoped John felt as contrite as he did.

The sound of a helicopter broke the awkward silence which had settled over the study and, with a quick glance towards Ducky, John led them into the front garden.

‘I told them to land on the village green,’ John told them, gaining a little of his usual insouciance as he headed across the road. The others followed him, and Radek took the opportunity to speak to Tony quietly.

‘Donald is head of your NCIS, no?’

‘Who, Ducky? No. He’s our medical examiner, our…our…’ Tony remembered a phrase he’d heard Ducky use in the past. ‘He’s our forensic pathologist.’

Radek’s eyebrows rose as he considered that. ‘The head of your NCIS is more formidable than this?’

Tony laughed along with Radek, but considered his words while he watched the helicopter disgorge four people and a couple of large holdalls. Ducky was certainly formidable at times and could certainly hold his own in a fight, as he’d shown on more than one occasion, but was he more formidable than the Director of NCIS? If the previous director, Tom Morrow, were still in place, Tony would have said a categorical yes, but Director Jennifer Shepherd? No, she couldn’t be called formidable, except perhaps in the looks department, but a formidable character? No, not at all. She certainly liked to micro-manage, but Tony didn’t see that as a positive trait at all, and as one who had been on the end of her micro-managing, particularly when Gibbs had ‘retired’, he’d had ample opportunity to evaluate it.

The fact was Tony didn’t like Madam Director at all. She had a habit of interfering instead of allowing her staff to do their jobs and she certainly played favourites; witness her interactions with Ziva in addition to creating a liaison post for her. She had a habit of flirting with men to gain their attention, then backing off when she got it, but what had concerned him most of all was her recent attempt to persuade him to go undercover on a special case for her. Normally, this was something
Tony enjoyed doing and knew he was good at, but his spidey-senses were tingling in this instance. The director wanted to keep this assignment strictly between the two of them and Tony would have no back-up while he was undercover, other than her cell number. His first instinct was to discuss it with Gibbs, but their relationship had been strained since he’d returned from Mexico and furthermore the Director had strictly forbidden him from discussing the case with anyone, particularly Gibbs. This fact alone made Tony very nervous. Gibbs knew everything and trying to keep a secret from him was simply asking for trouble.

Tony was pulled from his reverie by the introductions John was making to his team and he shook hands with each of them, just giving a smile as John introduced him as ‘my American cousin’. The entire group moved into the kitchen and Colin and Malcolm took over one end of the large table pulling cables and gadgets out of one of the bags, all the while passing comments to each other in what Tony immediately categorised as ‘geek-speak’. Radek joined them and began to explain what he and his wife had been able to do. Teyla and Ronon, on the other hand, looked at him with interest. He returned their looks and decided that while Teyla was a slight and beautiful woman, he wouldn’t want to meet her dreadlocked, behemoth of a colleague in a dark alley.

Ronon turned out to be a man of few words, and he concentrated on pulling out a number of fearsome weapons from the holdall he carried. Tony looked askance at the sheer number and size of the knives Ronon had, some of which quickly disappeared into the dreadlocked hair, while Teyla picked up and checked a couple of pistols. John simply frowned.

‘Did you have to bring the entire arsenal with you, Chewie? Did you leave anything for Adam if he needs it?’

‘Adam just encourages him, John. He was the one who included the MP7’s.’

‘What on earth did Adam think we were going to do that we’d need submachine guns?’

Teyla simply shrugged and rolled her eyes which made Tony laugh and John glare at him.

‘Hey, don’t get mad at me, coz. I like the way your Adam thinks. Far better in my experience, to have too much firepower than too little,’ and he reached out to take a Beretta for himself.

John clearly felt differently since he grabbed Tony’s wrist before he could touch the pistol closest to him.

‘I don’t think so, Tony.’

Tony pulled his arm back and scowled. ‘You want me to go in unarmed?’

‘We’re not going in anywhere as yet, but yes, you will be unarmed,’ John told him firmly.

‘What?’

‘Anthony,’ Donald cautioned. ‘You entered this country as a private US citizen. You have neither the permission nor the authority to carry a weapon here. Even with John’s position in MI5, if you shot and wounded someone you would be in serious trouble, as, most likely, would John for permitting you to carry a weapon.’

Unfortunately, what Donald said made sense to Tony, but it didn’t make him any happier with his cousin, and, just for good measure, he glared at them both.
Rodney was beginning to get a little concerned. Although he was locked up in what he thought was a cellar and his watch taken from him, he was certain more than a day had passed and possibly more than two days. Just when exactly was the cavalry due to arrive? And by cavalry he meant John. John must have realised he was missing and would come to the rescue immediately, wouldn’t he? Captain Kirk never stayed locked up for long. Spock always came for him before the end of the episode, just as Jim came for Spock when the roles were reversed.

Sadly, Rodney knew real life was very far removed from fiction and there would be no calls of ‘Beam me up, Scotty’ in his lifetime. Still, what was the point of having a secret agent boyfriend if he wasn’t going to use all the resources at his disposal to find the one he loved. Liked. The one he liked. The L word had never been mentioned between them and Rodney was certainly not going to be the one to break first. And yet if John wasn’t going to ride over the hill on his gleaming white charger to rescue him, Rodney thought he would have liked to tell John that he loved him before he died.

They tied him to a chair, hands behind his back, and an increasingly angry foreign man in a strongly accented voice demanded details of the project that had taken himself, Radek and Miko over two years to design. He’d actually been speechless when they first asked, rather than refusing to answer as they thought, as he couldn’t explain using words alone. He needed to use calculations, formulae and strings and strings of code to even touch the surface of it, and faced with a man who struggled to make a whole sentence in english and who had no idea how to send an email on a Blackberry… There was no way he’d be able to give away his top secret project.

So instead, Rodney thought about John, and about Brian, and about the long summer walks they’d taken and about the cold winters nights in front of the fire they’d spent, and he hoped against hope that John would come for him.

Chapter Four

In the end, it had been remarkably straightforward to find where Rodney was being held. Colin and Malcolm, assisted by Radek - who was fortunately used to playing second fiddle to both Rodney and Miko - were able to break into Rodney’s Blackberry programme since he’d written and installed it on that particular laptop, and they had John on hand to work them through layers and layers of password protected files. Malcolm admitted that without John’s help they’d never have managed it, and he asked John - encouraged by an eager Colin - if he thought Rodney might help them write a similar programme to use for Section D. John smiled ruefully and said they had to rescue Rodney first, which brought the excited analysts back to earth and cut off their paroxysms of admiration for the missing genius.

Once they had access to the programme they were able to access the inner controls of the remote Blackberry, even with the actual Blackberry turned off. The kidnappers were clearly aware of Location Reporting and that it wouldn’t work with the device turned off, but using Rodney’s
ingenious programme, they were able to determine from where the last call, text or email had been sent.

‘He’s close to the cathedral,’ John told the waiting group.

‘Can you be more precise?’ asked Tony, aware of the number of buildings they might have to search just using ‘close to the cathedral’.

‘Unfortunately not,’ Malcolm answered. ‘Dr. McKay’s programme is wonderful, but can only give a location within about a hundred yards.’

‘But without a precise location, we’ll have to search possibly dozens of buildings and the kidnappers will be sure to either see or hear us coming,’ Teyla pointed out before Tony could speak.

‘Which is why I’ve had another analyst running through traffic camera footage for a vehicle which entered the village between seven and eight o’clock on Thursday morning and which left soon after,’ John explained. ‘I’m hoping that might give us a better idea of where Rodney is. I’m just waiting for Ruth to call. I’ve also had her check any internet chatter about DSTL or Rodney on various sites of interest to us.’

‘She can do that?’ asked Tony, impressed with the capabilities of John’s team.

‘She has very good contacts at GCHQ. She worked there for about ten years before joining Section D,’ John replied absently, looking over Radek’s shoulder at Rodney’s laptop. He suddenly laughed. ‘Well, if I’d actually seen the email Rodney sent to DSTL, I’d have known he was being forced to write it.’

Radek was grinning too and Donald walked over to see what was so amusing. He took one look at the screen and began to laugh.

Tony frowned. ‘I don’t get the joke. What’s so funny and why would you know Rodney was forced to write it?’

John pointed to the end of the email but Tony still looked confused. ‘What? How do you know it’s written by Rodney. It’s signed Meredith. Isn’t that the name of your daughter, Radek? Why would he put that?’

‘Meredith is actually Rodney’s first name,’ John explained. ‘He hates it, and refuses to use it. Rodney is his middle name - after his maternal grandfather, I believe?’ He looked at Donald for confirmation.

‘Yes. He died long before Rodney was born, in fact I barely remember him. Aunt Vera, Rodney’s mother, was well into her forties when she had him.’

‘Rodney’s kidnappers would most likely know him as Dr. M.R. McKay,’ John explained. ‘They wouldn’t think twice about him using his first name in the email, but anyone who knows Rodney would also know he’d never usually sign himself as such and would question it.’

‘But no one at DSLT knew to comment on it?’ Tony rubbed his neck absently.

‘DSTL, and no, clearly no one picked up on that. I think there’s going to be a long conversation between MI5 and the DSTL security people about what’s happened. No one questioned the email and no one would listen when Radek tried to tell them he suspected Rodney was in trouble. It’s not good and it can’t continue.’
‘And we don’t know why Rodney was kidnapped yet,’ Tony reminded them all.

Actually, John thought he knew exactly why Rodney had been kidnapped and from the look Radek gave him it was clear he thought the same, however John was certainly not going to tell a US Federal Agent about Rodney’s top secret work, cousin or not.

Conversation was desultory while they waited for the call from Ruth although Ronon appeared happy enough sharpening the knives he had hidden about him while Donald fondled Brian’s ears and told him what a good boy he was. Finally, John’s mobile rang and all eyes turned to him as he answered it. Tension was high in the cottage kitchen as the call ended. John surveyed them all for a moment, then smiled.

‘We have a location. Let’s move out!’

There was a rush towards the door as John was followed by Ronon, Teyla, Tony and, rather surprisingly, Donald.

‘Ducky?’ Tony sounded surprised. ‘Are you coming too?’

‘We have no way of knowing if Rodney is injured in any way. If he is, you may need me.’

The helicopter and pilot had remained on the village green in case it would be needed when they knew exactly where Rodney was being held. Tony had wondered if they would take a car as they were headed into the city, but John and his team made straight for the helicopter so Tony and Ducky trotted on behind. Ducky had grabbed his medical bag from their rental car, surprising Tony as he hadn’t realised Ducky had brought it to the UK with him, but he supposed he was so used to seeing the bag he probably didn’t actually notice it any longer.

John was giving the pilot instructions where exactly to set down while the others strapped themselves into the back. John sat next to the pilot and grinned at the rest of his team behind him. Tony noticed that where before John’s eyes had been rather dull, they were now shining with life and it made the whole of his face animated, more like the kid Tony remembered from years back and it raised a hope within him that their former relationship could likewise be revived.

He found himself experiencing mixed emotions of anticipation and apprehension as they prepared to leave, emotions he also realised he had hadn’t felt for some while. He wondered how long he’d been acting on automatic pilot, how long since he’d actually enjoyed his work, and decided it could even be as far back as before Kate was killed. The whole atmosphere of NCIS had changed with the arrival of Director Jenny Shepard, especially given her past history with Gibbs and her introduction of a Mossad liaison position on the MCRT which Tony had always thought was a ridiculous thing to do. Put a foreign agent on the premier NCIS team and furthermore, make sure she has access to the whole agency network. Sure. That was an intelligent move.

After he became acting agent-in-charge when Gibbs had taken himself off to Mexico, Tony began to keep a record of the files which had been accessed by Officer Ziva David, in addition to those she downloaded and he discovered a very high percent of them were files she’d had no reason to even look at, let alone download. He puzzled long and hard over what to do with this information since Ziva had been given her security clearance level by the Director and, technically, had her authority to
access those files. Tony was unable, therefore, to take the matter any further without going over Director Shepard’s head and he was unsure he was ready to do that.

At that point, the helicopter began to descend and John and his team began to check their weapons. Tony felt oddly naked without his sidearm and even without his usual NCIS baseball cap and vest. He assumed MI5 worked under different rules to those in the US which required police and federal agents to give a warning before they entered private property, or engaged in a firefight. At the very least, it would be interesting to see how his cousin and his team performed under pressure.

They came in to land in the middle of a rugby pitch, one of the few green areas close to the cathedral not milling with people on a warm, autumnal Saturday afternoon, and before the helicopter was actually on the ground, John and Ronon jumped out, Teyla close behind them. Tony waited with Ducky until it properly landed then, throwing the ME an apologetic smile, he ran after the other agents. John knew exactly where he was going as he ran directly to an extremely old building on the perimeter of the field and simply kicked the door open. Tony held back, knowing John’s team were used to working with each other and not wanting to get in their way or between their guns and one of the kidnappers.

John headed into the main part of the house while Ronon and Teyla split up, one upstairs and one down into the cellar, although how they knew there was a cellar, Tony had no idea. He followed John into the kitchen where he found his cousin pointing his gun at three men sitting around a table, playing cards. Thunderous thumps on the staircase told Tony that Ronon was coming back downstairs, and just as he entered the kitchen a shout came from Teyla. Ronon and John exchanged glances and Ronon gestured towards the door to the cellar with his gun.

‘Go. I’ll look after our friends.’

John nodded his thanks, and Tony followed him down the uneven steps to a metal door set in a low brick wall. Tony thought it was a good job Ronon had remained upstairs since he’d have to bend almost double to fit through the doorway which was fastened only with a couple of bolts. Teyla had them unbolted but had left actually opening the door to John who took a deep breath and stepped forward.

———

Rodney woke to Brian’s wet nose on his cheek. *Damn mutt wants to go out.* He slowly opened his eyes to be greeted with an enormous lick and an exuberant wagging tail that thudded against the side of the bed. He groaned and rolled onto his back, then groaned some more as the bruises which littered his body made their presence felt. John immediately sat up in concern.

‘Rodney? Are you alright? Where does it hurt? Should I fetch Donald?’

‘John, stop stressing, I’m fine. Brian woke me up. He needs to wee.’

The stress etched on his partner’s face eased and he smiled ruefully. ‘Sorry. I’ll let him out. Want a coffee while I’m down there?’

‘Is there any fresh milk?’

‘Ummm…’
‘I’ll have tea then.’

As John clambered out of bed and struggled into a pair of soft cotton trousers, Rodney tried to sit up, but the pain in his wrists hurt too much and he collapsed back onto the pillows with a heart-felt ‘Owww!’

Brian leapt onto the bed, worried by the noises coming from one of his daddies, and that only increased the exclamations of pain coming from Rodney which now included various swear words. John tried to pull Brian from where he was now standing, licking any bit of Rodney he could reach and clearly thinking the whole thing was a great game.

By the time John managed to get Brian out of the room both Tony and Donald were emerging from their bedrooms, Donald to see if Rodney needed any further pain medication and Tony just to see what was happening. When John finally got back upstairs, carrying a tray, Rodney was holding court in their bedroom with Donald in an armchair, Tony laying against the pillows next to Rodney, and Brian - now back on the bed - cuddling up to his daddy.

Rodney’s wrists and arms were sporting fresh bandages and he was listening to Tony explain how he and Rodney’s cousin came to be in England.

‘Shift yourself!’ John ordered.

‘Make me!’ Tony narrowed his eyes as he regarded his cousin.

‘Boys!’ came the mild admonition from the armchair, and, following a brief scuffle, John settled himself in bed next to Rodney and Tony made a spot for himself on the end of the bed.

‘Any biscuits?’ demanded Rodney. ‘I’m starving. I didn’t eat for two days and I need feeding up.’

‘Tony, go and get the biscuits from the kitchen,’ John told him lazily, kicking his legs to dislodge his cousin.

‘Hey! I’m a guest here.’

‘So? Go and get the biscuits. I brought the coffee.’

‘But you forgot the milk.’

‘Didn’t forget it. Haven’t got any.’

‘Don’t you have milkmen here? I thought all English villages had milkmen.’

‘No money in it. Go and get the biscuits, you idle git.’

Rodney leaned back against his pillows, a small smile on his face. After the horrors of being locked in a cellar, wrists rubbed raw by tight plastic ties and a number of bad knife cuts to his arms, this was all so normal and… nice.

He glanced over to his cousin and his smile grew. Donald and his mother represented safety and love to Rodney and had done so for many years now. His birth had been neither planned nor wanted by his parents, and while abortion was legal in Canada if it threatened the life or health of the mother, abortion just because you didn’t want the baby was illegal in 1971. For the McKays, their aversion to their child was simply compounded when it was discovered the young Meredith had a frighteningly high IQ. The local schools couldn’t cope with the young genius either academically or behaviourally and this led to a mixture of boredom in the classroom and an increasing frustration
with the other pupils who mentally, simply couldn’t keep up. The whole situation erupted when Meredith decided to build a non-working model of a nuclear bomb for his science project when he was 11. Following a visit from the CIA - and Rodney had never understood why they became involved because hey, Canadian? - his school refused to teach him any longer and his parents were faced with actually having to do something for him. A telephone call from his Aunt Victoria came at just the right moment for the whole McKay family, as she offered to have Meredith go to live with her and complete his education in the United Kingdom.

It was a brand new start for Meredith and he fully embraced it. He decided to change his name and began using his middle name of Rodney, he went to a school where they knew how to deal with genius children - and rather than simply push him academically, they insisted he be involved in all aspects of school life - and he had a home where he knew he was loved and valued. During his first year at Eton, he wrote to his parents a couple of times but never received a reply and after a long conversation with his aunt and cousin, he decided to put aside his previous life and throw himself wholeheartedly into his new one. He never regretted it.

Having his cousin Donald here now, after he had truly believed he might die, was both comforting and reassuring. Donald had been a symbol of security and safety for the young Rodney and the adult Rodney was happy to discover he remained so. He’d cleaned and stitched his wounds the previous night and had been able to administer pain medication which had made a visit to the local hospital unnecessary, much to Rodney’s relief. John had questioned how Donald had managed to bring both medication and medical equipment through security and customs, but Donald had explained that there were procedures in place in most countries allowing doctors to travel with both drugs and equipment, providing they had the correct paperwork.

A gentle nudge to his shoulder brought Rodney out of his thoughts.

‘Hey, you.’ John smiled at him and Rodney felt a rush of emotion for this man who had rescued him and brought him safely home, who had stayed with him while his injuries were tended, and who had held him close while he fell asleep. Rodney didn’t have the words to express all of this, so he just smiled and nudged John back.

‘Hey, yourself.’

They spent the rest of Sunday quietly, just John and Rodney, and Donald and Tony. John spoke briefly to Ronon, who had taken the three men they’d found in the house in Salisbury back to Thames House for questioning and later in the day after he’d spoken with Harry Pearce he went to find his cousin.

He found all three men crashed out in the sitting room. Donald was browsing the Sunday newspapers which they’d picked up that morning and occasionally read out little bits that interested him. Rodney was busy with his laptop, but from the way his fingers were moving it was more likely to be a game he was playing rather than high science. Tony had put himself in charge of keeping the fire fed and was simply gazing into the flames with a concentration rarely seen outside of a chess game between grandmasters.

John sank down on the sofa next to his cousin and nudged him. ‘S’up, bro?’
‘Huh?’ Tony turned his head slightly and frowned. ‘Where’d you pick that up from?’

John just grinned and stretched his legs out, making himself comfortable. ‘Harry needs me back on the Grid tomorrow. I thought you might all go with me and spend a few days in London.’

‘Why on earth would I want to go to London?’ Rodney asked, still concentrating on his screen but proving he wasn’t sunk in some complicated programming or maths. He looked up to glare at John. ‘Brian hates London. You know that.’

‘And what’s the ‘Grid’?’ Tony demanded. ‘And why would Harry want you there instead of at your office?’

John had hoped Rodney would be more amenable after his kidnapping but that clearly wasn’t happening. ‘I’m not leaving you on your own here, Rodney, not until we know who kidnapped you and why.’

‘That’s not a problem then.’ Tony pushed another log onto the fire, viewed it critically then added a second one at a slightly different angle. ‘Ducky and I’ll stay here. I’m not back at work for another couple of weeks and I’m sure Ducky’ll be happy to spend some time here. Between us I’m sure we can look after Rodney and Brian.’ He glanced over to John. ‘And you didn’t say what the Grid is.’

‘It’s the name for our office, I’ve no idea why.’ John shrugged. ‘As far as I know, it’s always been called that. And I know you could look after Rodney, it’s just… we don’t know who was behind the kidnapping yet and we don’t know why he was kidnapped either. Not specifically.’

Rodney gave John what he clearly thought was a devastating glare, narrowed eyes and everything. ‘I don’t need looking after. I’m not some kid.’

‘No,’ John returned the glare to his partner. ‘You’re just the man who was kidnapped and tortured for three days.’

It was a low blow really, especially as Rodney’s wrists and arms were still bandaged and probably still painful, but John knew Rodney would never admit to needing looking after, even when he did.

‘Just…’ He sighed again and looked over to his lover. ‘Don’t fight me on this, baby,’ John said softly. ‘I need to look after you myself, keep my own eye on you.’

Rodney’s face softened and he gave his partner a small, shy smile and nodded his agreement.

‘Then we’ll all go up to London later and I accept your offer to look after Brian,’ John told Tony with a grin. ‘Maybe you’ll spare the odd moment to check Rodney’s okay as well.’

Donald looked up from his newspaper. ‘I shall keep an eye on all three of the boys, John, have no fear.’

John nodded gratefully and settled back into the sofa and let himself relax.

They waited until after dinner for the drive up to London, deciding to travel in just one car, and John found his patience sorely tested as Rodney kept running back into the house for bits and pieces he’d forgotten.

‘What!’ he demanded after John had sighed and looked at his watch for the umpteenth time. ‘I need all this stuff since you won’t let me go back to work in my lab, and Brian needs all his stuff since he doesn’t often stay at your place.’
'We could call Katie and ask if she’ll look after Brian for a few days if you like?’ John suggested innocently.

As expected there was a howl of protest from Rodney and even Brian appeared to be glaring at him. ‘Okay, okay, I’m sorry!’ John held his arms up in surrender and backed away from the outraged faces. ‘But I really would like to get home before midnight.’

Eventually, he had the car loaded and, with Brian in the boot and Rodney and Tony in the back seat, they set off.

‘I thought you’d have had a sportier car than this,’ Tony admitted as he glanced around the range rover.

‘I would, except that Brian gets his hair blown about too much in a soft top,’ John told him, glancing in the rear view mirror to see his cousin. ‘Rodney doesn’t have that problem though so maybe we could think about it?’

‘Oh ha very ha.’ Rodney poked John in the shoulder a couple of times in retaliation then turned his attention to Tony while John and Donald exchanged grins.

They each settled down for the two hour drive and John kept half an ear on the conversation in the back seat where Rodney and Tony were happily swapping tales of John as a child, cutting in now and then to deny an incident or to defend himself. Eventually their conversation turned to their own education and John was surprised to hear that after Tony realised his career as a professional athlete was over, he’d begun to educate himself to the needs of his new career in the police force.

‘So you have a second undergraduate degree in Criminal Justice?’ he asked over his shoulder.

‘Mmm. I studied part-time at Temple University in Philadelphia. It was originally set up for evening classes and I was lucky that some of the credits from Police Academy counted towards my degree so I finished it in three years instead of four. I have a master’s degree from Georgetown that I did part time as well.’ Tony sounded a little defensive to John’s ears and he wondered why.

‘You mean you did Police Academy and then worked at the same time as doing evening classes for a degree?’ Rodney demanded, and John saw the scowl appear on Tony’s face but before he could say anything, Rodney continued.

‘Wow! I mean… just… wow. That takes real guts and dedication. How on earth did you find time for a social life?’

Tony shrugged. ‘I didn’t, not really, and besides, I didn’t have an awful lot of money to have a social life with.’

‘I thought you were a Trust Fund baby?’ John frowned, glancing in the mirror again.

Tony gave a hollow laugh. ‘Not so much. After I finished school, Daddy Dearest refused to help me financially and that included access to the trust fund my mother left me. The lawyers mom had appointed to administer it allowed him to ‘invest’ it for me and surprise, surprise, all the investments failed.’

John made an angry noise, furious at himself for the number of things he’d assumed about his cousin, and furious with Tony’s father for not doing his duty by his son.

‘Why didn’t you…’ he began, but trailed off as he saw his cousin’s face. No. There was no way Tony would have contacted his English relations with a complaint about his father. His innate
loyalty would have prevented him - indeed did prevent him - from criticising his father, even to those who knew the man was a waste of oxygen.

‘Then I apologise for my appalling behaviour towards you over the last couple of days and in the past. I made assumptions I shouldn’t have and I’m sorry.’ John took a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry you felt you couldn’t come to us when you were in trouble and needed your family. That’s on me because I shouldn’t have judged you. I’m sorry.’

Tony simply smiled,

‘It’s fine, John. We’re fine. I think I’ve got my family back and I have to admit, I’ve missed you guys. It’d be nice to catch up with David and Uncle Patrick sometime, but you and me? We were always so close and I missed you.’

The beaming smiles from both Rodney and Donald warmed John’s heart as much as the admission from Tony and they exchanged grins before settling down to idle chatter between them all for the rest of the journey until John pulled into the garage of his mews house close to the river in Chelsea.

‘This is your house?’ Tony asked looking around.

‘Yes. I live in this small garage,’ John told him and tried to shrink away from the thump dealt to him by his cousin.

Rodney was already out of the car rescuing Brian from the boot, and he led them into the house proper and up the stairs to the main floor.

‘Wow. This is fantastic,’ Tony said, wandering around the large open plan kitchen and living room.

Donald nodded his agreement as he headed for the book filled wall facing the kitchen. ‘You have an eclectic taste in reading material,’ he told John as he read the book titles, head tipped on one side.

‘Want some tea, Donald?’ John called from the kitchen. ‘Coffee for you, Tony? Damn. We forgot to stop for some milk.’

‘I’ll go and get some,’ Rodney offered, but was immediately bombarded by a succession of ’no, you won’t’ from the others.

‘You’re not leaving this house without either Tony or myself,’ John told him. ‘Now sit down where I can keep an eye on you.’

‘I’ll go and get the milk, shall I?’ Tony asked. ‘You do have shops that are open on Sundays here, don’t you?’

He disappeared to follow John’s directions while John fusssed around Rodney, getting him comfortable and making sure everything was within his reach until Rodney appealed to Donald for rescue and John sulked and retreated to his study to call Harry Pearce and report that they were back in London.

--------

Chapter Five
Upon arrival on the Grid on Monday morning John was immediately called into Harry’s office where he also found his fellow Chief of Section, Adam Carter. John nodded a greeting and sat down in the vacant chair in front of Harry’s desk while Harry pressed a button and the glass in the windows overlooking the rest of the Grid darkened and the door automatically locked. John raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘Oliver Mace has been snooping around,’ Harry explained. ‘He says he’s simply paying a courtesy visit but I don’t trust that man as far as I could kick him.’

John agreed whole-heartedly. He had little to do with the chairman of the influential Joint Intelligence Committee, but what little interaction he had he didn’t like. Although Mace insisted they were all on the same side, John couldn’t help but feel the only side Mace was on was his own.

He knew Adam agreed with him as they’d had a very frank discussion not long after John joined Section D. Adam had initially taken John’s appointment as a threat to his own position but quickly realised that wasn’t the case at all. Finding themselves together on an operation a few weeks later they’d taken the opportunity to lay their cards on the table and found they had similar ideas and principles on a number of issues. One issue had been Mace, especially as he’d tried to use them against each other, clearly desiring their disunity rather than their co-operation. They quickly rumbled his plan and had turned the tables quite nicely, but forcing Mace to retreat had earned themselves his enmity. It didn’t help that John was everything Mace wanted to be; a successful officer in an elite force and a member of a wealthy and aristocratic family with an entrée to drawing rooms of Society if he wished. This was an enmity that would never go away.

‘What’s he after this time?’ asked Adam, aware Mace only inflicted himself on Section D when he was seeking something.

‘I’m not sure,’ Harry admitted. ‘But I don’t think it’s a coincidence he’s chosen today to pay us a visit.’

John and Adam digested this then exchanged glances.

‘Who actually knows Rodney was kidnapped?’ John asked.

‘Outside of the Grid; Peter West, who flew the helicopter down to Salisbury; your Dr. Mallard and Agent DiNozzo; and the Doctors Zelenka.’

‘You didn’t tell the Home Secretary?’

‘It wouldn’t have helped and may well have hindered you so I took the decision not to tell him. One of my jobs today or tomorrow will be to pay him a visit and brief him but I’d rather not do that until we have more information on why Rodney was kidnapped.’

‘So if Mace is here because of Rodney, someone has spoken out of turn…’ Adam said slowly.

‘Or Mace has found out another way,’ John finished.

‘Right,’ Harry began, decisively. ‘John, you take care of questioning the men we have locked in our basement while Adam pays a visit to the DSTL to discuss their security arrangements. I’m going to do a little digging to see if I can’t discover why Mace has chosen today to pay us a visit. Ruth and the terrible twins are searching for any recent mention of the DSTL or Rodney, either online or in chatter, and Ronon and Teyla are babysitting our guests downstairs. I understand Ronon has been sharpening his knives just where they can see him while Teyla has been doing a little exercise.’
John laughed. His team-mates had their own ways of breaking down the resistance of ‘guests’ from whom they wanted information. Ronon’s knife sharpening was only the first stage. Later stages included juggling the knives and target practice while Teyla’s ‘exercise’ used three foot long wooden fighting sticks she called bantos rods held in each hand used to both attack and defend against an opponent, or in this case used to perform intricate, slow motion movements that tested both agility and concentration.

As he left Harry’s office John could feel Mace’s eyes following him as he made his way to the security pods at the entrance to the Grid. He forced himself not to look at the other man aware that Mace hated to be ignored. It might have been petty but John decided he deserved to act a little pettily given the weekend he’d just had.

The basement of Thames House contained a series of small rooms Section D used as cells and interview rooms. All of them had tiled floors with a drain in the centre that, as far as John was aware, had been used for nothing more nefarious than dirty water although the guests who stayed there didn’t know that.

Each of the three men who were captured from the house in Salisbury where Rodney was found were being held in separate cells and John knew they’d not been allowed to communicate with each other. Initial shouts from them as John and his team had entered the house had been in English but it didn’t automatically follow that the men were actually English by birth and none of them had spoken since their capture.

John had worked together with Ronon and Teyla for a number of years. Ronon had been in the Royal Marines with John and had served under him on three tours of duty overseas where John had commanded a small group of RM Intelligence Corps Commandos. When John was approached by MI5 to join them he retained his commission as a cover and spent a couple of months a year in active service. It was almost like moving into the RM Reserves except to the world at large Major John Fitz-Shepherd had no connection whatsoever with MI5. This had continued for four years and John had earned his promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, but with the new rank had come the realisation that his cover story was no longer valid. It simply wasn’t feasible that an officer of that rank commanded only a small group of men without pertinent questions being asked, so John resigned his commission and seamlessly slipped into place as Chief of Section. At that point Ronon had asked to join him officially although he’d taken part in a number of operations John had led unofficially.

Teyla had worked in the diplomatic corps for a number of years and had specialised in negotiating trade treaties for the United Kingdom. Her move to MI5 came about when she grew disillusioned with the self-serving nature of many of the people with whom she worked. Desiring above all to help her country, her long-standing friendship with Ronon led to her application to work with Section D when he himself joined them. She never regretted her choices although the work she was now doing to help her country was nothing like she’d expected.

The clatter of wood upon wood greeted John as he made his way through the labyrinthine passages beneath Thames House. As he entered the high security detainment area the sounds became much louder and he saw Ronon and Teyla had become bored of their previous tasks and had begun their sparring practice in full view of the cells containing their guests. What ‘sparring practice’ actually meant was an intoxicating dance between the two of them each holding a pair of bantos rods and simultaneously defending against and attacking their opponent.
John himself trained with both Teyla and Ronon in the use of the bantos sticks but was no match for either of the two before him. It did, however, give him an excellent workout, although Rodney always complained at the number of bruises John sported on any given day after partaking in a training session with them.

Usually, watching the diminutive Teyla against the dreadlocked Ronon, with over a foot in height difference between them, was entertaining, but right now he wanted answers from the ashen faced men watching their two guards trying to knock hell out of each other, so he whistled loudly and the pair came to a halt but not before Ronon gave Teyla a hard whack on the thigh. She glared at him and dire retribution was promised within that glare.

‘S’up, Boss?’ Ronon asked, throwing his sticks into the air and catching them easily, and John gave his own glare to the unrepentant giant.

‘I think it’s time to have a little chat with our friends here,’ John said quietly and swept his gaze over the prisoners.

Ronon and Teyla’s eyes lit up.

‘Three on one or one each?’ she asked, and John pursed his lips.

‘I think we’ll start with three on one. We can always split up if we don’t get what we need to start with. Now, do we have any names yet?’

‘None of them are saying anything,’ Ronon rumbled.

‘No problem.’ John raised his voice a little so the prisoners could hear him. ‘We’ll call them Huey, Dewey and Louie. Teyla, bring Huey into my office please.’

A short while later ‘Huey’ was handcuffed to an upright chair in an otherwise empty room. John leaned nonchalantly against the wall, arms and ankles folded while Teyla leaned by the door while Ronon prowled restlessly around the room and Huey clearly had no idea who to keep his eyes on. Instead, his head twisted frantically from side to side.

‘I want my lawyer,’ he said suddenly. ‘I know my rights. I want my lawyer.’

So, definitely English, John thought to himself and out-loud, he simply said ‘No.’

This threw their prisoner off kilter. He obviously hadn’t expected an out-right refusal.

‘But…but…I know my rights and…’

John interrupted him. ‘The man you kidnapped had the right to be safe in his own home. Did you respect his rights? Why should I bother to respect yours?’

‘But…but…’

‘I want the name of the man who paid you to kidnap Dr. McKay.’

Huey looked down at the floor, refusing to say anything.

‘One final chance then I’m afraid I’m going to have to let my colleague hurt you.’

Huey’s head shot up in alarm.

‘Hey, you hurt Dr. McKay trying to get information from him. It’s only fair that we get to hurt you.’
Ronon cracked his knuckles in anticipation and stepped forward.

———

As it turned out, it had been almost too easy and Ronon hadn’t had to hurt anyone. None of the three had ever actually set eyes on the man who’d hired them, but ‘Dewey’ - who turned out to be called Jason Taylor - admitted to being the one who spoke to him and who gave the other two their instructions. Two junior case officers had searched the house just off the Cathedral Close in Salisbury after Rodney had been rescued but hadn’t found any mobile phones or indeed anything else linking the men to anyone else. They were dispatched to search what Taylor gave as his home address which produced a couple of mobiles, one clearly for personal use with contacts such as ‘Mum’ and ‘Nan’, and John wondered how these women would feel to know their son or grandson was involved in anything as sordid as a kidnapping. The other phone was a burner phone and had just one number with contact information, but had three other numbers that had been called by Taylor in the last few days.

Colin and Malcolm got to work on the phone numbers, seeing if they could get any information from them, while Ruth concentrated on internet chatter. James, Taylor, and Smith - Huey, Dewey, and Louie respectively - remained in the cells below Thames House for the time being as neither Harry nor John wanted the police involved as yet. There was far too much at stake to bring in a large number of people.

Harry, Adam and John met again in the late afternoon. Adam had returned from his visit to the DSTL absolutely furious - even after a two hour car journey back to Thames House. He cursed out the security staff, the management and the HR department, and Harry let him get it all out of his system for a couple of minutes before giving a slight cough which stopped Adam in mid curse. Despite it being far from amusing, John couldn’t help laughing at the expression on his friend’s face.

‘I definitely got the better job then?’

Adam narrowed his eyes while John held his hand up in a sign of surrender.

‘Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I couldn’t go though. Some of Rodney’s staff know me as Tom Wilson, a mid grade civil servant in the MOD. It wouldn’t do for him to go asking questions of their security.’

‘You owe me a drink, probably several,’ he told a grinning John. ‘How Rodney manages to work there without killing them all is a mystery to me.’

‘Only a very few people are permitted to speak to him.’

Adam’s jaw dropped. ‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously. He told the CEO - who incidentally isn’t on the list - that if they wanted him to work for them and not systematically kill everyone in the company, they had to allow him to decide who could and couldn’t speak to him. It’s why the people in HR probably didn’t recognise his name when Radek spoke to them - although it doesn’t explain why they didn’t know who Radek was. Perhaps they’re all morons, as Rodney claims. Anyway, Rodney made a list and pinned it to his lab door along with a note saying he couldn’t be held responsible for the lives or well being of anyone not on the list who tried to gain entry to his lab. After two people who weren’t on the list went in, and came out without any hair - head or eyebrows - the CEO sent a memo round forbidding anyone
not on the list from interacting with him. It seems to have done the trick.’

Harry was looking very thoughtful. ‘Any chance Rodney could get hold of some more of whatever he used on them? I could use it to stop Mace from treating us like his corner shop.’

‘Wouldn’t work,’ John told him. ‘Mace is as bald as a coot anyway. I’ll see if he can come up with anything else though. He likes a challenge.’

‘Anyway,’ Adam continued. ‘It’s no surprise to me no-one noticed Rodney was missing except Radek. There’s pretty much no security there at all. They appear to depend on the main gate to Porton Down itself to prevent any non-desirables from entering, but the site’s well over 5,000 acres. When I pointed this out I was told that there is a fence all around although when I looked at it myself in places it was four feet high rabbit wire that Ronon could probably just step over. In Rodney’s building there’s no permanent security. The gatehouse people have a schedule of driving around the base and checking to see no-one’s wandering round with masks or bags over their shoulders saying ‘SWAG’, but apart from that, nothing.

‘I thought the place was guarded by the army,’ Harry said with a frown. ‘This is the country’s top secret defence facility, for fuck’s sake!’

‘Maybe at one time, but it’s a private security firm now and they weren’t at all happy with the questions I was asking, and the HR department wasn’t much better. They all clearly believe that they’re the reason the DSTL is there. They talk about ‘the scientists’ and he used his fingers to make quote marks, ‘as if they’re only there to make their jobs more difficult.’

‘Which is pretty much what Radek said to me last week,’ John murmured.

‘Yeah? Well, I don’t blame him. When I pointed out that Rodney had signed his name as ‘Meredith’ rather than Rodney, they looked at me gone out. One of the HR managers - a real battle-axe of a woman - told me the scientists were not permitted to be familiar with ‘her gels’, and I swear to God, she said ‘scientists’ just like she might have said ‘perverts’.

‘Anyway, we need to have someone do some serious training down there on basic procedures and security. If it wasn’t for the fact that some of the scientists who work for Rodney might be in serious danger, I’d suggest the security company who’s guarding the place at present be kicked off site, but even poor security is better than no security at all.’

‘Harry, could you get anyone from the army down there immediately?’ John asked.

‘Hmm. I doubt it, not without giving away information we’d rather not divulge at the moment. Why? Have you got an idea?’

‘I could probably get a couple of platoons of bootnecks down there tomorrow if I can read their CO into Rodney’s project.’

‘Does it have a name?’ questioned Adam thoughtfully, and when John and Harry looked at him in surprise, he continued. ‘Rodney’s project. It’s always just called Rodney’s project. Does it have a proper name like ‘Manhattan Project’?’

John and Harry continued to stare at him, then John shook his head and turned back to Harry. ‘So. Anyway. Where was I?’

‘Reading in a Royal Marine commanding officer,’ Harry told him. ‘Yes, as long as you can vouch for whoever he sends down to Wiltshire with the Royals. There is no official list of who can and can’t know about ‘The Project’, and he glared at Adam who grinned back unrepentant. ‘We only
know because of your relationship with Rodney, otherwise we’d be in the dark as to why Rodney was kidnapped.’

‘Although pretty much everyone would have been in the dark about Rodney’s kidnapping,’ John pointed out. ‘I have to think the kidnappers didn’t know anything about my relationship with him. They could have held him for days, even weeks, and no-one would have raised an eyebrow.’

‘Except for Dr. Zelenka,’ Adam added.

‘But would he have got anyone to listen to him?’ John demanded. ‘Not from what you’ve said about the security, or lack of, at Porton Down.’

’No, I agree, but what’s your plan? The security firm aren’t going to let them inside the Porton Down complex - although I didn’t get to speak to any senior management today. None of them were on site although most of the directors and their departments are based in Wiltshire. Having a couple of platoons of, what did you call them, John? Bootnecks? Having a few Bootnecks down there won’t be much use, because even if we got permission from the CEO to allow them on site we’d be faced with the same problem of having to explain why we think some scientists are at risk, ‘Adam finished with a sigh.

‘Wow. I thought you were going to talk forever!’ John teased.

‘Fuck you!’ Adam said good naturedly.

‘So what’s your idea, John?’ Harry asked, bringing the discussion back on topic.

‘We put a few platoons of bootnecks - that’s Royal Marines Commandos to you, Adam - on exercise around Porton Down. It’s all MOD land around there so that won’t be a problem. Let them take a few vehicles and they can pretty much guard the weaker parts of the perimeter fence from a short distance, at least enough to see if anyone tries to get in who shouldn’t. At the same time, post a couple of Royals with the Zelenkas. They might not like it but it’s the only way we can keep them safe at the moment. I doubt the lab technicians are at risk but we can give them security as well if Rodney thinks they need it. Our job will be to find the people behind all of this. Once we’ve got them locked up or neutralised, we can have a good look at having proper security down there, both at the DSTL and in the scientists homes.’

‘Wow, I thought you were going to talk for ever,’ teased Adam.

‘And I’ll give you the same reply: fuck you!’

Harry shook his head in resignation.

By the time John left Thames House that evening he was exhausted. The meeting with Harry and Adam had gone on far longer than he’d expected and he’d then had to make calls to his former Commando Unit and sweet-talk their CO into an exercise in Wiltshire. Lieutenant-Colonel Cameron Mitchell had served with John and the pair remained good friends, despite rarely seeing each other. Mitchell had recently been given his promotion and with it, command of 45 Commando, based in Arbroath in Scotland.
Aware he was speaking on an open line, John gave the barest details possible to his friend but Mitchell understood the unspoken request: send a large group of fit armed men down to play soldiers on Porton Down and make sure no undesirables get into the site they most definitely were not guarding. ‘Got your back’ was not just a phrase to Royal Marines, it was a whole ethos.

That sorted, John stuck his head around Harry’s office door again.

‘Got a minute?’

‘Always.’

John sat back down in the same chair he’d occupied earlier.

‘Hypothetically, could we second a member of a foreign intelligence agency?’

‘Hypothetically?’ Harry repeated.

‘Hypothetically.’

‘Well, first of all we would have to decide just why we needed to second someone from a foreign intelligence agency.’

‘Hypothetically.’

Harry glared at John

‘Sorry, Harry,’ John said, totally unrepentant. ‘Let’s say he was the one person in a position to guard an important asset, like a scientist, but because he had no authority in the country they were in, he was unable to carry a weapon of any sorts.’

‘You want me to arm your cousin.’

‘Hypo…’ John stopped as Harry’s glare intensified. ‘Yes.’

‘If he’s a foreign citizen, I don’t see how we could do it without permission from his own government.’

John thought for a moment. ‘Tony’s mother was English. Is it possible he has dual nationality?’

‘I’m no expert on this, but I think only if his mother had registered him here before he was 18.’

‘Is there any way of finding that out?’

‘If Tony doesn’t know, his father might know. You said his mother died before he was 18?’

‘Mmm. When he was 11. His father stopped him visiting us after then and Tony hasn’t spoken to him for years. He won’t want to now.’

‘Would any other members of your family know?’

‘Dad might. I can ask him later. So, hypothetically, if he has dual nationality, you could second him to MI5 and give him permission to carry a weapon?’

‘Even with dual nationality, I think I’d still need to speak with someone in the US, and then we’d get into having to explain why and so on and so on. I understand why you want this, John, and I will look into it, but I can’t promise anything.’
‘Thanks, Harry. I know you’ll do your best.’

Brian hurled himself at John as soon as he stepped through the door to the living area on the first floor, being a mews house the ground floor containing just the hall, small bathroom, and garage.

‘Wow, what a greeting. Why don’t you greet me like that?’ John asked Rodney, stooping to pet the excited dog. Rodney simply glared at him.

‘He’s not happy because he’s not been able to go off the lead,’ Tony informed John.

‘You wouldn’t let Rodney off the lead? I know I told you to look after him, but I didn’t mean… uffff!’

A cushion in his face courtesy of Rodney silenced him.

‘So, have you been a good boy?’

‘Do you want to get laid ever again?’ Rodney demanded.

‘Hey! I was talking to Brian.’

‘No, you weren’t, you git.’

‘I might have been.’

A second cushion flew towards him and he caught it, grinning.

‘What’s for dinner?’

‘How should I know? What? You think because you’ve been at work and we haven’t, one of us should have cooked dinner for you?’

‘He didn’t get his nap today, did he?’ John asked Tony and Donald, which just led to a flying tackle and both John and Rodney collapsing onto the sofa, Brian bouncing around, barking loudly and generally joining in the mayhem.

‘Hey, watch your arms!’ John pulled Rodney down into his lap and held his hands gently. Rodney buried his face in John’s neck and cuddled into him, while John stroked his head just as he stroked Brian. He was a little shocked, since Rodney wasn’t the cuddly sort of person, but it was clear now that he needed John’s reassurance.

‘Has everything been okay?’ he asked the other two men.

‘I think Rodney’s suffering a little from a form of PTSD.’ Donald spoke for the first time, voice low and gentle. ‘Don’t worry, John, I expect it’ll pass fairly quickly, but I suspect he’ll be a little clingy for a while.’

‘Don’t talk about me as if I wasn’t here,’ a muffled voice said from the region of John’s shoulder. ‘I can hear you.’
‘It’s okay, baby,’ John murmured to him. ‘Remember when I came back from my first tour in Bosnia? I was a newly minted captain and 2IC of a group of around 125 Royals and I’d tried so hard to keep stoic in front of them, despite the things we saw, until one of the Colour Sergeants took me to one side and told me I wasn’t being stoic, I was being stupid, and the men would respect me more if I showed I was flesh and blood, just like them. So I threw up on his boots and we all laughed.’ He paused for a few seconds, clearly back in the moment. ‘I came home and cried in your arms and you told me you couldn’t make it all right, because no-one could do that, but you could make me feel better. And you did.’

There was silence after he finished speaking as each of the four men considered times in their lives when nothing could make the situation all right, but sometimes, just sometimes, there was someone who could make them feel a little better.

John had always intended they would eat out that night, despite what he’d said to Rodney about preparing dinner, but no-one felt like making the effort, so they ordered an Indian take-away and crashed in John’s large living room. Rodney stayed as close to John as he could, drawing comfort from his partner, which suited John just fine. There had been a subtle change in their relationship they’d not had chance to discuss as yet but both were aware of it. John had planned to speak with his father but was quite content to leave that for the following day, recognising that Rodney needed him more, and although conversation flowed easily between the four of them, John was aware that Rodney was quieter than he usually would have been. He didn’t comment on it, just held the younger man that little bit tighter against him while Brian cuddled into Rodney’s other side.

Chapter Six

John decided to let Rodney sleep on the following morning. Brian had woken him early, before his alarm was due to go off, so he switched it off and crept out of his bedroom, taking his clothes with him. Tony was already up and had the coffee machine on although John put the kettle on to boil as he preferred tea in the morning.

‘What sort of passport do you have?’ John asked his cousin as he waited for the tea to brew.

‘Umm. A blue one?’

‘Idiot. No, do you have dual nationality?’

‘Should I have?’

‘Tony! This is important. I’m trying to get you authorised to carry a weapon so you’re more use to Rodney, but we can’t just go around giving them out because we know someone.’

‘Okay, sorry. I don’t know if I have dual nationality. How would I find out?’

‘Did your dad give you papers regarding nationality?’
Tony gave his cousin a pointed glare.

‘Okay, point taken. Aunt Clare would have had to register you before she died, so I’ll phone my father and see if he possibly knows.’

‘Can I speak to him when you call?’

‘May you speak with him!’

Tony laughed. This was an old joke within the family. His grandmother, John’s Aunt Eleanor, had spent all one summer drilling this rule into the boys’ heads, David as well as John and Tony. For Tony, it was just another sign that things were getting back to how they used to be between them.

John made the call and was pleased to discover his father did know that Tony had been registered and as the family thought Tony knew, hadn’t bothered mentioning it.

‘I have the papers in my safe,’ Patrick Fitz-Sheppard told his son. ‘Do you want me to send them to you?’

‘Could you scan them in please, Dad, and email them to me? We’ll collect the originals when we come up.’

‘You’re coming up? When?’

‘I’m not sure yet. We have a few things to sort out here but I’ll phone you as soon as I can. Now here, Tony wants a word.’

Tony took the phone and looked a little apprehensive. ‘Hi, Uncle Patrick.’

John slipped out of the room as Tony began to explain the past few years to his uncle.

———

Checking his email on arrival on the Grid, John was pleased to see his father had already emailed a copy of the registration documents. He forwarded the email to Harry and went to see if Ruth or the terrible twins had discovered anything to help them identify who ordered Rodney’s kidnapping.

Ronon was sitting on Colin’s desk chatting to the two analysts when John walked over to their part of the Grid. John gave him a pointed look.

‘Any particular reason you’re here?’

Ronon had the grace to look a little abashed.

‘No, boss.’

‘All reports up to date?’ and as Ronon nodded his head, John continued. ‘Including the one about the search you did at Taylor’s address?’

The guilty look on his subordinate’s face gave him the answer he expected.

‘So…’
‘So, boss?’

‘So, why are you still here and not at your desk?’

John shook his head as Ronon got quickly to his feet and disappeared from view. Ronon had made an excellent Royal Marine in all ways but one: he hatred paperwork. And while the officers carried most of the burden of paperwork, NCO’s did have a certain amount to do, but Ronon would do anything to avoid doing his. He’d run laps of the base, do extra PT - until those senior to him realised that he actually enjoyed doing PT - and take extra duty rather than complete a single form and that had held back promotion for him. Ronon, however, didn’t particularly care about promotion, or lack of it. He loved being a Royal Marine, loved the corps and loved what he did - except for paperwork.

John was the only commander Ronon had served under who managed to get him to do it. After observing Ronon’s attempts to avoid any and all forms of administration, John sat him down and made a few things clear which boiled down to no paperwork, no fun things to do. If Ronon didn’t file the reports he was required to file, he’d sit out every exercise, every training session, every mission. Faced with this, Ronon, very grudgingly, began to file his paperwork. It was never more than the bare minimum, but it was there. John had half expected to earn the undying enmity of the man, but instead gained his undying loyalty, to the point that when John left the Corps, Ronon asked to join him and John had agreed - but only if his paperwork was kept up to date, otherwise, he’d be out on his ear.

Malcolm and Colin grinned as John shook his head over Ronon. Every single person on the Grid knew of Ronon’s kryptonite and most were willing to help the big man where they could. John let this go since he was only interested in the paperwork being done, and in any case, it would have been hypocritical for him to complain since he himself hated paperwork. He knew, however, that it needed to be done and he simply buckled down and did it as soon as he could, recalling the mantra of his old nanny: ‘the sooner it’s done, the sooner you can go out and play’. All that had really changed was the sort of play. Back then it had been climbing trees or playing tennis, now it was more likely to be fast cars and the shooting range, but he’d never forgotten the lesson.

Now, he grinned back at the terrible twins. ‘Found anything?’

‘We think so, we’re just waiting for Ruth to confirm one or two things and we should have what you need. Give us half an hour or so?’ Malcolm offered while Colin nodded in agreement.

Having a few minutes to kill, John wandered over to Harry’s office and knocked on the open door.

‘Got a minute?’

‘For anything in particular?’

‘I was wondering what happened with Oliver Mace yesterday. I forgot to ask last night.’

‘Come in and shut the door,’ Harry ordered, and when John was settled he continued. ‘Mace denied his visit being anything other than a courtesy call, and although I called him on it, he refused to be drawn. He stayed for about half an hour after you left but didn’t do or say anything to make me suspicious.’

‘So you believe him?’

Harry gave John a look.

‘Did I say that?’
'No, but—'

'But nothing. I said I didn’t trust him as far as I could kick him and I don’t. I’m ninety nine percent certain he was here for something in particular - papers, something he might overhear, I don’t know. I’m also ninety nine percent certain he didn’t get what he was looking for.'

'So, now…?'

'Now, we wait for him to make another move. If he thinks it’s something he can get from here, he’ll either come back himself or he’ll send someone else, probably with an equally poor motive for their visit. All we can do is wait.'

John rolled his eyes but remained silent.

'Now, about your cousin. ‘It’s been decided that we’ll take him on secondment to Section D.’

‘How did you swing that?’

‘I spoke to Paul Gifford, Head of the NCIS field office in London who I’ve met a couple of times. I explained that Mr DiNozzo was here to sort out some family matters which had become entangled in an operation we were pursuing. He offered to approach the US Secretary of the Navy and ask for Mr DiNozzo to be transferred to his office until the situation with his family in the UK could be resolved. I threw in the Paddington and Grantworth names and, in the interests of co-operation, their ‘SecNav’ - as I understand they call him - agreed to the transfer without asking any further questions. Paul is in the process of transferring Mr DiNozzo to Section D and I called your cousin a short while ago to explain the situation.’

‘Why all the complication? Wouldn’t it have been easier to just call Tony’s office?’

‘Have you spoken to him about why he came over here with Dr. Mallard?’

‘Well…no. I haven’t had time…’

‘Then I suggest the pair of you need to have a long conversation. Your cousin has his reasons for accompanying Dr. Mallard and it’s up to him to discuss them with you. All that matters is that Mr DiNozzo will shortly be officially seconded to Section D and under your command. The paperwork is being completed and he will come into Thames House with you tomorrow morning to pick up his credentials and a weapon—’

‘But what about Rodney? I don’t want him left alone.’

‘Ronon and Teyla can go and stay with Rodney and Dr. Mallard while Mr DiNozzo comes in. Incidentally, did you know Rodney’s cousin is a former member of the SAS and—’

‘Donald? SAS? No! How—’

‘He did his National Service in the Army and they offered him a commission when his time was up. He served for twelve years and did three years of that in the SAS. He also worked for us for a few years in the 80s.’

John was silent in astonishment.

‘His service with us never actually ended. He went to the US to work with the FBI for a couple of years as their Pathologist and then appears to have moved to NCIS, but technically, he never stopped working for MI5.’
‘But… How?’ John tried to work out just what that meant. ‘Was he spying for us?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It could simply be an administrative error and his final paperwork was never processed. We certainly haven’t been paying him for the last twenty years. I’ve got someone looking into it and I’ll let you know what they find. I’d also like to have a word with Rodney.’

John frowned. ‘Rodney’s still not fully recovered from the kidnapping. Donald suspects he might have a mild case of PTSD so I don’t want him interrogated. He made a full report on what happened and I filed it myself.’

‘Don’t worry, John. I just want to ask a few more details about the DSTL before I go and speak to the Home Secretary.’

‘Does he know about any of this?’ John waved a hand.

‘Not yet. As I said, I want to have answers to at least some of his questions before I see him and—’

Harry was interrupted by a knock at his door and his frown was replaced with a smile as Ruth poked her head around it.

‘Come in, Ruth. John, I’ll talk to y—’

‘Actually, Harry, John needs to stay. We’ve got some information about the kidnapping I need to share.’

———

Jack O’Neill was having a bad day. His choice of morning paper had sold out by the time he got to the tube station, the trains were all delayed for some reason which made him late, and his office phone was already ringing when he finally got there.

He sighed and snatched it up.

‘O’Neill.’

‘Jack? Is everything alright? You sound a little put out.’

‘General Hammond? No I’m fine, the tubes were all held up this morning and… Well, you know what it’s like. Can I help you? Isn’t it like, 4.30am in DC?’

‘Tell me about it! I needed to talk to you and I couldn’t reach you on your cell.’

Jack cringed. He hated cell phones, hated how they made him available to anyone, whatever the time of day or night, and he tended to leave his turned off. He usually relied on Carter, his deputy head of station, to tell him anything she thought he needed to know but she’d just had a few days of leave, although she would be returning the following day.

‘Yeah, sorry about that, sir. Reception’s terrible in the London Underground.’

‘Hmm. I received a phone call last night that had me a little worried and I hoped you might be able to ease my mind.’
‘If I can, sir.’ Jack held the phone under his chin as he struggled to get his coat off. He was on his own in the office until his colleague arrived. Danny had refused to enter the office without a decent coffee inside him, which Jack clearly understood to be a complaint directed at himself since he’d forgotten to buy fresh milk the previous day.

He dropped the phone, swore, dropped his coat onto the floor and then had to scrabble for the phone since the coat had - of course - fallen on top of the phone. By the time he was sitting down with the phone once more in his hand, he was exhausted.

‘Sorry, General, I missed all that, would you start again, please?’

There was a short silence on the other end of the phone and Jack cringed again, picturing the annoyed expression on his boss’s face - an expression he was very familiar with, both when he was still in the US Air Force and subsequently in the CIA.

‘Jack! Do I have your attention now?’

‘Yessir!’

Jack heard the General give a deep sigh but recognised it as a ‘mildly exasperated’ rather than an angry sigh

‘Good. I got a phone call last night from a cousin in London regarding a brewing situation and a name came up which caused them a little disquiet. He thought you might like to go and meet him for coffee in that little place just down the road.’

‘Okaaay, General. I think I got that.’

‘Good. You’ll take care of it then?’

‘Yessir. Shall I call later?’

‘That would be good.’

‘Right, sir, yes, sir, thank you, sir.’

‘Jack!’

‘Bye, General.’

Jack frowned. He’d never get used to this spy shit, no matter how many years he spent in it. Damn it, he’d *enjoyed* the Air Force, even enjoyed the wet work he’d done, although he hadn’t enjoyed not being able to be with his preferred partner. Moving to the CIA when his CO had been offered the post of Director had seemed the smart thing to do. It meant he and Danny could stop sneaking around and he was away from a backwards looking service who cared more about who a man slept with than how well he was trained. It did, however, have its downsides, the main one being Politics - and in his mind, Jack always spelt it with a capital letter!

He’d naively believed that the CIA operated outside of politics but that belief was extremely short-lived once he became a part of their machine. George Hammond, however, wanted him to take control of the London Station, and although the CIA employed a large number of people in the US Embassy there, Jack had requested that his own office, and that of his deputy, be moved out from the Embassy and into a less confining place. The main work of the analysts, information gatherers, IT experts and so on remained in Grosvenor Square, but Jack was able to move into a small suite of offices in an unassuming city building and do his own work from under the eyes of...well, pretty
much anyone. His partner, Daniel Jackson, an academic with a degree in Social Science and who spoke several languages, proved to be an extremely efficient analyst of the truck load of documents that arrived each day from the main CIA office, and Jack immediately put him on the payroll. Both he and Daniel worked very comfortably with the Station 2IC, Samantha Carter, so all in all, it proved to be quite a sweet set-up for each of them.

Pulling his thoughts away from ‘why the hell am I in this game’ to ‘George was giving me a message there’, Jack picked up, then pulled on his coat again, ready to go and visit ‘the little place down the road’ when the door opened and Danny came in carrying a tray of coffees.

“You do know it’s just the two of us today, don’t you?’ Jack eyed the four large cups balanced in the cardboard tray.

“Yes. Sam’s not due back until tomorrow. Why?’

‘Four coffees, Danny?’

‘Um, yeah?’

Jack sighed, pointed to himself and Daniel and held up two fingers. ‘Two people, four coffees. See anything wrong with this?’

‘No, Jack. What I do see wrong is the lack of a decent coffee machine in this office. I just thought I’d save time by not having to send you out for refills later.’

Jack considered that. He’d naively thought - something he felt he did far too often - that being the Chief of Station - and he’d checked his payslip, it did say Chief on there - meant he got underlings to fetch and carry for him. Sadly, he’d been wrong, and as he did like sleeping in his bed and not on the couch, he was big enough to admit this.

‘Good thought, Danny. It does save time, although you have an extra one to drink as I have to go out.’

‘Out where? And also, why?’

‘Well, I think I’m going to meet Harry Pearce in the coffee shop down the road—’

‘You hate the coffee there.’

‘Daniel.’

‘Jack.’

‘Daniel!’

‘Jack!’

Jack sighed again. When did my life become a three ring circus?

‘See you later, Space Monkey. Be good.’
Harry Pearce was already seated when Jack entered the small and steamy coffee shop. He slid into a seat opposite Harry who appeared to be enjoying a cup of what Jack had described to Daniel as ‘sludge’. Well, there was no accounting for taste.

‘Harry.’

‘Jack.’

Jack wondered if he should say ‘Harry’ again as he did with Daniel, but decided not to. Harry Pearce had been shocked to first meet Jack a couple of years earlier, since Jack apparently didn’t conform to the usual norm of a CIA operative. Jack had asked, honestly interested, what the norm was but had never been given a response. Still, he and Harry got on together for the most part, and Jack believed it was to his advantage that a senior spook of a foreign agency was disconcerted by him. This, after all, was why George Hammond had brought him in.

Harry was now studying him thoughtfully, making Jack want to squirm or check his face for dirt.

‘A surprising name has come up in relation to a small matter we’re dealing with,’ Harry finally said.

Jack thought about this and tried to translate what was actually being said. A small matter certainly meant something huge and if MI5 were admitting to being surprised it probably meant beyond shocked. He really hated the doublespeak that was used between spooks on opposite sides. He got that some things were better left unsaid and sometimes not said at all, he really did, but surely it would be better to be more upfront about ‘stuff’? They were, after all, supposed to be on the same side. He decided to take a chance on being frank.

‘Harry, I hate the coffee here, it tastes like watered down crap and believe me, I’ve tasted some awful stuff trying to pass itself off as coffee over the years. Let’s take a walk and talk properly.’

Harry raised an eyebrow but nodded and stood, leaving his coffee on the table.

They strolled down the street, one of the quieter ones in the City, looking like nothing more than a couple of business types taking a breath of air. Jack broke the silence after a couple of minutes.

‘I joined the CIA because my old CO asked me to when he became the Director. I’ve done some intelligence work in the past and visited a few countries who’ll have no record of me ever being there, so I’m not totally green, but I do hate politics. I hate having to remember who I’m supposed to be nice to and who I can afford to piss off. I’m not good at diplomacy. In the Air Force, if someone pissed me off I could court martial or just plain shoot them. There was no answering back and orders were obeyed. Now? Now I’m in a different world with different rules and I don’t always know those rules, or the rules can sometimes get changed.

‘I trust you. I like what I know about you and I trust you. Hopefully, you can trust me ‘cause we’re on the same side, most of the time at least. So, can we drop the codes and the doublespeak and all that crap and just talk? You and me?’

Harry pushed his hands deep into his pockets and continued to walk. Finally, he spoke. ‘I’m willing to agree for the most part, but only between the two of us and there will always be some things that cannot be said or discussed.’

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. He could work with that and did agree that some things would, by their very nature, need to remain private.

‘Great. Now, you were saying back there. You have a name you need help with?’
‘I can’t discuss how or why the name came up, not at the moment, but we’ve discovered a person of interest to us and we’re keen to speak to him.’

‘The name?’ Jack asked. ‘I’ll probably have to do some research but I’ll make sure it’s done by my analyst and not at the Embassy.’

‘Acasta Kolya. He’s a US citizen, but from what we’ve been able to discover he went to the US as a refugee from Kosovo about seven years ago and was granted US citizenship four years ago, in 2002.’

‘And what do you want to know?’

‘Anything you can tell us about him, especially where he works and who he works for.’

Jack looked a little puzzled. ‘Aren’t those details needed for a visa? Don’t you already have them?’

Harry sighed. ‘We have an agreement with the US where we allow entry to certain categories of people without the need to apply for a visa before travel. We issue a visitor visas at immigration after asking a few basic questions.’

Jack’s jaw dropped slightly. ‘Are you serious? You let pretty much anyone in?’

Harry scowled a little at that. ‘We rely on a person’s inherent honesty.’

‘Yeah. And how’s that working out for you?’

‘I agree it’s a stupid system but it’s the one we’ve got. Will you help us?’

‘I’ll see what we can do,’ promised Jack.

When Jack got back to his office, he found his partner had finished all four large cups of coffee. 

_Swell. He’ll be bouncing off the walls all day!_ Daniel was now busily working through the pile of documents that arrived each day, working them into a single report containing the salient points which he thought Jack needed to know. Jack was honest enough to admit that the bulk of the work of Chief of Station was carried by Danny but when he’d cautiously suggested that Daniel became Chief, or even Deputy, he was quickly shot down. Daniel declared he enjoyed the analyst role and admitted he was good at it but he wanted no part of the spying game itself. Jack was welcome to the title of Chief and all the garbage that went with it.

Jack gave a brief rundown of his conversation with Harry, secure in the knowledge that his office was free from any spy tech, audio or visual, having a useful little gadget he’d ‘acquired’ from his days in the military. It was Danny’s job each morning to sweep the office for any bugs and Jack wasn’t sure if he should be pleased or angry that each week revealed a couple of devices placed there by his own side. After a long and, at times, rather loud debate, he and his two colleagues had agreed to install a little spy technology of their own. Happily, Samantha Carter was a closet geek who enjoyed spending her free time researching and creating little bits of wizardry that they were able to utilise in their own office.

Not everyone had been pleased at the appointment of either George Hammond as Director or Jack O’Neill as London Station Chief, and both knew their enemies were simply waiting for the opportunity to trip them up. Fortunately for their country, both George and Jack had a streak of
loyalty to their home nation a mile wide and refused to give in, although both knew that the years were taking their toll and that at some point they’d have to retire. Both hoped, however, to have good and honest people to slip into their shoes when they did finally go, although both equally knew good and honest were dying virtues in the era in which they lived. Still, they had to try their best.

'So, see what you can find out about this Kolya guy,' Jack concluded. ‘And also see if anyone’s mentioned his name in any reports at all. It’s not a common name and should stand out.’

‘And if he’s changed his name or’s using a pseudonym?’

‘Then I’ll have to tell Harry we got nothing.’

Jack busied himself with the never-ending paperwork he swore multiplied on his desk, while Daniel researched what he could. They broke for a quick lunch but worked steadily through the day. As the clock approached 4.30pm, Daniel stretched his arms and glanced over at his partner.

‘Got a minute, Jack?’

‘Always for you,’ came the reply.

There’s something a little…odd here.’

‘Odd? How odd?’

Silently, Daniel dropped a single sheet of paper on Jack’s desk.

‘This odd.’

Jack read the report in front of him, eyebrows moving closer the further his eyes travelled down the paper. Finally he set it down and looked up at Daniel. ‘This is what you got from just a name?’

‘It helped that we knew roughly when he came to the US and where he came from.’

‘I need to speak to Harry Pearce first thing tomorrow.’

‘I think on this occasion we both need to speak to Harry Pearce. And at Harry’s office.’

‘I agree.’

--------

Chapter Seven

Tony had spent much of his day busily making fresh pasta. The only good thing his father had ever done after the death of his mother, as far as Tony was concerned, was to allow him to spend time with his paternal grandmother who had taught him to cook and had left him her family recipe book when she died. Both John and Rodney were reasonable cooks but they all agreed Tony was gifted.

'You can stay forever if you’re willing to cook like that every night,' John told his cousin, sitting back and sipping the last of the Amarone Tony had managed to find.
Tony laughed. 'It's just pasta and tomato sauce.'

Rodney was busy wiping his plate with a piece of bread. 'What we’ve just eaten is far more than just pasta and sauce. And the wine’s not bad, either.'

'Rodney, the wine Anthony provided is one of the very best Italy produces,' Donald said seriously. 'Calling it 'not bad’ is akin to saying vintage champagne is cheap fizz.'

'Since I’m not keen on champagne the vintage stuff could be cheap fizz for all I care. I just—'

'Why don’t I make some coffee and we can all relax,' John hurriedly interrupted, recognising the mutinous scowl on Rodney’s face and keen to avoid an upset to the pleasant evening.

The diversion worked and they were all soon settled in the living room, cup of coffee apiece, with Rodney flanked by John and Brian.

John looked across to his cousin. ‘Harry mentioned something about you having reasons for being away from NCIS when he and I spoke yesterday. Can you tell us a bit more?’ John was careful to make his tone of voice light, giving Tony the option of not telling the group, but Tony simply glanced at Donald and sighed.

‘I don’t mind talking about it and Ducky knows most of this anyway, but it’s a bit of a long story.’

John just nodded. ‘Whatever you want to say. We won’t speak about it to anyone if that helps.’

Tony gave a grim smile. ‘It’s been a tough year for me, tough couple of years in fact. My partner - NCIS partner,’ he qualified quickly, ‘…Kate was killed by a sniper last year, a guy we’d been chasing for a while and shortly after that we got a new member of our team, Ziva David, a Mossad Liaison Officer who’s an old friend of our new Director, Jennifer Shepard.’

‘Mossad agent?’ demanded John. ‘How… why…’

‘I suppose pretty much like I’ve been seconded to MI5,’ Tony shrugged.

‘Well, yes, but there’s a big difference between being seconded for a couple of weeks for a particular operation and becoming a Liaison Officer. Why would NCIS need a Liaison officer anyway?’

‘I agree with you, John, and can only presume it’s because she’s an old friend of our Director.’

‘Which is very suspicious, as well. You’ve been seconded to MI5 because you’re my cousin, but you’re also uniquely suited to protecting Rodney. Creating a post for a friend? That’s very different.’

‘I agree, and I was also very surprised when the senior agent of my team agreed to it. He doesn’t like to be told to do anything, let alone have a new team member foisted upon him. There’s another reason he accepted her, I’m sure of it, even if it was his former lover who appointed her.’

‘Former… Are you serious?’

‘I admit I was extremely surprised, too,’ Donald said. ‘It’s the very first time I can remember, at least since I’ve known him, that Jethro has accepted such an imposition from a director. In the past he’s simply refused to countenance a team member he hasn’t chosen himself. I can only infer from this that his former relationship with Director Shepard has influenced him greatly.’

‘I can understand why you thought some time away would help,’ John commented.

Tony smiled wryly. ‘Oh, I haven’t told you the half of it yet.’
John stood and topped up everyone’s glass and motioned to Tony to continue.

‘In May of this year, Gibbs, my boss, was caught in an explosion and suffered some severe memory loss. Fifteen years to be precise, and he finally decided to retire and move to Mexico. As Senior Special Agent, I took over the team, but this pissed off almost everyone concerned. Except Ducky,’ Tony added, with a look of gratitude at his friend. ‘Anyway, David and McGee, another agent,’ he explained before Rodney could do more than open his mouth. ‘David and McGee refused to accept me as their new supervisor and took the piss on pretty much everything. They refused to obey my instructions; they were late to work, or left early; McGee refused to do the paperwork associated with his new position of Senior Agent - he wanted the title but not the workload - and a host of other stuff. The Director refused to censure them and back me up and she insisted on overseeing every case we had and challenged pretty much any decision I made.

‘Anyway, Gibbs came back a month or so back - Madam Director had put him on leave instead of processing his retirement - and I went back to Senior Agent with little to no respect from my subordinates. No, John, let me finish. Just after Gibbs returned, the Director asked me to go undercover on an assignment for her. At first I was pleased: I’m good at undercover work and more importantly, it would get me away from the office, but when I asked a few more questions I discovered she wanted me undercover outside of office hours and to keep it secret from anyone else. The only back-up I’d have would be her cell phone number. No handler, no official presence, nothing.’

‘A black op,’ John said flatly.

‘Exactly. It concerned me tremendously and I refused, but she kept on and on at me and just before I left last week had begun to hint that if I didn’t take the case she’d do her best to get me removed from NCIS, or at least demoted and moved from the Major Case Team.’

‘She… Can she do that?’ John demanded.

Tony shrugged. ‘I don’t see why not. No-one questioned her putting a Mossad agent on the MCRT or giving the team leader five months leave. I don’t think a little thing like moving an agent from one team to another is going to bother anyone.’

‘Did you know about all this?’ Rodney demanded of his cousin. ‘Couldn’t you do anything about it?’

‘I didn’t know about the request for Anthony to go undercover, although I was aware of the problems he’d had with his fellow team members while Jethro was…away,’ Donald admitted. ‘I did my best to support him and persuade Timothy and Ziva, and Abigail too, to follow his commands, but to no avail. I’m a little ashamed I didn’t try harder or even realise what scrutiny Anthony was under from Director Shepard…’

‘It’s not your fault, Ducky.’ Tony put his hand on his friend’s arm. ‘You did your best, and you and Jimmy were always there for me when I needed some moral support or just to yell at somebody. You pretty much kept me sane between the two of you.’

Donald smiled sadly and patted Tony’s hand.

‘So, that’s the story of my summer. You can understand how happy I was to get away from them for a while?’

‘But the same problems will still be there when you go back,’ John pointed out. He was furious at the way his cousin had been treated and desperately wanted to do something to help. He just wasn’t
sure what, short of getting on a plane with a big stick.

‘Yes, but a little distance has given me some time to think,’ Tony told him. ‘I do have other options; the FBI have tried to poach me a few times. I just needed space and time to think.’

John nodded and tightened his arm around Rodney. He was glad his cousin had the opportunity to put some distance between him and his situation. He just hated it had taken Rodney being kidnapped to give that space.

As ever, Rodney seemed able to read his mind and he cuddled closer to John and patted his leg in comfort. Brian moved as Rodney moved and soon the scientist was squashed tight between his man and his dog, but John was fairly certain Rodney was both comfortable and comforted.

———

Early on Wednesday morning Jack O’Neill met with his Deputy Head of Station, Samantha Carter, to bring her up to speed on his chat with Harry Pearce and Danny’s subsequent findings. Sam was an old CIA hand, having progressed through the ranks from Junior Analyst to her present position with tours of duty in several different countries en route. Her father had been a CIA agent and she’d happily followed in his footsteps, anticipating a thrilling career jam-packed with glamorous locations and momentous, world-changing happenings. In retrospect, she should have known she’d be disappointed.

Life as a junior analyst had been monotonous and mind-numbingly boring. She’d been used as no more than a coffee monitor on frequent occasions, even when she was attending a briefing in an official capacity, and the sheer number of sexual advances she’d had to fight off was frightening. From being the shining star of her college classes and graduate studies, she’d become nothing more than a stepping-stone for ambitious young men, keen to use her intelligence to further their own careers.

Leaving the CIA, or indeed any of the intelligence services, however, was very difficult. All her time there was protected by non-disclosure agreements and to present a curriculum vitae to a prospective employer with several years unaccounted for was impossible. So she’d kept her head down and prayed she might finally be sent on a posting free from both sexual advances and sexual discrimination that she might, just possibly, enjoy.

Jack O’Neill had been her saviour, her knight in shining armour, and though she quickly found out his analyst was also his partner, it actually gave her reassurance that life as his deputy might finally be all she’d originally dreamed of.

For now, she read through the summary Daniel had compiled from a host of other reports and frowned. ‘But…what…?’

Jack smiled grimly. ‘I know. Frightening, eh?’

‘Do the people in the intelligence department not talk to each other? Is there no sharing of information any longer?’ Sam demanded. ‘When I worked there, admittedly not in England, we had daily meetings to compare lists of POIs.’

‘POIs?’
‘What? Oh, person of interest. Each section head would compile a list of names that kept coming up or subjects that recurred. It was easy to see how much overlap there was and took very little time. We could then merge the information and present a complete picture of what was happening, with whom and where. When did that stop happening?’

‘I’ve never been given a report like that,’ Jack said, frowning. ‘That’s why I brought Danny on board, to do just that. I don’t have the time or the patience to read through all the crap I’m sent. It’s also why I decided to move my office away from the Embassy. I don’t get folk turning up every five minutes moaning about so-and-so having a longer pencil than them.’

Sam smirked.

‘Really?’ Jack shook his head. ’And you call me childish!’

‘Actually, Jack, I think she called you infantile which is completely different.’ Daniel added his two cents.

Jack scowled at them both. ‘It was mistake putting the pair of you in my office. Now all you do is gang-up on me.’

This made Sam laugh. While it was true she and Daniel frequently ganged-up on Jack, for her it was the freedom to actually be able to do that, more than the teasing itself, which was so refreshing. She sobered and brought the conversation back to Daniel’s report. ’What do we do about that?’ She motioned to Jack’s desk.

‘We take it to Harry Pearce. This obviously ties in with whatever he didn’t or couldn’t tell me yesterday. We need to trust him and he to trust us. This report will help with both.’

———

The three Americans were shown into a small conference room at Thames House and were joined by Harry and his two senior case officers, along with another man they’d not met before.

‘Jack, Sam, Daniel, this is Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, on loan to us from NCIS.’ Harry smiled at Tony as he introduced him.

Jack’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline.

‘NCIS? How come you’ve got an NCIS agent working for you, Harry?’

‘It’s a long story, but the short version is that Tony has dual nationality, UK and US, and he’s uniquely placed to help us with our latest…issue.’

‘And that issue is…?’

‘Also a long story, but what you need to know at the moment is that John’s partner - who is also one of our top scientists - is under threat from someone we understand to be a US national. We believe two of Dr. McKay’s colleagues are also at risk so I’m hoping you have some more information for us about the name I gave you yesterday.’

Jack was silent for a moment, running all this information through his mind. He’d met John Fitz-
Sheppard and Adam Carter before, and he knew Adam’s wife had been killed the previous year although any details on her death had been kept extremely quiet. He didn’t know anything about John having a partner so was unable to divine anything further from the brief information just given.

‘How do you know John’s partner is being threatened? Has she received any calls or letters or anything?’ Jack finally asked.

He saw John and Harry exchange a glance and John give a slight nod.

‘Dr. McKay was taken from his home last Thursday by people we believe are working for Acasta Kolya. He was retrieved by John and his team, along with Tony, on Saturday, but we believe that Kolya is still a threat to Dr. McKay and members of his team,’ Harry explained.

Jack couldn’t hide his surprise. His own relationship with Danny had ruffled a few feathers, both inside and outside of the CIA, but he’d just ignored them and made sure everyone knew not to mess with either Danny or himself. To now discover that a senior member of MI5 - and a former high ranking Marine at that - also pursued a… a less than conventional relationship was a bit of a shock.

‘Okaaay. Right, well, we have some information on that. Danny?’

Daniel passed around copies of the report he’d made for Jack and there was a short silence while they were read. The surprise on each face told Jack when all had finished.

‘Yeah, it’s a little shocking isn’t it? I’m going to the Embassy when we finish here to bang some heads together.’

‘So, several US intelligence agencies have had Kolya under surveillance, but none of them noticed each other and each of them saw him meet someone different?’ Adam was a little incredulous. 'And all the people he met were on various agency watch lists but none of them realised? How is that even possible?’

‘A complete lack of joined-up thinking,’ Tony answered. ‘I’ve seen it myself at NCIS. Two or three units focus on one frequently small issue and don’t bother to look at the wider picture, or they ignore clues that might point to a wider picture.’

Jack nodded in agreement. ‘Which in this case meant Kolya was seen with SVR operatives, Russian secret police,’ he added as he saw Tony frown. ‘Along with known members of the Russian Mafia and no one picked it up. Those following the SVR had no idea who Kolya was, and those following Kolya—’

‘…Had no idea who the SVR and Mafioso were,’ finished Tony.

‘And reports on both groups were made to CIA analysts who also didn’t bother to cross check, even when the analysts were in the same department,’ Jack added. ‘It’s only because Danny summarises all the reports that come into my office that it was picked up, and then only because he did a little investigation of his own. One or two of those reports weren’t meant for me and would have simply been filed, but Danny includes everything that is produced by the Embassy analysts, not just stuff meant for me.’

‘So we have a couple of different issues here.’ John was clearly thinking out loud. ‘The fact that Kolya is in close contact with the Russians, and also the fact that you weren’t on the circulation list for a number of important reports. The question on that point surely is, were you - or your predecessor - ever on the list, or is it a new development?’

‘And how much else is being directed away from you?’ added Tony. ‘If you don’t know a report
exists, you can’t ask to see it.’

There was a further silence as each person thought through the ramifications of this new development. Harry finally broke the silence.

‘Jack, why did you bring this to our attention? You could have just told us that Kolya appears to have links to the Russians. We didn’t need to know about a possible conspiracy within your own department: that could have been dealt with by yourself. I’m very grateful, as are we all, but why tell us about this?’

Jack considered how to explain. ‘I’m still new to this spying game. I was a good officer and a damned fine pilot, but I’m not a spook. General Hammond brought me in for that very reason. I’m not a spook and I don’t have any of the issues that muddy the waters between the CIA and hell, almost everyone else. I’ve got a major problem here, but I don’t know how deep it goes. Is it just the London Station, or is it much wider? Much, much wider? I don’t know who I can trust at the Embassy or back in DC, but I do think I can trust you guys. You and I agreed, Harry. Agreed to trust each other, and now I’m trusting you, and your people, to help me sort this out. Am I right to trust you?’

———

Chapter Eight

John and Adam met with Harry in his office early on Thursday morning. Tony, now armed, had remained at home to watch over Rodney who was almost back to his usual insouciant self. Earlier that morning he had demanded to know when John would let him go back to work, explaining Radek was incapable of controlling the minions and who knew just what the idiots would do without him there to ride roughshod over them all. John, for his part, pretty much ignored what Rodney said but was happy to hear him complaining. An uncomplaining Rodney was almost a portent of doom and John reckoned they had enough on their plates without signs that the world might be ending so he simply grinned at his partner, patted him on his head and made a swift exit before Rodney could launch into a diatribe against him.

Adam gave John a pointed look and demanded to know what made him so chipper at 7am. John merely grinned a little wider and refused to say anything.

Harry glared at the pair of them and John toned down his grin a little, aware that not everyone was a morning person.

‘Acasta Kolya,’ Harry began, and John sobered immediately.

‘Have we found him?’

‘No, but Jack O’Neill, or rather Daniel Jackson, has come up with the name of someone who’s had a number of meetings with Kolya, but they’re reluctant to divulge the name at the moment.’

‘Why?’ demanded John and Adam together.

‘O’Neill couldn’t, or I suspect wouldn’t say. Which leads me to the conclusion that it’s either someone in the CIA or someone in a position of some power.’

‘Or both.’
'Or indeed both,’ Harry agreed.

’Soo we can’t do anything?’ Adam asked. ‘Now what?’

‘Ruth’s gone back to her source at GCHQ with the names of associates O’Neill was able to give us yesterday, and the twins have been doing the same with the internet. Two names did crop up which surprised me; Elizabeth Weir and Igor Vasiliev. Vasiliev is a Russian oligarch with suspected ties to the SVR, which is unsurprising. Most of the Russian mafia have close links with either the Russian government or the intelligence services. It’s how they got their money in the first place.’

‘I once heard a comment that amused me,’ Adam said. ‘After the fall of the USSR, every enterprise in Moscow was privatised, including state corruption, which just made it so much more successful and profitable.’

‘Sad but true,’ John agreed.

Harry continued. ‘Weir is an American who works at Mason’s Bank in the city, but her name has cropped up before and we had her marked as a possible CIA agent, probably operating without O’Neill’s knowledge. We know there are any number of them besides the official agents, just as we have men in various embassies around the world who answer to MI6 but appear on the lists as Foreign Office staff. What makes Weir different are her connections to both Vasiliev and Kolya, although the link to Vasiliev is a little tenuous.’

‘Could she be the person O’Neill is keeping quiet about?’ John asked.

‘If she is I can understand why O’Neill is being so cagey,’ Harry said. ‘She’s linked to a few folk in the US government; one Senator in particular is an old friend of her father who was killed in Vietnam. She’s also met with our beloved Mr Mace a couple of times, including a dinner he claimed on expenses.’

‘What would Mace want with someone who works at Mason’s bank?’ Adam frowned. ‘Do we know what she does there?’

‘Officially she works in their Human Resources department as a mid level clerk, but Ruth discovered she has her own office, not a common thing for a clerk to have, which is why her name rang a few warning bells.’

‘I can’t see Mace being interested in a mid level clerk.’

Harry nodded. ‘I think we might have to take a closer look at Ms Weir, or rather her computer. I believe the cleaning company who service the bank have need of some new staff.’

John and Adam grinned at each other. They were both expert…cleaners.

It was decided that Adam and Teyla would be the ones to pay a visit to the bank.

'John, you know you’re far too posh to pass as an office cleaner,’ Adam told him. 'Teyla’s a much better choice to go with me.’
'What about me?' Ronon demanded.

The others looked at him in incredulity.

‘Ronon, they’re going undercover and the point of it all is to remain inconspicuous. You’re six foot eight and have dreadlocks. There is no single part of you that is inconspicuous.’ John shook his head at the sulky look which appeared on Ronon’s face. ‘Don’t cry, for fuck’s sake. How about you taking over Teyla’s classes next week? You know you enjoy beating up recruits.’

This cheered up Ronon but Teyla glared at John with a look that promised retribution during their next training session together, but John thought it was a small price to pay.

They caught a break when Ruth discovered ‘Angels’, the cleaning company with the contract for Mason’s Bank, was a company they’d used on previous occasions and who were well paid to turn a blind eye to any temporary staff MI5 wanted to put into a particular building or company. They were able to get Adam and Teyla into position that very night with little effort while John headed the team providing surveillance and back up.

He hated being stuck in the van down the road from the bank but knew Adam and Teyla were more than qualified to do this. His job was to provide them with directions to the relevant office and keep an eye on anyone who might get in their way or prove to be suspicious of their activities. Malcolm was on hand to watch the security feeds just inside the bank, and to help with any technical issues that might arise, which were more likely to be connected to Weir’s computer than anything else since Angels were able to provide access swipe cards for the various parts of the building.

Adam and Teyla, both dressed in Angels overalls, made their way to the eighteenth floor where they’d discovered Weir’s office to be, pushing their little trolley of cleaning materials. John was able to see what Adam saw thanks to a micro camera in one of the buttons on Adam’s uniform and all four were connected by minute radio transmitters.

Teyla waited by the lifts as lookout while Adam made his way to Weir’s office, getting in without difficulty, and John watched him slip on a pair of latex gloves then turn on the computer on the desk. It powered up without a problem, and Adam used a nifty device created by Malcolm to determine the password, and began to download the hard drive onto a USB stick. While that was happening he searched the unlocked desk, each drawer opening easily.

‘Are we sure Weir is CIA?’ Adam muttered to John. ‘These drawers weren’t even locked.’

‘Sometimes agents get too confident, Adam. You know that,’ John replied in an equally low voice despite there being no possibility of being overheard.

‘There’s a desk diary here,’ Adam reported. ’I’ll take photographs.’

John could see the pages - a week to a page - flicking over as Adam photographed them but couldn’t make out any details. He froze suddenly as Malcolm cursed.

‘One of the security men has left the front desk and gone towards the lifts,’ Malcolm reported. ‘I can’t see where he’s gone but—’

‘Adam!’ Teyla’s voice sounded urgent. ‘The lift’s coming up.’

All the cleaning staff had been ordered to stay below floor ten for the first hour to give Adam and Teyla time to get to Weir’s office, so if the lift was coming above that, they were in danger of being discovered.
‘Adam, you need to get out of there,’ John ordered.

‘It’s only downloaded sixty percent,’ Adam protested. ‘Seventy….seventy five…’

‘Now, Adam!’

‘Lift’s arrived,’ Teyla informed them in a whisper. ‘I’m in the main office. Get out of there, Adam!’

‘Done!’

‘What are you doing?’ John heard a voice ask. ‘Why aren’t you with the other cleaners?’

‘We were told a bottle of milk had been dropped so we needed to get some detergent on it as soon as possible or it’ll stink the place out by tomorrow,’ John heard Adam say. ‘You could do with keeping a bottle of detergent somewhere in the office in case it happens again. Rancid milk is disgusting.’

There was a pause then Adam spoke again. ‘There, that should fix it. By the time we get back here to clean, it should have neutralised the smell.’

‘Thank you,’ the voice said. ‘Milk shouldn’t be brought into this office at all. I’ll make sure everyone knows.’

‘You’re welcome,’ Teyla told him, then instead of a view of the carpet, John watched Teyla push their trolley out from the office, into the corridor and towards the lifts. He and Malcolm looked at each other and gave identical sighs of relief.

Rodney was puttering about the house in Chelsea pretty much getting on everyone’s nerves. Even Brian made himself scarce as Rodney scrolled rapidly through the various channels on the television not once but twice then began pulling books out from John’s well stocked bookcase allegedly looking for something to read. Tony was grateful when Ducky finally told him to ‘settle down right now or take yourself off to bed!’

‘How old do you think I am? Twelve?’

‘More like five from the way you’re behaving, and if you don’t do as you’re told I might start treating you like a five year old!’

The glint in Ducky’s eye told them both he was very serious.

Rodney plonked himself down on the sofa with a huff, his arms folded, and glared at his cousin, but Tony noticed he’d avoided his usual place and was sitting as far away from Ducky as possible.

Ducky continued reading peacefully as though nothing had happened and Tony turned back to his Kindle. Peace reigned for a short while and when he next looked up, Rodney was fast asleep, cuddled up to Brian who had crept back as soon as all the shouting was over. He and Ducky shared a conspiratorial smile as they looked at Rodney. John had called to say he’d be late back and not to wait up for him, although Rodney had insisted he wanted to be up when John got home. From the look of it, however, neither Rodney nor Brian would manage that.

It was nice having a dog around the house, Tony decided. He’d always wanted one as a child but frequent family relocations had made it impossible - or so his father had claimed. Instead, the young
Tony had to be satisfied with the dogs he encountered at his cousin’s home in the north England where a mixture of labradors, springer spaniels and for some reason a single bearded collie - clearly from where John got his love of them - roamed freely about the house and grounds. He realised, however, having a dog in DC would be unfair on the animal, especially with the long hours he tended to work.

Tony was feeling a little frustrated with the situation in which they now found themselves. He was certainly glad to be away from NCIS and while he hadn’t expected to get embroiled in the aftermath of a kidnapping, now he was, he would prefer a more involved role. He’d been quite excited at his secondment to MI5 but finding himself relegated to babysitter - albeit a babysitter with a gun - was, quite frankly, boring. Seeing John go off each morning to secret meetings and discussions, knowing he was hunting for Rodney’s kidnappers, was difficult.

‘I can empathise with you, Anthony.’ Ducky’s voice broke into his brooding. ‘Being the one left behind each time. I can empathise.’

Tony smiled at his friend. ‘I know, Ducky, but you have an important role as our ME. I’m pretty certain anyone could guard Rodney if I weren’t here.’

‘But John trusts you with Rodney. Possibly more than he would one of his own men.’

‘I know that. I’m just used to being the one out there, where the action is.’

Ducky was quiet for a moment and Tony thought he’d perhaps said all he wanted to and dropped his eyes back down to his Kindle.

‘I wasn’t always a Medical Examiner, Anthony.’

Tony looked up again. ‘I know, Ducky. But you’ve always been a medic, even when you were in the army you were a medic.’

‘No, actually, I wasn’t.’

Tony was certain his face mirrored the shock he felt. ‘You weren’t? But I thought you went to Medical School straight from high school?’

‘No, I went straight into the Army. You have to remember that National Service was still in place when I left school, but since I’d been in the Combined Cadet Force at Eton, I was offered a commission. I actually served for ten years and for a while did a very similar job to John. I didn’t go to medical school until I was 30 years old. It’s not something I can, or even want, to talk about, but believe me when I say that I know how difficult it is being left behind. To not be the one making the decisions or leading a team out in the field. Sometimes you just have to accept being the one left minding the shop.’

‘Minding the shop? I don’t…’

Ducky laughed. ‘No, I don’t suppose you do. It’s a very British phrase meaning to look after something for a while. I’m finding myself slipping back into English rather than American having spent a few days with John and Rodney.’

‘John?’ spluttered Rodney, suddenly awake. ‘Is John here? Is he back?’

‘No, Rodney, I apologise. I simply spoke his name. He has not returned as yet. Why don’t you take yourself off to bed? You’ll be much more comfortable there.’
'I want to wait up for him,' Rodney insisted, stubbornly.

'Well, Anthony and I are going to bed ourselves as it’s almost half past eleven and I’m not as young as I once was. Anthony will take Brian out for his evening stroll and you and I can get ourselves ready for bed.'

'I can take Brian out.' Rodney’s glare was back again.

'Oh, no way, José,' Tony told him. 'I don’t want to face John if you get yourself kidnapped again, or even if you trip and stub your toe! You take your ass off to bed and I’ll take Brian out.'

Rodney scowled, but Tony refused to back down and eventually the scientist stomped off to his bedroom.

Tony took Brian for a short walk to let the mutt cock his leg and watched as Brian ran a short way, stopping to sniff at particularly odour-some blades of grass in a small front garden close to John’s house.

‘Come off there, Brian! It’s not your yard!’ Tony ordered, and smiled as Brian came bouncing back to him, having thoroughly watered the straggly bushes fighting for space in the tiny city garden. As they wandered back home, Tony kept a wary eye out for anything that might strike him as odd but everything appeared to be in its usual place and he and Brian were the only people out late at night in such a quiet residential area. It was doubtful that any attempt to seize Rodney would be made here in London as John’s address was likely to be known to very few, but Tony meant to stay alert and aware of his surroundings. He might find it boring but his cousin had entrusted his partner to him and Tony vowed not to let John down.

When they got back home Tony made sure the burglar alarm was set for the ground floor of the mews house. The door was securely locked, although he was unable to bolt it as John had still to return, but he checked that all the windows and even the door to the tiny rooftop terrace were locked before he made his way to his own bedroom. He glanced in John and Rodney’s room, where the door was left open for Brian who liked to wander from room to room in the night, and saw Rodney and his dog were fast asleep, both snoring gently. He smiled to himself as he got ready for bed. The unlikely pair had grown on him and he knew he’d miss them when he returned to the US, just as he’d miss his cousin now they were reconciled. His last thought before falling asleep was that he must visit his uncle in North Yorkshire before he left England.

Within a few minutes it was clear the house had settled for the night. There were no lights showing and no sounds at all, but the two men hidden in shadows waited for a full half hour after the last light was switched off. It had taken some work to discover where McKay had been taken and even more to discover the identities of the two visitors, but Kolya had finally discovered they were relations of McKay and his lover, not bodyguards as he’d suspected. He’d kept control of this kidnapping to himself, although with three of his small group still locked up somewhere he’d had little choice. He intended to get McKay out of London as fast as he could, certain keeping him so close to his home last time was why he was rescued before any useful information could be extracted. His patron needed the information McKay had and Kolya was determined to get it for him.
Tony awoke suddenly from a deep sleep. He lay for a moment listening. Had John finally come home? The alarm bleeped twice signifying it needed to be reset or switched off, then went quiet. He waited for it to be reset to cover the primary entrance to the house but it remained silent. Wouldn’t John have reactivated it? Tony sat up, ears straining, and heard soft footsteps on the lower stairs. More than one set of footsteps, he was certain.

Silently, he slipped out of bed and picked up the pistol issued to him by Section D. He crept to the door - slightly ajar because of Brian - and listened carefully. Definitely two people. He thought rapidly. He had the advantage, but shots fired in the dark could easily go astray and cause serious injury. Would the intruders know the layout of the house, know where Rodney would be sleeping? He heard the creak of a stair. They were coming up to this floor now. It was a narrow, enclosed staircase which meant only the man in front could use his gun safely. This was his best chance.

Tony stepped out of his room and fired once, twice, three times down the stairs, praying it wasn’t John. There was a yell and the sound of tumbling bodies and he quickly snapped on the light, illuminating the scene. Rodney, followed by a barking Brian, came flying out of his bedroom and Tony yelled at him to get back into his room and barricade the door. Peripherally, he saw Ducky grab them both and bundle them into his room and he heard furniture moving as Ducky blocked the door.

At the foot of the staircase was a tangled mass of bodies. As Tony had hoped, the first man had fallen back on his co-conspirator and neither were making any effort to get up. Holding his gun carefully in front of him, he made his way down the stairs and kicked the unmoving top body off the second, groaning body. The first man was dead, shot cleanly in the centre of the forehead, with a further shot in his chest. Good shooting! The second man had an awkwardly bent leg, obviously broken, and was holding his shoulder. That’s where the third shot went. Neither were going anywhere.

Tony heard the front door open two floors below.

‘Hello?’ a voice called. ‘Why is this door unlocked?’ John. Thank God.

‘Up here, John!’

Footsteps came running up the stairs.

‘Tony? I thought you’d all be…What the fuck!’

‘Hi, John. How was your evening?’

By the time the house had emptied of police, paramedics and spooks, it was past 3am. Harry Pearce arrived first and he and John were able to keep the police in the lower part of the house, claiming the entire event was a matter for the security services although Harry did demand a police presence at the hospital, where Kidnapper Two had been taken, to remain outside his hospital door at all times. Kidnapper One was bundled into a body bag and taken back to the morgue at Thames House to await post mortem by the Metropolitan Police pathologist, although Harry asked Ducky to be present. Tony’s gun was slipped into an evidence bag by an operative from Thames House, purely as a matter of procedure Harry assured Tony who just nodded. He’d have done - had to have done - exactly the same. He wasn’t worried about any enquiry that might follow, he’d been given authority by MI5 to guard Rodney which was exactly what he’d done.

Rodney, Ducky and a very sheepish Brian emerged from Ducky’s bedroom soon after John arrived
John had looked at the two bodies at the foot of the staircase in shock and Tony realised that - like himself - John had probably thought Rodney was perfectly safe here, that arming Tony was perhaps being a little too overprotective. They’d both been wrong.

John held out his hand to shake Tony’s hand, but at the last moment, reached forward and pulled Tony into a hug. ‘Thank you. I… I… Thank you.’

A little surprised - John had always been the most undemonstrative member of the family - but far from unwilling, Tony hugged his cousin back, aware that their relationship had now entered an entirely new phase.

Chapter Nine

The following morning, John insisted they all pack bags as they’d be moving to a safe-house. Rodney tried to argue but a single look from John - who’d seen Donald use it to great effect - quieted him.

‘I don’t see why Ronon and Teyla can’t guard us,’ he was heard muttering as he stomped off.

‘Because they have jobs to do,’ John called after him and shook his head as Rodney waved him a two finger salute.

‘We’re all going into Thames House first,’ John informed Donald and Tony. ‘We need to meet with Harry and Adam and decide just where Rodney will be safest.’

‘We?’ Tony asked.

‘You, Donald and myself. I’ll stick Rodney in a room with his laptop and an internet link and then we three can go and talk about him behind his back.’

‘I heard that!’ came a yell from upstairs.

‘You want me with you as well?’ Donald asked in surprise.

‘Donald, I suspect you have more experience in your little finger than Adam and I have in our lives, at least when it comes to the security service.’

‘You know, then?’

‘Harry Pearce told me the other day. And you didn’t look at all surprised, Tony.’

‘Ducky was just about to share his past exploits with me last night when Rodney woke up.’

There was a knock at the front door which made them each jump, and Tony made a movement towards his gun before realising it had been taken away the previous night.

‘We’ll sort you out with a new gun when we get to Thames House,’ John promised. ‘This’ll be our car and driver. I didn’t want to use mine as I can’t drive and keep a look out at the same time.

Ten minutes later they were all settled in the SUV with Rodney in between John and Tony in the
'Why am I in the middle?' he complained. ‘You know I get car sick.’

‘You’ve not been car sick since we were at school, and I want you next to me and away from the door,’ John told him, patiently. ‘Now shut up and buckle-up.’

‘What’s happening to Brian? Why isn’t he in the car?’ Rodney demanded, suddenly realising his dog had been left behind.

‘Ronon’s going to take care of him for a few days, he’ll pick him up later, and you know Brian loves him.’

‘That dog would love anyone who fed him,’ Tony muttered, and jumped as Rodney poked him in the ribs and glared.

Once at Thames House John set Rodney up in Harry’s office, deciding that the centre of the Grid was the safest place for his scientist, but just before he left to join the others in the conference room he held Rodney close; a little reassurance for each of them.

As he entered the conference room and made his way to the space left at the long table for him, John heard Tony mention how irritable Rodney had been for the last few days and felt he needed to defend his partner.

‘Rodney’s a scientist and he’s never been in this sort of situation before. His home has been invaded, twice now, he was taken away by people who hurt him and he’s being kept from the work he loves. I can’t say he’s always a jolly, happy person, but at the moment he’s worried and afraid, for us as much as himself. It took a long time for him to stop shaking last night and I hate to think what this will do to him long term. Give him a little slack, Tony, please.’

‘I do understand, John, and I remember what Ducky said the other day about PTSD. I just hate to see him like this. I’ve only known him a few days but he does grow on you, doesn’t he?’

John nodded and smiled at his cousin.

‘Umm, I have a question?’ Adam raised his hand and they all turned to look at him. ‘Ducky? Really?’

John laughed. ‘I gave Tony a hard time when I first heard him use it,’ John told him, ‘but apparently, it’s what Donald likes to be called. I’m afraid I’ve known him for too long as ‘Donald’ to use it myself, since that’s what Rodney’s always called him, but if Donald is happy, go ahead.’

‘I would be very happy for you to use whichever name you find comfortable, Mr Carter,’ Donald told him with a smile, then took in the others around the table. ‘And that goes for all of you.’

‘Thank you, Donald,’ Harry brought the meeting to order. ‘This is Adam Carter, my other senior case officer, and I was expecting Ronon and Teyla.’ Harry looked around, as if he expected them to be hiding somewhere. ‘John, do you know where they are?’

John shook his head. ‘They insisted on coming over last night after all the excitement to keep an eye on the place, and then they disappeared after breakfast. I assumed they’d each gone home to change and that they’d meet us here. Ronon’s offered to take care of Brian until it’s safe for Rodney to go back to Laverstock and the DSTL.’
‘Well, we can’t wait for them. We need to discuss where you four are going to stay for the next few
days and also what Colin and Malcolm were able to pull from Weir’s hard drive from your little
excursion to Mason’s Bank.’

‘Wow, I’d forgotten all about that,’ John commented. ‘Was it only last night? How come the twins
have got the information off it so soon?’

‘They never went to bed,’ Harry said dryly, ‘and apparently neither did Ronon and Teyla. I’m
dreading the overtime bill for this operation.’

‘May I ask why Anthony and I have been brought in?’ Donald asked.

‘I do beg your pardon, Donald. I’d meant to address that earlier. I wanted your input, both of you,
on Elizabeth Weir and how we go about questioning her. Tony’s an experienced agent but likely
has very different methods to ours, and you yourself have years of experience, both in the
intelligence services and as a psychological profiler. I’d like to hear what each of you have to say.’

‘This isn’t going to cause any conflict of interest for us is it, Sir Harry? Both Anthony and I are
currently employed by the US Department of the Navy, despite my past associations with the British
Intelligence Community.’

‘Tony has been officially seconded to MI5 and has signed what is commonly called the Official
Secrets Act, as have you, albeit a number of years ago.’ Harry explained ‘It’s an enduring legal
document and while you act under it for and on behalf of the British Government you are, to all
intents and purposes, a member of MI5. We have a reciprocal agreement with the US which allows
members of our security services to be seconded to US security services if it becomes necessary.
Neither country will ask such an agent to act against one of their countrymen unless it’s absolutely
unavoidable, so we can’t second someone and force them to reveal secrets about something we’re
interested in, and equally the US can’t force you to reveal details you might have learned while
seconded to us. It’s in both our interests to adhere to the agreement.’

Tony and Donald both nodded, but just as Harry was about to continue, the door to the conference
room opened and Ronon and Teyla entered, accompanied by…

‘Evan?’ John jumped to his feet. ‘What are you doing here? I thought you were playing war games
down in Wiltshire?’

Evan Lorne came fully into the room and nodded at everyone, but directed his words at John. ‘We
were, but we had a little incident earlier and I wanted to accompany my charges up to London and
make my report in person.’

‘Charges?’

‘Report?’

‘Incident?’

Several questions were asked at once, but John took control and motioned his friend forward.

‘Harry, Major Evan Lorne. Evan? This is Sir Harry Pearce, Head of Section D. I’ll introduce
everyone else later. Now, what charges, what incident and what report?’

Evan nodded to everyone in the room, but addressed his report to John. ‘I’ve had the lads down near
Porton Down ‘on exercise’ and we’ve been monitoring comings and goings at the main and side
entrances to the base. I’ve also had a couple of lads driving the Doctors Zelenka back and forth and
I think Doc Radek told anyone curious enough to ask that he had a couple of nephews visiting. Incidentally, both corporals were allowed inside the base yesterday based only on the Doc’s say so. They were in civvies but both were armed and the muppets on the gate didn’t even ask for identification.’ He took a bottle of water from the side table, opened it and took a drink.

‘That’s better. So, the four of them left the Docs’ house at the usual time this morning, but as they were driving out of the village a van pulled across the road in front of them and two men jumped out both holding guns. They were clearly expecting to find two scientists and a couple of foreign visitors, not two armed bootnecks who quickly overpowered them. Anyway, Corporal Taylor drove the van back to our temporary HQ with the two gunmen and their driver tied up in the back while Corporal Hudson drove the Docs. I decided to keep them away from the labs as just about anyone can get in there and someone knew their movements well enough to know just where they’d be at a given time. I called Dex, no, actually I called you first but there was no answer so then I called Dex, he brought a helo down for us all and that’s that,’ he finished with a grin.

‘You took a helicopter down to Wiltshire without asking anyone?’ Harry demanded of Ronon.

He shrugged. ‘You were all busy and I knew you’d want them here.’

‘So where are they?’ John asked with a glance at Harry. Ronon had done the right thing as far as he was concerned.

‘The Docs are in with Rodney and the other three are in the cells.’

‘Any injuries?’ John asked Evan.

‘My chaps got off a couple of warning shots, but both would-be kidnappers dropped their weapons and held their hands up and the driver wasn’t armed. Taylor and Hudson were quite disappointed.’

John laughed. Bootnecks hated to miss out on a fight.

‘So we’ve now got six locked up in your cells, one in hospital and one in the morgue,’ mused Tony. ‘How many more do you think we still have to catch?’

Teyla ushered Radek and Miko into Harry’s office where Rodney was busy looking very busy. He was actually playing solitaire but had a couple of other windows open in case anyone asked what he was working on. He jumped up as soon as he saw his friends come in and stepped around the desk to hug Miko who was looking very teary.

‘What on earth’s happened? Are you alright? Why are you here? Teyla, why are they here? What’s happen—?’

‘Rodney, breath,’ Teyla instructed him. ‘Doctor Radek, please take a seat. Would you like some tea?’

‘Thank you, yes, we both would, I believe,’ Radek answered, collapsing into a chair by the desk while Rodney guided a shaking Miko into the seat he’d just vacated and knelt by her side.

‘Miko, what on earth’s happened?’ He looked up to include Radek in his question and watched as
Radek removed his glasses to polish them. Rodney recognised this as one of Radek’s tells when he was upset, so he continued to rub Miko’s cold, trembling hands and waited for his friend to collect himself.

‘We were driving into lab this morning with people John asked to take care of us. Van pulled in front to stop us and two men with guns disembarked, pointing them at us. Our guards also got out with guns and with one, two shots, strange men were taken and tied. We are driven to barn and helicopter is brought for us to come here. We are neither hurt but just very shaken and upset.’

‘Oh my God! Does John know about this?’

‘I believe Major Lorne, the head of people giving us guard, is speaking with John now. He comes with us in helicopter, and I never, never want to fly in such again. Never!’

The door opened and Teyla slipped in carrying a tray with three steaming mugs on it.

‘Hot and sweet, Dr. Radek, Dr. Miko, it’s the best thing for shock. Rodney, this is yours, without sugar.’

‘Thank you, Teyla. Here, Miko, drink this, you’ll feel much better,’ Rodney told her, holding the sweetened tea out for her to take.

Miko took it but Rodney had to grab it back as her hands were still shaking too badly to hold it. Instead, he held the cup to her lips, speaking softly and gently, and she was able to take a couple of sips.

‘Thank you, Rodney,’ she whispered. ‘I will be fine. It was just such a shock and I didn’t like the helicopter at all. What will we do now?’

‘We’ll wait for John. He’ll know what to do and he’ll look after us all,’ Rodney told her gently, with firm confidence in his partner.

‘Do you come in here everyday?’ asked Radek, his voice much stronger and language clearer now he knew they were both safe. ‘Is this John’s office?’

‘No. This belongs to John’s boss and I’m just here until we move to a new house for a while.’

Radek raised his eyebrows in enquiry and took another sip of his sweet tea.

‘We were paid a visit last night, well, early this morning. John’s cousin, Tony, you met him? He shot one of the men coming up the stairs and he fell onto the one behind him who fell and broke something, his leg I think, but the first one was dead, so… well, we didn’t get much sleep.’

‘And your Brian, did he wake everyone when he heard the ones breaking in?’

Rodney scowled. ‘No. The stupid mutt was asleep with me and didn’t wake up until we all did when Tony fired his gun. He mustn’t have heard them.’

‘And John? Did he also sleep through?’

‘No, he’d been out doing… something… and only got back when it was over. But he said we have to leave the house and move somewhere safe and Ronon is going to look after Brian.’ Rodney paused a moment, his face clearly showing his worry and frustration. ‘I’m so tired of this and it’s not quite a week since I was kidnapped. I want it all to be over so I can go back home and be safe, and not have to worry about gunmen breaking in, or…or cars being hijacked. I just want it all to go
While Evan disappeared to write up his report, John paid a quick visit to Rodney and the Zelenkas to reassure them they were now safe and that they’d stay with MI5 until the whole situation had been resolved, and also to find out how many more people were potentially in danger owing to their knowledge of the secret project. He slipped back into the conference room just as Malcolm stood up to speak.

‘We found emails between Elizabeth Weir and a Senator Henry Landry. He’s a Republican, represents California and was first elected in 1992 before which he was a Congressman and before that he was in the Air Force.

‘The emails between them don’t give any particular details, but it’s clear they’ve known each other a long time, that they see each other fairly frequently when she’s in Washington DC, and that she’s requested various documents from him - he’s on the Senate Committee for Intelligence - and that he usually posts those documents to her. We have no idea what they might contain. She’s been very careful to avoid mentioning just what they are, although she does occasionally give some numerical references which might be relevant.’ Malcolm paused and took a drink of water.

‘Do we know if CIA documents are referenced numerically?’ Adam asked. ‘Tony?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t help you with that,’ Tony said regretfully. ‘We have regular dealings with the FBI but very rarely with the CIA and I can’t recall ever having seen any CIA documents. NCIS numbers reports and memos but it’s mostly just an internal thing: date, department etc.’

‘The ones we’ve seen aren’t numbered in any significant way but it doesn’t mean that none of them are. It’s really a question for Mr O’Neill,’ Malcolm told them. ‘We did, however, find some deleted emails. Quite a number of deleted emails she obviously thought she’d got rid of, copied to either Landry or Igor Vasiliev, who we do have information on. A fair amount of information, but I’ll get to that shortly. We have a clear link between Landry and Vasiliev although we don’t know if they’ve ever actually met. They have, however, interacted through email, both to and from each other with copies to Weir, or from Weir to either one of them with copies to the other.’

‘They’ve used their own names in open emails?’ John asked, a little incredulously.

‘In Landry’s case, yes. In Vasiliev’s case, his email address is very different to his name, it’s just that Weir’s filed any emails under his name. We also have several diary entries for her over a number of weeks, the most recent on Tuesday this week, which just says ‘meet AK MILBR’.’ Malcolm wrote the letters on the whiteboard.

‘AK, Acasta Kolya?’ Harry asked. ‘And perhaps ‘Milbank’?’

‘Good guess, but bearing in mind just where her office is, we suspect Millennium Bridge. It’s not proof that would hold up in court, but...’ He shrugged.

‘We don’t need it to hold up in court. This operation will never get to court. We just need enough to prove her involvement to the American cousins and let them deal with her,’ Harry told him. ‘Good work, Malcolm and Colin. Thank you.’
Malcolm gathered up his notes, headed to the door and was about to leave when Harry spoke again.

‘Wait. What about Vasiliev?’

Malcolm paused and shook his head. ‘I completely forgot.’ He returned to the table and fumbled for a sheaf of papers which he passed around the group.

‘Igor Vasiliev. Ruth picked up his name from GCHQ reports a couple of days ago when we first picked up Weir’s name. This is a report on his activities, but in brief? He’s a Russian Oligarch who made his money through government contracts after the breakup of the USSR. He’s almost certainly a member of the Russian Mafia with links to organised crime, gun running, drugs and just about anything which will make him money, and he has very close links to the SRV. His second in command is a former KGB agent.’

‘Thank you, Malcolm.’ Harry looked around the group at the conference table. ‘So. Thoughts?’

‘We need to get Jack O’Neill back over here,’ John suggested. ‘His information the other day linked Kolya to the SRV and the Russian Mafia, and we now have links for Weir to the SRV and Russian Mafia, as well as a couple of other names.’

‘And when the gentlemen in your cells are questioned, you might have other names,’ Donald pointed out. ‘Or verification of the names you already have.’

Harry nodded. ‘John, do you want to get your team back down to the cells?’

‘Hey, it’s my turn,’ Adam cut in. ‘John got to play the other day. My team want a go.’

Harry gave a small smile. ‘Very well, Adam. Take your team down and see what you get. John needs to pick out somewhere to take his family which appears to have had a further two members added to it, and Donald? Would you mind taking the information we have on Weir and Vasiliev and working up psychological profiles? You’ll see things from a different perspective.’

A smaller group met in the same conference room later that day. Donald, Rodney, Radek and Miko had been taken by Ronon and Teyla to a private house to the west of London that was owned by MI5 and had state of the art security. It was frequently used by visiting VIPs and had hosted a number of top secret meetings and small summits. There was a permanent team of guards on duty and they were augmented by further guards from Thames House as well as John and Tony later on.

Harry began the discussion. ‘Adam and his team were able to confirm that Acasta Kolya was in charge of the kidnapping teams and his second in-charge, an Alex Muravyov, is the man Tony shot dead. Kolya himself is recovering in hospital from a compound fracture of the leg and a bullet in his shoulder. He’s not going anywhere except to a cell when he’s well enough to be moved although we are keeping a guard on him while he’s in hospital. We’ll question him tomorrow morning either there or here in our cells and hope he can tell us where he got John’s address from.

‘We also have a statement from a Max Bell, who was part of the team trying to take the Doctors Zelenka, that he was present at a meeting between Kolya, Muravyov and a Dmitry Biryukov, who we understand is Igor Vasiliev’s second in command. One of them had information from a source detailing Rodney’s address, as well as the Zelenkas, and that they were working on a top secret
project, although he can’t recall which of them it was. Adam is sure he’s telling the truth. Rodney was chosen as their main target as they believed he lived alone. As John suspected, they had no idea he was anywhere in the picture.

‘I’ve invited Jack O’Neill and his team to join us to discuss the connections we’ve found to Elizabeth Weir. They should be here shortly.’

‘Do we know if there are any other potential kidnappers out there?’ asked Tony. ‘We seem to have collected three, six, eight men so far, but we’ve no idea how many might still be a problem.’

‘We probably won’t know that until we’ve questioned Kolya himself,’ Adam pointed out. ‘In the team that first took Rodney, only one of the three had any contact with Kolya: in the Zelenka’s team, two of the three had met with Kolya and another Russian. There may well be other men or even whole teams that only Kolya knows about.’

John nodded in agreement, then gave a quick laugh. ‘I’m going to tell Radek you called his attackers ‘his team’.’

Adam threw a pencil at him then looked around the room. ‘What happened to your Marine chum?’

‘He’s gone back down to Wiltshire. There are three lab assistants who’ve been working on The Project - actually Adam, I hate to say it, but you were right. We do need a proper name for it. Anyway, he’s gone back down to keep an eye on the three young lab assistants who are the only other ones who have any significant knowledge of Project Rodney. Although, Harry? We do need to get the security sorted out down there. Evan will only be able to run his ‘exercise’ for a few more days. Has anyone been looking at a new risk assessment and profile for what the DSTL, and possibly the other facilities this security company run, what they all need?’

‘I’ve got Ruth working on it right now,’ Harry told them. ‘We’ll probably have to take it through the MOD as they officially run the site, and I’d prefer to have this operation tied up before I pay them a visit.’

‘Have you told the Home Secretary yet?’

‘State Opening of Parliament next week.’ Harry told them, in a very satisfied tone of voice. ‘He’s very busy!’

The door opened just as Adam and John joined Harry in laughing, and Jack, Sam and Daniel were shown in by Ruth.

‘Something funny?’ Jack asked looking around. ‘Have I got something on my face or spinach between my teeth?’

‘No, sorry, something amused us, that’s all. Take a seat all of you,’ and Harry straightened his face and motioned around the table.

He gave a quick résumé of the rather complicated connections they’d uncovered and John made a helpful diagram on the whiteboard of who was linked to whom.

‘How did you get this information on Elizabeth Weir?’ asked Daniel, studying the collection of circles and connecting lines.

Harry’s face remained impassive. ‘Let’s just say we acquired it.’

Jack gave him a sharp glance but made no comment.
‘How did Elizabeth Weir’s name come up anyway?’ Sam Carter asked. ‘She wasn’t on the list we passed on.’

‘But was she on the list you didn’t pass on?’ asked Harry in return.

The silence from the three Americans spoke volumes.

‘Is she a CIA agent?’

Again, there was nothing.

‘Well, what are you prepared to share with us about her?’ Harry pressed.

Jack sighed and glanced at his colleagues. ‘Her name cropped up when we looked at Kolya, and in a couple of other places too, but I’m not prepared to discuss that.’

‘And Vasiliev?’

‘Have you guys been hacking our system?’ Jack demanded, then realised what he’d said and closed his eyes. ‘Crap!’ Opening them again, he looked around the table. ‘I knew I’d be a lousy spook. I told George Hammond I’d be a lousy spook.’

‘Actually, Jack, I think you told him you’d probably cause an international incident,’ Daniel said with a small smile. ‘But you’ve not done that yet,’ he added, comfortingly.

Strangely, Jack’s slip broke the rising tension in the room. Each person around the table visibly relaxed.

‘So, Vasiliev.’ Harry repeated. ‘I’ll tell you what we’ve discovered. Russian oligarch, mafia links and almost certainly SVR links. His second in command, a chap called Dmitry Biryukov, has clear connections to Kolya and we have evidence of emails between the two. We also have emails between Vasiliev and Weir and what looks to be evidence of meetings between Weir and Kolya.’

‘And do you know where all these people are at present?’ Sam asked.

This time it was the MI5 people who remained silent.

‘We can offer no evidence that a crime has been committed by any of them at the moment,’ Harry said eventually.

Daniel narrowed his eyes a little and John suspected he’d taken note of Harry’s careful choice of words, but Jack and Sam both appeared to accept this at face value.

‘So what happens now?’ asked Sam.

There was a pause while each of them waited for another to speak. Finally, Harry broke the silence.

‘Jack, how serious were you about cleaning house at the US Embassy?’

Jack looked a little surprised. ‘Is that relevant?’

‘I think it could be,’ Harry told him. He pointed to the diagrams John had drawn on the whiteboard. ‘The information Daniel gleaned from your Embassy contained two sets of names: Russian Foreign Intelligence agents and Russian organised crime. Our only link between them was Acasta Kolya. Now we can link Elizabeth Weir to both groups and we can link her to Kolya.'
'The other day you said you’d come up with another name that you weren’t ready to divulge at that point. My guess is that it was Elizabeth Weir.’

The three American agents remained impassive and Harry sighed.

‘Jack, you said you wanted to us to trust each other. Have you changed your mind?’

Chapter Ten

Jack remained silent for a moment. He’d half expected this question to come up but had really hoped it wouldn’t. Sam had taken him to task a couple of days before for being a little too open with Harry Pearce and the men with him. In particular she’d pointed out that Harry had seconded an NCIS agent and hadn’t given a real reason for so doing. There were a number of unknowns in play, and discretion - never one of Jack’s strong points - was probably the better path to follow.

Jack had argued that he frequently acted on instinct and it rarely let him down. His instinct had been to trust Harry and be open with him. He had a problem with reports coming out from the US Embassy and it needed to be dealt with. Instinct told him that information had either been deliberately withheld, or presented in a fashion that would obscure links between people or situations in the hope that he, as Station Chief, would simply ignore it. He, or rather Daniel, hadn’t ignored it though, and they were now very aware that someone, or possibly more than one, was playing them.

Making a decision to go with his instinct, Jack decided to give the MI5 people - plus one NCIS agent - the information they needed.

‘Yes, her name was the one that came up but we had no real evidence to link her to Kolya and Vasiliev. How you managed to get your information, I have no idea. At least, I have an idea, but it’s probably best for all of us if you keep it to yourself.

‘I suspect Weir is a CIA agent and that she’s instructed the Embassy staff to keep her name out of a number of reports. On what authority she’s done that I don’t know, nor do I know why they followed her orders and not mine. I intend to go in later and kick some ass. It might not solve all the problems but it will make me feel a bit better.’

Everyone but Daniel laughed at that and he simply shook his head in resignation

‘Something I don’t understand, though,’ Jack continued, ‘is what. What is she trying to keep away from me, from us? What does she gain by this?’

‘I think you’re looking at this from the wrong angle,’ John cut in. ‘It’s not what she’s keeping from you, but why. She didn’t want us to link her to Kolya and she certainly didn’t want us to link her to Vasiliev. Kolya is an American citizen, at least nominally. Vasiliev has close ties to both organised crime and Russian Foreign Intelligence. If a US citizen has close associations with the SRV, questions are going to be asked whether she’s CIA or not. If she is CIA, it’s even worse, unless she’s been authorised to have that association. And furthermore, if she’s instructed the CIA staff to keep information from you, their boss, that’s both very suspicious and very serious as you can have no idea what else is being kept from you.’

‘How can you confirm if she is CIA or not?’ asked Tony. ‘I doubt there’s a list for you to look at. Although you appear to know the Director quite well. Can he tell you if she’s acting under his instructions? If he’s not in the loop, then there really is a problem.’
Jack nodded thoughtfully. ‘I feel as though we’re missing pieces of this puzzle. Either that, or I’m not seeing the picture properly.’

‘I may be able to help there,’ Harry offered. ‘There are some things I simply can’t divulge, you know that, just as some things you have to keep back from us. I really didn’t want to bring this to your attention as it probably opens some cans of worms none of us are prepared to deal with, but we have information that suggests one of your Senators is passing information to Weir. We have no idea what this information is, but she has probably passed it on to Kolya, or to Vasiliev.’

‘Oh crap!’ Jack moaned. ‘I really wish you hadn’t told me that.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ Sam joined the conversation. ‘This might not be anything bad. I mean, what information can a Senator have that isn’t in the public domain anyway? If he or she’s not a member of…’ She stopped and sighed. ‘He is though, isn’t he? He’s on an important Congressional Committee.’

‘Senator Henry Landry. Senate Intelligence Committee,’ Harry told her with a grimace. ‘Potentially, he has a lot of information the Russians would like and you wouldn’t like them to have. We probably wouldn’t like it either.’

‘If you have evidence she’s passed confidential papers to the Russians, that’s treason, no matter why she did it,’ Daniel stated bluntly. ‘If you have evidence, it’s probably enough to get both Weir and Landry locked up.’

———-

‘I miss my dog,’ Rodney complained as they sat eating breakfast on Saturday morning. ‘I swear I don’t sleep as well without him.’

‘You slept perfectly well last night so stop complaining,’ John told him. ‘You did stop me from sleeping with your snoring, though.’

‘I don’t snore!’

‘Yes, you do!’

‘Yeah, you do, Rodney,’ said Tony. ‘I could hear you from my room back at John’s house.’

‘It probably was John,’ Rodney told him airily. ‘I don’t snore.’

‘John wasn’t even in the house, so it was either you or Brian.’

‘I miss him,’ Rodney said again, abandoning the discussion on snoring.

‘Ronon said he’d look after him.’

‘Yes, but will he let him sleep on his bed?’

‘Brian shouldn’t be on anyone’s bed,’ John told him firmly. ‘You just spoil him.’

‘I remember when we had a cat that liked to sleep on beds,’ Donald reminisced. ‘He’d climb on and turn himself round and round, making a nest for himself and—’
‘Oops!’ Tony said as he knocked over a milk jug. ‘I’m sorry, I’ll go and get a cloth to wipe it up.’

They all watched as Tony disappeared through the door.

‘I’ll go and help him.’ Rodney stood and was about to head for the door himself when a hand gripped his arm.

‘Tony doesn’t need any help,’ John told him grimly, pulling him back into his abandoned chair. ‘I’m sorry, Donald, you were saying?’

Rodney glared at John, who kept his grip on Rodney’s arm, careful to avoid the bandages still wrapped there. John smiled back at him, all teeth. There was no sign of Tony returning to mop up the spilt milk.

‘My parents had a cat when I was born,’ Radek began. ‘We lived in Prague and one day, so my mother told me, the cat went out and it never came back.’

There was a short silence when he finished speaking.

‘That’s it?’ demanded Rodney. ‘That’s all there is to your story? *It went out and didn’t come back? Why are you even telling us this?’

‘We were talking about cats,’ Radek defended himself.

‘No, we weren’t. I was talking about my dog, John was talking about snoring. There were no cats!’

‘Donald was talking about cats,’ Miko pointed out, defending her husband.

‘No, he wasn’t. He was talking about beds. There was no talking about cats!’

John spotted Tony peeping through the door. ‘Get yourself in here and wipe up that milk. The rest of you? Shut up, now! No more cats, dogs or canaries.’

‘I was…ngrngm’ Rodney began, but John slipped his hand over his mouth.

‘No. Nothing. We’re having breakfast. We eat, we drink, we smile. No talking, no arguing.’

‘You’re talking,’ argued Tony, a safe distance from John’s hands.

‘Tony? Shut up!’

Peace reigned for a few minutes, then there was a knock at the dining room door and one of the MI5 guards poked his head round.

‘Colonel Fitz-Sheppard? Sir Harry’s here to see you.’

John sighed. ‘Show him in please, Jim. And will you ask the kitchen for some fresh tea and another cup?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Why do they all call you Colonel?’ Tony asked a question he’d been wondering about. ‘I noticed most of the staff at Thames House call you Colonel as well.’

‘Perhaps because he is a Colonel?’ Rodney said sarcastically.
‘Boy, did you get out of bed the wrong side this morning,’ Tony told him. ‘I know he’s technically a Colonel, but he’s not in the Marines, sorry, Royal Marines any more.’

‘But he was when he first joined us,’ a new voice declared, and Harry Pearce joined them. ‘John worked with us for a couple of years while he was still a serving officer. Most people used his title and thought no more about it. Now, how is everyone?’

‘John’s been bullying us and he gave my dog away,’ Rodney said with a glare at his boyfriend. ‘Radek’s been blathering on about cats and Tony’s been chucking milk around. How are you?’

They retired to the large sitting room where a fire had been lit in the grate. John grabbed Rodney and pulled him down beside him on a small sofa and although Rodney scowled at him, he allowed himself to be tucked into John’s side. The others scattered themselves around the room, with Miko settling herself on the floor close to the fire, leaning against Radek’s legs. Once settled, all eyes turned to Harry.

‘I wanted to get a few more details about this project that seems to be causing so many problems,’ he began. ‘For a start, does it have a proper name? We’ve just been calling it ‘The Project’.’

Radek, Miko and Rodney glanced uneasily around the room.

‘Umm. It is a top secret project, you know,’ said Rodney after a moment. ‘If we tell you all, we might have to kill you.’

‘I’m more worried about the potential of the three of you being killed,’ said Harry, very seriously. ‘Everyone here has top secret clearance and we’re all involved whether you like it or not. I don’t want the scientific data, that’s not important, but we do need to know just who knows what.’

Rodney, Radek and Miko exchanged glances again.

‘Right. It has no official name as yet,’ Rodney began. ‘We’ve been calling it Project Pegasus between ourselves, but I do stress that’s not official.’ He glanced at John who was frowning, and continued. ‘The three of us have done the most work on it and we each have a lab assistant who has worked on little bits, but nowhere near enough to be able to give away any information about it.’

‘But they do know the name and that it’s a weapon delivery system?’ Harry asked.

‘They know the name, because we have to call it something, but it isn’t a weapons delivery system.’

‘I understood that it was?’ Harry said.

‘So did I,’ John put in, still frowning.

‘I never said it was a delivery system,’ hedged Rodney, ‘because it isn’t.’

‘But it is a weapon.’

Rodney looked at Radek for some help.

‘Do we need to go into that?’ Radek asked.
Alright. I’ll ask a different question. Is Project Pegasus something other countries would like to get their hands on?

Hell, yes!

Ano!

Yes, indeed.

Harry’s eyebrows rose at the barrage of answers. ‘Well, we’ve established that at least. Now what —’

Pegasus!’ John interrupted. ‘I knew I’d heard that somewhere before.’

I believe it’s a small galaxy close to ours, isn’t it?’ Donald said, looking around.

‘Yes, it is,’ agreed Rodney, a little uncomfortably. ‘John, please, shut up. Shut up now.’

John eyed him. ‘Right, but you and I are having a chat later. Because… Right. Later.’ He nodded.

‘Getting back on track.’ Harry looked at the scientists from DSTL. ‘Just to clarify, only the three of you know exactly what Project Pegasus is?’

‘Yes.’

‘But your lab assistants know a little bit?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Do they know enough to work out what the project is?’

Rodney sighed and looked at Radek and Miko. ‘I didn’t think so, but now…?’

‘No, Rodney, I don’t think they know just what it is,’ Miko said quietly. ‘We were each of us very careful to limit their access.’

‘Rodney, when you were debriefed after your kidnapping, you said the kidnappers wanted you to write down the details for them to make one of their own. Did you get the impression they knew exactly what they were asking for?’ Harry folded his hands together.

Rodney thought for a moment, replaying the days he’d spent locked up and being tortured. He shivered a little and John pulled him closer to his side.

‘No,’ he said eventually. ‘They kept asking for a description and kept on telling me to write down everything I could about it, which I couldn’t even if I wanted to because it’s not like building a lego model; put brick A here, and brick B here. No. I’m sure they didn’t know what it is, they just know it exists and they want one.’

‘And let’s say, hypothetically, if they got the details, could they build one?’

Again, Rodney looked to his fellow scientists. ‘I don’t think so. Some of the, the concepts are… things we’ve developed between us. Without the background work we have, I doubt they could actually duplicate it. But then again, we have no idea of knowing just how advanced their science is. If they were at the point we were when we came up with our… idea, they just might be capable of making the jump.’
‘I agree,’ said Radek. ‘While we think we are years ahead of anyone else, it is very possible that they have been hiding just as we have.’

‘And if they were capable,’ Miko added, ‘and they were able to build…one, it would be very bad for everyone.’

‘Are we talking Manhattan Project bad here?’ Tony asked quietly.

‘No,’ said Rodney, very definitely. ‘It’s not something that could end the whole world, but it is something we would not want our enemies to have, or would even,’ and he glanced at Tony, ‘want our allies to have, quite honestly.’

Tony sat up straight. ‘Should I recuse myself here?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Harry said. ‘If what Rodney says is true, even if you went back to NCIS and told them our scientists are developing a new weapon, yes Rodney. I know you haven’t confirmed it is a weapon, let me finish. If you said that the UK has a new weapon, they wouldn’t be able to do anything with that because neither country shares experimental technology unless it’s something we’re working on together. That’s correct isn’t it, Rodney?’

Rodney nodded.

‘The most they could do officially is ask to share the technology when it goes into production, I believe,’ Harry finished.

‘But unofficially?’ Donald asked.

Harry spread his hands. ‘I really don’t know. Which is why I want Rodney and the Doctors Zelenka to remain here. If anyone had access to your computers at DSTL, could they extract any information?’

‘Not enough to do anything with.’ Rodney looked at his colleagues. ‘We each keep our work on non-networked computers which we clear to portable drives each night. We each keep the portable drives somewhere safe. They might be able to get bits and pieces, but it wouldn’t tell them much.’

‘Where are these portable drives kept? Let’s say someone broke into your house again. Could they find them?’

‘No. We’re talking about tiny USB drives here. I would think we each have them here with us. You’d need each one of them to get the information you need, and even then, it wouldn’t be much use without us.’

‘So, if someone blew up this house, everything would be lost?’ John asked in alarm.

‘If we three were here, then yes,’ Rodney told him. ‘Remember, John, the information is pretty useless without us three. Even if someone managed to get the information and say Radek and Miko, without me, they wouldn’t be able to recreate… it. We designed it that way to keep the information safe, and to keep each other safe. The idiots who took me the other day could have never got what they wanted from just me.’

‘But they don’t know that,’ Harry clarified. ‘You are each still in danger.’

‘Well… yes, I suppose so,’ Rodney admitted.

‘Sooo,’ John paused, clearly thinking. ‘You said Project Pegasus requires a number of different
skills and uses concepts you three have developed between you, and you three are probably the top scientists in this country.’ He looked at Radek for confirmation.

‘There are a number of very fine scientists working outside of government circles since remuneration is always much better in private companies, but yes, I think it is fair to say that we three are among the top scientists in the UK.’

‘If not the world,’ added Miko, in such a matter of fact way that no one could accuse her of being conceited.

‘So it’s unlikely that just anyone could continue your work?’ John confirmed.

‘Yes, highly unlikely.’

‘Then are we sure that we’re looking at the right people behind the kidnapping attempts?’ There was a silence in the room as everyone thought about this.

‘Explain your thoughts please, John,’ Harry asked.

‘If it’s taken three of the best minds in the world’ - here he nodded to Miko - ‘to get Project Pegasus to its current state, just how many scientists in the world would be able to pick it up, even if they had all the notes and information available? We’re not looking at a few mobsters who are after the Project, we’re looking at a country with vast scientific programmes.’

‘Unless those mobsters simply want to sell the information on,’ Tony pointed out.

‘No.’ John was very definite. ‘There has to be a buyer, a country already in place. You can’t just hawk details of a project like this around. This is steal - or kidnap - to order. And if Igor Vasiliev is involved, we can be pretty sure Russia is the final destination. This business with Weir is just a distraction. She may well be involved in selling US secrets to foreign powers, but the kidnappings are all being directed from Russia. They have to be.’

‘And Kolya? What about him?’ Tony asked. ‘Where does he fit in? He’s a US citizen.’

‘I suspect Russia sent him to the United States when an opportunity arose to slip someone in as a refugee.’ Donald looked around the room. ‘The United States accepts a number of refugees each year, but the majority are women and children. Male refugees, in great numbers, are rare, and backgrounds are checked quite vigorously. If a large number of men are accepted in an emergency situation, the checks will be more difficult to make. This is when it is most opportune to place an agent into a foreign country and when I suspect the Russians would make their move.’

Harry nodded. ‘I agree. I think we have to assume that Kolya is working for the Russian government but we will likely know by tomorrow. He’s being transferred to our protection today and Adam and his team will be having a chat with him later this afternoon. For the moment, we protect our scientists but prepare for a further attempt to gain the information our enemies desire.’

They spent the rest of the day and Sunday relaxing. Rodney and John disappeared for a while and returned downstairs in time for dinner, both with damp hair and looking pleased with themselves. Tony opened his mouth to comment, but Donald grabbed his arm and shook his head, a warning
frown on his face. Tony pouted but remained silent, and the evening passed quietly.

On Sunday they all took a long walk around the grounds of Holly Lodge with Brian, who’d been brought over for the day by Ronon, and following a traditional Sunday roast, all disappeared for afternoon naps. They met up for afternoon tea although Miko was a little tearful after an emotional conversation with Meredith’s nanny, Clare, who had taken the small child to stay with her own aunt to keep her off the radar of anyone looking for leverage over any of the three scientists, as Harry had recommended. She’d also had a rather complicated conversation with Meredith who couldn’t understand why Mumie and Tati weren’t there to put her to bed. Miko had come off the phone white-faced and shaking, and it had taken Rodney, Radek and Donald to assure her this was in Meredith’s best interests and she was better with a regular routine than in a strange house full of even stranger people.

John was tempted to take his scientists into Thames House with him on Monday morning, but even he had to admitted it was highly unlikely anyone could break into Holly Lodge to hurt them. He did, however, go out to the Guard House at the front gate and speak to the team currently on duty. He’d checked the defences of the house before they had moved in and was content with the mixture of technology and good old fashioned brute strength that provided the house with its excellent security. He’d been to several meetings there previously, both as an attendee and as part of a security team, so he knew the layout and the staff who looked after the house, as well as those who guarded it. There were no suspicious new members or replacements and everything appeared to be in order, so he finally agreed to trust the people there and go into work, taking Tony with him.

Donald had sent the psychological profiles he’d drawn up for Harry by email the previous day so John wasn’t surprised to see his boss reading them when he and Tony joined him in the conference room.

‘Are you happy with what Donald’s produced?’ he asked when he saw Harry had finished.

‘Very happy. I’ll send copies to both you and Adam, and we may have to think about employing a profiler ourselves. Zoe was very good and we do miss her in more ways than just her profiling talents, but it would be helpful to have someone as qualified as Donald is.’

‘Zoe?’ asked Tony. ‘I don’t think I’ve heard anyone speak about her.’

‘She left us a couple of years ago,’ was all John would say.

Adam slipped into the room, along with Colin and Malcolm, and took the floor.

‘We spent a frustrating amount of time yesterday trying to get Kolya to answer our questions, but we pretty much failed. Whoever trained him, trained him well. He’s not talking.’

‘Should we ask Ronon to have a word with him?’ John asked, spinning a pencil between his fingers idly.

‘I don’t think even Ronon could get anything out of him.’

‘Then we have to look at this another way,’ said Harry. ‘I paid a visit to Holly Lodge on Saturday to see how John and his family were getting on. John made a very good point about the Russians
driving the search for information on Project Pegasus - which is what the scientists call it, Adam. We agreed that Weir is probably nothing to do with the Russians wanting the scientists or their knowledge, but we do know she has had meetings with Kolya.’

‘Which are more likely to do with passing along the information she gets from this Senator,’ Tony added.

Harry nodded. ‘I agree, but she may know something more about Kolya’s visit to the UK, and while she may not be involved in trying to get hold of Project Pegasus, she may have more information on it than we have.’

‘There was nothing on her hard drive about a Project Pegasus,’ Malcolm commented, ‘but then again, we weren’t looking for it by name.’

‘Then look again,’ Harry told him. ‘We need to know if there is still a risk to our scientists or to the DSTL, or if we do actually have all of those involved locked up.’

‘And we still don’t know if there’s a leak from the DSTL and if there is, who is doing the leaking,’ Colin put in. ‘We’re certain there’s nothing on Weir’s computer connecting her to anyone at DSTL, but that doesn’t mean anything as it could have been done on another computer.’

‘Say that again,’ demanded John.

‘All of it?’ Colin asked. ‘If there is a leak…’

‘No, about another computer. Crap! We’ve assumed she always used her computer at work. She probably has another one at home. We’ve been so bloody stupid! We should have searched her home!’

‘And searched wherever Kolya was staying,’ Tony added.

‘I can’t believe we’ve all missed this!’ Harry slapped his hand down on the table. ‘We’ve been so wrapped up in protecting the scientists, we’ve forgotten our basic police work. Damn it!’ He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. ‘Right. We need home addresses, any addresses for Kolya, Weir, and the man in the morgue. I’ve forgotten his name. We need teams out there, now. Use Gas Board identities, BT, anything you need. Get in those houses and find what you can.’ He looked around the table. ‘What are you waiting for? Go!’

There was a scramble for the door as the room emptied while Harry sat alone and cursed fluently. It didn’t help the situation at all, but it did make him feel much better.

There was a clatter of china as Rodney replaced his cup on the saucer.

‘It’s nice coffee, but I do miss having a large mug to drink it from. You just don’t get enough in a cup,’ he complained. ‘Right, we’ - and his swept arm encompassed Radek and Miko - ‘are going to use the small conference room as a makeshift lab. You’re welcome to join us, Donald, if you want some company.’

‘Thank you, Rodney, but I think I shall make myself at home in the library. The housekeeper, Mrs
Thompson, said she’d have a fire made up in there and I expect I shall be very cosy. She told me she’ll take refreshments in there at 11 o’clock and you’re all welcome to join me if you wish, but I’m sure she’ll take yours to you if you all prefer to remain working.’

Donald watched the three scientists leave the dining room, Rodney and Radek already arguing, with Miko ushering them in the right direction, almost unnoticed by her companions.

He finished his tea, quite content with the delicate china tea service they’d been using and made his way to the library which, he decided, was a rather optimistic name for a room with a few bookshelves of uniformly bound classics and a table of magazines and newspapers. Nevertheless, he settled himself in front of the fire with a copy of The Times and quickly fell asleep.

He was woken somewhat later by a knock at the library door and Mrs Thompson poked her head around.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you, Dr. Mallard, but one of the staff said they heard a mobile phone ring in your room while they were cleaning. They didn’t look for it of course, but the phone rang again and Millie thought you ought to know in case it was about something important.’

Donald stood, the unread newspaper tumbling to the floor. ‘Thank you, Mrs Thompson. I’d quite forgotten about it.’

The housekeeper nodded and disappeared and Donald stretched, then ambled upstairs to fetch his forgotten cell phone. It was his NCIS phone which he’d left in his medical bag, having been issued, along with Tony, a UK mobile phone containing the contact details for John and the other members of Section D he might have need to call. He was actually surprised the NCIS cell had enough battery left to ring since he hadn’t bothered to charge it after being given the new phone by John, and sure enough, it showed battery charge at 2% when he dug it out from the depths of his bag.

He returned to the library and plugged in the phone to charge. Someone had been into the library to build up the log fire and he settled himself back in his chair and picked up his abandoned newspaper, meaning to check for any messages when the cell was sufficiently charged.

Instead of reading, however, he found himself thinking about the NCIS office, and his own Autopsy, which he’d left in the rather nervous hands of Mr Palmer. He had complete faith in the young man as a Medical Examiner but had noticed times recently when he disappeared for short periods of time, or reappeared from unexpected places, and this had begun to affect his work. He’d intended to have a word with the young man and see if there was anything he should know about but Rodney’s disappearance had pushed all other concerns out of his mind. He would have to remember to sit Mr Palmer down for a chat when he and Tony returned to work.

His mind moved on to his old friend Jethro Gibbs, although the friendship between them had taken a sharp knock from the revelations of Jethro’s first marriage, a marriage Donald had known nothing about. Donald was honest enough to admit he’d been hurt when details of Jethro’s dead wife and daughter became known, hurt because Jethro hadn’t wanted to share those details with a supposed close friend. Jethro was a different man now, after the loss of his memory although the memories had returned, for the most part, but the old Jethro hadn’t. The new Jethro - and Donald admitted he hadn’t spent much time with him after his return - was hard and lacking in compassion, much more like Ziva in that respect. The old Jethro had certainly been hard but had a depth of sympathy and empathy which now appeared to be missing, earning his oft stated the second B is for bastard.

As his thoughts dwelt on the other members of their little NCIS family, the door opened to admit Rodney, Radek and Miko with Rodney and Radek still arguing. Donald wondered idly if they’d ever actually stopped or if this was a new argument. Mrs Thompson also appeared, carrying a tray of
tea and coffee, and a large fruit cake, the sight of which distracted Rodney from his discussion.

‘Mrs Thompson. Will you come and live with me? I’ll throw John out and make room for you. I mean, he is pretty but he can’t make cakes like you can.’

Mrs Thompson just laughed as she poured the tea, but Donald noticed that she gave Rodney the largest slice of cake.

The ringing of his cell phone broke through the moans of pleasure Rodney was making as he munched his cake and Donald grabbed for it, not wanting to miss the call again.

‘Hello?’

*Where the fuck are you, Ducky? Why the fuck haven’t you answered your phone?*

The yelling voice was heard by everyone and Donald checked that he hadn’t mistakenly pressed the speaker-phone button.

*Ducky? Ducky! Where the fuck…* but the voice became muffled as Donald quickly headed out of the room.

Rodney looked across at his friends.

‘What a charming fellow.’

Chapter Eleven

It was mid afternoon before Harry was able to gather his agents and analysts - and one seconded NCIS agent - together. John took the lead this time and made notes on the whiteboard as the reports were made.

‘We searched Weir’s flat in Battersea and we caught a break when Tony spoke to security to see if she was in. Fortunately for us, she wasn’t so Teyla and I had no trouble gaining access as BT engineers while Ronon and Tony kept a lookout in case she came back. If she is a CIA agent - and we didn’t find any proof either way - she’s extremely lax and needs some lessons on basic security. We found her laptop beside the bed - the twins are going through the copy of her hard-drive we made - and the password had been left at a string of zeros, so we had no problems accessing it. A desk in her sitting room contained several files of top secret, eyes only documents - and her name isn’t on the list of who can see them. We photographed and replaced them but also found four fake US passports, two for herself, one for a man named Alex Brown with a photo of Acasta Kolya in it, and a blank one with no details or photo. Probably waiting for someone who needs it or she may well be selling them. We don’t know.’ He paused to take a drink of water and make a couple of notes on the board.

‘We found a false base in one of the kitchen cabinets which also contained a number of documents we took photographs of. There were certainly financial details there which will all need looking at and some papers were in languages we didn’t immediately recognise, although some of the letters looked possibly Cyrillic.
‘We did a basic check for bugs but didn’t find anything, and although it is possible all the documents were fake and the whole thing was a set up, it didn’t feel like that.’ He looked down at his notes.
‘We also found a box under her bed containing a Makarov pistol and ammunition.’

‘That’s a Russian weapon,’ Colin commented.

‘Yes, but it’s also a fairly old fashioned weapon. I think the Russian intelligence services use a P-96 or GSh-19 now. There are any number of reasons why she could have one, including that it was put there for us to find.’

‘But you don’t think it was a set up?’ Harry confirmed.

John shook his head. ‘No, I don’t. I know places can be staged to look real, but if it was a fake it was a very good one.’

‘Thank you, John.’ Harry straightened a sheet of paper in front of him. ‘Adam’s taken Zaf and Jo to search the other addresses we have but called in with details from Kolya’s address as they don’t amount to much. They found a mobile phone which they’ll pass to the twins later, and apart from a few dirty clothes that was it. Kolya had paid for accommodation for three months in mid August and his landlady said he had two weeks left, so we can assume he came to London in early to mid August unless he was staying somewhere else before. Ruth checked with the diary we pulled from Weir’s office and her weekly meetings with AK began in early August, which fits our timeline. Finally, Mrs Sidney said he spent a few days away at the start of October and he told her he’d gone to visit some friends. That might be when he went down to Wiltshire to look at the DSTL and see where Rodney lived, because I’m fairly certain he would have done a recce.’

‘Did his landlady say if he’d had any visitors?’ John asked.

Harry checked the notes Ruth had made. ‘Apparently he sometimes spoke to people in the bar, but she couldn’t say if he’d arranged to meet them or just spoke to them.’ He paused for a moment. ‘We need to see what the twins can pull off Weir’s hard-drive and Kolya’s mobile and whatever else Adam comes up with, but Weir and Kolya are our main concerns. Ruth’s looking through the documents you photographed, John, and should have a report by tomorrow morning.’ He sighed and shook his head. ‘I can’t imagine what the overtime bill will look like this month! Go home, people, and enjoy the rest of Sunday if you can. We’ll meet back here in the morning.’

As soon as they walked into Holly Lodge that evening, Tony and John could feel the tension. They exchanged glances and hurried to the sitting room, John holding onto Brian’s lead having called at John’s house before coming out to Holly Lodge since Ronon had decided to keep Brian in his known environment. John was pretty sure his collection of DVDs and video games were also a factor but didn’t call his subordinate on this. Brian had gone mad when he’d spotted John, but after a minute or so of bouncing, cuddling and licking he’d looked around for Rodney. Tony had sworn Brian’s tail had drooped when he realised Rodney wasn’t there.

The tugging on his lead now, however, proved he’d caught Rodney’s scent and as soon as John opened the sitting room door, Brian gave an almighty tug, pulled his lead out of John’s hand and hurled himself on Rodney.
‘Brian! Oh, Brian! I’ve missed you!’ The pair ended up on the floor so Rodney could hug him and Brian could lick every bit of Rodney’s skin he could reach. ‘Daddy’s missed you so much, my baby!’

‘Baby?’ Tony murmured. ‘He’s sixty pounds at least!’

Rodney heard that and glared at Tony as he covered Brian’s ears with his hands. ‘Shut up! You’ll hurt his feelings!’

He continued petting his dog until John asked, quite plaintively, ‘Don’t I even warrant a ‘welcome home’?’

‘Welcome home and thank you for rescuing my dog from that barbarian,’ Rodney replied without looking up.

‘Rodney, Ronon isn’t a barbarian,’ John told him and as Rodney opened his mouth again, he continued, ‘and he isn’t a Wookiee either. He’s been kind enough to look after Brian so he didn’t have to go into kennels.’

At that, Rodney covered Brian’s ears again. ‘Don’t you listen to the horrid man. Daddy would never let him put his baby in kennels. He would let Horrid Man sleep on the sofa though, or maybe in the shed!’

John threw his hands in the air in resignation. ‘Never come between a boyfriend and his dog.’

Rodney ignored him in favour of his dog.

‘So,’ Tony began casually. ‘Everyone alright? No problems?’

John remembered the tense atmosphere they’d both felt when they entered the house and looked around the room. Three, no, four doctors? Check. Bruises, bloodstains or broken bones? Nope.

Rodney was on the floor, now rubbing Brian’s tummy as Brian lay on his back, front and rear legs akimbo.

‘I’m fine, now Brian’s been released from prison,’ he told them. ‘But Donald’s all cut up about some git who phoned him and yelled at him.’

‘Rodney!’ said Donald sharply. ‘I said I’d discuss it with Anthony.’

‘Oops. Sorry.’ But he didn’t sound sorry at all.

‘Okay then, Ducky. D’ya wanna discuss it now?’ Tony asked, with a raised eyebrow.

‘Have you had your cell phone switched on, Anthony?’

‘Umm, yes? Ever since John gave it to me.’

‘No, your NCIS cell phone.’

‘No. I threw it in my bag as I knew I didn’t need it. Why? Did…’ John could almost see the cogs turning in Tony’s mind. ‘Gibbs. Gibbs called didn’t he?’

‘Who’s Gibbs?’ asked Rodney, still rubbing Brian’s tummy. ‘Is he the yelling git who called?’

John saw both Tony and Donald smother laughs.
'Yes,' Donald confirmed, still smiling. 'He said he’s been trying to contact you for several days with no success, so he tried my cell phone today.'

'That is a most impressive battery life,' Miko commented. 'My own mobile lasts for a couple of days at most.' Radek nodded in agreement.

'It was almost flat when I retrieved it, but yes,' Donald agreed. 'It has a most impressive life. It’s a rather old phone you see and I remember when—'

'Ducky,' Tony interrupted. 'What did Gibbs want?'

'Oh. Well, he wants us to go back home.'

John frowned. 'I thought you both had a couple of weeks leave. And Tony, you’re seconded to MI5 for the moment. You’re away for as long as we want you, or as long as you want.’ He sat down by Rodney and absently patted Brian’s head.

'Officially we are on leave, yes. But Jethro has little patience for officialdom at the best of times. He was particularly upset that we hadn’t informed him about Anthony’s secondment and said he refuses to permit it, as, apparently, does the Director.'

'He refuses to permit it? What right does he have to refuse anything?’ John asked. ‘Permission was granted by your Secretary of the Navy. It has nothing to do with anyone else.’

‘That’s never stopped Gibbs before,’ Tony told him wryly. ‘He has his own rules…’ He paused then slapped his forehead. ‘Which I’ve just shot to pieces!’

‘What rules?’ demanded John.

‘Jethro has a number of rules he bases his life around.’

‘So? That doesn’t sound too bad,’ Rodney commented, now leaning against John’s legs, but still cuddling Brian who had draped himself over Rodney’s legs.

‘It depends what the rules are,’ Radek said, joining the conversation for the first time. ‘There were rules in the past in Czechoslovakia that were beyond bearable and very bad for both our country and our people. When such rules are imposed, it is very bad.’

‘Gibbs’ rules are… well, more a code to live by than anything,’ Tony explained. ‘I’ve broken rule three wholesale since I’ve been here, and so have you Ducky.’

‘So I was informed this morning,’ Donald replied dryly. ‘Rule three is 'Never be unavailable',’ he informed the rest of the room.

‘What happens if you do break a rule?’ Miko asked, voicing the very question John was thinking.

Tony grimaced. ‘Well, I don’t know about Ducky, but I usually get my head slapped.’ He rubbed the back of his head in memory.

‘He hits you?’ John asked, incredulously.

‘Well, slaps me upside the head.’

‘And you fucking let him? How is this man still in a job, or not in prison?’ John wanted to stand and perhaps pace but was held in place on the sofa by Rodney clutching his legs.
'Well…' Tony tried, but clearly struggled to justify his treatment at the hands - quite literally - of Gibbs.

'I hope you told him to get stuffed,' Rodney told his cousin who began to look a little uncomfortable.

'Jethro is… He makes it all appear quite normal at the office. He doesn’t slap me, of course, but… it just appears normal,' Donald finished quietly.

'Donald, you do know this isn’t normal, don’t you?’ John asked, equally quietly. He looked around the room. ‘I’m not the only one who doesn’t find it normal?’

‘No!’

‘Ne!’

‘Absolutely not! And Brian doesn’t think it’s normal either.’

‘Tony?’ John asked.

‘I… No. No, it’s not normal, I get that, but…’

‘No. There is no ‘but’. He needs reporting at the very least.’

‘I doubt that would do any good.’ Tony shrugged. ‘I told you the Director was a former lover. She not only supports whatever he does, but refuses to support anything I may do even though I’m the senior agent on MCRT.’ When Miko looked puzzled at the letters Tony gave her a brief summary of NCIS and the reasons behind his leave. ‘Pretty much everyone lets Gibbs get away with whatever he wants, even SecNav on occasion,’ he finished.

‘Tony, you have to get away from there,’ John told him seriously. ‘Find a new job. With your qualifications it shouldn’t be difficult. Hell, come and join MI5! Harry’d have you like a shot, just, please, don’t go back there.’ John gazed at his cousin intently. ‘They don’t respect you or your qualifications.’

‘John’s right, Tony. Don’t put yourself back in an abusive position,’ Rodney agreed.

‘It’s not… It’s not abusive. It isn’t.’ Tony’s voice faded.

‘Anthony.’ Donald leaned forward in his chair, hands clasped in his lap. ‘Now I’m away from the office and am able to look at the situation from the outside, I have to agree with Rodney. Jethro should not physically abuse you, and nor should he allow other members of the team to do the same. Remember what happened at the start of the year when Ziva shot you—’

This time John did leap up, dislodging Rodney from his position against his legs and making Brian growl. ‘Your colleague shot you? She fucking shot you, and you still don’t find it wrong!’

‘She didn’t shoot me!’ Tony glared at Donald. ‘She fired her gun in a shipping container because she was scared and it just happened to hit me.’

‘I don’t believe what I’m hearing!’ John paced around the room, fury emanating from every pore. Poor Brian was cuddled up to Rodney, ears down, tail tucked firmly between his legs.

‘John. John!’ Rodney stood up, hands on his hips. ‘Come back and sit down. You’re scaring Brian, and yelling at Tony isn’t helping. Yell at this Gibbs git if you ever meet him, but don’t blame Tony. Or Donald,’ he added as John’s gaze swept over to Rodney’s cousin.
John took a deep breath and settled back on the sofa, Rodney at his side with Brian almost climbing into his lap, tail still curled underneath. He petted both Rodney and Brian and glared at Donald, but the glare was down from incendiary to merely smouldering.

‘I do blame Donald. He’s old enough and experienced enough to spot when someone is being abused and should have done something about it or at the very least report it to someone in authority.’

‘You are correct, John, and I apologise.’ Donald bowed his head. ‘I beg your pardon, Anthony, for not taking the proper action when I saw you were being abused by both Jethro and Ziva. I can assure you it will not happen again. In fact, I can see a number of things which will not happen again, I promise.’

John was becoming very tired of the small conference room on the Grid. He was sure he’d spent more time in here in the last ten or so days, than in the last year. He glanced over to Adam who was looking equally jaded.

‘I’ll be glad when this is all over,’ Adam told him with a grimace.

‘You’ll be glad? I woke twice last night when Rodney had a nightmare. He seems fine during the day but subconsciously he’s still dealing with it if the shouting and thrashing about during the night are anything to go by. Fortunately he doesn’t remember anything in the morning. He’s also tired of being away from his beloved lab. I’m pretty sure I’m only third on the list after Brian and his lab.’

‘You’re only third on what list?’ Tony asked as he and Harry entered the room.

‘Rodney’s list of who or what he loves most.’

‘I take it Brian’s still top then?’ asked Harry, aware of just how fond John’s partner was of his dog.

‘Of course he is.’ John shook his head in resignation.

‘I thought the CIA bods were joining us this morning,’ Adam said, looking around the room as though Jack et al might be hiding somewhere.

‘We decided on a video conference,’ Harry told him and, right on cue, Colin entered to sort out the link to the large screen at one end of the room.

‘I wanted a few minutes to go through what we actually want from O’Neill’s people without revealing all our hand at once. He knows there’re things we’re keeping from him but that probably goes both ways.’

‘So much for ‘open and honest’,’ Adam murmured.

Harry ignored him and continued. ‘We need to question Elizabeth Weir and that will probably ruffle a few feathers but if she really is a CIA agent they’ll be even less happy as her crimes are primarily against the USA.’

‘Although we could question her about having an unlicensed gun and fake passports,’ Adam pointed
out. ‘If she hasn’t got diplomatic immunity - and Jack would know if she has - it’s enough for us to bring her in.’

‘Do we really want to tell O’Neill how we know about that?’ asked John. ‘He’s not going to be happy we broke into the home of a US national, no matter what her crimes might be.’

‘To be honest, I’m surprised O’Neill hasn’t had someone of his own around to her flat,’ Adam said. ‘It’s certainly what we’d do.’

‘Maybe he has.’ John shrugged when they all looked at him.

‘The link’s ready when you are,’ Colin told Harry, handing him a control device for the screen.

‘Thanks, Colin. So, what are our priorities?’

‘Question Weir.’

‘See if he’s got any more information on Kolya.’

‘Ask what the CIA director had to say about Elizabeth Weir. Does he know why she’d have meetings or email exchanges with Kolya and Vasiliev.’

Both Harry and John nodded as Tony made his suggestions. Donald had told John that one of Tony’s greatest talents was to cut through all the if’s and what’s surrounding a case and get straight to the centre of the investigation. From the satisfied look on Harry’s face, he’d also been told this.

‘So, Weir is our focus. We preferably want to question her ourselves but could work with Jack and his team if we have to,’ Harry concluded.

‘Mmm, but this might be to our advantage,’ John said, thinking it through. ‘If she is CIA, she’s certainly not working with Jack and he’s going to want to know why but isn’t in a position to question her as he has no actual evidence to base a search on. If she isn’t CIA, she may be being protected by someone with real clout in the US and the same thing applies, he can’t question her even with the knowledge we can give him regarding the documents in her possession. We can because of her links with the men who kidnapped one of our top scientists. We have just cause to bring her in right away, CIA or not. Of course we’ll have to release her pretty quickly if she is CIA, but by that time we may have already got what we need from her, even if it’s just what’s on her mobile phone. We can then share anything we get with Jack, if we want to.’

By this point, all heads were nodding.

‘Right,’ Harry said, satisfaction in his voice and on his face. ‘We have a plan. John, as soon as we’ve finished with Jack you can go and get hold of Weir. Colin, set up everything John’ll need to get her. Everyone ready?’

He clicked on the screen and the side of Jack’s head could be seen as he spoke with someone out of sight, probably Daniel Jackson from the sound of the second voice.

‘Jack?’ said Harry, loudly, trying to catch the man’s attention.

Jack’s head swung round and glared. ‘Jeez, Harry! Give a man a heart attack, why don’t’ya!’ His gaze swung back to the person out of sight. ‘I’m just sayin’, Danny, go easy on the caffeine. You were twitchin’ like a mad thing in bed last night. I’m covered in bruises.’ The voice off screen spoke but the MI5 people couldn’t quite hear what was said, although Jack’s comments alone were enough to put grins on their faces.
Jack turned back to them, face a little pink with what he’d unwittingly revealed. ‘So. Okay. That’s not embarrassing. Anyhoo. Weir. General Hammond was unable to either confirm or deny Weir is one of ours.’ Jack spoke as if reading something from a script.

‘Which means…?’ asked Harry, motioning with his hand.

‘Well, as far as I’m concerned you can—’

The MI5 people watched in some bemusement as Jack, the London Station Chief, was firmly pushed out of the way and Daniel Jackson, his analyst, appeared on screen.

‘What Jack is trying to say is that Ms Weir does not fall under the purview of this Station,’ Daniel told them, staring directly, so it seemed, into each of their eyes.

Behind him, they could see Jack mouthing the word ‘purview’. John smiled into his hand and saw Tony doing the same. He liked Jack O’Neill although he recognised he’d be a nightmare to work for or with.

‘So….’ Harry paused, clearly thinking of the words to use. ‘She’s simply working in the UK for Mason’s Bank?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Kolya and Vasiliev?’

‘Mr Kolya has US citizenship and if he has violated the conditions of his visa, he must be either deported back to the US forthwith or deported following any sentence he might serve after being tried and found guilty of any crimes he may have committed. If he should be sent for trial, we would expect our Embassy to be notified.’

‘And Vasiliev?’

‘Mr Igor Vasiliev is not a US citizen and we therefore can make no comment on his position or situation.’

Harry was smiling widely. ‘Thank you very much, Mr Jackson. Jack, you know you are always welcome here for a coffee and a chat, or perhaps afternoon tea?’

Jack looked a little puzzled but Daniel smiled and nodded. ‘Thank you, Sir Harry.’

The screen went blank.

‘Who on earth ever thought Jack O’Neill would make a good Station Chief needs their bumps felt,’ Adam exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘I suspect the Director knew exactly what he was doing,’ John said with a grin. ‘Particularly by allowing Jack to appoint Daniel as his analyst.’

Harry was still smiling. ‘I agree, but, John? Why are you still here? Jack’ll be over for tea and interrogations at three o’clock so get your skates on.’
'Listen up, everyone,' John began. ‘The plan is we pick up Elizabeth Weir as she does her usual lunchtime sandwich run. We've had some chaps keeping an eye on her for a few days and she generally leaves the bank at around 1pm to go to the coffee shop across the square.

‘Ronon and Teyla? You’re the back-up to Tony and me as we move in on her, and you’ll be posted here.’ He pointed to the diagram of Queen’s Square on the whiteboard. ‘Malcolm, you’ll be in the van on comms here.’

‘What if she doesn’t come out?’ Tony asked, interested in how MI5 planned their missions and their use of technology to help them compared to the extremely low-tech MCRT. *McGee would be panting over the tech they have here.*

‘If she doesn’t come out there’s not much we can do short of storming the bank to get her. We’ll just come back tomorrow and the next day until she does make an appearance,’ John explained. ‘Malcolm will connect to the bank security feed through the hack he made last week so we’ll have a heads up when she appears in the foyer. Now, any more questions? No? Then let’s get going.’

At six minutes past one, Tony and John saw the dark haired woman they knew was Elizabeth Weir exit the bank and begin to walk across the square. They shared a glance and moved to intercept her. They fell into step, one at either side, and each slipped an arm through one of hers. She looked at them in panic and tried to pull away, but they each gripped her more tightly and John spoke in a low voice.

‘We’d like you to come with us, Ms Weir. We have a few questions we’d like to ask you.’

‘Let me go! Who are you? You have no right—’

‘As I said, Ms Weir,’ John interrupted, ‘we’d like to ask you a few questions.’

John and Tony turned direction and walked her across to the waiting car, Ronon now in the driving seat. She continued to try to pull away from them, but was clearly unwilling to cause a scene and they were able to push her into the back where Teyla was waiting. John followed her into the back of the car, keeping Weir between himself and Teyla, and Tony slipped into the front passenger seat. The whole thing had taken less than three minutes.

Weir remained silent as they drove to Thames House and into the underground carpark. She remained silent, in fact, until they had her seated in one of the interrogation rooms and Tony and Ronon slipped out - having also remained silent - to watch through the window from the adjoining observation room.

‘She’s a sour-faced puss, isn’t she?’ Tony remarked to Ronon who grinned back.

‘My Nan would have said ‘a face like a smacked bum’,’ which made Tony laugh.

‘What do we know about her?’ he asked Ronon, more to get to know his giant of a companion than seeking facts he mostly knew anyway.

Ronon shrugged, ‘46, single, two degrees, one in German with Russian, and a Masters degree in International Relations, whatever that means. Former political activist, works in the HR department
Tony smiled at the pithy reply which told him exactly nothing about Ronon, and watched with interest as John leaned against the wall inside the interrogation room while Teyla leaned against the wall behind Weir, out of her line of sight. He was curious as to John’s interrogation technique and suspected it would be very different from his own ‘clown’ routine. John just watched her to start with. He didn’t say anything and didn’t do anything. He just stood and leaned and watched.

Weir was clearly discomforted. She began shifting awkwardly in her seat and eventually shouted ‘What do you want?’

She became more and more agitated by John’s silent presence, totally ignoring Teyla, and suddenly stood up and approached him, raising a hand as though to strike him. He caught it, held it and forced her back to her seat and down into a sitting position, then rested both hands on the table and leaned down into her face.

‘Why?’

She looked surprised, as though this was the last question she had expected, but turned her head to the side away from John and didn’t answer.

This time he slapped his hand down hard on the table and she physically jumped and looked momentarily frightened.

‘Why?’ he demanded. ‘Why would you sell your country’s secrets to a foreign power?’

A look of contempt crossed her face as she watched him warily.

‘I’ve looked through some of the documents you had in your flat and that you’ve passed to the Russians. There were details of other agents in there, agents that are probably dead now, thanks to you. Is this what you think your father died for? For you to sell details of undercover agents to Russia and goodness knows who else? He would be so proud of you.’

She flew at him again, caught on the raw, but John easily forced her back into her chair again.

‘So why? I’m curious. Was it for money or sex or drugs? Or just for kicks, just because you could?’

Two red patches appeared on her cheeks and she pressed her lips together, one elbow in the opposite hand, arms crossed, fingers twitching.

‘You simply wouldn’t understand,’ she said finally, and Tony started in shock, surprised she’d broken so quickly, so easily.

‘Try me,’ said John, his eyes narrowed into slits. ‘Explain why you’d betray your father’s sacrifice for financial gain.’

‘My father left us! He went away and got himself killed! He was too old to be called by the Draft but decided to leave us anyway! I can’t betray his memory because he betrayed us first!’

‘And that makes your betrayal to your country acceptable?’

Tony watched her becoming angrier and angrier and wondered at her lack of self control. He’d been taught interrogation techniques at the Police Academy and FLETC - Federal Law Enforcement
Training Centre - and through working with Jethro Gibbs which was much more useful. He’d always supposed CIA agents had similar, if not better training, and was beginning to wonder if they’d all been mistaken and she wasn’t a CIA agent at all.

The door to the observation room opened and Jack O’Neill, accompanied by Harry Pearce, entered.

‘Has she said anything yet?’ Harry asked.

‘Only to excuse herself for her treason. She misses her daddy who selfishly went and got himself killed, and now blames him for pretty much everything,’ Tony glanced at Jack. ‘Are we sure she’s a CIA agent because she damn sure ain’t acting like one.’

‘Let’s say she’s still nominally on their payroll,’ Jack replied, leaning back against the window. ‘She’s been on unpaid leave for about eight months following a family bereavement. She held a couple of posts overseas for a few years after training but then began throwing her weight around and upset pretty much everyone, so she was shipped back to the US and put on desk duty at Langley where a close eye was kept on her and—’

‘Just a minute,’ Tony interrupted. ‘Back up a little. She’s on leave following a family bereavement? What family? We were told she had no one, except her mother in Philadelphia, since her father died in ’73.’

‘Who told you that?’

Tony glanced at Harry who looked as surprised as he felt.

‘Give me a minute,’ Harry said pulling out his phone and slipping out of the room. He was back within a couple of minutes, a frown on his face.

‘One of our analysts pulled as much information on her as she could and according to the information Weir gave her University in 1978, she only has one living relative, her mother, who lives in Philadelphia on a small war widow’s pension. Our analyst discovered she’d moved into a retirement home a few years ago and called them to verify the information before she passed it on to me. Her mother never remarried and Weir has no other close relatives, so why would the CIA think she has? Surely they checked up?’

Jack grimaced. ‘Not necessarily. They might have just taken her word for it and since it’s unpaid leave it’s not costing them anything, other than keeping an opening for her.’

‘But if she’s lied about this…’ Ronon didn’t finish his rumbled sentence since it was clear Jack understood what he meant.

‘Yeah, what else’s she lied about. I probably need to speak to George Hammond again.’

The four men had stopped paying attention to what was happening in the interview room but they now watched as John and Teyla left Weir and John came to join them.

“She’s nuts,” he said succinctly as they all watched her pace the room, stopping occasionally to glare at the mirror behind which she must know she was being observed, all the while muttering to herself. ‘I have no idea why the CIA employed or continues to employ her, if she is CIA at all.’

Tony glanced at Jack who gave John a brief account of her employment history.

John frowned. ‘Don’t the CIA do yearly evaluations on their staff?’
'In usual circumstances, yes, but it’s possible she’s not been evaluated for a couple of years as she’s been on leave.'

‘No,’ said John decisively. ‘I’m no psychologist, but I’d say this behaviour of hers is pretty long standing. She seems to think she’s owed something by the US Government, probably because of her father. I’m actually surprised the CIA ever employed her, given her past as a political activist. It would throw up an immediate red flag for MI5.’

‘Political activist?’ Jack repeated carefully.

The others looked at him in surprise.

‘She was a professional activist before she was recruited,’ Harry told him. ‘Worked for one of the “Stop The Bomb” groups, I can’t recall which one. She went straight from there to the CIA and appeared on our lists when she spent a few months in London in the nineties.’

‘There’s no record of this in her CIA file at all,’ Jack said grimly. ‘It simply says she did some charity work after leaving College and before being recruited.’

‘Which I suppose is partly true.’ Tony shrugged. ‘It was a charity but she was salaried.’

‘How did you get this information?’ Jack asked desperately. ‘How did you find all this out while the CIA were unable to get any of it?’

John looked at his companions and shrugged. ‘We have good analysts?’

Jack sighed and closed his eyes. ‘I need to speak to George. Did you get anything else from her?’

‘Well, strictly speaking I didn’t get this from her,’ John pointed out. ‘All I got was a lot of whining about how her awful father ruined her and her mother’s lives, and that she doesn’t see her treason as, well, treason. She says the US government deserves it because she’s so badly paid and her job is boring and that she’s not betraying secrets, just selling information, which she doesn’t get from the CIA anyway, so how can it be treason?’

‘She… what the fuck?’

‘As I said, she’s crazy. She honestly can’t see why anyone would be upset at her selling information to Vasiliev - yes, she was happy to name him as her paymaster. When I asked about Kolya she just scowled and called him a bastard.’

‘Where’s she getting the information from, then?’

‘From her father’s friend, Landry,’ Harry told him. ‘We now have proof. He’s on the Senate Intelligence Committee and he passes her anything he thinks she can sell.’

‘What the actual fuck?’

For a moment Tony thought Jack might have an aneurysm there and then, and he clearly wasn’t the only one as John grabbed his arm and made him sit down, pushing his head down between his knees.

‘Jack, breath!’

‘No, stop it, I’m fine,’ Jack argued, trying to fight John off.

‘No, you’re really not. Take deep breaths.’
Harry thrust a bottle of water into Jack’s hand. ‘Drink this, you’ll feel better. Ronon, John, put Weir in one of the cells and keep an eye out for any signs of recognition from our other guests as you take her there. Tony, help me get Jack back up to my office. I’ve a bottle of single malt that’ll make us all feel a lot better.’

Tony did as he was told and between them, they got Jack seated in an armchair with a glass of Talisker in his hand. He went to take a sip but pulled a face at the smell.

‘What the… Is this liquid tar?’

Harry scowled at him. ‘No, it isn’t, it’s finest 30 year old Islay malt. You won’t get better! Drink it and shut up!’

Hesitantly, Jack took a sip and Tony watched him swill the liquid around his mouth and swallow.

‘Oh! That is so smooth!’

Tony took a sip of his and while he too got the smokiness, the taste was very different. Scotch wasn’t really his drink, although he supposed this wasn’t just generic ‘scotch’. He took a second sip and decided that while scotch wasn’t his drink, this malt could easily become so.

John slipped into the room and his eyes lit up at the sight of the bottle on the desk.

‘Talisker 30? You are spoiling us, Harry!’

Harry smiled in response. ‘Feeling better, Jack?’

‘Better still with a drop more of this.’ Jack passed his glass over for a refill.

Harry laughed and poured a little more of the golden ambrosia into Jack’s glass.

‘Right,’ Jack said to the room in general. ‘Tell me again what that crazy bitch downstairs has done.’

‘She receives regular deliveries of documents from Senator Henry Landry, who copies what documents he has access to as a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and passes them on to her,’ John explained. ‘In return, she pays a regular amount into his offshore bank account, keeping the remainder of the money from Igor Vasiliev for herself. The documents are passed to Vasiliev in a variety of ways; post, through an intermediary in a variety of locations, or via a dead letter drop. She sends Vasiliev a text message when she has something for him and it contains a letter, A B C type letter, telling him which delivery option she’s going to use and, if relevant, where.’

‘She told you all this? No hesitation? No having to… persuade her?’

‘She’s quite frank about it all. As I said, she doesn’t see what she’s doing as wrong. She’s not taking the information herself - although I suspect if you look back far enough to when she had access to more sensitive material, you might find that some of it made it’s way into Russian hands. As far as she’s concerned Landry gives her the information and she just sells it on.’

‘That makes him just as guilty of treason!’

‘Well, it would in the UK, but apparently you have very different laws in the US,’ John said carefully. The other three men looked at him questioningly.

‘Weir said that it’s only treason if the information helps an enemy make war against the USA. And her information hasn’t done that since you’re not at war with Russia. She also said that she’s not
committed espionage as she’s neither taken the information herself, nor sold it to a foreign power, simply to a foreign national. If she’s correct - and Ruth’s looking into it - I’m not sure that she is guilty of either treason or espionage against the state.’

‘Of course she’s guilty!’ Jack snapped.

‘Oh, I agree. She’s guilty as hell for selling US secrets but you’ll need to check the wording of your laws because she may well be able to wriggle out of a conviction if she gets a good solicitor.’ John gave Jack a level look. ‘Of course, that’s if it gets to court.’

Tony and Harry both nodded, recognising what John was saying, but Jack was still looking angry.

‘Why wouldn’t it get to court? We need to nail her ass!’

Harry gave him a little smile. ‘Jack. I think you need to discuss this with Daniel. He’ll be able to explain.’

‘What? Why would—’

‘Jack. Just tell Daniel what we’ve discussed and he’ll clarify things for you. Life in the forces can be very black and white but real life isn’t like that.’ As Jack opened his mouth to argue, Harry just repeated himself. ‘Talk to Daniel.’

He turned his attention back to John. ‘You said she called Kolya a bastard. What else did she say about him?’

‘Not a huge amount, but you know we initially thought she was controlling him?’

Harry nodded. ‘Go on.’

‘I don’t think she was in charge at all. I think Kolya was controlling her.’

Harry sat back in chair thinking this through. ‘Go on,’ he said again.

‘Our assumption, my assumption, was that Kolya was the middle man who passed information on to Vasiliev who we know has connections with the Russian government. Weir, though, says she passed her information to Vasiliev directly, or at least not through Kolya. We know, however, that she’s had meetings with Kolya. Why would she need to do that? It’s just another person to take a cut of whatever she made.

‘My belief is that she’s had a long term agreement with Vasiliev because some of the documents we found in her desk had dates on them much earlier than the last year or so. She’s been doing this for a while. But it’s possible that her association with Kolya is much more recent and is about a totally different matter. What if he’d been planning to kidnap Rodney for a while? Or was at least looking for information from DSTL and thought she’d be able to help him?’

‘But there was nothing on her hard-drive to suggest she’s had any contact with DSTL,’ Tony protested, then stopped. ‘Her hard-drive at the Bank. We don’t know what’s on the one from her apartment yet. Or what’s on her cell.’

John smiled at him in encouragement.

Tony continued slowly, working it all out as he spoke. ‘She checked out the DSTL, maybe met someone from there. One of Rodney’s lab assistants. They’d likely speak to another woman, far more than they would a pock-marked man with a foreign accent. If she flattered them, or even paid
them, they might be tempted to talk about what they were working on and who was in charge of it. It’d then be easy for Kolya to pick a few men to kidnap Rodney and get him to tell them what he knew, except Rodney held out and we rescued him. So they went after him again and the Zelenkas in case they couldn’t get Rodney to talk.’

‘Weir didn’t need to be involved in that,’ John agreed. ’She just needed to get the initial information. I bet if we ask her about the DSTL she might give us something.’

‘What about your people at the Embassy, Jack?’ Harry asked suddenly. ‘Were they deliberately keeping information from you?’

Jack grimaced. ‘Not as such. They just resented me getting the job. The senior guy there expected to get promoted to at least Deputy, if not Head of Station, and he was disappointed when Carter and I turned up. Then I moved my office out of the Embassy to keep’em all at arm’s length, but it meant he was in charge back there. He managed to keep me out of the loop on a number of things and got away with it.’ Jack smirked. ’He’s on his way back to the US now, suitably chastened, and I’m going to have to get some new people in, or at least Carter is. She can deal with this shit since she should have known what was going on as my deputy. It’s got nothing to with Weir, though.’

‘So we need to see who or what she discovered at DSTL. Probably someone in Rodney’s lab who’s willing to gossip or just plain sell information.’ Tony sighed. ’He’s not gonna be happy.’

‘No, he’s not,’ John agreed. ’We also need to know if there are any other people out there who are still after him and the Zelenkas ’cause Miko wants to go home and see her baby again, and Rodney wants to get back to his lab.’ John grinned. ’He says he can’t imagine what mess the monkeys might have made by now.’

Tony laughed. ’I can just hear him saying it!’

Harry watched as Jack O’Neill left the Grid to go and discuss the intricacies of US law with his partner, then relaxed back into his chair and surveyed the two younger men, now bickering good-naturedly over the superiority of malt whisky versus bourbon. He could see the relationship between the two was much better than when Tony had first arrived. They were each much more comfortable and open in their dealings with one another and their friendship was obvious.

They worked well together, Harry decided, and he could see why Tony had such a good reputation amongst the other US alphabet agencies. He’d spoken to a few contacts in the US about Anthony DiNozzo before seconding him to MI5, and discovered Tony was spoken of with great respect and admiration. Several agencies asked if he was in the market for a permanent position as they would be interested in his recruitment but Harry was quick to point out the secondment was only a short-term posting. He admitted privately to himself that he would be happy to make the posting permanent if Tony so wished as MI5 would certainly benefit from another man who made intuitive links between supposedly disparate facts, just as John was wont to do. It must be a family trait, Harry decided. I wonder if there’s another brother or sister or cousin out there.

Having spent enough time admiring his staff, Harry’s mind turned to the increasing number of people locked in the cells underneath Thames House. He now had nine of them, and though eight had been caught in the act of kidnapping or attempted kidnapping, Weir was an entirely different kettle of fish.
Possession of an unlicensed firearm and three forged passports was probably enough to hold her for the moment, but since her more serious crimes were against her own country, they were on quite shaky ground regarding any longer term detention, especially since MI5 had no rights of arrest.

The opening of one of the security pods onto the Grid caught his eye and Harry groaned, thus catching the attention of the two cousins, still bickering good-naturedly. They both followed his line of sight and John groaned too.

‘What the fuck does he want?’

Tony looked enquiringly at Harry who grimaced.

‘Oliver Mace, self appointed-pain-in-the-arse to MI5!’ he sighed. ‘He’s the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the body which supervises the Security Services, but he has a distinct hatred of MI5 and John in particular. I don’t trust him as far as I could kick him!’

Mace was making his way to Harry’s office and John stood, about to leave, with Tony doing likewise a few seconds later.

‘No, sit down,’ Harry ordered. ‘I’m less likely to punch him if you’re here.’

‘And I’m not?’ John asked, a glint in his eye.

‘Sit down and share the pain!’

Mace swept into Harry’s office without knocking.

‘Harry, John,’ he acknowledged, then turned his gaze on Tony who smirked at him. ‘And you must be the… American.’

‘Only half American. The other half is pure spite.’

Harry’s lips twitched while John covered his mouth with his hand to hide his grin.

‘I must say, Harry, that I disapprove of allowing foreigners onto the Grid.’ Mace looked Tony up and down.

Harry ignored him.

‘Run off and play, children,’ Mace told John and Tony. ‘The grown-ups need to talk.’

‘Stay right where you are, John and Tony. Mr Mace will be leaving shortly,’ Harry told them. They both took their seats and John picked up his whisky glass and sipped it, smirking at Mace over the rim, who coloured slightly and sat in the chair Jack had previously occupied.

There was a silence in the room. John and Tony relaxed and sipped their drinks, exchanging smirks every so often, while Harry dealt with paperwork on his desk, ignoring Mace who became increasingly restless.

‘I wanted to talk to you privately,’ he said at last.

‘And I wanted England to beat the All Blacks,’ Harry said, not lifting his head. ‘We don’t always get what we want in life, though.’
Mace glared at Harry but Harry simply ignored him, refusing to be cowed by an oik such as Mace, and John and Tony followed suit.

Mace broke first. ‘I have received a complaint that you are holding an American citizen for questioning,’ he said imperiously.

*That is interesting. I wonder where he got his information from, and so quickly.*

‘I have spoken to the US Embassy and they say they have not been notified of any reason you might have for detaining one of their citizens,’ Mace continued.

‘Does this citizen have a name?’ Harry asked, politely.

‘How many Americans could you possibly be holding!’ Mace demanded.

Harry said nothing.

Mace waited until it was clear Harry wasn’t going to answer him, and reluctantly ground out ‘Weir. Elizabeth Weir. She’s a… she’s a banker and your underlings snatched her illegally from the street earlier this afternoon.’

*He must have had someone watching to know when and where we picked her up. Were they watching her or us?*

Harry glanced almost imperceptibly at John who gave an equally imperceptible nod, stood and left the room. Tony never blinked but remained where he was and Harry made a mental note to see if there was any way he might persuade Tony to stay with MI5.

‘You’ll have to give me a few more details, Oliver, as I can’t bring to mind any… banker my underlings might have snatched from the street,’ Harry said, face immobile.

‘She’s not a banker, she’s a CIA agent working undercover!’ Mace snapped.

‘Then why did you say she was a banker? And why has someone other than the CIA complained to you?’

‘This comes from people way above the CIA. This comes from the Senate Committee for Intelligence.’

*Landry.*

---------

**Chapter Thirteen**

‘Colin, Malcolm, Ruth - small conference room, now!’ John turned from the analysts and headed to Adam’s desk. ‘Adam, I need you. Mace had someone watching when we picked Weir up earlier.’

Adam looked up and frowned. ‘What? Who?’
'That’s just what we need to find out as soon as possible.’ John led the way towards the conference room, Adam behind him. The junior members of their teams were taking turns watching their basement guests, with Zaf and Jo below stairs at the moment, so John gathered up his own team members and shut the door firmly as soon as they were all seated at the conference table.

‘Someone was watching Weir when we took her. Mace says he’s had a complaint from the US—’ He paused as his mobile vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out, swearing fluently as he read the message from Tony. It was just one word. Landry.

‘Okay, scratch that. Tony says the complaint came from Landry, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the US counterpart to the JIC. It’s possible that Mace knows him although I don’t know what position Landry holds on this committee.’

Ruth typed quickly on her laptop. ‘Henry Landry, Republican, Vice Chairman. He supplied her with SIC documents to sell, Adam. He was a friend of her father’s.’ She looked up from her screen. ‘Why would he have had watchers on her? And which agency would they have come from?’

‘Are we looking at this the wrong way round?’ John asked with a frown. ‘We know they’re not CIA as Jack knew next to nothing about her unless Langley kept him out of the loop which is unlikely. What other US agency has the resources or the permission to operate in Britain? What if…’

‘It was someone else?’ Adam finished, seeing where John was going with this. ‘Some other agency…’

‘Like the Russians,’ finished John, grinning at Adam.

Colin and Malcolm were both busy tapping on their laptops, muttering in undertones to each other.

Ruth stood, gripping her own laptop in her hand. ‘I’ll go and see if we’ve picked up any chatter about Weir. We’ve been listening for ‘Kolya’, but we’d let ‘Weir’ drop when we discovered she was no longer CIA.’

John was reading another text which had come through. ‘Tony says Mace still thinks Weir is CIA, or at least that’s what he’s been told. Maybe Jack didn’t tell us the truth.’

‘Or maybe Mace’s informant didn’t realise she’s been on leave for several months?’ Teyla suggested.

John nodded at his team-mate. ‘Good point, Teyla. Okay, we need to find where Mace got his information from. Malcolm…’

‘Already on it, old boy.’

‘Colin?’

‘Likewise.’

‘Right. Get on with it, people. Let me know when you get anything.’ He turned to Adam and grinned. ‘Want to come and try a little Mace-baiting? Grab our laptops.’

John took his previous seat in Harry’s office as though nothing had happened while Adam dragged another chair over and picked up Jack’s abandoned glass.

‘Whose was this?’ he asked glancing towards Mace. ‘Will I catch anything if I use it?’

Harry removed the used glass from his hand and poured a finger of malt into a new one. ‘This isn’t
an open bar, you know. And that’s the last clean glass I have,’ he told Adam, not bothering to offer a
drink to Mace. He was aware of the danger in poking such a bear with a stick, but the man was so
objectionable that Harry couldn’t bring himself to chastise his officers when they indulged
themselves by tormenting him, and certainly not when he was quite happy to do the same himself.

At the moment, it was a standoff. Mace wanted Weir released but obviously didn’t know how much
MI5 knew about her. Harry and his officers, meanwhile, needed to discover what Mace knew about
the situation and where he’d acquired his information, so Harry was content to let the youngsters
play with their prey until he either broke and told them what they wanted to know or exploded from
irritation. Either way, he was going to have fun watching.

Thus, almost an hour passed, during which Harry managed to get a fair amount of paperwork done
and John and Adam worked on their laptops whilst chatting with Tony and each other about any
number of subjects including schools, universities and the various families they knew, all intended to
increase Mace’s ire. Harry, for his part, was impressed at the speed at which Tony picked up on
what John and Adam were doing by adding his own comments on topics chosen to illustrate Mace’s
exclusion from the very society to which he so greatly desired to belong. Harry had no idea how he
managed to keep a straight face when Tony asked John if ‘Uncle Patrick’ still used his club, since
Harry knew Mace had been refused membership there on more than one occasion.

‘Father tends to stay at the Guards when he comes up to town,’ John explained. ‘He says Whites has
become infested with civil servants and when I told him I was, to all intents and purposes, a civil
servant, he looked at me over his specs and said at least I had the decency not to inflict my chosen
profession on other more fortunate people.’

The four men watched in awe as Mace’s face first went pale, then became increasingly purple, until
Harry was sure they would have to call for an ambulance. To their rather reluctant admiration,
however, Mace managed to retain his composure and his both his colour and his anger subsided.

He finally stood and glared at the four men. ‘I want Weir released immediately. You have no
grounds for detaining her and if you fail to release her forthwith, I shall have no option but to place
this entire section under review.’

With a final scowl he grabbed his overcoat and marched out of the office.

Harry and his officers looked at each other.

‘I’m pretty sure he means it,’ John said, and the others nodded in agreement.

Harry reached for his phone and ordered her release. As he replaced the handset he gave a small
smile. ‘Well done. That bought us enough time to have the twins set up surveillance on her and slip
one of the location trackers into her water. We can now track all her movements for roughly the next
forty eight hours.’

Harry watched as his agents left his office, all with big grins on their faces. Sometimes I really love
my job.

———

As Tony settled into the pool car they’d been lent, John called over to Adam who was just unlocking
his own car.
‘Come and have dinner with us tonight, Adam. We already have a houseful so one more isn’t going to make any difference.’

Adam nodded. ‘Thank you. I will.’

‘Ruth told me Adam lost his wife sometime last year,’ Tony said to John as they pulled out of the underground car park.

‘She died in his arms after a case went wrong a year ago today,’ John told him, weaving the car in and out of the rush hour traffic, Adam following behind them. ‘It’s why we didn’t want to give him much time today to brood.’

Tony nodded. ‘Is that why you went Mace-baiting?’

‘Nah. That’s just pure good fun, plus the twins needed time to set the other stuff up. We knew when he arrived Mace would demand Weir be released.’

There was silence between them for a while, then Tony said, a little enviously, ‘You really enjoy your job, don’t you?’

‘It has it’s moments, and I hate only being able to see Rodney at a weekend and not always then, but…yeah. I suppose I do.’

‘Can you imagine doing anything else?’

John shot him a quick glance, seeing the pain on his cousin’s face clearly, even in the dark of a late October evening, and realised the question wasn’t about himself at all.

‘I can, actually,’ he replied carefully. ‘If I thought it would be better for me or for my family and those who loved me then, yes, I can imagine doing something else. I’m John Fitz-Sheppard first and foremost. I might also be Colonel John Fitz-Sheppard and Officer John Fitz-Sheppard, but they aren’t titles that define me. I’d happily be John McKay if I thought Rodney would have me. I enjoy my job and would be loath to give it up, but if Rodney asked me or my family needed me to? Yes. Like a shot, especially if I can have Rodney by my side. He’s my partner, my axis, my everything. Anything else is just jam.’

Tony was silent for a long time and John guessed he was thinking about what defined him. Harry had explained to John what his background checks on Tony had turned up and how he was unsure if Tony was aware of the number of alphabet agencies who would love to hire him. He’d added that he would be very interested in taking Tony on for MI5 himself. While they had a number of very qualified people an increasing amount of their operations were made alongside law enforcement personnel of various kinds: police, immigration, customs and excise. Having an experienced law enforcement officer - even one trained in US law - would be extremely useful, and they’d both agreed that Tony would quickly learn what he needed to know about relevant UK law to go alongside his law degree from Georgetown.

As the car approached the small village where Holly Lodge was situated, John spoke again, quietly.

‘Tony. You do know you have other options, don’t you? With qualifications like yours as well as your experience, you could get a job pretty much wherever you wanted. It’s just up to you. Decide what you want and where you want to do it. Don’t settle for second best or stay somewhere out of some misguided sense of loyalty. Loyalty doesn’t pay the bills or put food on the table and it certainly doesn’t keep you warm at night. Your family is here in the UK and we’ve all missed you. I’m glad to have my friend back and Dad and David both want to know when you’re going to visit
Grantworth, and don’t forget the Paddingtons. Eddie and Clive would be furious if you visited Dad without going to see them too. You’re all they have left of their sister, don’t forget that.’

Checking Adam was still following, John indicated to turn into the drive of Holly Lodge and pulled up at the gate house.

‘Good evening, Colonel Fitz-Sheppard.’ The guard touched his cap as John wound down his window, then peered at the passenger seat. ‘Evening, Mr Tony.’

‘Adam Carter’s following us. He’s coming for dinner,’ John told him with a grin. It amused the hell out of him that all the staff and guards had taken to calling his cousin ‘Mr Tony’. Apparently Mr DiNozzo was a bit too foreign for them.

‘No problem, Colonel. I’ll radio George at the front door and let him know. Have a good evening, sirs.’

‘Thanks, Jason.’

John drove off slowly as he watched Jason stop Adam’s car and have a good look around and in it. The guards at Holly Lodge were mostly former military themselves, employed by MI5 and extremely professional both to visitors and other MI5 personnel. He was very happy to have them look after his scientist and all the other people he appeared to be collecting, but he just wanted to get the case sorted out so they could all go home.

He was surprised to see Brian heading towards them as he and Tony went through the front door, Adam shortly behind them. With an almighty ‘woof’ the bearded collie launched himself at John who hurriedly dropped to his knees to avoid being knocked over by the heavy dog. Brian did his usual trick of rolling onto his back to have his tummy rubbed and both John and Tony obliged, laughing at the happy dog.

John looked up to see Rodney enter the hall.

‘You were supposed to stay hidden, you stupid mutt,’ Rodney told Brian. ‘Not run and greet him at the first opportunity.’

‘What is Brian doing here?’ John raised an eyebrow.

‘Having his belly rubbed?’ Rodney suggested hopefully.

‘Rodney.’

‘John.’

‘Rodney!’

‘I missed him, okay? I missed him and…I… um…’

‘Rodney!’

‘Okay, I went to get him. I got George to drive me to your house and I went to get him. He was lonely with Ronon at work all day and there’s no dog walker for him in London so… I went to get him.’

‘You do understand why we’re here, don’t you? For your protection.’

‘I know! But…I missed him. And he missed me. And anyway, he can help protect us.’
John looked down at Brian, on his back, legs splayed apart and tail wagging, and he sighed. ‘Of course he can.’

Dinner was a pleasant meal, particularly as Mrs Thompson was such a splendid cook.

‘Are you sure she can’t come home with me?’ Rodney asked for the umpteenth time, but John just ignored him.

He was pleased to see Adam relax and enjoy himself as it had been a very difficult year for him. After Fiona was killed, Adam lost himself for a while. His son, Wes, had finally gone to live with his maternal grandparents which reduced the pressure on Adam, but meant he only saw his son occasionally and once he was back to full fitness, it also meant he had a lot of time to brood. Evenings like this were good for him and John made a mental note to invite him for supper more often.

They were just settling down to enjoy coffee in the sitting room when Jim, one of the ‘inside’ guards, asked to speak with John. John started towards the door and found Tony and Adam right behind him.

‘Adam, stay here with the scientists. Tony and I’ll go and see what’s happened.’

He saw Donald move into his recently vacated seat next to Rodney and tried to smile reassuringly at them both.

‘It’s probably nothing. Stay here and we’ll go and see.’

Rodney nodded, but John noticed he clutched at Brian who was cuddled up next to him on the sofa. He glanced at Tony and they each moved their hands closer to their side arms and slipped out of the room.

‘There’s a bit of a disturbance at the gate house, sir,’ Jim explained to John. ‘We’re a little worried it might be some sort of diversion so we’ve alerted all the teams and pulled some of the outside men closer to the house.’

‘What sort of disturbance?’

‘Two men and two women in a car tried to gain entrance and threatened Jason when he refused to let them in without proper authority. He asked the driver to step out of the car, but when he stepped forward to search her she tried to attack him, then the rest of them got out. Sean was inside the gate house and he called for backup and began to lock down the house and grounds, then notified Thames House we had a possible incursion. They’re putting a helicopter in the air in case we need to evacuate.’

John nodded. This was all according to the protocols he himself had written for Holly Lodge. ‘Have the police been sent for?’

Jim looked a little discomforted. ‘Well… no, sir.’

‘Why not? Sean should have called them as soon as he initiated lock down. We don’t want to have unfriendlies locked in with us and we certainly don’t want them just wandering off. Why weren’t they called?’ John was seriously annoyed. The guards knew exactly what the protocols were and why they were there. He glared at Jim, who was looking worried. ‘Get it done, now!’ he barked.
'But, sir,' Jim began, then stopped at the black look on Colonel Fitz-Sheppard’s face. ‘Sir, they said they know Mr Tony!’ he managed to get out. ‘They said they were friends of Mr Tony!’

In the end, they all went down to the gate house. John argued that the four scientists should stay in the house with Adam and the other internal guards to keep them safe. Rodney argued back that they’d be safer all together and anyway, who was likely to kidnap seven people, three of whom were well trained professionals, plus all the other guards around the place as well as Brian, so John should ‘just suck it up buttercup and let’s get down there and back because it’s bloody freezing outside and my coffee’s getting cold and do you really want to sleep on the sofa or get laid ever again?’

Tony then laughed and commented that John seemed to spend most nights on the sofa, which made the others grin, John scowl and Jim and the other guards look very embarrassed to learn so much about the Colonel’s sex life.

John, however, thought Tony’s laugh had been somewhat forced and a quick glance at his cousin confirmed that he had a pretty good idea who the people at the gate house might be.

John led his enlarged family down the long drive, Tony acting as whipper-in. He stepped forward to face the group standing beyond the gates, Jason and three other guards keeping a close eye on them, guns raised.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’

The grey haired, older man looked him up and down. ‘I could ask you the same thing,’ he said in an American accent.

John said nothing and pushed his hands deeper into his coat pockets. The older woman pushed herself forward and looked between him and the man he assumed was the infamous Gibbs.

‘I am Director Jennifer Shepard,’ she announced imperiously.

John pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Is that supposed to mean something to me?’

She glared at him and out of the corner of his eye he saw Adam pull out his phone, probably to cancel the helicopter.

‘I want to see Agent DiNozzo. I don’t need the rest of the circus here. I’ll come inside and speak privately to him,’ she told John.

‘No.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No.’

She was obviously nonplussed by this and tried another tactic. 'Look, all I want is to speak in private with one of my agents.' She peered at the group on the Lodge side of the gates, trying to find Tony, but John had kept him at the back for just that reason.

‘You’re trespassing on private land.’

She tried to give a smile she probably thought was winsome but which came out more as
constipated. ‘Then invite us in and we won’t be trespassing.’

‘You still haven’t told me what you’re all doing here.’

‘Jenny, this is ridiculous,’ the younger woman said, looking down her nose at John. ‘This man is nobody and his little guards will do nothing. We are all getting cold. Let us simply take DiNozzo and leave.’ She pushed at one of the gates which opened slightly.

John stepped forward, annoyed at both the younger woman’s insolent tone and the fact that the gates hadn’t been secured, but before he could do anything, Brian came bounding through the group towards their uninvited guests and somehow, in the brief time between the main house and the front gates, he’d managed to get himself covered in mud and John watched in silent joy as he hurled himself through the open gate and jumped up at the glamorous redhead who just happened to be wearing a cream coloured coat. She shrieked as Brian left two wonderfully large muddy paw-prints on the jacket, then bounced again and added a couple more for good measure. Rodney came bustling from the back of the group, apologising profusely.

‘I am so sorry, he just pulled himself out of my grip and, oh dear, look at what he’s done to your coat. How sad, what a shame.’ And if the words themselves weren’t insincere enough, he tried to ‘help’ by patting ineffectually at the jacket, thereby spreading the mud even further.

The entire Holly Lodge contingent grinned as Brian - aided and abetted by Rodney - continued to wreak havoc amongst the Americans, jumping up and rubbing against them as he tried to greet them, but the grins vanished as the young woman pulled a knife from inside her jacket and took a step towards the over enthusiastic dog. Rodney moved to protect his dog and the click of safety catches was heard as number of weapons were pointed at her.

‘Put the knife down, now!’ John ordered in his best Commanding Officer voice. ‘Along with any other weapons you might have brought into this country illegally.’

She tried to stare John down, but thankfully for everyone’s safety, the young man in the group moved to her side and whispered in her ear, pointing to the guns trained on her. She nodded reluctantly and put the knife on the ground in front of her, glaring at John all the while.

‘Place any other weapons you might have on the ground as well. That goes for all of you.’

No-one else in the NCIS group moved and John motioned Jason forward to search the woman. She tried to stop him but the younger man gripped her shoulder and, with very bad grace, she submitted to the search. Another knife and a small pistol were added to the knife and John stepped through the gate to kick them away for Jim to pick up, being careful to avoid the other guards’ lines of sight.

‘Just carrying those is enough to get you locked up for a number of years in England,’ John said to her. ‘I would be very interested to know how you managed to smuggle them through customs. Jason, Mike, search the rest of them and see what other illegal items we can collect.’

‘You have no right to do this,’ the redhead told him angrily. ‘My agents have my permission to carry weapons.’

John was about to reply when a helicopter was heard approaching. He gave Adam a questioning look.

‘I thought we might be able to use their cargo,’ Adam said with a grin. He made a hand motion and two of the guards who’d accompanied them down the drive ran towards the landing pad where lights were now shining.
To John’s surprise and relief, as he didn’t know quite what to do with the four NCIS people, Harry Pearce and Jack O’Neill climbed out and made their way over to him.

‘Hello, boys and girls,’ Jack called out cheerfully as he looked at the two distinct groups, one inside the Holly Lodge grounds and one standing on the other side of the open gates. ‘Are we having fun?’

‘Who are you?’ the redhead demanded

‘The person who might save your butts,’ Jack told her, his playful demeanour now entirely serious. ‘And this is Sir Harry Pearce, Director of Section D.’

John hid his surprise at Harry being introduced as such and decided Jack must know what he was doing.

‘These people are keeping my agent from me. I want him back, now.’ The woman directed her comments to Jack, his familiar accent obviously persuading her of his support.

‘And you are…?’ Harry asked.

‘I am the director of NCIS.’

‘Okay, Madam Director, then you need to go through the proper channels and not turn up unannounced and unwelcome,’ Jack told her. ‘What did you think you’d achieve here tonight?’

‘And more to the point, why did you come here, to this house?’ Harry added.

Shepard simply shrugged and Tony stepped into her field of vision for the first time.

‘Let me guess. You had Abby or McGee track our cells.’

Her suddenly pink cheeks gave them the answer.

Harry kept his eyes on her as he pulled out his mobile phone and dialled a number. Making no attempt at privacy, both groups heard every word he said.

‘Harry Pearce here. I need a team from Special Branch out at Holly Lodge. We have four people to take into custody under suspicion of terrorist offences.’

‘Terrorist Offences?’ Shepard gasped. ‘How dare you!’

‘You turn up here, armed, demanding one of my officers? Having ascertained his location through illegal means? Yes, terrorist offences. Jason, Mike, get them into the gate house.’

‘One of your officers? DiNozzo works for me!’

‘Not at the moment, he doesn’t,’ Jack drawled ‘If you don’t like it, take it up with the Secretary of Defence.’

Jason and Mike moved forward to herd the quartet into the gate house but the younger woman crouched into a defensive position.

‘If you lay one finger on me I will kill you.’

The guns held by the other guards, which had been lowered, were now immediately raised and pointed at the group again but Shepard sighed and shook her head.
‘Leave it, Ziva. Do as they say. We have no option, at the moment.’ She turned and looked at DiNozzo through narrowed eyes. ‘But don’t think for a minute this is over.’

‘Are you threatening one of my officers?’ Harry asked in a deceptively calm tone.

‘Just who are you?’ Gibbs spoke for the first time in a few minutes. ‘I’ve never heard of Section D.’

Harry gave him a grim smile and turned away, nodding slightly at John, who understood the silent order and herded his happy band - and dog - back up the drive.

Jack remained with the quartet and followed them into the gate house.

‘Who are you?’ Shepard asked him again.

‘Jack O’Neill, London Station Chief.’

‘CIA?’

‘Yup.’

‘Who are these people? I’ve never heard of Section D either.’

‘You probably know them better as MI5.’

‘Tony is working for MI5?’ the younger woman asked, disdain dripping from every word. ‘I do not believe you.’

‘Please yourself,’ Jack told her dismissively, disliking the woman before even knowing her name.

What little he’d seen of Tony had impressed him, so much so that he’d put out a few feelers for more information from old friends in the US, and one of them, an FBI senior agent in DC, had told him a few stories about DiNozzo that had impressed him even more.

‘Are they really sending this Special Branch, whatever it is, to take us into custody, or was that man joking?’ Shepard asked.

‘Harry Pearce doesn’t make jokes about terrorism.’

‘You know we’re not terrorists!’ she said, angrily. ‘He has no right to do this. I shall certainly be complaining to the Secretary of Defence at the first opportunity. You don’t really want an international incident on your hands, do you?’

Jack studied her, wondering what had made her so stupid. ‘What have you come here for, really?’

‘I told you. I want my agent back.’

‘So you flew over three thousand miles and drove to a house you found illegally, and brought three other people with you, one of them armed to the teeth? Just to get your agent back? I don’t think so, lady. There’s much more to this than that. And until I find out what that is you’ll stay in the custody of Special Branch.’ He heard a vehicle approach and looked through the window to see a police van arrive.

‘Your ride’s here.’
Chapter Fourteen

Harry suspected it wouldn’t be long before news of the four NCIS visitors, as well as their present accommodation in a police cell, reached the ears of Oliver Mace, provoking a further visit to the Grid. The source of his information would be very revealing.

With this in mind, soon after he left Holly Lodge Harry got to work to find out just how the NCIS agents had arrived in Britain. Having discovered this he made a call to an old friend, the US Secretary of Defence and expressed his displeasure at not being informed of their visit as well as their use of NCIS resources to track down an MI5 secure location. SecDef was extremely apologetic and assured Harry he would make a full investigation into all of Shepard’s activities.

In return Harry explained that he and the CIA London Chief were making enquiries into various issues - of which General Hammond was well aware - and he would be grateful if the SecDef would keep a lid on the NCIS activities for the time being.

‘I will, Harry, but only if you promise to have dinner with me one night and tell me just what’s been going on. I’ll be in the UK next month.’

‘I’ll look forward to it, Peter. You’ll be paying, I assume?’

‘I paid last time, you old bastard!’

It was no surprise then, to receive a visit from Mace early the following morning. Harry noted, with a perverse pleasure, the man was almost incoherent with rage.

‘How dare you! How dare you have the director of a US federal agency locked up!’

Harry sat back in his chair, threw his pen onto his desk and surveyed the angry man, although…

Yes. Certainly angry, but is that a touch of glee I see in there too? Does he think he now has us at a disadvantage?

‘You mean the woman who determined the location of an MI5 secure site through an illegal process, who arrived in the country with no authorisation via a US Naval Activities base, and who brought with her not only two NCIS agents, but also an agent of a foreign power - armed, I might add - travelling under false documents. Is that who you mean?’

Mace spluttered and glared at Harry. ‘I’ve ordered them all to be released and I’m ordering you to co-operate with them in any possible way.’

‘And have you discussed this with the Home Secretary?’ Harry asked quietly. Far too quietly, if Mace had bothered to pay any attention.

‘He’s far too busy to be involved in your mess,’ Mace replied dismissively.

‘And yet, here he is,’ said a new voice from behind Mace who swung round in shock.

‘Home Secretary!’
Robert Kilbride, Home Secretary, came fully into Harry’s office and took a seat.

‘Do carry on, Oliver. You were ordering Harry to cooperate with four people who entered the country under false pretences, I believe.’

‘Well… I… that is…’

I’d be very interested in hearing your reasoning,’ Kilbride continued mercilessly.

‘I… one of them is the Director of NCIS. Pearce can’t simply lock her up.’

‘Not even when she arrives covertly with a Mossad agent?’

‘Mossad? No, I think you’re mistaken, Home Secretary. She has three of her own agents with her. She never travels without her own security.’

‘Ziva David, daughter of Eli David, head of Mossad, although she entered our country using an NCIS identity card, naming her an NCIS Agent with no mention of either her status as a Mossad liaison officer, or her nationality. Still think I’m mistaken, Oliver?’

‘I…’ Mace paled and fell silent.

Harry decided to take a turn, although he thoroughly enjoyed seeing Mace lost for words. ‘She does have two of her own agents with her, although one is a Probationary agent with a degree in Forensic Computing, so I’m not sure just how useful he would be in an emergency.’ He turned from Mace and spoke directly to Kilbride. ‘I’ve spoken to the US Secretary of Defence and he wasn’t aware they were in the UK and is obviously perturbed since it leaves NCIS with neither its director nor its senior agent. He’s also unhappy that she wishes to take Agent DiNozzo from us. ‘SecDef’ is very keen for him to continue his secondment to MI5 and has even suggested a liaison post or a possible exchange programme be arranged. He said he will discuss it with you when he comes to the security conference next month.’

‘I look forward to it.’ Kilbride inclined his head. ‘What does he want us to do with the director and her… security?’

‘It is rather a coincidence that she turns up right at the time when we have some concerns of our own. He—’

‘What concerns?’ Mace interrupted. ‘I haven’t been informed of any concerns.’

Kilbride gave him a cold stare. ‘The last time I looked Harry ran Section D and didn’t answer to you, but to me. Your role is of advisor to the Cabinet and doesn’t require that you be briefed on current Intelligence operations. If you’re struggling to understand just what your job is, Mace, perhaps it would be best if I look for another JIC Chairman.’

Harry almost cheered and for a moment thought about hugging HomSec - It does have quite a ring to it - but settled for a polite smile as Mace glared at both him and Kilbride.

‘No, sir. That won’t be necessary. I shall take my leave. Good day.’

They watched him leave, then Kilbride turned to Harry.

‘I always feel as though I need to wash my hands after dealing with him.’ He gave a theatrical shiver. ‘What do you want to do about the Americans?’
‘I suggest we bring the three NCIS people here to talk; however, I’m reluctant to allow Eli David’s daughter on MI5 property or any government property if it comes to it. She was armed when they arrived at Holly Lodge last night and didn’t hesitate to attack one of the guards.’

‘And are you happy you have that situation under control?’

Harry thought for a moment. ‘Holly Lodge, yes. That’s under control. The rest of it? I’m not sure about under control, but we’re getting there. Some more information has turned up, but we have a couple of pieces of the puzzle still missing. There’s some serious work to do with the security of the DSTL and I’m loath to send the three senior scientists back before it’s done and without getting to the bottom of the leaks. You seeing off Mace has cleared the board a tad and we’re working pretty well with the CIA.’

‘Yes, I’ve met Jack O’Neill. He’s…original.’

‘And being original makes him unpredictable. I’m enjoying working with him and we’re building up a good rapport with him and his team.’ Harry paused again. ‘We’ll let the David girl go but only if Shepard promises to keep her on a tight rein. If we catch her where she shouldn’t be or doing something questionable, she’ll be on the next plane back to Israel.’

‘Not back to the US?’

‘I suspect she’ll be leaving her ‘liaison’ position very shortly. Peter West is not happy with that situation at all, nor is he happy with Shepard and her priorities.’

Kilbride nodded and stood. ‘Thank you for briefing me on the DSTL situation and this mess with NCIS. Keep me in the loop, Harry.’

As the HomSec left, Harry wondered if the recording equipment in his office had been on. He knew of several people who would enjoy watching and listening to Oliver Mace being put in his place. Perhaps I could send it out instead of a Christmas card this year?

The recording system had been working, Harry was pleased to learn.

‘I set it so any conversations in your office are recorded by default,’ Colin told him. ‘I’m sure I sent you a memo about it. Unless you tell me otherwise it automatically deletes each day at midnight. It’s just easier to delete what you don’t want than remember to switch it on when you do want to record a conversation. I’ll isolate the time while Mace was here and let you have it.’

‘As long as we can all listen to it,’ John added, and the others nodded eagerly. The chance to hear Mace routed was not to be missed by anyone, not even Tony who’d only met the man a few days previously.

‘I’ll let you all have copies.’ Colin rolled his eyes.

‘But I’ll be the one to share it outside of the Grid,’ Harry ordered. ‘Do not steal my thunder!’

Malcolm moved to the screen, ready to begin the briefing proper, and Harry nodded to him.
‘We had a good look at the camera footage around Queen’s Square and identified a few people who were there for long periods of time and weren’t doing anything other than watch Mason’s Bank. Eight people appeared to switch out with each other and we’re confident they were the ones watching Weir. At least some of the ones watching her.’

‘Some of them?’ John asked in surprise.

Colin and Malcolm exchanged looks.

‘We think there were two distinct groups watching her, apart from ourselves the other day,’ Colin explained. ‘One is the SVR, a mixture of Russians and British, and the other group, a smaller group, are American. Almost certainly DIA.’

‘Who on earth are DIA?’ John demanded.

‘Defence Intelligence Agency,’ Tony told him. ‘They deal with military intelligence and oversaw the two Gulf Wars and the Iranian nuclear power thing for example.’

‘Why would they be interested in Weir?’ John demanded. ‘And just how many intelligence agencies does the US need? Don’t you get confused with who’s who?’

Tony laughed. ‘A little. There’s a huge amount of dislike and rivalry as well and they’ll all do anything to avoid working with one another. NCIS is just as bad. We hate the Feebs and they hate us. The only thing everyone agrees on is that we all hate the CIA.’

‘Feebs?’ asked Adam.

‘FBI.’

‘Why do you think they’re DIA and, as John said, why would they be interested in watching Weir?’ Harry asked Malcolm, bringing the meeting to order.

‘We matched a couple of faces to Embassy personnel and made a call to Jack O’Neill. He, or rather Sam Carter, suggested they might be DIA. As for why? It’s only supposition, but the only reason she’d appear on their radar is if she involved in actual military espionage; US military installations or weapons capabilities perhaps, which would fit in with the reasons behind Rodney’s kidnapping.’

‘And you’re sure they were watching her and not somebody else we don’t know about, are you?’

‘We’ve checked several days footage and can see them following her as she moves around the city. We also think they realise the SVR are watching her, but as far as we can tell the Russians haven’t noticed them, but then the Russian group is made up of a few Russians, mostly from their Embassy, and a few Brits who don’t have a clue about surveillance work. Mostly muscle for hire, the sort that kidnapped Rodney and tried to kidnap the Zelenkas. The DIA people are professionals.’

Harry nodded, and thought for a moment. ‘What about the surveillance we had on Weir after she was released?’

Malcolm clicked a few screens forward and showed photos of Weir taken in London. ‘We can’t really work her out. She’s either particularly stupid, or so clever that we have no idea what she’s really doing. After she was released from here, she went straight to the pub where Kolya was staying. She went inside but came out after a few minutes looking really angry. She then went back to her apartment and hasn’t left there since then apart from a trip to the corner shop for some bread and milk. She’s not met with anyone, not that we’ve seen, and she’s only received one phone call, and that was from Landry checking she was okay.’
‘You’ve a tap on her phone?’ Adam asked.

‘On her landline and her mobile, so unless she has a second mobile we don’t know about, she’s not had any visitors or made or received any calls. It’s pretty much a dead end for us.’

‘So what’s our next move?’ John asked. ‘We sit and wait to see who she contacts or who contacts her?’

‘It’s all we can do at the moment,’ Malcolm told him. ‘The DIA and SVR still have people outside the bank but they’re both down to just one man at a time. The Russians also have people watching her flat but there’s no sign of the DIA there.’

‘Why?’ John asked suddenly. ‘Why are the Russians watching her? We were pretty certain she was working for Kolya and she’s tried to contact him but can’t because he’s in one of our cells. She obviously didn’t realise we had him, or probably anyone else down there. The Russians must be aware we’re holding Kolya and his rent-a-kidnap-crew. Why are they watching her?’

‘And how did Mace know we had her?’ Adam put in. ‘We assumed his information came from Landry, he pretty much admitted that, but how did Landry know? Would the DIA tell him?’

‘It’s possible,’ Tony said slowly, thinking about who knew what. ‘But if we assume they’re watching her because they suspect she’s up to something, why would they tell Landry, who they must know is the one passing information to her?’

‘So if not the DIA…’ John began.

‘The Russians told Landry,’ Adam finished. ‘Which means he’s in direct contact with them. So why would he pass stuff onto Weir to be passed on again?’

‘We’re missing something,’ Harry frowned. ‘Malcolm, is the money trail clear yet?’

‘Not yet. Ruth’s on the case and she hopes she’ll have something later today.’

‘I hope so,’ Harry said, then looked down at his notepad. ‘Right. Our visitors to Holly Lodge last night. Tony, what do you want to do?’

Tony looked surprised to be asked. Surprised, but pleasantly so. ‘I think it would cause the least problems if I met with them and found out just what they want.’

‘They want you to go back with them and that Shepard woman wants you to go undercover for her,’ John said bluntly.

‘I spoke with the SecDef earlier today - Secretary of Defence, Adam,’ Harry clarified, at the puzzled look on his officer’s face. ‘He’s not at all happy with your director, Tony, not for dragging her people all the way over here, nor leaving the agency without two of its most senior people and not least for this liaison post she’s apparently set up for her friend, the daughter of the head of Mossad. I hope you don’t mind, but I also told him about the unsanctioned undercover op. He’s not at all pleased with that. He is, however, very pleased with your secondment position and is content to let you stay as long as you wish, or until I get tired of you.’

Tony looked very relieved while John grinned happily.

‘Told you it’d be fine,’ he said, punching his cousin lightly on the arm.

‘Now who’s abusing me?’ Tony grinned, punching his cousin back.
‘Doesn’t count. You’re my baby cousin!’

‘By a month!’

‘Still younger than me!’

‘Boys!’ Harry tried to glare at them both, but failed miserably. ‘As you know, Tony, your erstwhile colleagues are being released from their prison cells and—’

‘I just love the idea of them being locked up,’ Tony said, with a huge beam, then ducked his head. ‘Sorry, Harry, I interrupted you.’

‘Yes, you did. As I was saying. They are being released but have been told not to return to Holly Lodge under any circumstances. I’ve ordered them to come here at 1 pm for a brief meeting, but the David girl has been told to remain in her hotel until they go back to the US.’

‘She won’t obey you,’ Tony told him. ‘She thinks she’s above things like orders or instructions.’

‘So I gather. But it has been impressed on her that if she sets one foot outside her hotel she’ll be deported to Israel as soon as possible. The others have been informed of this and know they are responsible for making sure she obeys.’

‘What did Donald make of this?’ Adam asked John and Tony.

‘He wasn’t impressed at all,’ John said. ‘I’ve never heard him say anything negative about anyone before, although I’ve only met him a few times before this last couple of weeks. I get the impression, though, he’d rather say nothing than say anything bad about someone.’

Tony nodded. ‘That’s Ducky all over, although he isn’t averse to taking someone on one side and telling them off privately. He’s not looking forward to going back to NCIS at all.’

‘Really?’ Adam was surprised. ‘I got the impression he loved his job.’

‘Oh, he does. But he’s tired of the politics that have appeared since Jenny Shepard took over as Director. And annoyed she refused to back me up properly while Gibbs was on his long vacation. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if he decides not to go back. He’s well over sixty now and may just think it’s more trouble than it’s worth.’

Harry tapped the table to get everyone’s attention. ‘Are we any further on discovering the mole within the DSTL, twins?’

‘Again, we’re waiting for the money trail,’ Colin admitted. ‘Ruth’s delving through it but it’s exceedingly complicated and whoever is responsible has covered their tracks pretty well. Not well enough to fool Ruth, mind you, but it is taking her some time.’

‘Good. Thank you.’ Harry glanced at his notes again. ‘Adam, go and visit Jack and see what he’s got for us. Apparently some information came in overnight. John, Tony, look over the risk assessment Ruth’s completed for the DSTL and give me your recommendations. Twins, back to your computers and do whatever it is you do.’ they all smiled. Harry dealt perfectly well with technology but liked to give the impression he was a bit of a Luddite. ‘The NCIS people will be here at 1 so be ready, John and Tony. We’ll meet them in the ground floor conference room. I’m not having them on the Grid. Adam, I’d like you here if you can manage it. Right, people. Let’s get on with it!’
It was no surprise to anyone when Harry received a phone call just before 1pm to say David had turned up at Thames House with the NCIS trio. He ordered security to hold them in a ground floor conference room with an armed guard, then put in a call to the Home Secretary explaining what had happened.

‘Is she completely stupid?’ Kilbride asked.

‘Which one of them?’ Harry asked in reply. ‘We explained what would happen if David came here. This is just a courtesy call to tell you we’re putting her on plane for Tel Aviv as soon as possible.’

‘It’s not going to create problems for us with the Israelis is it?’

‘Because Eli David’s daughter was effectively smuggled into the country under false documents? Pretty difficult to determine what they’d complain about. I’m certain if we did the same in Israel, they’d just shoot whoever it was.’

‘Have you informed the Secs def… deft… Secretary of Defence?’

‘SecDef. Not yet. It’s my next call. At least this time he’s likely to be awake and not grumble at me!’

Harry gathered his officers and Malcolm promised to record the meeting. They found Jack O’Neill and his team, along with a grinning Adam, waiting for them on the ground floor.

‘I wasn’t about to miss out on what promises to be an entertaining afternoon,’ Jack told them happily. ‘You can’t buy entertainment like this. I brought popcorn.’ He waved a carrier bag full of smaller bags and passed it round, all the while grinning widely.

Harry just shook his head and hoped this was all being recorded. He was certain the SecDef and HomSec would appreciate copies. The group, now up to seven, made their way into the conference room where the previous night’s visitors were being held under armed guard.

‘So, what part of ‘don’t bring the David girl’ did you have trouble with?’ Jack asked politely, and made himself comfortable while Shepard opened and closed her mouth like a fish.

‘You have no right to speak this way,’ David spat.

Jack opened his bag of popcorn, threw a piece into the air and caught it in his mouth.

‘Show-off!’ muttered Daniel Jackson sitting beside him and opening his own bag.

Harry watched with interest as Shepard went red, then white with anger.

‘You have no right to speak this way,’ she hissed at Jack, who looked around in surprise.

‘Is there an echo in here? Danny, is there an echo?’

John, Tony and Adam exchanged grins as they took seats further down the table from Harry and Jack, and Sam Carter joined them. She whispered something which made them laugh and Harry, much as he was enjoying Jack’s floor show, decided to take control before Shepard had an aneurysm.
‘You were instructed that David should remain at your hotel.’ It wasn’t a question. Harry knew she’d been informed. ‘Why is she here?’

‘You had no right to give such an instruction,’ Shepard told him, voice shaking with rage. ‘Ziva is one of my agents.’

‘No, she’s not.’ Jack threw another piece of popcorn into the air. ‘She’s an agent of Mossad and a liaison officer for you. Although, I have no idea why NCIS should need a Mossad liaison officer.’

As Shepard opened her mouth to reply, he spoke again. ‘And neither does Peter West.’

Shepard’s mouth closed.

‘Who is this Peter West and what does he have to do with this matter?’ David asked angrily. ‘It is Jenny’s decision that I be a liaison officer and not the business of anyone else.’

Jack caught another piece of popcorn. ‘Tell her who Peter West is,’ he ordered with a malicious grin.

‘He’s the Secretary of Defence,’ she told David, very unwillingly.

‘And what does that matter? You answer to the Navy’s Secretary.’

‘Who in turn answers to the Secretary of Defence,’ Harry explained, directing a small smile at Jack who grinned back and ate some more popcorn.

‘What does he mean, Jenny?’

‘Y’know? I was told you spoke and understood English,’ Jack said conversationally. ‘But now, I’m beginning to wonder. You didn’t understand ‘stay the fuck away’ and now you don’t understand ‘he’s my boss’.’ He turned to the scowling Shepard. ‘Tell me again why you wanted her?’ When Shepard turned her head away, he slapped his hand on the table, making everyone jump. ‘It wasn’t a suggestion, Shepard. Why did you employ her?’

Harry hoped the others, especially Tony, were enjoying the performance as much as he was. Being head of Section D was frequently a thankless, dirty job so you had to get your kicks when you could. And today is the day that just keeps giving!

‘I don’t answer to you!’

‘Yes, you do.’ Sam leaned forward. ‘Secretary West instructed the CIA to liaise with MI5 to sort out your mess. If you want to speak to him, I’m sure he’d be happy to take your call.’ She sat back with a smirk.

It was clear Shepard didn’t want to do that, but equally clear that if she refused to answer, she was as good as admitting it was done as a personal favour to either the head of Mossad or his only daughter. Harry could almost see her conflicts playing out in her mind as well as the moment she made up her mind.

‘Ziva was the controller of her half-brother, Ari Haswari, when he killed an NCIS agent, and threatened another.’ She glanced in his direction. ‘She was forced to kill him to protect Agent Gibbs. She feared to return to Israel and came to me as we were old friends. I offered her a job.’

There were sharp intakes of breath from Tony and the other young NCIS agent, but surprisingly, not from Gibbs himself. Harry, however, was watching David, and she was definitely smirking. He
noticed Jack and Sam were watching her as well.

‘So you did her a favour,’ Harry clarified. Shepard wasn’t expecting this question.

‘I…yes. Yes, I did.’

‘Because you thought she might be in danger if this became known to Eli David?’

Shepard nodded uneasily. It was clear she had no idea where this was going and had assumed Harry’s questions would take a different route.

‘Well, yes. And because she’d saved Agent Gibbs’ life.’

‘So it wasn’t a favour but a reward?’

‘I… no… yes… what do you want me to say!’

‘We want you to tell us the truth,’ Jack said implacably

‘That is the truth!’

‘Is it? Or is it your version of the truth?’

‘It’s the truth!’

‘So a reward and a favour, huh?’

Shepard folded her arms and looked away from him, lips pressed together, but Harry had little sympathy for her. Malfeasance in public office was unlawful, even for a life-saving act, and rightly so. But there was something else here. He had a strong suspicion this was only part of the truth and he was fairly certain the others on his side the table agreed with him.

‘You’re claiming that you feared David would be in danger if she returned to Israel, so you offered her a job.’ Harry wanted to make sure he was understanding this properly.

Shepard nodded, eyes darting between Jack and himself.

Jack munched on popcorn for a while, then turned to David, asking ‘Is this true?’ in such a mild tone that Harry immediately suspected Jack knew far more than he was letting on, so he smiled to himself and opened his own bag of popcorn.

David took her time in answering and when she did, it was with a mildly insolent tone.

‘Of course.’

‘So this Hairy Haswanobi was your brother?’

Daniel choked and Jack made a big fuss about slapping him on his back, which gave their side of the table time to straighten their faces.

‘Ari Haswari!’

‘Hairy—’ Jack began.

‘Ari!’ David almost shouted.

‘Ari, Hairy, what’s the difference?’
David glared at him.

‘So, that guy. He was your brother?’

‘My half brother, yes.’

‘Same dad, same mum?’

‘We shared a father.’

‘Right, right. Head of Mossad.’

‘Yes!’ David was getting angrier.

‘So Hairy’s mother—’

‘Ari! Are you so stupid you cannot correctly pronounce his name!’

There was an immediate cessation of sound, and as David looked around, startled, it was almost possible to see the young NCIS officer dissociate himself from her. Shepard put her hand on David’s arm, but she shook it off.

‘Why are you asking these ridiculous questions!’ She turned to Shepard. ‘This man is a fool and yet you permit him to question me. Me!’

‘Ziva,’ Shepard said quietly. ‘Ziva. Calm down. This is just a—’

‘He is a fool and I will answer no more questions. Jenny, come, we must leave. She stood, expecting her colleagues to follow her.

‘Sit down, Ms David!’ There was no sign of the clown in Jack now and David frowned, as though thrown by this apparent change of tack which really didn’t speak awfully well of the vaunted Mossad training, Harry decided, enjoying his popcorn.

‘You were instructed to remain in your hotel. Why didn’t you?’

David retook her seat, looking around in confusion.

Really not impressed with Mossad training.

‘It was a ridiculous instruction,’ she shrugged.

‘Right. You disobey any orders you don’t like, don’t you? Orders don’t apply to you.’

Her lip curled as she stared at him.

‘Are you in the habit of disobeying your father?’

‘No!’

‘And yet you do.’

‘No! I do not!’

‘The evidence says you do.’

‘I always obey my father! It is the way of my people!’
‘So you always obey him, huh?’

‘Of course!’

She walked directly into it. Shepard opened her mouth but before she could speak, Jack closed the trap.

‘You claim you disobeyed him by shooting Ari. Were you not disobeying him, but in fact following his orders?’

Harry watched Gibbs sink back into his seat, close his eyes and sigh. David was looking around, clearly hoping someone to help her. He decided it was his turn to ask a few questions.

‘So your father ordered you to kill your brother. Why?’

If looks could kill, the entire CIA and MI5 contingent would be stone dead, Harry decided.

‘Why was it so important for you to be employed by NCIS?’

Still no reply, but Shepard was looking even more uncomfortable than before. Harry turned his attention to her.

‘Why did you smuggle her into the UK?’

‘I didn’t smuggle her into the UK!’

‘No? What do you call using a false identity to get a foreign agent into a county to prevent questions being asked?’

‘It wasn’t to prevent questions being asked!’

‘So why was it?’

Silence.

‘Let’s try something else. Why did you permit David to accompany you today when you were explicitly told she should stay behind?’

Silence.

‘And that if she didn’t, you would all be held responsible and she would be deported.’

Shepard began to look a little uneasy while the young agent looked downright scared. Harry glanced down at his notes, taking a piece of popcorn absently.

‘Agent McGee.’

The young agent jumped. ‘Um…yes, sir?’

‘You were aware that if David left your hotel, you would all be accountable?’

‘I…um…I…I was…um… I was aware, sir. Yes, sir.’

‘How long have you worked for NCIS?’

‘I… I’m sorry, sir?’
‘How long have you worked for NCIS? It’s not a difficult question.’

‘No, sir. I…um…’

‘Agent McGee!’

‘Almost three years, sir.’

‘Do you like it?’

A panicked McGee glanced around him, looking for help.

‘I…yes, sir. Yes, I like it.’

‘And yet you’ve risked your career by allowing David to accompany you here today.’ Harry honestly thought the young man would burst into tears. He turned his attention back to David.

‘You’ve put your team members’ careers at risk by disobeying orders and you were told you would be deported if you came here, so why come? What was so important that you had to come here today?’

‘You cannot deport me!’

‘Yes, we can and yes we will. A police van is waiting outside to take you to the airport where you will be put on a plane for Tel Aviv. Your Embassy has been notified and one of their staff will accompany you.’

‘You cannot do this!’

‘Yeah, he really can,’ Jack drawled as Harry stood, opened the door and motioned to someone outside.

Two uniformed officers entered and handcuffed David who began fighting and screaming, but she was quickly secured as this time the police had been prepared. Shepard leapt to her feet and began shouting but quickly found herself handcuffed too. Gibbs and McGee stayed in their seats though McGee was shaking with fright while Gibbs simply looked furious though Harry wasn’t quite sure just who he was furious with. The two women were taken out, both still screaming, and the door closed behind them.

‘What…what will happen to them?’ asked McGee, still looking terrified.

‘David will be sent back to Tel Aviv under armed guard and Shepard will be held in a cell while we decide what will happen with you all,’ said Harry. ‘Right now, we want to know just why you all came to the UK. And any fairy tale about coming for DiNozzo can be forgotten straight away,’ he added. ‘We want the real reason.’

---------

**Chapter Fifteen**
It was late afternoon before they got back to the Grid and there were still a number of questions outstanding although some things were a little clearer as McGee told them pretty much everything he knew - which admittedly wasn’t a huge amount - although he had believed the story he was told that Tony had been arrested by MI5 and NCIS needed to rescue him. McGee hadn’t given any thought to how Tony might be rescued from the British domestic Intelligence Agency and had been surprised when Tony appeared to be completely comfortable - to say nothing of not being imprisoned - with the apparent head of MI5. Gibbs, however, had been unsurprised at Tony’s freedom although he was furious with himself for having been taken in by Shepard and David. Tony, in his turn, was furious when he discovered Shepard had tried to persuade McGee to work undercover for her on the same operation she’d tried to force him to take.

They were no clearer, however, why Shepard had brought the entire group over to the UK. John, Tony and Adam discussed this while they were waiting for a briefing from Ruth Evershed on the money trail she’d been looking into and Tony was sceptical that the two very different issues might be related.

‘It happens far more than you might think,’ Adam commented. ‘And in this case, we know Weir was selling information and we also know Israel will buy pretty much any information available in the hope a few grains of gold might be found in it.’

Tony shrugged. ‘Maybe. I’ve had little to no experience with international espionage. Do you think Mossad were involved in the plot to kidnap Rodney?’

‘Not involved, no,’ John said thoughtfully. ‘But they may well have known about it and wanted a share of anything gained from it.’

‘And what do you think the Israelis will do when they find you’ve deported her?’

‘They won’t do anything because we haven’t deported her,’ a new voice said and Harry entered the conference room.

‘Huh?’ Tony looked confused.

‘She could be a valuable source of information on Weir and the Russian connection,’ Harry explained, and Tony noticed neither John nor Adam looked at all surprised by this news.

‘You knew? You knew and didn’t tell me?’

‘We didn’t know for sure,’ said Adam.

‘But we did suspect it might happen,’ John added. ‘Why deport her when it doesn’t gain us anything?’

Harry nodded. ‘We’re still debating whether or not to let her ‘escape’ on the way to the airport, in the hope she might lead us to anyone we’re unaware of.’

Tony frowned. ‘That could be quite dangerous. She is Mossad trained—’

John threw his pen onto the table with a clatter. ‘Y’know what? I’m really fed up of the way everyone says ‘Mossad trained’ as though it gives their agents some sort of superpower. So they know fifty ways to kill someone. So do I. They can track and shadow and stuff. So can we. They have super training in self defence. So do we! We can do everything they can, but no-one says ‘Ooo. MI5 trained’.’ He sat back in his seat and huffed.
‘Feel better now?’ Adam grinned, and when John scowled at him and opened his mouth to argue, he held up his hands. ‘Hey, I agree with you. Every word. But it does give us an advantage sometimes when the bad guys don’t think we’re capable and let their guard down.’

Tony looked from one to the other. ‘Okay. Be careful she doesn’t take you by surprise, that’s all I’m saying. Her training - shut up, John - leads her to act first and ask questions later. I know. I’ve worked with her for over a year.’

Harry nodded in thanks, then, as the door opened to admit Ruth, he jumped up to help her carry in a bundle of papers and a laptop and place them on the table. Tony saw John and Adam smirk at each other but didn’t quite understand why. Ruth set herself up and then clicked the large screen on which displayed a number of diagrams.

‘I think I’ve found where everything is and how it links up, but please bear with me because it is complicated. I’ve found payments from Kolya to various people, but it isn’t quite clear where his money comes from although my guess is either the Russian Intelligence Service, or from Igor Vasiliev and the Russian Mafia. Kolya has made payments to pretty much everyone in our cells as well as Weir and Landry, and I’ve also found payments made to Landry that I can’t trace but which appear in the same account as the others in the Cayman Islands. Weir keeps most of her money in Switzerland which makes things very difficult to track, but I think I’m there.

‘Kolya’s money is spread around. He certainly doesn’t declare it to the American tax people and I’m almost certain I’ve not found everything he’s hidden. One new name has come up, a Jennifer Keller, who works at the DSTL and has received transfers of money from Kolya, and has also made a few large cash deposits in her Nat West account.’

‘Nat West?’ asked Adam with a frown.

‘National Westminster Bank. You must have heard of it, Adam.’

He scowled at her. ‘I have, I’m just surprised anyone took a bribe and put it in their Nat West account. Didn’t anyone there question where it came from?’

‘Yes, which is how I found the cash payments. She’s being investigated by the Serious Fraud Office at the moment but she isn’t aware of it yet although they will be speaking to her any day soon. I spoke to the person in charge of her case and asked him to hold off from speaking to her as we have an ongoing operation concerning her and they’ve agreed but…’

‘They’re not known as the Serious Farce Office for nothing,’ finished Harry grimly. ‘Okay, I’ll have a word with them myself and make sure they’re quite clear on this.’

‘So we think she could be our leak at DSTL?’ John asked. ‘Shall I have a word with Rodney and see if he knows her?’

‘Yes please, John, as soon as you can. Was there anything else, Ruth?’

‘Yes. Weir drew out a large sum of money on Tuesday 24th October, eight thousand pounds in cash from her Barclays account in London just after 10.00. Her credit card was then used to purchase a train ticket at Waterloo station, so I checked the station camera footage - thankfully the images on CCTV and security cameras are retained for a month - and I found her getting on a train to Salisbury at 10.50. It got into Salisbury at 12.20 and I was able to follow her to a bench in the Cathedral Close where she met two men and handed them an envelope.’ She paused and took a drink of water. ‘Now, we can’t prove that the envelope contained money but I think we can assume it did. She then went back to the station and caught the 13.47 back to Waterloo. I have the facial recognition
software running on the two men she met as we have a clear view of them arriving at the meet.’

‘So this was after Rodney had been rescued and was safely in London,’ John clarified.

Ruth nodded. ‘I’ve asked for details of her mobile phone to be sent to us, but you know how
difficult it is to get that sort of information without a search warrant.’

‘Then get a search warrant,’ Harry told her. ‘Christ knows we have enough on her to lock her up a
few times over.’

‘Um. I have. Well, I’m waiting for it to come back from the court, but as soon as it does I’ll get onto
the phone people and…’ she trailed off. ‘Yes. Well. I’ll go and chase it up shall I?’

They watched as Ruth hurried out. ‘Nice girl, but she does flap a bit,’ John commented, which drew
him a glare from Harry. Tony suddenly realised why John and Adam had been smirking earlier. *The
old dog!*

‘Now.’ Harry clasped his hands on the table. ‘Ideas about what the two men from Salisbury might
be up to.’

‘Trying to kidnap the Zelenka’s kid?’ Adam suggested. ‘To hold that over them to get them to hand
over details of, what was it called?’

‘Project Pegasus,’ supplied John. ‘Possible, but Meredith is being well looked after at a place they’d
struggle to discover.’

‘A break in at DSTL?’ Tony suggested. ‘Try and get the information directly?’

‘But why would they break in when they have direct access to someone there?’ asked Adam.

‘If this Keller woman isn’t in Rodney’s department, she might have trouble getting to what they
want.’

‘Rodney’s already explained that the information they’re after isn’t there, at least not enough to make
any sense of,’ John pointed out. ‘And he also said that very few people actually knew about Project
Pegasus anyway, so we may find Keller is on Rodney’s staff.’

‘John, go and call him now so we can clear this bit up,’ Harry ordered. ‘Do it in my office for some
privacy. We’ll carry on brainstorming.’

It appeared, however, that any more ideas had dried up as no-one had anything to suggest while John
was gone. Fortunately he returned after a few minutes.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t all hear Rodney yelling,’ he told them, sitting back down. ‘Keller does
work for him. She’s one of his lab techs and I expect her ears are burning after the words Rodney
used to describe her! He wanted to fire her straight away but I told him to keep quiet until we know
just what’s happening. He’s hopping mad though.’

The others grinned at this description.

‘Do the bad guys know nothing is kept at the DSTL?’ Tony asked

‘If they have access to Keller they do, as she’ll have told them, or at least told Kolya,’ John said.
‘Why?’

‘I was wondering if they might try and break in.’
'How long is your chum down there for, John?' Adam asked. ‘Has he gone back to Scotland yet?’

‘Major Lorne is down until Friday,’ Harry told him. ‘And if we’ve not wrapped this up by then another team is coming down to take over. The Home Secretary sorted it out yesterday after he left here. We don’t want to leave the DSTL vulnerable and it could be some time before a new security company is put in place. In the meantime, the Royal Marines will be sharing guard duty with the current security people. Or at least until they walk off site in frustration,’ he finished happily, and when the others looked a little confused, he continued; ‘If we just kick them out, we’ll have to pay thousands in breach of contract, but if they break the contact and leave site, they have to pay us.’

‘So the Royal Marines are able to have fun and games officially pissing them off?’

‘It’s what we do best.’ John nodded in satisfaction.

‘But we still don’t know why those two men were hired.’

———

For the first time since this whole mess had started John was reluctant to go home. Not because he didn’t want to see Rodney, because he did, desperately so. But all the other folk at Holly Lodge? He could do without them and without having to be polite. He wanted a beer, junk food, and to curl up with his scientist and shut out the whole world. Instead, he’d have to eat a proper meal at a proper table, and be nice and charming and all the other crap that came with being well brought-up and well mannered. So when he sighed heavily he just knew his cousin raised his eyebrows, even though John was driving and couldn’t see Tony’s face.

‘S’up?’ Tony asked.

‘Nothing really. It’s just been a long day and I’m tired.’

‘And now you’re going to have to play nice for the whole house-full?’

John huffed. ‘How did you know?’

‘Come on, John! It’s not that difficult. You normally live alone during the week and now there’re six of us and Brian. I feel a little the same, and this is supposed to be a vacation for me!’

John grimaced. ‘D’you mind being dragged into work while you’re on your hols? ‘M’fraid I forgot that bit. I’ve just got used to having you around. Should I apologise?’

Tony laughed. ‘Are you kidding? This is the best fun I’ve had for years! I get to work for MI5. MI freaking 5! You realise just how awesome that is, right? I’m living the plot of ‘The Ipcress File’! And I got to see my bitch of a boss and her little assassin sidekick led off in handcuffs! You can’t buy entertainment like that! Plus, everyone at MI5 treats me like I can really help and they listen to my ideas and stuff. I didn’t realise just how much I’d got used to being ignored or pushed off as a joke. I love it here. And, you know, working with you and us being friends again and meeting Rodney and Brian. I’m just not looking forward to going back Stateside, especially as I’ve been on the opposite side of this affair to my boss, well, bosses. And seeing Ziva taken away in handcuffs might have been great, but I’m probably gonna have to work with her again and she’s gonna hate that. And so am I, but for different reasons.’ He finally broke off to take a breath.
John laughed, suddenly feeling much better, lighter. ‘So, you’re happy here?’

‘Ya think?’

‘You could stay y’know. Harry’d like to keep you.’

Tony was silent for a while, so long, in fact, that John took a swift look at him, wondering if everything was alright.

‘Tony?’

‘I’m fine, John. I was just wondering what it would be like here, working with you full time.’

‘Well, for a start, you’d probably work mostly with Adam as I don’t think we could be on a team together, but I think I’d quite like it. David is only four years older than me, but he seems much more than that really. Maybe it’s because he’s the heir, I don’t know, but I do know I’ve enjoyed having you around, having family around. And so has Rodney, and Brian of course, but then he’d like anyone who’d feed him or rub his belly!’

Tony laughed. ‘I’ve gotten pretty fond of them both too, but there’s a lot to think about if I did decide to stay.’ He fell silent and John let him be, recognising that to leave his job and his country in one fell swoop was a big decision to make.

The rest of their journey passed in silence, but a pleasant, genial silence: the sort only found between family or very good friends, which in their case John thought happily to himself, was both.

The other occupants of Holly Lodge had also passed a pleasant day, and Rodney pointed out to anyone who’d listen just how much work he’d managed to get done without the interruptions which usually peppered his day at the DSTL.

‘But don’t you need specialist equipment when you work?’ asked Tony, when they’d all settled in the sitting room after dinner with coffee, as had become their wont. ‘The sort of stuff that can’t easily be brought home?’

‘Not really,’ Rodney said, stroking underneath his chin with a thumb. ‘And if we do, it’s usually something we’d know about in advance so could plan it into our schedule.’

Radek nodded. ‘If we were perhaps to work three days at home with just two in our labs, we would each ensure that our lab work was properly planned.’

‘But it’s unlikely the DSTL would agree for all three of us to do that,’ Miko pointed out. ‘Who would supervise the technicians?’

‘And speaking of technicians,’ John cut in. ‘We need to discuss Jennifer Keller.’

Rodney heaved a great sigh. ‘I should just fire that bitch,’ he muttered which made Donald frown.

‘Who is this person and why would you wish to fire her?’

John opened his mouth to reply but Rodney got in first.

‘She’s one of our technicians who received a few cash payments from the bloke who arranged my kidnapping,’ Rodney explained. ‘The stupid bint paid them into her Nat West account and John wouldn’t let me fire her arse,’
'Because she may well lead us to anyone else still out there,’ John told him, for the third or fourth time. ‘We’re all pretty sure there are more of Kolya’s people out there, and we know that the two men Weir met are still at large—

‘At large? Does anyone really say that?’ Rodney snarked, and John glared at him.

‘As I was saying. Weir’s two chums are still at large and we have no idea how many others there might be, so no, you can’t fire her.’

‘Why would Keller spy for the Russians or possibly the Americans?’ Tony asked. ‘What’s made her turn traitor?’

Rodney shrugged. ‘No idea.’

‘Oh, come on, Rodney!’ Miko frowned. ‘You know exactly why she’d turn on you.’

Rodney looked surprised. ‘No, I really don’t. I have as little to with her as possible and the work she does do is shite. I’m always having to get her to run stuff again or check for errors. I’d have fired her months ago but it takes so long to get security clearances through, I wouldn’t get a new minion for at least a year if I found someone who looked suitable; so even if her work is shoddy, it’s better than the nothing I’d have if she wasn’t there.’

‘Rodney!’ Miko shook her head in exasperation and turned to the others. ‘She was trying to get him to ask her out for months, but he never even noticed her until I mentioned it to him, and then he said very loudly ‘Hello? I have a boyfriend’ and she ran out of the lab crying.’

‘Did she?’ Rodney asked in astonishment. ‘I remember you telling me about someone trying to get my attention, but I don’t think I ever knew who it was. I thought most people I work with had met John so, you know, realised I prefer a di…’ but the last word was muffled as John slapped his hand over Rodney’s mouth.

‘No! Not in front of Miko!’

Rodney pulled away from John’s hand and glared. ‘You have no idea what I was going to say!’

‘Oh, I think I do,’ John glared back.

‘Fine!’ Rodney folded his arms and stuck out his bottom lip in a fine sulk.

There were grins around the room.

‘I recall him doing just that not long after he came to live with us,’ Donald reminisced, ‘when I was home for Christmas I think. Mother threatened to wipe soap across his bottom lip and he soon pulled it back in.’

John looked thoughtful but Rodney poked his chest with his finger.

‘Don’t even think about it you…you…’ but just for once he was lost for words which made the others laugh although Tony was quick to tell him they were laughing with him, not at him.

‘By the way, Ducky, you should have seen Madame Director led away in handcuffs this morning. It was awesome!’

‘She was handcuffed again?’ Donald asked in surprise.

‘She was told very clearly that the David woman was to be left back at the hotel,’ John explained.
‘But, of course, they both ignored Harry, and David showed up at Thames House. Harry called the Police and they took them both away in handcuffs. David is going to be deported to Israel and it’s unlikely she’ll be allowed back at NCIS as the Defence Secretary was extremely annoyed she was ever given a job. He’s furious with Shepard and I don’t fancy her chances at keeping her position.’

‘Goodness me!’ Donald exclaimed. ‘How could she be so foolish as to ignore an order from Sir Harry?’

‘Well, they’re both pretty arrogant,’ Tony pointed out. ‘It turns out that her shooting of Ari, and oh Ducky! You should have heard Jack O’Neill. He kept calling him ‘Hairy Haswanobi’ and Ziva was furious.’

‘Hairy Haswanobi?’ Rodney frowned, cuddling up to Brian and ignoring John. ‘Who’s he? And who on earth calls their kid Hairy?’

‘His name was Ari Haswanari, no, Haswa… Crap! I can’t remember it now!’ Tony shook his head then grinned. ‘Anyway, the terrorist who killed my old partner, Cate Todd, turned out to be Ziva’s half brother and he went after Gibbs, that’s my boss, but when he was about to kill him, Ziva appeared and shot him instead and Gibbs was really grateful and so when Madame Director gave her a job on our team, Gibbs was okay with it because she’d saved his life, except she didn’t because it turned out she was ordered to do it by her father to get her onto Gibbs’ team and so she was lying all that time.’

‘Well, that was clear as mud,’ Rodney told him. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m afraid Anthony was a little excited there, Rodney, but allow me to explain—’

‘No, no,’ Rodney said hurriedly. ‘Thanks, Donald, but it’s fine. I got the gist of it, thank you.’

Donald’s eyes rested on Rodney for a long moment then he turned to Tony. ‘Did her father really order her to kill Ari?’

Tony nodded. ‘She admitted it to Jack O’Neill. Poppa David ordered her to kill him to get her a place on Gibbs’ team.’

‘But why?’

‘Because…well… actually, we don’t know yet.’ Tony blinked. ‘And we don’t know why they all came to England, except that it wasn’t for the reason the Director gave to Timmy.’

‘Which was?’

‘She told them I was being held by MI5 for questioning. She didn’t say what they were supposed to be questioning me about, just that they were holding me. She must have realised that she’d be found out quickly enough when they got here, though.’

‘Unless she was told by someone that you really were being held,’ suggested Radek, adding his idea to the mix.

‘But who’d do that? Because it was bound to come out that he wasn’t,’ Rodney protested.

‘That’s what we’re still trying to find out,’ John said, pulling Rodney closer to him and ignoring his muttering. ‘But we can’t think why she’d lie because, as you said, as soon as they met up with us they’d know Tony was here of his own volition.’
‘Unless it didn’t matter by that time,’ Donald said slowly, thinking it through. ‘All she had to do was make them believe they were on a rescue mission to get them all here, but once they were here, it didn’t matter. She’d achieved her goal. They were all in the UK.’

There was a silence as they all digested this.

‘That’s the only thing it could be,’ John said finally. ‘She needed a reason to get them all over here. But why?’

‘Does she need all of them?’ Radek asked with a frown. ‘What if she only needed an excuse for herself?’

‘Then she wouldn’t have brought the rest of the floorshow with her,’ Tony said immediately. ‘She could have found a good enough reason to get herself into the UK so…’

‘She needed one of the others,’ John finished.

‘Ziva,’ both Donald and Tony said at the same time, and looked at each other. Tony made a motion for Donald to continue.

‘She needed an excuse to get Ziva here and the only way she could do that, without arousing suspicion, was to bring Timothy and Jethro too. She spun a yarn about Anthony being held by MI5 to persuade Timothy and Jethro to accompany her so her arrival with Ziva did not stand out, and they came to here last night to maintain the deception.’

‘But why would yelling git agree to that when he knew you weren’t being held by anyone,’ Rodney pointed out absently, shifting to the floor to rub Brian’s tummy. ‘Donald spoke to him only a couple of days ago.’

‘Just a moment.’ Donald sat forward, a frown on his face. ‘Rodney, you are correct. Gibbs knew we were both fine when he called two days ago. He ordered us to go back to NCIS at once and said he wasn’t prepared to allow Anthony’s secondment to MI5.’

‘That’s right,’ John nodded. ‘I’d forgotten he’d called. So, if he knew about the secondment, why was he so angry that you weren’t being held by MI5 as Shepard had told him? He knew you were okay, Tony.’

‘As did Director Shepard,’ Donald added. ‘Jethro told me she hadn’t agreed to Anthony’s secondment.’

‘So why lie to us when they knew Gibbs had spoken to you, Ducky?’ Tony asked, very puzzled.

‘Ah, but did Director Shepard know that Jethro had called? We don’t know if she did. But, of course, that would still mean Jethro knew you were not being held by MI5, so why would he agree to accompany her?’

There was a further silence as they all absorbed Donald’s comments, then Rodney spoke up. ‘Okay, I’m getting confused here. Let’s set this out again. Yelling Git knew Tony was alright, so why was he angry when he found out she’d lied about her reasons for coming to the UK?’

‘Because he wasn’t angry about that but something else?’ suggested Radek, and John could see how much he was enjoying trying to solve the puzzle before them, and being a part of the group discussion.

‘He wasn’t aware she’d been trying to get both me and Timmy to go undercover for her,’ Tony said
immediately. ‘That’d make him angry alright. He hates not being consulted about stuff like that.’

‘Okay, that works,’ Rodney said thoughtfully. ‘So our next question is why did David and Madam need to be in the UK, or in London specifically?’

‘Ziva needed to be here, Director Shepard just needed to bring her, get her into the country without the UK authorities realising,’ Donald said. ‘Although that doesn’t explain why they brought Timothy with them.’

‘Yeah, it does,’ Tony argued. ‘It provided better cover for Ziva if it looked as though the entire team had come.’

‘So why would David need to be in the UK?’ John asked.

‘To collect something or to deliver something?’ suggested Miko. ‘It must be a physical object as news could be relayed through other means.’

‘Or to help someone with something?’ Radek added.

‘It could be pretty much anything,’ Rodney said in exasperation. ‘We could sit here all night and discuss who or what.’

‘Okay, let’s look at it another way,’ John said. ‘We suspect the Israelis were aware that Rodney would be kidnapped, and if they did they’d want some of whatever Kolya’s gang got out of him. Agreed?’

There were nods from around the sitting room.

‘And they might not know he’d been rescued and his kidnappers captured. What if the Israelis sent David here to find out what’d happened to Rodney and the whereabouts of the information they were promised. What if she was always going to be their link to the Russians?’

There was a pause as they all considered this hypothesis.

‘Rodney wasn’t actually introduced last night or even mentioned by name, was he?’ John continued. ‘So unless David seen a photo of him, she wouldn’t have recognised him.’

‘I can see how it would fit the information we have,’ Tony said cautiously. ‘But Gibbs’ rule 39 comes to mind.’

‘There is no such thing as coincidence,’ Donald murmured.

‘And what did Adam tell you this morning, Tony? It happens far more than you might think,’ John told him. ‘If she was under instruction from David or her father, to get David to Britain, there’s our reason for her and her merry band being here. And David needs to collect something that can’t be posted, or to actually do something that can’t be done by anyone else.’

‘Or meet someone who couldn’t get to the US?’ suggested Miko thoughtfully. ‘If it was someone who couldn’t get into America or who couldn’t afford to be seen there?’

‘The only person who seems to be involved in all of this who isn’t either a US citizen, or has no problem getting a visa is Vasiliev, the Russian billionaire,’ John said. ‘But I can’t think why he’d be refused entry to the US as he doesn’t have a criminal record, not that we know of, and like I said, he’s a billionaire.’
‘No,’ Tony said suddenly. ‘No. There is someone else who seems to be tied up in this. That chap you and Adam hate, the one Harry slapped down. He’s—’

‘Mace,’ John interrupted. ‘Oliver Mace. David came here to meet Oliver Mace.’

The suspicion that Mace might be the reason for Shepard and David’s trip to the UK was sufficiently worrying that John left the sitting room at Holly Lodge to make a call to Harry Pearce. He made the call in the library and had just told Harry how they reached the conclusion that Mace could be the link between NCIS and Mossad, when Rodney slipped into the room and squeezed in next to John in his armchair.

‘Ooof. You need to lose some weight, Fitz-Sheppard!’ he complained as he wriggled himself into a comfortable position.

John sighed, moved over a little, and switched on the speaker-phone. ‘You’ve got Rodney here now as well, Harry.’

‘Hi, Harry,’ Rodney called out, waving his hand for some unknown reason.

Was there something you needed, Rodney? Harry asked, and John thought he could hear the tiredness in his boss’s tone.

‘Yes,’ Rodney admitted, still wriggling a little to give himself more room. ‘I’m a bit concerned about Keller being the mole at DSTL.’

Do you think we might be mistaken?

‘No, no I think you’re right, at least after Miko told me Keller had been trying to get into my pants for a while. How can she not realise that I’m gay and even if I wasn’t, she’s not my type at all and… ow!’ he broke off and glared at John who had just cuffed him on the back of the head. ‘What was that for!’

‘Rodney, pipe down. Harry doesn’t need to know about your type of women, or men for that reason,’ he added as Rodney opened his mouth to argue. ‘Just tell him what you want and go. I’m working here!’

‘I don’t want anything, I was trying to help, but if you don’t want my help…’

Rodney. What did you want to discuss regarding Keller?

‘Oh, yeah, right. Well, I’m not saying she isn’t the mole, as she’s one of the only people it could be, but there’s very little she could actually tell anyone about Project Pegasus, since she doesn’t really do anything on it. Radek, Miko and I have kept it pretty close to our chests and the only things the minions have done are some calculations. We’ve kept them away from the project and working on the everyday stuff that we deal with.’

‘She does know about the project though,’ John confirmed, worried that they might have been looking at the wrong reason entirely for Rodney’s kidnapping.
‘She knows we’re working on something we’re keeping from them, but the way those blokes who kidnapped me kept asking for details of the ‘weapons delivery system’ proves they’ve no real idea what we’re working on.’

Rodney, just what is Project Pegasus?

‘I can’t tell you, Harry. I’m sorry, but I really can’t tell you, and certainly not on a telephone that could easily be bugged.’

‘It’s much harder to bug a phone than you would imagine,’ John pointed out. ‘And this is a secure line to Thames House anyway.’

‘Still not telling you. We can’t let it fall into enemy hands, that’s about all I can tell you at the moment,’ Rodney said stubbornly. ‘I’m having a meeting next week with the MOD’s Chief Scientific Advisor and I shall only tell him the barest details of it and only because we’ll need their permission and funding to create a prototype.’

‘Does anyone else know you’re almost at the stage of creating a prototype?’ asked John, his mind busy assessing the risk of this being known.

‘Nope. Only Radek, Miko and me. And you two now, of course.’

So actually, you were kidnapped too soon to be able to give any real details away.

‘Yes. If they’d waited a few months we might have had an initial prototype ready. Which is why I’m concerned about Keller being the mole. While she doesn’t have any details about Pegasus, she does know there isn’t anything physical to see as yet, and, like I said, she knows we’re working on something super top secret that is nowhere even close to being in a production stage. Why would so many people be interested in what amounts to a concept?’

‘Does Keller or anyone at DSTL know where you are?’ John asked suddenly.

‘No. She knows I’m with the Zelenka’s, but not where we are. And since you turned on the phone jammers, there’s no way she could find out, even by trying to trace our mobiles.’

Did she call you, or you call her before the jammer was switched on, Rodney?

‘I don’t think so, although if the Israeli & that woman who’s Tony’s boss knew where to find us, they may have told someone else,’ Rodney said thoughtfully. ‘We’re not going to have to move again are we?’

‘We may have to,’ John said, concerned that he hadn’t thought about that. ‘Damn them all to hell!’

Quite. Okay, well, good work, John. Pass on my thanks to the others, please.

After John had replaced the receiver he and Rodney remained where they were, squashed into an armchair, for a while.

‘Missed being with just you,’ John told Rodney, planting a kiss on his head.

‘Miss you too. It’s nice to get a bit of privacy for once, isn’t it?’

‘Mmm,’ John hummed, holding his partner close and enjoying the silence.
Wednesday passed quietly on the Grid, for once. Adam and his team had disappeared off on a new operation and Ronon and Teyla had taken the day off after spending much of their time recently in the basement with their guests.

All the kidnappers, bar Kolya, had been transferred to the police on various charges involving kidnapping. Kolya remained in the hopes he might be persuaded to divulge more information and also because he was a US citizen, and MI5 hoped to avoid any arguments with the US Embassy. The US Secretary of Defence was aware they were holding Kolya, and for the moment, it would have to be enough.

By Thursday, some ‘just us’ time with Rodney and a couple of good nights’ sleep made John feel much better. When he and Tony headed onto the Grid they stopped to speak to the twins, Colin and Malcolm, to see if any new information had turned up.

‘We’ve been doing some further digging into Henry Landry,’ Colin told them. ‘I’ve been speaking with Daniel Jackson to see what he’s been able to dig up, and it would appear that Landry’s made a couple of trips to Russia, one in the company of some other Senators and one on his own when he was the guest of Igor Vasiliev.’

‘What?’ demanded John, shocked that Landry would be so blatant about his relationship with a known member of the Russian Mafia and a suspected member of the SVR, or at the very least, one with very strong links to them.

‘He told the Secretary of Defence that he was trying to forge closer relations with the Russians, in the interests of world peace.’

‘And the Secretary of Defence bought that?’

‘Not really,’ Malcolm chipped in, ‘but there wasn’t very much he could do about it. Landry did nothing wrong nor illegal.’

‘We’ve also been tracking the movements of Vasiliev himself and his second in command,’ Colin said. ‘They’ve been in the UK recently, but went back to Russia a couple of days before Rodney was kidnapped. As far as we know, they’ve stayed there since.’

‘Weir hasn’t moved from her flat in the last 48 hours, not even to go shopping, and hasn’t made any phone calls that we know of,’ Malcolm reported. ‘To be honest, I’m getting a little concerned about her. I was going to suggest to Harry that someone pay her a visit, just to make sure she’s okay.’

‘Are the DIA and SVR still watching her?’ asked Tony, sitting on the edge of Malcolm’s desk and doodling on a scrap of paper.

‘The SVR are still watching her flat.’ Malcolm frowned at Tony and snatched the paper from him. Tony gave an apologetic smile. 'The DIA were watching Mason’s Bank but they’ve pulled their men out now.'
'Okay, I’ll have a word with Harry about Tony and I going over to see her,’ John told the twins. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. The two chaps Weir met in Salisbury. We’ve had the results of the facial recognition and they appear to be thugs for hire. Both have convictions for assault, and one also has a conviction for aggravated burglary. Ruth’s had Weir’s mobile phone records sent to us and there’s nothing we didn’t know about in there, and we now have proof that she’s spoken to Keller. We already knew about her meetings with Kolya but this is usable evidence if we do decide to prosecute her.’

‘Okay, thanks, twins. We’ll go and see Harry about paying Weir a visit,’ John told Colin and Malcolm.

‘Do they mind you calling them ‘the twins’?’ Tony asked as they made their way over to Harry’s office.

John laughed. ‘I think they’re secretly pleased we gave them a nickname. Proves we see them as an important part of the team and not just gofers.’

Tony nodded. ‘I always felt my team was my family, but now I realise I just wanted them to be. In reality, we’re a group of people with very different backgrounds who happen to work together. This past year has been difficult but it has been revealing in that I know just who my friends are.’

‘And…?’ John asked.

‘Ducky and his assistant Jimmy. They’re the only ones I would trust now. McGee showed his true colours while Gibbs was on his Mexican siesta by not listening to me and arguing with every decision I made, and Ziva… Well. I’d certainly never turn my back on her. Gibbs only cares about himself and possibly the results we produce as a team, but as for caring for me, Tony DiNozzo, he just doesn’t.’ Tony shrugged.

John squeezed his cousin’s shoulder in support as they entered Harry’s office. He could see just how badly Tony felt he’d been treated by his so called team, and he fervently hoped he would agree to staying with MI5, either as a liaison or as a full MI5 officer. Would it make me a terrible person if I hope the NCIS crowd get their comeuppance?

Half an hour later John drove himself and Tony towards Weir’s flat. Harry had agreed they should go and check on her, and as there were no other leads to follow up as yet, they might as well spend their time in doing something useful.

As John parked outside her apartment building, Tony looked around to see if he could spot the watchers from the SVR but there was nothing obvious. No parked cars with people in them, no-one loitering on a street corner. I suppose I wouldn’t spot them, not if they’re doing their jobs properly.

After showing their ID cards, the security man of the block allowed them to go up to Weir’s flat.

‘I haven’t seen her for a few days,’ he told them, after they’d explained they were concerned about her. ‘But I only work from 8am to 6pm, and she might come or go during those times so I haven’t worried about her. Not an easy lady to talk to,’ he added. ‘Prefers we guards call her Ma’am and doff our caps to her like she was the Queen, or somebody important.’

John knocked on the door of flat 12 but there was no reply. He shouted through the door but still no-one came, so, after again shouting through the door, they used the master key from the guard and let themselves in.
It was clear the flat had been searched. Books, their pages ripped and spines bent, lay on the floor, furniture was upended, drawers were emptied out and the contents of cupboards scattered about. Weir herself lay on her bedroom floor and she’d been tortured before she was killed. Knife cuts marked her face and bare arms, and her fingers looked to be broken. A single bullet wound on her forehead looked to be what actually killed her but she had obviously suffered before she’d died.

John sighed as he pulled out his mobile to call Harry, then turned to Tony, shaking his head. ‘What a waste. What a waste of a life.’

‘I wonder who killed her? It could be any number of people. D’you think Harry would mind if we called Ducky in to do the autopsy? He’s a brilliant ME and might just spot something we could use.’

John made a further call to Harry and Tony listened to the conversation this time as John put Harry on speaker-phone.

'It's a good idea, Tony. I'll get a car sent for him straight away, and I think it might be a good idea to bring Rodney and the Zelenkas into Thames House for the rest of the day.'

‘Do you think they might be in danger?’ John asked, a worried tone in his voice.

No, I don’t, but then I didn’t think Elizabeth Weir was in any danger either. Let’s bring them all here just to be on the safe side.

Tony and John poked around the house as much as they could without disturbing the crime scene too much, although Tony had to push past his inclination to seal the flat until the police arrived. He itched to take photographs and make sketches even though he knew that wasn’t his job here, but pulled out his mobile phone anyway and took photos of all of the rooms.

‘Force of habit,’ he explained when John looked surprised at what he was doing. ‘You never know if we might find something in them later on.’

John nodded and continued his search as they waited for the crime scene folk and the MI5 pathologist. As he was looking over what papers he could see scattered on the floor around her desk, he suddenly spotted something.

‘Tony, come over here and photograph this.’

Tony stooped to look at what John was pointing to. A couple of A4 sheets of paper showed fairly poor quality photographs of a cluster of buildings, set in countryside. They were either printed from the internet or were actual photographs printed on plain paper. Tony took his own photos of what he could see while John had a closer look at the printer which lay on its side on the floor, the top broken off.

‘Look, here.’

Tony stepped closer and peered down. A tiny SD card had been slotted into a port on the printer, barely visible unless you knew what you were looking for. ‘I’ve not seen one of these before.’

‘They’re pretty new. The idea is that you don’t need a computer to get prints of your photos. You just put the SD card straight into the printer and print directly from it.’

‘Well, it’s new to me, and I’m guessing it was new to whoever searched the flat since they didn’t look too closely at the printer.’ Tony reached out and carefully removed the SD card after photographing it multiple times from multiple angles. ‘Do you think this is what they were looking for?’
‘No idea, but let’s take it and have a look at it. I’d prefer not to leave it for the Police. Can you see the laptop or hard drive anywhere?’

They looked carefully, but it was clear the killers had removed any computers they could find as well as the documents in the secret space under the kitchen cupboard. Since MI5 already had downloads of Weir’s laptop and hard drive, they and the killers probably now had the same information.

‘Why do you think they tortured her?’ Tony asked as they drove back to Thames House, leaving the flat to the crime scene people.

‘Don’t know. Chances are her killing is linked to our operation, but we can’t be sure. Harry was going to contact Jack and co and let them inform the US Embassy, but she’d been dead for at least a day I would say, so unless anything appears on the security footage we’ve got from the building we’ll struggle to prove just who did kill her.’

‘I wonder if the SVR are still watching her apartment. Colin and Malcolm said they were earlier. If they are, it suggests they don’t know she’s been killed.’

‘Unless that’s what they want us to think. But I agree. I think we might have to look elsewhere for our killers.’

‘The DIA had been watching her. And Malcolm said they’d pulled their men from Mason’s Bank.’

‘That doesn’t automatically make them guilty.’ John pointed out. ‘Although I’m struggling to come up with another group who might want her dead, at least connected to our operation.’

Rodney was waiting for them when they got back to the Grid and he hugged John tightly.

‘Harry said one of your suspects was murdered,’ he muttered, face buried in John’s neck ‘I don’t like this, John. Not at all. I was just beginning to feel safe at Holly Lodge, but now I’m not.’

A bark and a bundle of hair suddenly threw itself at John.

‘Oooof!’ he groaned as a bearded collie bounced him. ‘Did you have to bring Brian?’

‘Well, I certainly wasn’t going to leave him behind again,’ Rodney retorted, dropping to his knees and cuddling his dog.

‘Rodney! The Grid is hardly the place for a large bearded collie!’

‘Oh, stop moaning! Everyone loves Brian. Harry’s already been feeding him biscuits, which of course means Brian’ll love him forever. And Malcolm and Colin have taken him round to meet everyone. So far, only Ruth hasn’t made a fuss of him, but she did say that she prefers cats.’ Rodney scrunched up his nose. ‘Who could possibly prefer cats to a beautiful boy like my Brian!’

John shook his head and left Rodney rubbing Brian’s belly as Brian himself lay on his back, panting, legs splayed out and tail wagging.

‘Sorry, Harry,’ he said as he entered his boss’s office. ‘I didn’t realise he’d bring Brian with him.’

‘No problem. You know I love dogs, and home just hasn’t been the same since my Sam died. Now, what did you find at Weir’s, apart from a dead body?’

‘An SD card in the printer that the folk who turned her flat over - and most likely killed her - missed.
Tony’s just taken it to Colin to get prints made of anything on it.’

And no sooner had he said this, Tony appeared holding a stack of paper.

‘There were a couple of hundred pictures on the card, so Colin’s only printed off photos of actual places. He’s setting up a laptop so we can look through to see what documents she photographed, but he thought it would be easier if he actually printed the places,’ and he plonked the pile of paper onto Harry’s desk.

Harry looked up at him and frowned. ‘Can you take this lot through to the conference room to look at? I do have other things to do in here.’

Tony flushed, and hurriedly gathered his papers - which had spilled across the desk - together. ‘Sorry, Harry.’

They moved into the small conference room and spread the pictures out, and John pointed his finger at a series of a dozen or so. ‘That’s the DSTL. Why would Weir have photos of the DSTL?’

He stuck his head around the door and yelled for his partner to come. Rodney arrived at once, Brian on his heels.

‘What’s happened?’ he demanded, and in answer John pointed to the photos on the table.

‘Why have you got photos of the DSTL?’ he asked, looking at them.

‘We got them from Weir’s flat,’ John told him. ‘Can you look at them and tell us where they’ve been taken from?’

Rodney nodded and yelled for Radek and Miko who came hurrying over. John explained where the photos came from, and the three sat down to look through them, sorting them into separate piles. Finally, Rodney looked up.

‘Okay, these ones here,’ and he pointed to a pile on his left, ‘are taken from just outside the main gate and show the security cabin and the main drive, although how she managed to take them without being stopped is anyone’s guess.’

‘Oh, I think I can make a pretty accurate guess,’ Tony growled, as he pointed to the shots of the security cabin. ‘You can see quite clearly these guys aren’t watching her. It looks like they have a TV or something in there. No wonder John’s friend was able to get a couple of his men in there without a problem.’

One of the other sets of photos were actually taken from within the DSTL grounds.

‘That’s our lab,’ exclaimed Radek. ‘Look! That’s your car!’

‘Who on earth took these?’ asked John, but Rodney replied almost instantly.

‘Keller. It has to be. She’s the only one who knows where everything is and who could get access to the grounds without a problem. The main question is why she’d take them?’

‘There might be something amongst this lot,’ Malcolm said, as he came in carrying a laptop and a further pile of papers. ‘I’ve loaded the documents that were photographed onto here,’ and he handed Radek the laptop. ‘Here are some more places, although I think these might be inside your lab, Rodney.’ He passed the new batch of photos to Rodney who quickly glanced through them.
'Yes,’ he said grimly. ’These are inside our main lab, and these are in my office.’ He laid out the photos showing scenes of computer monitors along with a couple of other machines John didn’t recognise. Rodney’s office was clearly rarely used as it was extremely tidy, unlike his study at home.

‘But, why?’ Rodney asked again.

Unfortunately, no-one had any answers for him.

An hour or so later, John gave Harry an update on what they’d discovered so far. The others were still looking through the laptop to see just what had been photographed. ‘I think I need to go down to the DSTL myself.

‘I agree. And I think you should take Rodney with you. No, hear me out,’ he said as John opened his mouth to argue. ‘Rodney will have the best idea if anything is missing or moved from where it should be, especially in his own office. Plus, no-one will ask any questions if he takes you in. You said they already know you as Tom Wilson, so you accompanying him won’t raise any eyebrows. He is a board member, after all.’

John considered this. It certainly made sense although he was very reluctant to take Rodney into possible danger. ‘Could I get Tony in as well do you think?’

‘If we give him some identification for a member of the MOD, probably. He’ll have to watch his accent, but I’ve noticed he’s becoming more British the longer he spends here. Give him a year and I doubt anyone could tell he’d spent most of his life in the States.’

John laughed. ‘He’s always picked up accents quickly. As a kid he was pretty much a Brit by the end of our summer hols. I’m sure he’ll manage to pass as at least mostly British. I’ll go and see what the twins can rustle up in terms of ID. See you later.’

Just after 4pm the MI5 pool car pulled up at the security cabin at DSTL. Rodney stuck his head out of the passenger window.

‘Dr. McKay with Tom Wilson and Anthony Gibbs.’

He didn’t even have chance to hand over the identification he’d collected from ‘Tom’ and ‘Tony’ before the guard waved him through.

‘Nice to see you back, Dr. McKay. Are you feeling better now?’

Belatedly, Rodney remembered that he’d supposedly been on sick leave. ‘Er, yes thanks, much better. I’ve just come to er, pick something up as I’ll be off for a few more days,’ and he coughed into his hand.

The guard gave him an odd look, but lifted the barrier for them to drive through.

‘What was that about?’ John demanded. ‘You can’t act for toffee, Rodney, and don’t try coughing again because that just yells ‘look at me with my fake cough’!’

‘I’d forgotten I was on sick leave. I was just trying to make it seem realistic.’
‘Yeah, don’t bother!’ advised Tony from the back seat. ‘It’s best to stick to the truth as far as you can and just make little adjustments as you need to.’

‘Thank you, Mr Gibbs,’ Rodney said sarcastically. ‘I can’t guess where you got that name from!’

Tony laughed. ‘I couldn’t resist it. And I know just how to act as Agent Gibbs.’

‘Except you’re not Agent Gibbs, you’re a mid level civil servant from the Ministry of Defence,’ John told him. ‘Both of you can stop acting. Just be yourselves as much as possible.’ John pulled up in front of a single story building. ‘Okay, Rodney. This is your lab, isn’t it?’

‘Why is it separate from the other buildings?’ Tony asked, looking around.

‘We occasionally use explosives in our work, so we’re well away from anywhere else just in case there’s an accident.’

‘I didn’t know that!’ John said in surprise.

‘Why should you?’ Rodney shrugged. ‘You don’t know most of what we do here and there’s no need to tell you. It’s all supposed to be top secret. One of our main objectives here is to design new weapons for the military. That sometimes means we use explosives, although most of our testing is done on the range a couple of miles away.’ He led them into his lab through an unlocked door.

There was no one there, which surprised Rodney as he’d been expecting the three lab techs to be there. ‘While the cat’s away and all that I suppose,’ he grumbled as he turned on the lights in his office, John just behind him. Tony was looking around the lab and was about to poke something when Rodney spotted him and yelled at him to stop as he hurried towards him.

‘Don’t touch anything! You have no idea what’s safe and what isn’t. I already told you we sometimes work with explosives.’

‘That’s not an explosive,’ Tony argued. ‘It’s a… well, I’m not sure what it is, but it’s not an explosive.’

Rodney was just about to argue back when he heard a curse from John who was still in his office. He spun around to see what was wrong but John called out first.

‘Don’t come any closer! Stay just where you are, or better still, make your way carefully outside.’

‘What?’ Rodney demanded, stepping towards his office, but this time John yelled.

‘Stop! Tony, grab him and get outside! Both of you!’

‘John?’

‘Now, Tony! Do as you’re told!’

It was clear John needed them to obey him, so Tony grabbed Rodney’s arm and began to drag him outside.

‘What? Tony, let go! Stop it! I need to—’ but Tony was insistent and he managed to get Rodney out of the building and away from the door. He gripped Rodney’s shoulders and shook him slightly.

‘Rodney! I don’t know what’s wrong, but John was every inch the Colonel in there and we need to do as he says. Stay here, well away from the building. If I have to tie you up or knock you out, I will!’
Rodney gazed at him in astonishment. Tony was clearly very serious, but he was extremely worried about John and what had happened inside.

‘John…’ he began brokenly.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Tony promised. ‘But Rodney, you have to do as he says. You have to.’

Rodney gave a small nod and took a few steps away from the low building. ‘Look after him, Tony. I don’t…’ but his voice broke.

Tony went back to the doorway and called out. ‘John? Rodney’s safe. Now, what is it? What’s happened?’

‘Some bastard’s put an explosive device in his office. It’s under his chair and looks like it has a compression detonator, similar to a landmine. If he’d sat down, then stood up, it would have gone off. I knocked the chair and I think I’ve primed it and started a timer of some sort.’

‘Can’t you just leave it and come out? There’s nothing in there more valuable than your life.’

‘It’s a compression detonator. If I stand up, it’ll go off.’

‘How long do you think you have?’ Tony pulled out his cell phone and began dialling Harry.

‘I don’t know. Not long I think.’

‘Harry? Tony here. John’s disturbed a bomb in Rodney’s office and thinks he’s started a timer,’ he said, trying to keep his voice low enough that Rodney couldn’t hear.

*Jesus fucking Christ! I’ll get the bomb squad out, but they might not have time… No. The Royal Marines, John’s friend. They might be able to help. I’ll call everyone I can. Keep them safe, Tony.*

‘Tony? What’s happening? Who was that on the phone?’ Rodney demanded.

‘I was talking to Harry. No! Stay where you are!’ he yelled suddenly as Rodney took a step towards him. Making a quick decision he ran over to Rodney, and grabbed him by the shoulders again. ‘Listen to me and do exactly what I tell you. Okay?’

Rodney nodded slowly, frightened by what was happening.

‘Someone’s put a bomb in your office and John thinks he’s primed it. No! Listen! He can’t move because he’s afraid the bomb will explode, but he needs to know you’re safe.’

‘Tony! Let me go! I need…I need…’ Tears ran down Rodney’s cheeks. ‘Let me go. I need to talk to him.’

‘No, Rodney. I can’t. John told me to keep you safe.’

‘What can we do?’ Rodney asked plaintively.

‘I…I don’t know, but we have to do as John says. He needs you to be safe. Will you stay here if I let you go? Promise?’

Rodney nodded and Tony slowly removed his hands, ready to grab Rodney again if he made a move, but instead he collapsed on the ground and put his head in his hands. ‘I can’t lose him, Tony.'
I can’t.’

Tony nodded, a massive lump in his throat. ‘I know, Rodney. I know. Now, stay here and I’ll go back and talk to him, but you must stay here, okay?’

Rodney moved his head which was still buried in his hands and Tony took that as a yes. He went back to the door to the lab and called out again.

‘John?’

‘Still here!’.

‘I’ve called Harry and he’s sending help, but he doesn’t know how long it’ll take. Can you move the chair?’

‘I’m sitting on it, but if I move it, I’m worried the bomb will go off.’

‘Fuck it, John! I’m coming in!’ Tony said, with a look back at Rodney, still on the ground, but now watching him like a hawk. ‘Rodney, I’m going in but you have to stay there, understand?’

‘Yes, Tony. I will, I do, just…just tell him… tell him I love him.’

‘No need, Rodney. You can tell him yourself when he gets out,’ Tony said, trying for a jaunty tone but pretty certain it didn’t work. He shook his head and walked slowly into the lab again and positioned himself so he could see John who was sitting stock still in Rodney’s chair, while still being able to keep an eye on Rodney.

‘John?’ he said quietly, and John gave him a humourless smile.

‘Tony. You shouldn’t be in here. Get out and keep my Rodney safe.’

‘He’s promised to stay where he is, John. He understands he has to do as you say. Is there… is there anything I can do here?’

John shook his head, careful not to move the chair.

‘Is there anything here that might protect you from the blast?’ Tony asked, looking around the lab.

‘Not that I could get to before the explosion. What did Harry say?’

‘Just that he’s trying to get someone here as quickly as possible.’

John nodded again, his voice finally breaking. ‘I…I’ve really enjoyed working with you these last few days. I…I think we’ve made a great team together.’

The lump in Tony’s throat grew even larger, if that were possible. ‘Me…’ he coughed. ‘Me too. Though I thought you wanted me on Adam’s team?’

‘You’ll work well with Adam. He’s a good chap. Misses his wife.’

Tony nodded, lost for words now. There was nothing he could do to help his cousin, the man who’d been his best friend in their youth. Who would have undoubtedly become his best friend again.

‘You need to go now, Tony. Go and see how my Rodney is. And Tony? Look after him for me, won’t you? Tell him… tell him I love him.’
Tony nodded and stumbled out of the lab. Tears were now streaming down his cheeks and he somehow found himself in Rodney’s arms when he’d meant to take care of him. They clung on to each other desperately, trying to come up with a plan to save the man they both loved, but nothing came, so they simply clung on. Suddenly, there was a massive explosion which blew them both over. Alarms began ringing and people poured out of nearby buildings where windows had been blown out.

Belatedly, Tony realised he should have begun to evacuate the area, but he couldn’t find it in him to care about anyone else as he and Rodney simply clung to each other.

Chapter Seventeen

It wasn’t long before they were surrounded by people, some crying, others asking what was happening, but no-one knowing what to do. Tony managed to pull himself together enough to order people away from Rodney’s destroyed lab, declaring it was a crime scene and no-one must enter. Very shortly John’s friend, Evan Lorne, appeared at his side.

‘Tony isn’t it? What’s happened? Why are you here? Where’s John? Is he with you?’

‘Can you get your men to keep people away from the lab, or what’s left of it?’ Tony asked, and grabbing both Rodney’s arm and that of Major Lorne, he dragged them over to the MI5 car which was miraculously still in one piece although covered in dust and debris. He pushed Rodney into the back seat and followed him in, pulling him into a hug, leaving Major Lorne to get in the front.

‘Tony? What’s happened?’ Lorne asked.

‘There was a bomb in Rodney’s office. John triggered it and couldn’t keep it from going off.’

‘Jesus! Is… Was…?’

‘John was killed in the blast.’ Tony pressed Rodney’s face tight against his shoulder. ‘Thankfully there was no fire but it is a crime scene so we have to keep people away.’

‘I’ll get right on it,’ Lorne promised, and opened the car door. He was back within a couple of minutes and his gaze fell sadly upon Rodney. ‘I’m…I’m so sorry, Dr. McKay. John… John was one of the best.’

‘He was the best,’ Rodney growled, and Lorne just nodded.

‘Harry Pearce called me and said where you were and that you were in trouble, but he didn’t tell me what the problem was. I got here as soon as I could.’

‘You couldn’t have helped him if you’d got here any sooner,’ Tony replied bleakly. ‘John said the bomb was like a landmine. Once it was triggered, it was going to go off. You couldn’t have done anything.’

There was a knock on the car window, and one of Mitchell’s men stooped to peer in. Lorne opened
Don’t disturb me now, Stackhouse,’ he snapped. ‘Can’t you deal with it?’ He pulled the door closed.

Stackhouse, however, had other ideas, and opened the door again.

‘Major. Someone’s hurt. We need a medevac.’

‘What? Who’s hurt themselves? Do they need me to wipe their arses for them! If this—’

‘No, Major. Someone inside the building. Someone’s hurt and we need a medevac.’

There was only one person it could be inside the wrecked laboratory. Rodney pushed Tony out of the car, followed closely by Lorne. They went straight to where Stackhouse was pointing and saw a couple of the Royal Marines moving debris covering—

‘John!’ yelled Rodney, and stumbled across the wreckage towards his partner, Tony and Lorne on his heels.

John lay, blinking up at them, covered in dust and grime with small cuts from flying debris, but alive and smiling up at Rodney.

‘Hey, you!’ he managed to say, before being overcome by coughing.

‘Lie still, idiot!’ Rodney ordered, his tone belying his words, as he sank to his knees and touched John’s face tenderly. ‘I can’t believe you lived through that!’

Tony and Lorne appeared at his side and Rodney beamed up at them. ‘He’s alive!’

‘I’ve called for a medevac,’ Lorne told them. ‘They should be here in a few minutes.’

‘I don’t need a medevac,’ complained John, trying to sit up, but he fell back down as he tried to move his left arm. ‘Mmm. Think that might be broken.’

Rodney opened his mouth as though to tell him off but instead just beamed at him. ‘We thought you were dead.’

‘M not dead yet!’ John said in a squeaky voice, making the others laugh.

‘Idiot!’ Rodney repeated fondly.

The sound of a helicopter arriving caught the attention of the many people still standing around watching and Lorne moved to clear them away from the site, making way for the medics to get to John.

‘We’re going to take you to the Royal Hospital at Gosport, sir,’ one of the medics told John as they gently loaded him onto a stretcher, Rodney grimly holding his right hand. ‘Sir, you need to let us move him,’ he told Rodney.

‘You can move him, but I’m not letting go. I’m staying with him,’ Rodney told him.

‘Sir!’ the medic protested, but Lorne stepped forward.

‘This is the Colonel’s partner and we all thought he was dead. Dr. McKay won’t get in your way, will you, Rodney?’
‘Dr.?’ asked the medic raising his eyebrows.

‘Not a medical one,’ Rodney replied shortly, eyes fixed on John. ‘Come on. We need to get him to hospital. And if you say you’re fine,’ he told John, who had opened his mouth, ‘I’ll…I’ll…well, I’ll do something!’ he threatened, but the tender note in his voice ensured John knew he was joking.

It took some manoeuvring, but they managed to load both John and Rodney - who refused to let go of John’s hand - and were able to take off. Tony and Lorne watched the helicopter leave, then turned to look at the ruined former laboratory.

‘We need to get a forensic team here,’ Tony noted absently as he and Lorne looked around. ‘And I have to phone Harry and tell him John’s alive.’ He shuddered as he spoke, remembering the desperation he’d felt when they thought John was dead, and despite not believing in a God or any other religious mumbo jumbo, he offered a small prayer of thanks to whichever deity might be listening.

Following a telephone conversation, Harry ordered Tony to go straight home to Holly Lodge, for which Tony was very grateful. He was still feeling emotional and wasn’t sure how he’d cope talking to anyone at Thames House. Holly Lodge would be bad enough, but he was so thankful he could tell them John was fine - hospitalised but fine - that he didn’t mind talking to just Ducky and the Zelenkas.

Tony wasn’t sure if he was insured to drive the MI5 car but decided that was a job for someone else to sort out if he were stopped by the police. Fortunately, the car was fitted with Sat. Nav. so he was able to get home without too many problems, although he’d never driven a right-hand drive car before.

By the time he got back home, he was exhausted, hungry and it was past eight o’clock. The others had already eaten, but Mrs Thompson made up a tray for him to eat in the sitting room in front of a log fire. Ducky and the Zelenkas knew about the explosion and John being alive, having been at Thames House when Tony called, but when Tony first arrived home no-one quite knew what to say although Ducky had given him a warm hug.

Just as he was finishing up his supper, the door opened and Harry Pearce came in.

‘I thought I’d call in and give you the latest news on John.’

‘How is the dear boy?’ Ducky demanded.

‘He’s doing well.’ Harry settled himself into an armchair. ‘He has a number of cuts and bruises but no serious injuries apart from a broken left arm and shoulder which is a miracle, really. He shoved the chair with the bomb into the main part of the lab and threw himself under Rodney’s desk. The bomb exploded in the lab but the desk and internal wall protected him from the worst of the damage. The entire building collapsed on him, which is what caused his injuries, and the blast knocked him out for a short while. Oh, thank you, Mrs Thompson.’ He broke off to accept the tray of supper Mrs Thompson brought for him and tucked in while she fetched a tray of tea and coffee for the others.

Ducky went to the drinks cabinet, pulled out a bottle of cognac and poured a glass for each of them. ‘I think we all need this,’ he said as he passed the glasses around.

Once Ducky was settled back in his chair with his own drink Harry continued, between mouthfuls.

‘The hospital are keeping John overnight, mostly because of the suspected concussion, but hope to
release him tomorrow. Rodney, of course, is staying with him and we’ll send a car down for them when John is released. He’s been incredibly lucky. I looked at the photos of what was Rodney’s office and lab and I’m amazed he survived.’

‘We didn’t think he had for a while,’ Tony admitted. ‘Rodney and I were convinced he was dead. It was only when one of Major Lorne’s men saw something moving that we realised he was still alive, and man, I’ve never felt so relieved.’

‘Do you have any idea who may have placed the bomb, Sir Harry?’ asked Radek, his face still a little pale.

‘We’ve got the forensic people down there now, along with some men from the Royal Engineers’ bomb disposal unit. I would think it’ll be a couple of days until we have any firm information but the twins are going over the photos of the DSTL we pulled from Weir’s flat. We don’t think Weir placed the actual bomb, but we do think the photos were taken to help whoever did. We just need to work out who that was.’

‘Rodney was pretty sure Keller took some of the photos at least,’ Tony said, trying to recall just what Rodney had said.

‘Yes, I know, but unfortunately we will need to be able to provide proof if we want a conviction to stick,’ Harry replied. ‘Still, it’s a starting point and we’ll follow up on it, although we have to track Keller down before we can question her about anything. She appears to have vanished.’

‘What about our other two lab techs?’ Miko asked. ‘Tony said all three were missing when they arrived.’

‘Kavanagh and Lee were both at home. Apparently Keller told them that she’d spoken to you, Radek, and you’d said for them all to take some leave. We’ve no idea what happened to her, but it certainly suggests that she at least knew about the bomb.’

There was silence for a while as Harry finished his supper, and he eventually put his tray on the floor, whereupon Brian appeared to check nothing had been left. He’d been searching for his dads since Tony had arrived home and it seemed as though he understood something serious had happened as he wasn’t his usual boisterous self, but appeared content to lay by the door, waiting for them to come home. A lump came to Tony’s throat as he considered how even Brian would have been distraught had John really been killed. He cleared his throat and broke the silence.

‘What would you like me to do tomorrow, Harry?’

Harry looked surprised. ‘I hope you’ll be coming into work. We’re desperately short handed with Adam and his team away, and now John out of action for a while. I’m going to need you to lead the investigation into the bomb.’

Tony must have shown his surprise at this as Harry continued. ‘Frankly, even if John and Adam were available, I’d prefer you to handle this as you have the best experience with police investigations. John and Adam aren’t investigators, so your talents would make a good addition to our section. I’m minded to give you a team of your own if you do agree to stay with us. You’d lead any proper investigations that arise which would help tremendously, since at the moment we have to call on the Met to provide officers or even hand cases over to them if they need investigative skills we don’t have. I do hope you’ll seriously consider staying with us.’

Tony found himself both shocked and gratified at Harry’s words. He’d certainly been seriously thinking about John’s comments that he stay in England, but hadn’t realised Harry wanted him to
stay for the skills he would bring to Section D. He’d rather assumed that Harry wanted him to stay as a favour to John, but this gave him a burst of such confidence as he’d rarely experienced. His eyes swept to Ducky, to gauge his reaction to Harry’s suggestion and found the ME had a wide smile on his face.

‘I think it’s a splendid idea, Anthony, and you should give it serious consideration. You’ve been unhappy at NCIS for a while and I know you’re concerned about what will happen now, after the contretemps of the last week. You have family here so won’t be all alone, so think about it, and perhaps discuss it with John.’

‘He’s not the only one I’m interested in working for us you know, Donald,’ Harry said to the older man. ‘I know you’re coming into Thames House tomorrow to continue the post mortem on Elizabeth Weir and I’m very grateful for that since usually a pathologist comes in from the Met on a case by case basis. It would be very useful for us to have our own, but more than that, you’re a profiler and since Zoe left we haven’t had our own in-house profiler. I’d very much like you to consider coming to work for us too. Your past service with us would make employing you a fairly simple process. I’ll have a look at terms and conditions tomorrow, and with the permission of you both, I’d like to draft a contract for each of you to look at. Obviously there’s no pressure, and I’ll fully understand if you do decide to go back to the States, but I would like you to consider what we can come up with.’

He stood and stretched. ‘And now I’m going to take my leave. It’s been a long day for all of us but at least we have some good news to go to bed with instead of the tragedy it might have been. Radek, Miko, I hope you’ll come into Thames House with Tony and Donald tomorrow. This house is very secure, but we’re not quite sure just what’s happening so I’d rather be safe than sorry. Goodnight, all, and goodnight, Brian.’ He bent and fussed the dog for a moment, then left to find his driver who was being fed and watered by Mrs Thompson.

For a while the only noise was the crackle of the logs in the grate. Eventually, Ducky stood and stretched. ‘I’ll say goodnight as well. It’s been a very tiring and emotional day.’

Radek and Miko followed quickly after him and soon it was just Tony and Brian in front of the fire. Tony sat for almost an hour thinking about the day’s events and Harry’s offer of employment, Brian asleep on his feet. At long length he stood. ‘Come on then, mutt. I guess you’re going to want to sleep on my bed since your dads aren’t here. How would you like me to stay in Britain? I could look after you when your dads want to go away somewhere. I think we’d both like that.’

Brian licked his hand and trotted after him upstairs. He liked this new member of his pack and his daddies were missing, as he knew sometimes happened. This time, though, he was a bit worried as all the other members of his pack were upset. Anyway, while his daddies were away somewhere, he’d stick with new Uncle Tony and make sure his feet were kept warm, just like he did with his daddies.

He did hope they’d be back soon though.

They’d taken John for x-rays and an MRI scan and wouldn’t allow Rodney to go with him. He understood that, really he did but it was awfully difficult to be separated from John even for an hour after what had happened. Thankfully, the staff at the hospital were happy to allow Rodney to stay
with John. He’d been a little concerned they wouldn’t permit him to stay, but both John’s military and MI5 files showed Rodney as next of kin as well as his medical proxy even though that term wasn’t particularly used in England, and neither had legal status. It had never been a problem previously as neither men had been hospitalised, but it did now give Rodney the authority to be there and to be consulted about John’s injuries and treatment.

He was very grateful for the private room John had been given due to his concussion and the likelihood of noise on the main ward and, as he sat waiting for John to return, Rodney finally allowed his thoughts to return to the DSTL and the blast he’d thought had killed John, and he shuddered. It was, without doubt, the worst few minutes of his life and how strange was it, that it had been just minutes between the blast and discovering John was still alive, when it felt like a lifetime.

More than that, he’d had to ask Tony to tell John he loved him as he’d never actually said those words to the most important person in his life. Rodney made a vow then, in a hospital room waiting for his injured boyfriend to return, and he vowed to tell John that he loved him at the first possible opportunity. Even if John couldn’t say the same words back at him, he needed to tell John, to actually say ‘I love you’.

Before long John was returned to his room, his left arm in a cast and strapped to his chest to keep his shoulder immobile. He offered Rodney a faint grin, but his face was pale and etched with lines of tiredness, and probably with pain as an anaesthetic was impractical due to possible concussion.

Once he’d been transferred - very carefully - to his bed, Rodney moved back to his side and clutched his hand.

‘Hey, you,’ John whispered, just as he had back at the DSTL.

‘Hey, you,’ Rodney repeated quietly but said nothing more while the nurses were busy setting up various pieces of equipment. ‘Did they do the x-rays? And the MRI?’

John started to nod, but screwed his eyes up in pain as he moved his head. Rodney put his free hand gently on John’s cheek.

‘Don’t move your head,’ he ordered. ‘Blink instead - one for yes, two for no.’

John blinked once and smiled a little. ‘Love you,’ he managed to whisper, and Rodney gazed at him in shock, not sure if he’d heard properly. ‘Love you,’ John repeated and Rodney felt tears sting his eyes.

‘I love you too, John Fitz-Sheppard, but I’ve been too stubborn and selfish to actually say it. I had to ask Tony to tell you for me earlier because I’d never said it to you.’

‘I did too,’ John whispered. ‘I asked him to tell you. We’re idiots, aren’t we?’

Rodney leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to John’s mouth. ‘Yeah, but I still love you.’

It was a mutual decision to let Ducky drive into Thames House the following morning. Tony would have driven if he’d had to but he knew Ducky was an excellent driver and was used to a right-hand drive car. Tony bagged shotgun leaving Radek and Miko to occupy the back and Ducky made short
work of the morning traffic and pulled into the parking garage beneath Thames House at a little before nine o’clock, which was actually a late start for all of them.

‘Anthony and I are supposed to be on holiday,’ Ducky explained to Miko and Radek.

*Best holiday I’ve ever had!* Tony thought to himself.

It was, however, strange to enter the Grid without John at his side, but he escorted Miko and Radek through to Harry’s office where they would be able to work in peace. Harry had moved himself to the small conference room for the day and he looked perfectly comfortable, papers spread about him, when Tony went in to see what his instructions were for the day. Ducky had disappeared to the pathology lab which was in the basement of the building, making it easier to bring bodies in and out Tony had supposed when he left Ducky there.

‘Hi, Boss,’ Tony greeted Harry who looked up in surprise.

‘Does this mean you’ve thought about my proposal?’

‘Oh, sorry, no. That is, yes I’m thinking about it but I’d like to have another chat with John before I make my decision, if you don’t mind?’

‘Take your time. You need to be sure this is what you want before you go burning any bridges, and speaking of burning bridges, take a seat will you? I want to discuss your, hopefully, erstwhile colleagues with you.’

Raising his eyebrows, Tony sat down opposite his potential new employer. ‘Ziva causing you problems? Are you still going to deport her?’

‘We have a couple of options which I wanted to run past you,’ Harry told him, sorting through one of the piles of papers in front of him. ‘One option, of course, is that we simply put her on a plane for Tel Aviv, but we wouldn’t gain anything by doing just that, so I’ve looked at a couple of other options.

‘We did consider allowing her to escape, as I think I mentioned to you, but you made an extremely valid point that she could just disappear and we’d have an angry Mossad agent, who is possibly also a member of a Kidon unit, on the loose in Great Britain.’

‘A Kidon unit?’ Tony frowned. ‘I don’t think I’ve come across that name before.’

‘It’s an extremely secret division of Mossad which is only rumoured to exist, although I have met one or two of their members in my time,’ Harry explained. ‘It’s a unit that specialises in assassination.’

‘Well, we’ve always joked about Ziva being an assassin, in fact she almost boasts about it herself.’

‘Which is one reason we’re not too sure if she actually is one. Most assassins tend to keep a very low profile, to blend in as much as possible so as not to draw attention to themselves. David is quite boastful, as you say. I don’t doubt for a moment she is a very skilled killer, but I’m not certain she’s a member of a Kidon Unit and nor do other colleagues I’ve spoken to about her.’

‘Plus, she’s the daughter of the head of Mossad, which already gives her quite a high profile I suppose,’ Tony agreed. ‘On the other hand, she did kill her brother. That’s pretty cold blooded.’

‘Half-brother, but yes, it is cold-blooded, but she killed for a purpose; to gain her admittance to the Major Crimes…’
‘Major Case Response Team,’ Tony supplied.

‘Thank you. It gained her admittance to your team, and while your colleague Gibbs obviously already knew she killed her half-brother, I was watching his face when Jack challenged her about acting on her father’s orders and he was surprised at that, very surprised, and possibly shocked that he’d been taken in by her. Your director, however, was not surprised, merely uncomfortable I suspect, that this was now known to all in that room.’

Tony nodded thoughtfully. ‘Do have any idea yet why Shepard allowed herself to be used like that?’

‘We don’t know for sure but I’ve been asking a few questions, both from colleagues here in London and also from people I know in Washington. Put together with the information we’ve had from yourself and McGee, we think it’s possible Shepard believes Eli David can provide her with information concerning her father.’

‘Her father? What’s her father got to do with anything?’

‘Jasper Shepard was an Army colonel who committed suicide in 1992 after being accused of involvement in the selling of decommissioned Soviet weapons due to be destroyed. He was part of a group who went out to Moscow shortly after the Soviet Union imploded to supervise the destruction, but was later accused of accepting bribes from an arms dealer: a Rene Benoit—’

‘Whose daughter Shepard wanted me to get close to,’ Tony finished. ‘I was always suspicious of that undercover gig she tried to get me to take. There’d be no back-up at all for me and I didn’t like the sound of it at all. Did she want to get revenge on him or something, for bribing her father?’

‘She didn’t believe her father was guilty. After his body was discovered and the post mortem concluded that he’d committed suicide, she fought against the decision. She argued for a long time that her father was innocent, but once the situation regarding the weapons was fully investigated it was clear her father was as bent as a nine bob note.’

The look of incomprehension on Tony’s face made Harry grin.

‘He was guilty of taking bribes, Tony, not gay! Have you ever seen her house in Georgetown? She inherited it from her father although she does have a sister so it’s perhaps shared ownership. It’s practically a mansion, yet her father was an army colonel and there was no family money to speak of. How on earth could he afford such a house on an army salary? In the end it was proved, pretty conclusively, that he did accept bribes, which I suppose makes his suicide understandable.’ He paused to take a drink of water.

‘It’s our belief that Eli David had proof that her father was guilty and essentially blackmailed her to allow his daughter to work for NCIS to enable her to pass information back to Israel. Alternatively, he might have claimed to have proof her father was innocent, with David being employed by NCIS etc. etc. Your SecDef has had people searching the NCIS computer systems and it appears David has copied a number of Top Secret files and presumably passed them on to daddy dearest. He’s furious that a foreign agent was given full access to NCIS systems, and that’s enough to get Shepard fired, but being complicit in espionage pretty much guarantees her a jail sentence when she gets back to the USA.’

‘So what’ll happen to her and Ziva?’

‘Your SecDef wants Shepard returned in chains, but we’re minded to let her go and see where she leads us to in London. We’ve decided to keep David locked up - largely based on your advice - but
we’ll permit Shepard to see her if she asks. We’ll watch her closely if we let her go and we’ll make sure she’s marked with one of those 24 hour tracker thingies the twins have come up with.

‘Now, would you mind taking the lead on the investigation into Weir’s death, please? Ronon and Teyla will work with you and are happy to follow your orders, but don’t hesitate to ask if you need extra help or aren’t sure of our protocols. The twins will happily look into whatever you need them to. I’m afraid we can’t give you full access to our systems as you’re still an agent for a foreign power, but the twins will do what you ask. Are you happy with that?’

It was an enormous amount of information to take in, but Tony nodded and accepted Harry’s final words as a dismissal. He took his leave and went to hunt out a cup of coffee and mull over what he’d just been told.

It was clear he’d managed to avoid a massive, steaming pile of crap by refusing to accept Shepard’s undercover job and was glad she wasn’t going to be able to foist it onto poor McGee. He made a mental note to try and have a word with his probie before they went back to the US, although he didn’t really want to talk to Gibbs, despite what he’d assumed was their previous friendship. That needed thinking over, and possibly a further discussion with Ducky, but he couldn’t help but smile over Gibbs’ reaction if both he and Ducky decided to stay in the UK. Gibbs’d be positively furious at them both, but really, after the way he’d treated them before and after his Mexican siesta, he had only himself to blame.

And with that cheery thought, Tony went to find his two new minions, although he’d better not call them that to their faces. They both looked as though they could kick his ass!
Chapter 2

Chapter Eighteen

Shepard and David were back in the police cells where they’d spent their first night in England and Shepard could hear Ziva ranting and raving from the cell next to hers which was distracting her from trying to work out just what had gone wrong since they’d landed in Buckinghamshire. She’d needed to get Ziva into the UK with no questions being asked and had then planned to go and get DiNozzo from the country house where he was staying before heading to London where Ziva had a meeting with a contact of her father. It should have been a straight in and out mission but everything had gone wrong as soon as they got to that house, which was clearly all DiNozzo’s fault. How dare he allow himself to be hired by the British! She needed him to go undercover to get her revenge on Benoit for killing her father. It was what she’d spent over ten years planning and she wasn’t going to be stopped by a two-bit Italian cop!

Shepard walked up and down in the small cell while she tried to think through the rest of her plans for her time in Britain. It was essential Ziva got to the meeting Eli David had set up otherwise he’d never release those papers proving her father’s innocence to her. After she’d got them it might be a good idea to persuade Ziva to give up her allegiance to Eli and work for her at NCIS instead. Ziva must know Eli didn’t care for her, only for what she could do to help him gain more power in Israel. Shepard nodded. Yes. She must make Ziva work for her and then she’d have her own personal killing machine. She liked that idea and began to make a mental list of the people she might let Ziva kill for her.

The young police constable who’d been ordered to keep an eye on the prisoners in the cells was curious about the well-dressed American lady in cell six. She was very quiet, although clearly upset at being locked up which he thought was understandable. He was more than a little concerned about her, though, as Sarge had said they had to be watched as they were very dangerous, although Sarge had been tight lipped about why they’d been locked up. She didn’t look dangerous, just sitting there, not like the other one who’d thrown her meal tray against the wall and threatened to kill them all with a plastic fork. He was worried about the older one especially since she’d begun talking to herself, even though Sarge told him it was just pretend and she was trying to get them to let her go. Young Vince didn’t agree. A nicely dressed lady like her couldn’t be dangerous, but Sarge had said to watch them so Vince carefully wrote down that she’d been talking to herself and nodding as though somebody was answering her, then went to put the kettle on for Sarge’s morning tea.

Shepard was finally released at lunchtime on Friday 4th November, two days after being locked up. There was no explanation, no apology and no Ziva released with her. She was permitted to see Ziva, however since the younger woman was still furious it was difficult to hold a conversation. She agreed to pay a visit to one of Eli David’s contacts on Ziva’s behalf, but only to say Ziva would be in touch as soon as she could. Shepard wasn’t very happy about being kept in the dark, thus she had little choice but to accept it and promise to do her best to get Ziva released.

Neither woman considered their conversations could be overheard or even observed; just one of their
many mistakes and assumptions. Harry Pearce smiled grimly as he watched them converse, their every word recorded, and when he nodded to one of his younger operatives to follow Shepard to wherever she was going, there was no indication from her that she even suspected she was being followed. Harry tried to remember who had suggested she was either stupid or arrogant: here was the proof she was probably both.

They’d discussed the chances of getting Shepard to take one of the MI5 black cabs which were fully set up for surveillance. The twins didn’t think she’d be foolish enough to get into a cab waiting right outside the police station she’d been held in, but Tony thought it was worth a shot.

‘I’m not aware of us having such a thing in the US although it’d certainly be a good idea, especially in DC. Maybe the Feebs have some but I’ve never heard of any. She’s arrogant enough not to think she might be under surveillance so it’s worth a shot.’

As Shepard disappeared in the back of an MI5 cab followed by Phil Green, Harry’s young agent, in a second one, Harry climbed into his chauffeur-driven car and nodded to his driver to take him back to Thames House.

Ruth was already following Shepard via the hidden cameras when Harry got back to the Grid and she smiled as he slid into a seat next to her.

‘She hasn’t changed taxis, changed directions, or done anything to suggest she might be trying to lose a tail. She’s either—’

‘Stupid or arrogant, yes, several people have suggested that.’ He watched the screen for a while. ‘Where do you think she’s going?’

‘Weir’s flat, I think,’ Ruth frowned. ‘Did we know they knew each other?’

‘We weren’t aware they did, but David asked Shepard to pay a visit to a contact of her father’s. She didn’t give a name, just an address, but I recognised it straight away. All we need to do now is work out why David would be visiting Weir, although we did suspect that Weir and Eli David were in contact with each other. This just proves our theory that they were, but not why.’

‘Her taxi’s stopped opposite Weir’s flat and Shepard’s got out and is walking towards the apartment block,’ Ruth reported, even though Harry could see the screen if he shifted sideways a little. ‘Green’s taxi’s driven past and he’ll probably get it to turn around somewhere. She’s crossed the road and tried to get into the building… She’s in.’ Ruth turned to Harry who had leaned back in his chair and was watching her with a smile. ‘What?’ she demanded, but he just smiled a bit more, while she flushed and turned back to the screen.

‘Right, she’s back out again, obviously they’ve told her she can’t go up to Weir’s flat - are you still keeping her death a secret?’ Ruth turned to Harry again, who managed to stop smiling and sit up straight.

‘Yes, for the moment. The doorman has been instructed to tell any visitors asking for her that she’s away from home and to take a name and a message if possible.’

‘So what will Shepard do now?’

‘She’s been told to get herself and her agents on a plane for the US tonight. We’ve got the information we wanted from her, that David had been ordered to contact Weir, although we did suspect she might have been meeting…someone else.’

Ruth gave him a sharp look but said nothing.
'We just want them gone now,’ Harry finished.

‘And David?’

‘Will be on a plane back to Tel Aviv tonight and will be marked persona non grata in our records. She won’t be allowed back into the UK with her own face again. If she manages to be smuggled in some way and we catch her, she’ll be arrested for terrorist offences and locked up. We know she’s willing to kill just about anyone who gets in her way. We don’t want that sort of person running around Britain unchecked and neither do the Americans. They’re going to mark her in a similar way, so she won’t be going back to NCIS despite what she might think.’

‘And whatever she wanted with Weir?’

Harry shrugged. ‘We may never know. She can’t have killed Weir herself as she was locked up most of the time, and we have possession of everything left in Weir’s flat after the killer or killers had searched it. We can only assume they took whatever they wanted and until we catch them we’ve no idea of what it actually was.’

‘Until we catch them?’

‘Donald Mallard had found various bits of stuff we might be able to use to get a DNA match and with Tony now investigating the flat, we may get some more.’

‘Stuff?’ Ruth repeated, and laughed.

‘Technical description,’ Harry explained, shamelessly. ‘He sent some samples off last night so we’ll hopefully get a result back later today or tomorrow.’

‘And do we have any other leads?’

‘We have a few people who would have had the opportunity and possibly a motive for killing her, but outside of that, we’ll search the databases and keep our fingers crossed. Now, I didn’t get any lunch and I’m starving. How about we go and grab a sandwich somewhere?’ Harry tried to keep his hope from showing too clearly on his face, realising that if he wanted a relationship with Ruth, he’d have to move very carefully, but to his great pleasure - and surprise - she smiled at him and agreed.

Harry was a gentleman from his head to his feet, but as he motioned for her to leave the Grid before him, he couldn’t help the megawatt smile on his face.

———

It wasn’t quite a celebratory homecoming for John on Saturday afternoon, but it wasn’t far off. Mrs Thompson had been baking and had made some of his favourite treats - lemon curd tarts and Yorkshire parkin - and had made a steak and kidney pudding for dinner. Harry, Tony, Donald and Radek were waiting at the door and when John looked around for Miko, Radek explained that she’d been invited to go and stay with their nanny’s mother, where Meredith was being kept safe, for the weekend.

‘I’m sorry I can’t let you go home yet, Radek, but until we’re sure we’ve got all the people hunting for you two and Rodney, I’d rather be safe than sorry,’ Harry told him.
Radek nodded, a mixture of understanding and resignation on his face.

‘So we’re a bachelor household now, are we?’ John asked, looking around the sitting room where he’d been settled on a sofa by Rodney, Brian cuddled up next to him while Rodney settled himself on the floor.

‘Yeah, but no strippers or drinking games,’ Tony told him. ‘We’ve only just got you repaired.’

‘And what am I?’ Rodney demanded. ‘Scotch mist?’ And when John looked at him in surprise, he sighed. ‘Hello? Boyfriend here, which means you? Not a bachelor, unless there’s something you want to tell me?’

In reply, John reached out his good arm, grabbed him around the neck and pulled him close.

‘There’s only one thing I want to tell you—’

‘Okay, no, just… no,’ Tony interrupted. ‘Get a room, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Oh, stop it. I just want to tell my boyfriend that I love him, okay? Am I allowed to do that?’ John glared at his cousin.

‘The pair of you can stop arguing right now!’ Donald told them both in a stern voice. ‘Sit down and behave or there’ll be no tarts for anyone!’

The other five men stared at him for a few seconds, then all burst out laughing. Donald glared at them, then realised what he’d said and joined in the laughter, which was enough to put any quarrelling between Tony and John aside. Tony put his hand on John’s good shoulder in an unspoken apology and John smiled up at him and nodded.

‘So what did I miss?’ he asked when everyone was settled with tea and cakes.

‘Well, we still haven’t found Jennifer Keller yet, and she’s our favourite for having actually planted the bomb, although we doubt she made it.’

‘What makes you think that?’ Rodney frowned.

‘Well, it’s generally men who make bombs…’ Harry began, taken by surprise at Rodney’s question.

‘And that’s your only reason?’

‘Well—’

‘You do know how easy it is to build a bomb?’

‘Well—’

‘You could probably get the instructions via Google these days. It was much more difficult before the advent of the internet. I had to search the local library when I made my first bomb.’

There was an acute silence in the room before John asked, hesitantly; ‘Your first bomb?’

Rodney twisted his neck to look up at him. ‘Yeah, my first bomb. I made a nuclear bomb for my science project when I was eleven. A non-working one,’ he added at the looks of horror he was getting from everyone except Donald. ‘I thought you knew,’ he told John. ‘It’s why I got sent to Aunt Victoria. I was sure I told you.’

‘No, Rodney, you never told you made a nuclear bomb when you were eleven years old!’ I might
‘Umm, what happened after you made it?’ Tony asked. ‘You said you got sent to your aunt. Was that your punishment? Being sent to Ducky’s mum?’

‘Don’t be stupid. I wanted to come to live with my aunt. At least she wanted me!’

John squeezed Rodney’s shoulder. He knew just how much it had hurt him, being pretty much abandoned by his parents after they handed him over to his aunt. It was rare he ever spoke about it but it obviously still hurt.

‘And the bomb?’ Tony asked.

‘The CIA turned up at my school and wanted to talk to me and my parents. They weren’t terribly happy but there wasn’t much they could do since it was a non-working model. I couldn’t get hold of any uranium,’ he told them, as though that explained everything. ‘They did suggest to my parents they keep a better eye on me since they hadn’t noticed what I was making in the garage. That meant having to actually speak to me though or even take an interest in what I was doing, so they looked for a boarding school instead. Luckily, my mother must have mentioned it to my Aunt Victoria and she suggested I come to Britain and go to Donald’s old school which she said coped very well with gifted children and so,’ he shrugged, ‘I came to England and never saw them again.’

John had known most of Rodney’s history with his late unlamented parents, but explained like this, in such a matter of fact way, it almost broke his heart. He hugged Rodney to him and kissed what he could reach of his head. ‘Best idea they ever had,’ he told Rodney. ‘Their loss was definitely my gain.’

After a short, uncomfortable silence, Rodney spoke once more. ‘That’s a long-winded way of saying Keller could have easily made the bomb herself.’

‘And the two men Weir met?’ Tony asked.

Rodney shrugged. ‘May have nothing to do with this, I don’t know. I’m a scientist, not an MI5 officer. That’s your job.’

‘Thank you, Rodney,’ Harry cut in. ‘That’s actually very helpful. We’re still looking for Keller and the two men Weir met. It’s possible they supplied Keller with the materials she’d need, but until we get the report back from forensics we don’t know just what the bomb was made of or how it was made. However,’ he paused and sipped his tea, ‘we released Shepard yesterday and allowed her to see David briefly. David ordered her to visit someone her father had wanted her to meet and, as we had half suspected, it was Elizabeth Weir. Shepard went to her flat but was told Weir was away so she returned to the hotel Gibbs and McGee were staying in. She’d been told to leave the country last night, but they weren’t able to arrange a military flight so quickly so they’ll be leaving first thing in the morning. David was flown to Tel Aviv earlier today, but as yet we haven’t heard anything from our agent there.

‘We had hoped Weir might be asked by David to visit Oliver Mace, but that was probably too much to hope for. It doesn’t mean we’ve ruled him out of being a part of all this as we most certainly haven’t, but until we get some more concrete evidence, we can’t do much about him. I think that just about brings you up to date, John.’

‘Thanks, Harry. How’s Adam getting on?’

‘He’s fine and they’re making some slow progress. I’m very glad we’ve got Tony here to help out,
otherwise I’d have had to ask for help from the Met.’

‘And we all know how much you enjoy doing that!’ John grinned at him.

‘We’ve also had some very valuable help from Donald,’ Harry told him, smiling at Donald. ‘He’s done the post mortem on Elizabeth Weir and has discovered one or two things which might help us to identify her killer, but again, we’re waiting for the results. Rodney, can’t you get some of your people working on faster forensic tests? DNA tests can take up to three days, more if the lab has other priorities.’

Rodney looked surprised. ‘I’ll certainly look into it. I have a number of chemists working for me. I’ll make sure to speak to them about it.’

‘Thank you,’ Harry said. ‘Having Donald do our PM has helped tremendously and has moved the case on much faster than usual, even with having to wait for results. I’m minded to speak with the Chairman about MI5 having its own labs. If Donald does decide to stay, we’ll be creating a mortuary lab for him, but I think having our own forensics lab would also be useful.’

John looked over to both his cousin and Rodney’s cousin. ‘Have you both thought any more on Harry’s offer?’

‘Harry gave us both draft contracts to look at last night,’ Tony told him. ‘I’d appreciate you looking over it, John, if you don’t mind, but unless you can find anything that says I have to hand over my first born child or something, I’ll be staying on with you.’

John grinned at his cousin and offered his congratulations while Harry’s face was one great smile. Even Radek, who wouldn’t be affected by Tony’s decision, looked pleased.

‘I, too, have decided to end my working career where it began.’ Donald smiled at them all. ‘I shall bring Mother back to continue to live with me and I suspect she will be extremely happy to have all her family around her again,’ and he nodded at Rodney who flushed in pleasure at being recognised as family.

Harry left shortly after their discussion and Rodney chivvied John upstairs for a nap. John complained that he didn’t need a nap, then agreed to it if Rodney joined him, leaving just Tony, Ducky and Radek in the sitting room. Radek and Ducky had become good friends during the week they’d spent together and Tony half listened to their conversation while he rested his eyes a little.

Tony was awakened from a deep sleep when Jim, one of the house guards, knocked on the sitting room door.

‘Sorry to disturb you, Mr Tony, but there’s an American man at the security gate asking to speak to you and Dr Mallard.’

Tony rubbed his eyes, trying to wake himself up. 'Who is it?’

'It’s a Mr Gibbs, sir.’

This took Tony by surprise and he wondered for a moment if he were still dreaming as he couldn’t work out why Gibbs needed to speak to him. In the meantime Ducky also appeared in the doorway.

'I heard someone mention Jethro’s name. Is there a problem, Anthony?’

Jim cleared his throat. 'The gate security called to say a Mr Gibbs has arrived and he says he needs to speak to you, urgently. He claims to work with you both, but Sir Harry didn’t mention any
visitors.

By this point Radek had emerged from the library asking what the problem was.

Ducky took control of the situation. 'Everyone into the sitting room and keep your voices down. I don’t want John or Rodney disturbed.'

He herded Jim and Radek towards Tony. 'Now, Jim, what is the problem?'

'There’s an American at the main gate asking to speak with yourself and Mr Tony but Sir Harry didn’t tell us anyone was expected and we don’t know if we should admit him or not.'

'Send him up to the house. I am prepared to accept responsibility for his admittance should Sir Harry question your actions.'

Jim looked a little wild eyed. 'Yessir. I'll get him sent here. Right away, sir.'

Jim disappeared to speak to the gatehouse while Tony, wide awake by this time, wondered where Gibbs had got a car from and if he was driving as fast as he did at home.

*Not going to be home for much longer.* As he thought this, he realised he didn’t care but, rather, was looking forward to his new life in Great Britain.

Gibbs finally arrived and stepped into the hall where Tony and Ducky were waiting, Radek having disappeared back into the library with a small smile of apology. Tony didn’t blame him for making himself scarce and wondered for a moment if he should join him and leave Ducky to handle Gibbs, then decided that was cowardly so he stood with Ducky and watched Gibbs close the door.

‘I’m not here to cause trouble,’ Gibbs told them, holding his hands up in front of himself, ‘I just wanted to talk.’

‘Then talk away,’ Tony said, leaning back against the doorframe to the sitting room.

‘Anthony,’ Ducky chided gently, and stepped forward. ‘Come into the sitting room, Jethro, and sit down. I don’t want the pair of you waking John and Rodney.’

With poor grace, Tony stepped aside and followed Ducky and Gibbs to sit down.

‘So?’ Tony asked when they were all comfortably seated. ‘What do you want?’

‘Anthony!’ Ducky said again, frowning at him. ‘What did you wish to discuss, Jethro?’

Gibbs regarded them both and sighed. ‘I wanted to apologise for my behaviour after I came back from Mexico.’ He paused when Tony and Ducky looked at him in surprise. ‘Yeah, I know. Broke one of my own rules. Happens sometimes. Still, I treated you badly, Tony, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know Jenny wanted you to go undercover for her. Glad you didn’t do it. There was no back up and it wasn’t even an official case she wanted you on. Turns out she’s had a bee in her bonnet about her father’s death for years and she never let it go.’

‘She also tried to get McGee to do it when I came to the UK with Ducky,’ Tony reminded him. ‘He’d never’ve lasted a day, and she didn’t care.’

Gibbs flinched. ‘Yeah, I know. I’ve told him to come to me if she tries that again, although I get the feeling she won’t be Director for much longer.’

‘I doubt she will,’ Ducky told him. ‘She kept a number of things from the Secretary of Defence,
including this little trip of hers to England. I suspect there will be another name on the Director’s door before very long.’

Gibbs nodded. ‘I didn’t know Ziva had been ordered to kill Ari by her father either. Felt a bit of a fool when she admitted it, but…,’ he shrugged. ‘We’re returning home tomorrow. Will you be coming with us?’

The way he asked made Tony think he already knew the answer and just wanted it confirmed. Tony and Ducky looked at each other then Ducky spoke gently.

‘We have both decided to accept the offers of employment MI5 have made to each of us. It means we will be close to what little family we each have left, and I expect Mother will be happy to return to the country of her birth.’

‘I thought your mother was Scotch, Ducky,’ Gibbs tried to joke, failing miserably.

‘We drink scotch; people born in Scotland are Scottish,’ Ducky told him with a small smile. ‘However, Mother was born in London, she only moved to Edinburgh when she married my father.’

‘And you, Tony? What family do you have here?’

‘My cousin John, who you saw the other day. He’s a former Royal Marine and a Senior Case Officer for MI5. His father, my uncle, lives near York on the family estate which is close to the Paddington estate. Uncle Patrick’s older sister was my grandmother who married into the Paddington family which is what my mother was before she married my father,’ Tony explained, saying more than he’d intended, as he was shocked at the sight of Gibbs both apologising and trying to make a joke. ‘You should come and visit when you take some leave,’ he found himself saying.

Gibbs gave a small laugh. ‘I may do that.’

He stood and looked around awkwardly. ‘I didn’t know this was an MI5 secure location. I also have no idea why you’d need a secure location but I’ll leave that story for when I see you next. You’ll be coming ho… back to DC to pack, I guess?’

They both nodded.

‘We need to discuss with SecNav when we can officially be released,’ Tony explained. ‘I’m seconded at the moment and I have no idea how it’ll all be worked out, but I’ll be back to close up my flat at least.’

‘And I will have to arrange to sell my house and find one here for Mother and myself,’ Ducky added.

Gibbs nodded and held out his hand. ‘It’s been a pleasure working with you, Tony.’

‘And with you, Jethro.’ Tony clasped his former boss’s hand. ‘I learnt a huge amount from you. Thank you. Take care of McGee for me, will you? Don’t let my probie do anything I wouldn’t do.’

They both laughed nervously and Ducky held his hand out, too.

When the door finally closed behind Gibbs, Tony leaned back against it, sighing. ‘Well, that went slightly better than I thought it might. At least he’s not still mad at me.’

Ducky patted his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. ‘I suspect he was never ‘mad’ with you
but rather frustrated with himself for the gaps in his memory. Then when he returned from Mexico he was trying to prove Ziva innocent of murder, which as it turns out was rather ironic.’

Tony nodded thoughtfully.

‘Are you regretting the decision you’ve made already?’ Ducky asked.

‘Not at all, I’ve just never seen Gibbs so…so quiet before. And he’s now lost two of his team, along with you and most likely his boss. Who do’y’ think will be the next director?’

Ducky laughed. ‘Maybe Gibbs himself?’

Chapter Nineteen

A relaxing weekend was what they all needed. There was no work, no excitements, and though Radek was missing both Miko and Meredith, they enjoyed their all male time together.

‘It’s not that I don’t like having women around, because I do, quite a lot,’ Tony explained. ‘It’s just…nice to be able to relax amongst family and not have to watch what you say or do.’

Radek flushed a little in pleasure at being included as ‘family’ and Rodney nodded in agreement.

‘I know it’s different for John and me, obviously, but I agree. It was one of the things I found most difficult when I went to Cambridge. I’d been used to an all male environment for seven years, and it was weird suddenly having girls, women, all around. I just never knew what to say to them, although Captain Kirk over there had no problems whatsoever!’

‘When did you two actually start going out?’ Tony asked curiously, as John lazily flicked two fingers up at McKay.

‘Well, we were friends right from the start.’ John smiled at Rodney. ‘We met on our first day at Eton and were best friends from the very first day. It helped, I suppose, that we had very similar timetables, both very much science oriented and belonged to the same hobbies clubs and such. We both read maths at Cambridge too and chose the same College, although for very different reasons. We were still just friends then, although we did most things together. It was only when Rodney came back from MIT with his first PhD that we started seeing each other as more than just friends.’

‘I came back to the UK because I missed him,’ Rodney explained, a reminiscent smile on his lips. ‘He was in the Royal Marines by that point, and since he was based in Scotland, I chose to do my second PhD at Edinburgh.’

‘Where I did my medical training,’ Donald added. ‘It’s a lovely place to study and live. I thoroughly enjoyed my six years there.’
By Monday morning, John was ready to go back to work.

‘The doctor told you to rest for a few days,’ Rodney told him crossly. ‘What part of rest do you not understand?’

‘I have rested - for a couple of days.’

‘You were blown up and you had a concussion.’

‘But I’m fine now. Rodney, you know I’ll go stir-crazy if I have to sit around doing nothing for a few days.’

Rodney sighed. He did understand, but John didn’t understand just how it had felt for him. Believing John dead, that he’d never see him again.

He felt an arm snake around his neck and a forehead press against his, a pair of lips brushing against his lips.

‘I do understand, Rodney,’ John said very quietly, as though he’d actually read Rodney’s thoughts. ‘I thought I’d never get the chance to tell you myself how much I love you, how much you mean to me.’

Rodney relaxed against him, arms curling around John’s shoulders, holding him tightly. ‘I thought you were dead. I had no idea what…’ his voice broke.

John just held him close with his one good arm until the shaking ceased. ‘I know, baby,’ he whispered. ‘I know.’

‘I’m just not sure I can go through that again. I really don’t know how, or even if, I can live without you.’

Lips brushed against his once more. ‘I do understand, but you have to understand that I need to see this operation through. I need for it to be tied up, with all the people who want to hurt you locked away. Once that’s done, we’ll talk again and decide together what we want to do. Okay?’

Rodney nodded and buried his face in John’s shoulder, afraid to let him go just yet. John clearly understood this since he held Rodney close to him, close enough that Rodney could feel both their hearts beating, and it gave him the strength to let go. As long as both their hearts were still beating, preferably close together, they’d be alright.

He made Donald and Tony promise to keep an eye on John, and to make him take a rest if they thought he looked tired, and to stop him from doing anything dangerous.

‘How you expect us to be able to that, I have no idea,’ Tony grumbled. ‘As he keeps telling us, he’s a Royal Marine, and I swear they have most of their self-preservation removed when they sign up or join up or whatever it is they do.’

‘Hey!’ John protested, but he didn’t deny the truth in what Tony said.

Rodney sighed. ‘Just do your best,’ he told Donald and Tony, then turned to John. ‘And you! You just listen to what they say!’
'Yes, dear,' John replied, and laughed when Rodney smacked his good arm.

Adam was already on the Grid when the three men from Holly Lodge arrived, and he walked directly to John and hugged him. Then he too smacked his good arm.

‘Ow! What was that for?’

‘I’d’ve slapped your stupid head if you hadn’t injured it,’ Adam told him. ‘Seriously. Stop trying to get yourself killed.’

‘I wasn’t trying…’ John stopped under the glare Adam was giving him. ‘Okay,’ he muttered instead, dropping his gaze to the floor.

Adam glared at John a little longer to make sure he understood. ‘Come on, Harry wants to see us. All of us,’ he added as Tony and Donald made to move away.

They crowded into Harry’s office and Adam was dispatched to fetch an extra chair.

‘There’ve been a few developments over the weekend,’ Harry told them. ‘I wanted to get you all up to speed together. First of all, the results are back from fibres Donald found on Elizabeth Weir’s body and sent off for analysis. They’re from a dark grey woollen twill, a fabric most often used for suits or overcoats,’ he read from a report. ‘They couldn’t get a DNA profile from it but said they’d be able to match the garment they’re from if we could find it. They’re still waiting for DNA results from the stuff Donald took from under her fingernails.’

‘So our killer is someone with a grey suit or overcoat?’ Adam asked with a touch of sarcasm. ‘No problem!’

John nodded in agreement. ‘Where do we even start?’

Tony, however, frowned at them. ‘No, that’s not how it’s done. We already have a suspect pool. We examine that first, and only if we can’t find our man there do we have to widen the field.’

Looks of comprehension dawned on John and Adam’s faces.

‘And that’s exactly why I offered you a job,’ Harry told Tony with a smile. ‘These two are experts at preventing a bomb from going off in the city, but have no experience with criminal investigations. Now,’ and he looked at the others in his office. ‘Bearing in mind what Tony has just said, who do we know who wears a dark grey twill overcoat?’

‘I’m assuming apart from yourself?’ Adam asked with a grin.

Harry glared at him.

‘Sorry.’ Adam bit his lip. ‘Mace. Oliver Mace wears a dark grey overcoat, summer and winter. But how can we match it?’

‘It’s not a problem if we know who his tailor is.’ John grinned a little maliciously. ‘He still uses Graham and West doesn’t he, Harry?’

Tony frowned. ‘How will that help us?’

‘Because all bespoke tailors keep a scrap of fabric from each item they make for a customer. Dad uses Graham and West which is how I know who Mace goes to. He told me one day that he’d met
my father there, and when I asked Dad about it he just said ‘filthy upstart’ and changed the subject.’

A smile split Tony’s face. ‘I can just hear Uncle Patrick saying that. Who do you go to?’

‘Stephenson. Most of the officers in the Corps do and I just stayed with them, although I have heard the usual comments about recognising your tailor if you do use them.’

‘I thought that was the point. That people recognise you have a bespoke tailor rather than buying off the peg like us lesser mortals,’ Adam said curiously.

‘There’s a great difference between the various bespoke tailors, though,’ Harry explained. ‘Stephenson are known for their civilian attire being almost military in cut and some men dislike them because of that. However, that’s beside the point. We need to contact Graham and West and see if they can supply a piece of the fabric from Mace’s overcoat. If the lab can match it we can prove Mace was in Weir’s apartment at some point. We’ll just have to wait for the DNA which will prove pretty conclusively who murdered Weir.’

‘But you think it was Mace?’ asked Tony.

‘Well, he’s been in our sights for a while,’ said Harry. ‘And although we thought David had come here to speak to him, she sent Shepard to see Weir.’

‘Would Mace actually be stupid enough to meet a foreign agent himself?’ Adam asked with a frown.

‘Weir was a foreign agent,’ John pointed out. ‘We know he met her a couple of times at least. But I get your point. Meeting a CIA agent isn’t half as suspicious as meeting a Mossad officer.’

‘And Mace, despite what we might think, is far from stupid,’ Harry added. ‘He could have arranged to meet David at Weir’s flat and couldn’t because she was killed, but David still sent Shepard there since she didn’t know Weir was dead. That would fit. It’s possible Mace is the missing link in Ruth’s investigations into the money trials. If he was being paid by the Israelis, it makes sense that he’d want to keep a meeting between himself and them off our radar.’

‘Is this not all a little too convenient?’ Donald ventured to ask. ‘Everything appears to have fallen into place so easily, along with evidence that Mace was in Weir’s flat and thus may have killed her. I’m a little concerned it might all be too straightforward to be true, since real life is rarely like that. Indeed, I remember a time when—’

‘Donald’s right you know,’ interrupted John with a quick smile of apology at cutting him off. ‘Are we making the evidence fit the crime rather than vice-versa?’

There was a short silence after this as everyone considered that.

‘I understand what you mean, Donald,’ Harry said eventually. ‘But it doesn’t make it any less so. As you know, much of our work depends upon creating a working hypothesis and then testing it, much as a scientist would. Sometimes the most obvious explanation actually is the explanation, but I’m more than happy to look at any other hypotheses we might come up with.’

‘I’m not disagreeing with you,’ Donald explained. ‘I’m merely suggesting that we also look at other possibilities, although I am unable to posit one at the moment.’

Harry smiled. ‘You make a very good point, and we’ll make sure we examine any other possibility or situation that might occur to any of us.’
They’d no sooner settled down to work after a late lunch-break when Harry stuck his head around his office door and yelled for John, Tony and Adam to join him.

‘I’ve explained to him umpteen times how to do that through his intercom system,’ Malcolm grumbled from his desk. ‘Bloody luddite!’

John grinned and patted his shoulder as he went to join the others, and just as they sat down, the entry pods activated and Jack O'Neill sauntered in. Tony immediately went to get another chair and set it down by Harry’s desk as Jack made himself comfortable in Tony’s former seat.

‘So, how are we all?’ Jack asked with a grin. ‘Glad to see you suffered no lasting injuries, John. Do try not to get yourself blown up again. And Tony. Welcome to the UK. I hear you’re joining the cousins. If you get sick of them, come over to the dark side and work for me.’

‘Stop trying to poach my officers!’ Harry told him, trying to muster up a scowl.

‘You know you love me really.’ Jack blew a small kiss at Harry and joined in the laughter that followed while Harry shook his head in resignation.

‘So, boys and girls,’ he began once they were all settled, ‘I come bearing news from the colonies. It would appear that Senator Henry Landry was arrested by the FBI about,’ he glanced at his watch, ‘two minutes ago, on charges of espionage, treason, theft, abuse of position and having a bad haircut. We might have problems making the theft charge stick, but it doesn’t matter since the other charges constitute a capital crime and thus carry the death penalty.’

There was a deathly hush in the small office. Adam spoke first. ‘Is…is he likely to be put to death?’

‘Nah, but he’ll serve life imprisonment without parole, which is more important,’ Jack told him breezily.

‘No more than the man deserves.’ Harry was quite blunt. ‘Jack told me earlier that over thirty overseas agents have been captured and or killed, entirely due to the highly confidential material he passed to foreign powers, Russia amongst them.’

John nodded. ‘I’ve seen too much death in my own military career to agree with the death penalty, but he’s a traitor and at the very least is guilty of being an accessory to murder.’

There was a further short silence, then Jack spoke again.

‘We’ve also heard from our Israeli Ambassador that Eli David has been replaced as Director of Mossad and placed under arrest. A number of US officials will be under investigation following the arrest and seizure of information, including an NCIS senior agent, a Leon Vance, who, it appears, has been in close contact with David for a number of years following a joint operation together. He may not be charged with espionage, but he’ll almost certainly lose his job as no one will want to work with him. There’s going to be a wholesale clearing of house among all the US agencies and government bodies, and not before time.’

‘I’ve come across Vance,’ Tony admitted. ‘He really didn’t like me and thought only people with graduate degrees should be permitted to advance in NCIS, much like senior promotions in the armed forces. I didn’t like him either,’ he added as an afterthought.
‘But you do have a graduate degree.’ John frowned. ‘You have a masters in Law from Georgetown.’

‘But it was done as a part-time degree and he doesn’t think they’re as good as full-time degrees.’

‘Is he stupid?’ John demanded. ‘A part-time degree should be worth double what a full-time one is. You have to work much harder as people normally have full-time jobs to cope with as well.’

‘I don’t disagree,’ Jack cut in, ‘and yes, he is that stupid. He’s got a massive chip on his shoulder about something, I’m not quite sure what.’ He shrugged. ‘Landry, however, has been arrested and all his assets frozen, including the accounts he has in the Cayman Islands. I’m curious to know what his rationale was. It may have been pure and simple greed, but there could be some underlying fanaticism or crusade motivating him. We probably won’t know until the trial.’

Just after 11 on Tuesday morning a call came through from Hampshire Police to say Jennifer Keller’s body had been found the previous evening in her car at a campsite in the New Forest. The site was closed for the winter and it had been pure luck that one of the forest Rangers had happened to pass close by the site and noticed new car tracks which shouldn’t have been there. Someone in the police had been paying enough attention to notice Keller had been put on an APW - an All Ports Warning, the British equivalent to a BOLO, Adam explained to Tony.

‘We watch so many cop shows in the UK these days that everyone knows what a BOLO is, but even some of the Police don’t know what our own version of it is. There was a case a couple of years ago when a Chief Constable laid into Harry because he hadn’t issued a BOLO on a suspected terrorist and he was aghast when Harry told him that no, he hadn’t, because we didn’t use BOLOs over here, but if the CC had checked the APW listings, he have seen the suspect's name listed in black and white, because we live and work in Great Britain not Los Angeles. John and I had to leave the room before we burst out laughing, but Harry was very annoyed about it.’

‘And I still don’t see what’s funny about the upper echelons of the English Police not even recognising their own acronyms,’ Harry said acidly, surprising Adam by coming up behind him.

‘Jesus! Don’t scare me like that!’

‘Not Jesus. Just plain Harry will do. Sir Harry if you want to lick my arse.’

This made Tony laugh. ‘My old boss, Gibbs, use to appear out of thin air and frighten the life out of us. And he always knew everything that went on, even when he’d not been around.’

‘He probably had you all bugged,’ John told him, also appearing from thin air.

Tony rolled his eyes. ‘Perhaps he did, but where’ve you been? We were looking for you.’

‘Been telling Rodney his lab assistant had turned up dead,’ John told him, sitting down and leaning back in his chair, flicking a pencil between his fingers. ‘Any more details about Keller?’

‘Apart from her being dead, you mean?’ Adam shrugged his shoulders. ‘Donald’s asked for the body to be brought back here and he’ll do the post mortem tomorrow. We might know more about it after that. What did Rodney have to say?’
'Not much, actually. Radek jabbered away in Czech in the background but I have no idea if he was trying to help or was insulting my parentage.'

'So what happens now?' Tony asked.

'You tell us. We don’t usually get involved to this depth in Police procedure. They’ve generally taken the case over by the time we get to the evidence bit.’ John tapped his pencil on his lips. ‘What would your next step be if this was your case?’

'It is his case, in that respect at least.’ Harry wheeled a chair over and settled himself in it. ‘And on that subject, we need to get Tony set up with a desk near you two. I’ll speak to someone about it. So, Tony. What do we need to do next?’

Tony was quiet for a moment, thoughts running through his mind. ‘Who’s doing the forensics on the car and the kill site?’

The others looked at each other. ‘Hampshire Police I suppose,’ Adam said with a shrug. ‘Why?’

'Because I think that’s probably something else that we might want to look at keeping in-house. A crime scene can yield so much information if you know what you’re looking for and quite honestly, I wouldn’t have trusted the forensics guys from rural US PDs to examine a crime scene properly. I’d be surprised if your locals are any different.’ He looked over to Harry. ‘I’d like to go down there myself and take a look at the crime scene. I do know what I’m looking for and I might find something to help us.’

‘That’s fine by me,’ Harry told him. ‘I said you’d have a free hand to do what you needed to.’

‘You mentioned the possibility of setting up our own forensics lab? I’d say it’s essential we have our own forensics people to send and take over a case like this. I just hope the locals’ve not trashed the crime scene, but they might have because they don’t have the trained people we would have. I don’t suppose there’re many murders in the New Forest.’

‘No, there aren’t,’ agreed Harry. ‘And Keller’s murder was treated as a suicide at first. I did ask them to preserve the crime scene, but we don’t know what might have been moved or destroyed by the time you get there.’ He gave a heavy sigh. ‘I just need to work out how to justify setting up two new departments here at Thames House, and then equipping them and staffing them.’

‘And that’s why they pay you the big bucks,’ Adam told him with a grin. ‘To make the large and expensive decisions.’

Chapter Twenty

Late on Wednesday afternoon Tony received a preliminary report on the forensics from Hampshire Police. He gave a shout of glee as he read through the email.

John, sitting at his desk next to Tony, looked up. ‘Something interesting?’
'You could say that.’ Tony stood up and raised his voice. ‘Can we all go to the meeting room, please? We’ve got some initial results from Portsmouth.’

‘Well yes, we probably all can,’ Adam drawled, laughter lighting up his eyes. ‘The question is, may we?’

Tony glared at John.

‘Hey, I never said a word.’ John pointed at Adam. ‘Take it out on him!’

‘You told him, didn’t you?’


‘You told him, and now both of you are going to be on my back about it.’

‘If you picked up bad grammar while you were living in the colonies…’ John began, ducking as Tony threw a pen at him. ‘Hey! Pax!’ he yelled, as a pencil flew his way.

‘Get yourself in there, you, you grammar fascist you!’ Tony told him, throwing a second pen at his cousin. ‘I will get my revenge, I promise!’

Harry joined them in the conference room, where the three men were still teasing each other, and smiled to himself. Bringing in Tony has made such a difference around here.

‘Boys, boys. A little decorum, please!’ Harry glared at them all until they settled down but was unable to hide the glint of a smile in his eyes.

‘Thank you. Now, Tony?’

‘I’ve had preliminary forensics back from Portsmouth. When I was down yesterday I noticed some fibres caught in a bit of loose door trim and I asked forensics to process them. Their scene of crime man argued they could have been caught there at any time but I asked him to process them anyway. Long story cut short, Keller’s car was valeted over the weekend and she apparently paid for the platinum valet which is a deep clean inside and out, including the spare wheel. There’s no way they’d’ve missed those fibres, and as the company she used take before and after photos, we can check that. The main point, though, is that the fibres are from—

‘A dark grey twill,’ John finished. ‘Please tell me I’m right.’

‘You are absolutely right.’

The two cousins grinned happily at each other.

‘Will there be anything left of Mace’s coat by the time we get hold of it?’ Adam muttered. ‘He seems to be losing bits of it left, right and centre.’

Harry smiled. ‘We’re just waiting for the DNA results to come back from both Weir and Keller, although hers will be longer, but if they give the result we’re expecting, the state of his coat will be the last thing on his mind.’

‘How long?’ John asked. ‘I thought you said a couple of days on Weir’s.’

‘I was told three days, but I foolishly counted Saturday and Sunday as working days and apparently
A barrage of exclamations assaulted Harry, which essentially questioned the qualifications of the forensic officers, as well as their parentage.

‘I quite agree,’ he told them. ‘But it appears that nagging and demanding don’t make the results appear any faster, or so I’ve been told. Another reason I’d like us to get our own forensics unit because unfortunately, criminals and terrorists do work weekends. However, I’ve been assured that we should have the results of both by Friday which means we just have to wait.’ He turned back to Tony. ‘Any further news about our bomb makers?’

‘Well, it grieves me to admit it, but apparently Rodney was right and Keller was our bomber. There were traces of explosive in her garage and probably would have been in or on her car - no doubt the reason for the expensive valet. Her laptop had been used to find instructions on how to make a bomb although she’d deleted them, of course, but as we all know, no files are ever really deleted, and while the evidence could have been planted to make her look like the bomber, my gut says it wasn’t. Which I know wouldn’t be enough to convict her, but we’re saved having to do that at least.’

‘And if we go with the hypothesis that it was planted?’ John asked.

‘Then we need to find the two men that Weir met since we still don’t know what she paid them for and see if we can find anyone who went to Keller’s house within the last week or so to actually plant the evidence.’ Tony leaned back in his chair and shuffled the papers on the table in front of him thoughtfully. ‘We need to find any CCTV footage from the area and also sweep the house again for fingerprints. It might be worth interviewing the neighbours to see if they noticed any visitors, or anything out of the ordinary; cars, delivery vans, motorcycles, anything that might mean strangers visiting her house.’

‘Let’s get on with that, for the moment at least,’ Harry ordered. ‘Far better to do work we might not need, than lose our chance at getting information or evidence we might want later. Thank you, Tony.’

Friday morning found the whole team back in the large meeting room on the Grid. This time, however, Tony was at the head of the table, and John grinned to himself as he watched his cousin going through the details and evidence the team had collected in the past couple of days.

‘...so the forensic results prove the bomb evidence found at Keller’s house wasn’t planted, and that she did have the help of one of the other Lab Technicians,’ Tony glanced down at his notes, ‘a Peter Kavanagh. A search of his room - he still lives with his mother - yielded two thousand pounds still in Barclays Bank currency bands. They managed to lift a partial fingerprint from one of the bands and it matches Weir’s prints so I would say this is almost certainly part of the money Weir gave to Hudson and Lester in Salisbury. They also found traces of RDX which is—’

‘Explosive. More accurately, it’s the stuff used in plastic explosive,’ John said grimly.

‘Yes,’ agreed Tony, ‘but the lab report says it’s not particularly good RDX, which means it didn’t have the explosive capacity it might have had - probably the reason you were only injured and not killed, John.’
John clearly didn’t know whether to look pleased or upset. ‘Yeah, don’t repeat that bit to Rodney. I’m trying to keep him off the whole ‘You could have been killed’ rant.’

They all smiled at the thought of Rodney’s famous - or possibly infamous - rants, then Tony continued his report. ‘This means we can tie the bomb, and the people involved with making and placing it, up with Weir, who was almost certainly acting on the instructions of either Mace or Kolya, which means the SVR, or possibly even both of them.

‘David, and the Israelis in general, are mostly red herrings with regards to this case. Eli David obviously wanted shares in anything that came out of the DSTL, and out of the US for that matter, but we’ve no grounds to suspect they were involved in either the kidnapping attempts or the bomb. Sadly, Shepard has no real connection other than pursuing her own agenda regarding her father. She’s certainly guilty of treason, but has no real connection to Rodney’s kidnapping et cetera.’

‘What about Landry?’ Harry asked.

‘I was just getting to him.’ Tony took a gulp of water. ‘He’s also a bit of a sideshow. He was certainly in contact with Oliver Mace, who wasn’t - as far as we’ve been able to discover - giving orders to him. He was mostly passing on US secrets and information, some of which Mace no doubt passed on to MI6.’ He sighed. ‘I don’t think we’re going to be able to touch Mace with anything linked to Landry, as Mace will no doubt claim he was doing it on behalf of his country.’

‘But that doesn’t explain the money Ruth found we think he received from Landry,’ Harry objected.

‘No,’ John agreed. ‘And if we did try to nail him on that, he’d wriggle out of it. But Rodney and I had an idea.’ He looked at his colleagues around the conference table, his eyes filled with mirth. ‘We’re pretty sure that if we try to get Mace on a murder charge, he’ll manage to get himself let off, or the case dismissed or some such trick. But even if he does, he can’t do an awful lot without his money, the money in the Cayman Islands, that is. And if that money were to go missing, shall we say, he can’t really make a fuss about it because it was gained pretty unlawfully. Rodney says he could… help Mace to make a charitable donation, shall we say. All we need to do is choose a worthy cause to benefit from his ill-gotten gains.’

Only Ruth had a small frown on her face. All the others were smiling happily.

‘It’s not exactly…legal, is it, Harry?’ Ruth finally asked.

‘Not in the slightest. But, as John says, he acquired it illegally and I for one would shed no tears if it were to go missing, and I’m pretty certain the Home Secretary wouldn’t either, if he were ever to hear about it. Which he won’t. My vote is for half the money to go to a services charity of some sort and half to an educational fund for disadvantaged children. He’d hate that!’

John laughed. ‘Let’s all write our nominations down and pass them on to Rodney. He can make his decision, or work out a system for us to chose a couple of charities to donate to. It’s probably best if we stay out of it all together.’

A cough from Tony brought their attention back to him. ‘May I continue?’ he asked, raising his eyebrows, but John just grinned.

‘Be my guest.’

‘Right, where were we?’ Tony shuffled his papers and tried to ignore his cousin’s smirks. ‘Kolya. Acasta Kolya. As I said before, Kolya was an undercover SVR agent who became an American
citizen in 2004. We don’t quite know when he became Elizabeth Weir’s handler but it was almost certainly before 2004. He had contact with both Weir and Landry, and was probably getting information from each of them. We can charge him with kidnap, and breaking and entering and such, but since we can’t prove he actually instructed Weir to do anything, my recommendation is that we hand him over to Jack O’Neill and let the CIA deal with him.’

Harry nodded. ‘I have no issue with that. They’re far better placed to deal with him. We’ll just slap a persona non grata on his file.’

‘The other kidnappers have been handed over to the Metropolitan Police and they’ll be charged by them. Which leaves us with Weir and Mace. Weir’s obviously dead, but Mace… We can charge him with two murders, Weir and Keller, but as John said, he’ll likely find a way of wriggling out of it somehow. He was almost certainly giving orders to Weir but we don’t know who might have been giving him orders. It is possible that he was just working for himself.

‘I’m at a disadvantage here, though, as I’ve no idea what resources you guys might have for getting rid of… shall we call them problems? We know he killed Weir and Keller, took money from pretty much everyone we’ve been dealing with and has sold out his country not just to the highest bidder, but all the bidders at the table. I just don’t know what to suggest.’

‘He has friends in fairly high places,’ Harry said thoughtfully ‘Possibly not as many as he thinks, though. Leave this one with me. I need to think and have a couple of chats with certain people. Thank you, Tony, for wrapping this up.’ He looked around the table at his team; senior case officers to technical assistants, John still with his left arm bound to his chest. ‘Thank you, all of you, for your work on this case. We’ve come out of it with relatively few injuries, which is a miracle all things considered. I know for a while we all thought it was going to be much, much worse.

‘Now, we have nothing urgent on at the moment so I’d like you to finish any outstanding reports and then get yourselves off home. I’ll see you all on Monday morning.’

There were grins around the table and a low level of chatter, but when John looked towards Harry, he was given a quick jerk of his boss’s head. Harry wanted a chat with him.

There was a general melée in the conference room after Harry left, as people stood and gathered papers and bags and chatted about the unexpected half day holiday they’d all been given. John managed a quick word with his cousin, telling him not to wait for him.

‘Harry wants a quick word with me but you and Donald get off home. I’ll either get Harry to drop me off or get a taxi. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,’ he told Tony, who just frowned at him.

‘Rodney threatened me with sudden and violent death if you managed to hurt yourself again. And I believe him, so no. We won’t go home without you. We’ll wait here until you’re done.’

Shaking his head at his cousin’s stubbornness, but privately enjoying the feeling of security it gave him, John made his way to Harry’s office. He had a pretty good idea of what this ‘chat’ was going to be about.

A glass of single malt was waiting on the desk for him and John raised his eyes in surprise.
‘Twice in a week, Harry? You’re getting soft.’

‘I thought this was a conversation that needed a wee dram. Sit!’

It was disconcerting just how difficult it was to relax with a glass in hand when the other hand was strapped up. John finally managed to settle himself, balancing the crystal tumbler carefully on his useless arm.

‘I’d like you all to remain at Holly Lodge for a couple more days,’ Harry began, surprising John who’d thought they’d be relocating to Chelsea the following day.

‘Why? I thought we’d got everyone concerned with the case either locked up or in the mortuary.’

‘Not Mace.’

John jerked in surprise. ‘You really think he’s a danger?’

Harry nodded and sighed. ‘I do. He’s already killed twice, tidying up loose ends. He must know, or at least suspect, we have enough evidence to convict him, although I agree that he’ll try every way possible to claim it was all in the national interest. But, John, he’s a very dangerous man and we mustn’t underestimate him.’

‘Are we any safer at Holly Lodge than we would be at Fairburn Mews? He knows everything about Holly Lodge, security measures, guards. At least at Fairburn Mews there’s only one entrance to watch.’

‘And only one exit. I’d rather you stay at Holly Lodge until we’ve got Mace behind bars or… neutralised. Just a few more days, will you? And you have to admit, it’s hardly a hardship considering Mrs Thompson’s cooking.’

‘I think Rodney’s already tried to persuade her to move in with him.’

Harry laughed. ‘I don’t doubt it. That wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about though, John.’

‘No, I didn’t think it was. You want to know what I intend to do next.’ He grinned at the look of surprise on Harry’s face. ‘Harry, I’ve been an agent for a good few years now, and I’m not stupid. There are a finite number of times I can get almost killed and I suspect that I’m coming to the end of my allocation. And this time was so very, very close.’ He took a sip of his whisky and tried to keep his hand from shaking. ‘I realised, as I sat on that chair waiting to be blown to kingdom come, that I’m not just me anymore. I’m me and Rodney, and Brian too, I suppose. It’s the old Aristotle thing - ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.’ He took another sip. ‘I can’t give you an answer at the moment, I’m afraid. I need to talk to my other part, and look at my options.’

Harry nodded. ‘That’s fine, John. Just remember that you do have other options. Take your time, take all the time you need. You shouldn’t have been in this week at all really, but I know you needed to see this case closed, which it pretty much is now. I have to speak to a couple of people about Mace, and probably talk to our lawyers as well and see just what we can make stick, but I would hope we’ll have it all sorted one way or another over the weekend. I’ll keep you posted, but once this is all closed you need to take some time off. And that’s an order!’

Putting his empty glass down on Harry’s desk, John smiled. ‘Thanks, Harry.’
The call he’d been half expecting came early on Sunday morning. John answered his mobile blearily, barely even half awake. ‘Hello?’

*Sorry to wake you up, John, but I have some news and I thought you’d want it as soon as possible.*

‘Umm, okay?’

*Oliver Mace has been killed in a car accident. His car hit a telegraph pole but no other cars were involved and the police suspect he was many times over the legal limit for alcohol.*

‘What!’ John struggled to sit up a little. ‘That’s… Okay, what—

*I’ll call in later and give you a full briefing, John. I’m waiting for the police to call back with some more information. Apologise to Rodney for me, will you?*

‘Yes, of course.’

*I’ll see you later.*

‘Okay. Bye, Harry.’

He sank back against the pillows, rubbing his eyes. ‘That was Harry,’ he told Rodney, who’d also been woken by the phone.

‘Really? I’d never’ve guessed. Not with you saying ‘Bye, Harry’. What did he want? It’s not even light outside! He can’t possibly want you to go and do something! He—’

His voice was muffled by John’s hand over his mouth.

‘Rodney, shut up. He doesn’t want me for anything. He was just phoning to … to give me some news that’s all. And he did apologise for waking you. Now, go back to sleep.’

Rodney glared at him through narrowed eyes. ‘Only because I want to. He told you something important and I’ll want to know what it is later. I won’t forget,’ he threatened, then rolled over and within seconds was snoring softly.

John lay for a moment, thinking about the call. Obviously, Harry’s discussion with the lawyers hadn’t gone so well and they’d moved to Plan B. It wasn’t the first time this had happened and most certainly wouldn’t be the last, but John had never been personally involved before and he wasn’t quite sure how he felt.

He glanced at the clock and saw it was almost six am. He got himself out of bed carefully so as not to wake Rodney again, and not to bang his arm and shoulder, which still gave him some pain but not enough for him to take any of the painkillers the hospital had given him. He managed to pull a sweater over his head and get his right arm through the sleeve but left the other sleeve hanging loosely, then made his way quietly downstairs.

Mrs Thompson was already in the kitchen kneading bread. John smiled at her and pulled out a chair from the table when she ordered him to sit down. ‘This was her kingdom and no-one in their right mind would annoy the Queen in her own kitchen.

‘I’ll just get this loaf in the oven, Colonel, and I’ll make us both a nice cup of tea.’

John had tried to explain that he was now retired from the Royal Marines, but Mrs Thompson had
known him while he was still a serving officer, and she just ignored him - which had made Rodney laugh - and continued to treat him like a little boy, all the while addressing his with his former rank. Sitting watching her bake bread took him back to his childhood and the early mornings spent in the kitchen at Grantworth Hall watching their cook baking bread, although he’d been Master John in those days and thoughts of the future were mostly concerned with what they’d have for lunch.

He was drawn from his reverie by the scrape of a chair being pulled out next to him and he smiled as his cousin joined him at the table.

‘Mmmm. Freshly baked bread. That smell takes me back,’ Tony said as he sniffed the air.

‘That’s just what I was thinking,’ John admitted, and smiled his thanks at Mrs Thompson as she placed a cup of tea in front of him. No mugs were allowed in her kitchen, as they’d all discovered when they’d each gone searching for hot drinks. Mugs were to be used outside, she lectured them. Any hot drinks inside were to be taken in a cup with a saucer.

Tony soon had a cup of tea in front of him, and although he wished it could have been coffee, he knew better than to say so after Rodney had been thrown out of the kitchen on their second morning at Holly Lodge for asking for coffee instead of a cup of tea. Mrs Thompson had told him in no uncertain terms, that if he wanted coffee, he’d have to wait until breakfast was served. He’d quickly apologised, most profusely, for being so rude, and she’d forgiven him and had begun to make little treats for him after hearing about his harrowing experiences whilst kidnapped. Still, they all knew if they went to the kitchen before breakfast was served, they’d get a cup of tea or do without.

A couple of thick slices of bread, the butter melting gently into it, were also placed in front of them and the two boys - both now in their thirties - grinned their thanks.

‘So, what’s up?’ demanded Tony thickly, his mouth stuffed full of bread and butter.

John waited until he’d swallowed his own mouthful. ‘Harry phoned earlier.’

Tony’s eyes rose in enquiry while he took another bite of his bread.

‘Mace is dead.’

Tony choked and John slapped him on his back a couple of times, probably a little harder than he needed to.

‘Dead? How?’ Tony managed to gasp when he could talk again.

‘Car crash.’

‘And…?’ Tony made a ‘more details’ motion with his hand.

‘Crashed into a telegraph pole. No-one else involved, probably over the limit. Over the alcohol limit for driving,’ he explained at Tony’s puzzled look.

‘And you don’t think it was an accident?’ Tony asked carefully.

‘I know it wasn’t an accident. I knew it was a distinct possibility if we couldn’t convict him, but…’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t quite know what to think or feel. On the one hand, he was probably involved in Rodney’s kidnapping, and possibly the bomb, or at least aware of what was going to happen. But on the other hand…’ he fell silent.

‘…We can’t just go around killing people we don’t like,’ Tony finished.
‘He was an evil man who killed two people in the last ten days or so, and likely a number of other people who got in his way over the years. I just can’t…’ John shook his head. ‘I’m struggling to accept that this is a valid option. That if we come across someone who does awful things and we can’t send him to prison - for whatever reason - that we can just… just have them killed.’

Tony put his hand on John’s good shoulder and squeezed gently. ‘The other day Adam said that Harry’s paid a lot of money to make the big and expensive decisions. He was joking, but in many ways, it’s true. You’re a good case officer. A really good one, I can see that. But you’re never going to want to step into Harry’s shoes are you? Because his job isn’t just about telling us all what he wants us to do, or filling out forms and reports and going to meetings. It’s about making the really hard decisions that sometimes have to be made. I’m not sure I could do it either, and I’ve been a police officer or a federal agent all my working life. There aren’t that many people who can do it, and if I had to make a guess, I’d say that Harry isn’t feeling all that good about himself at the moment even though he knows it’s his job to make these decisions.’

It was a long speech for Tony but John agreed with pretty much everything he’d said. He wasn’t cut out to be Head of Section D, nor did he want to be Head of Section D. He’d been a damn fine Royal Marine and he was a pretty good Senior Case Officer, but he suspected that was the highest he wanted to go within MI5.

In many ways, even making it to Senior Case officer was good since their world had any number of ways of killing or otherwise disposing of personnel. His predecessor, Tom Quinn, had left MI5 and had had to leave the country under a new name, leaving everything connected to his old name and life behind him. Few people in their world actually made it through to retirement and John wondered for a moment what that would mean for him.

The kitchen door opened at that point and a grumbling Rodney came in, rubbing his eyes, accompanied by the faithful Brian.

‘You weren’t there!’ he complained, looking at John. ‘I woke up and you weren’t there!’

John stood and made a move towards his lover, but Tony pushed him, gently, back into his seat. He guided a still half asleep Rodney into the chair next to John and went to let Brian outside for his morning business. Mrs Thompson came bustling over with a mug of coffee for Rodney, and when John and Tony looked up at her in surprise, she just tutted, gently.

‘Poor Dr. Rodney was kidnapped you know,’ she told them earnestly, with a quick wink that John was’t quite sure he’d seen.

Rodney, for his part, simply grasped the mug with both hands and groaned in pleasure. ‘Mrs Thompson, are you sure you don’t want to come and live with me?’ he asked between sips.

‘I’m quite sure, thank you, Dr. Rodney,’ she said, and disappeared again into the pantry where they could hear the rattle of china as she prepared to lay the dining room table.

Rodney curled up under John’s good arm. ‘You weren’t there!’ he complained again, nose buried in his coffee. ‘And what did Harry want with you at o’dark thirty?’

‘He called to say that Mace has been killed in a car crash.’

‘You mean Harry had him bumped off.’

John and Tony exchanged surprised looks over Rodney’s head. ‘Well… he said it was an accident and that Mace had been drinking,’ John said, slowly.
‘Oh come on!’ Rodney snorted. ‘I wasn’t born yesterday. If there wasn’t a decent enough chance that Mace would be locked up for the rest of his life, Harry had to make sure he disappeared in another way. It happens in my world as well, you know. A scientist gets too much information about something he shouldn’t, or has a change of heart about something nasty he’s created. They don’t just get patted on the head and left to retire to the Cotswolds, or Midsomer, despite what the television might try and tell us. They have unfortunate accidents.’ He finally looked up and frowned. ‘What?’

‘That’s… it’s… wow!’ Tony sat back in his chair looking a little stunned.

‘You thought I was too fragile to know such things?’ Rodney scowled at Tony, and twisted his head to include John. ‘I’m not stupid! I know how things work. I knew as soon as you said that Mace was in the whole thing up to his neck that this was only going to end one way, as I’m sure you both did. I’ll not shed any tears over his death. He was an evil and traitorous man, so good riddance to bad rubbish. Now, I wonder if Mrs Thompson will give me a refill?’

No-one was surprised when Harry turned up halfway through breakfast. Mrs Thompson bustled in, laid a place for him and directed him towards the hot-plates filled with the various breakfast dishes. She always made a special breakfast at weekends, something they’d all miss once they were home.

‘So, how is everyone?’ Harry asked, helping himself to bacon and eggs.

‘Well, we all know about Mace,’ Tony told him, buttering another slice of fresh bread. ‘Rodney summed it up pretty well. ‘Good riddance to bad rubbish!’’

Harry nodded. ‘It does mean you’re all now safe to go home,’ he said, cutting his fried bread into neat triangles and loading each one with a piece of bacon and some egg before he ate it. ‘Radek, I’m sure you’ll be happy about that.’

‘I’m going to miss Mrs Thompson,’ Rodney told him gloomily. ‘She said she can’t come and live with me.’

John slapped the back of his head. ‘To echo someone at this table, what am I? Scotch mist?’

Rodney rubbed his head and glared at him. ‘You can’t cook as well as she can. Plus you live in London and I live in Salisbury, or hadn’t you noticed?’

‘Mmmm. About that,’ Harry began. ‘John, you’ve done some courses at the Defence College near Swindon haven’t you?’

John looked surprised. ‘Yes. I did a couple when I was in the Royal Marines and I did one when I first joined Section D. Why?’

‘Because they have a need for a new instructor in Command and Staff Training. I put your name forward,’ he said blithely, taking another mouthful of breakfast.

‘What? I don’t… those courses are generally a few months long. How would that work if I had a case?’ John was a little confused.
‘It’d be a full time post, John,’ Harry told him, smiling gently. ‘You’d leave MI5 and work at Shrivenham full time.’ He put his knife and fork together on his plate and wiped his mouth with his napkin. ‘Just have a think about it, will you? You’re on a week’s leave now and they won’t need an answer until you’re back at work so give it some thought. I’ve emailed you the details along with who to contact for more information.’ He paused and looked at Rodney. ‘I’ve always thought Marlborough was a particularly nice town, although I’m probably biased since I was at school there.’ He glanced over to Tony and Donald. ‘Why don’t you both take a few days to settle in and perhaps sort out some accommodation? I believe Chelsea is a fine place to live, Tony.’ Harry’s smile was all mischief as he closed the door behind him.

There was a brief silence after he’d gone and then everyone began speaking at once. John listened for a moment, unable to make out anything anyone was saying, put his fingers in his mouth and blew a shrill whistle.

‘Quiet! No-one can hear if we all talk at once. Radek. You go first.’

‘I have nothing to contribute, thank you, John. I was simply saying I may go home now to my wife and daughter.’

‘You certainly may. Get your stuff together and I’ll arrange a car to take you to Salisbury. I’m afraid we can’t run to a helicopter this time.’

Radek grinned at them all and disappeared to pack.

‘Donald?’

‘Thank you, John. I shall begin the search for a house for Mother and myself to share, and then I shall make a trip to Washington to bring her home. In the meantime, I presume we will be returning to Chelsea?’

‘For the moment, yes,’ agreed John. ‘You and Tony are welcome to use Fairburn Mews if you’d like to stay in London or you can join us in Laverstock as I presume that’s where you want to go, Rodney.’


John sighed. There were times when he wanted to smack his partner. Despite being the cleverest man on the planet, Rodney didn’t always understand the nuances of polite conversation or behaviour, something he’d got used to over the years but which took other people longer to fully understand.

‘You’re both very welcome to come to Laverstock or stay in Fairburn Mews,’ John told Tony and Donald. ‘Or, if you prefer, go up to Yorkshire and stay at Grantworth. Dad and David would love to see either or both of you. I’ll arrange for you to have the use of a car and Harry will no doubt have a suggestion for an estate agent in London, Donald. Or if you wish to rent, I’ll speak to my father and see what properties we have available.’

Donald looked surprised. ‘Does your father own an estate agency?’

‘No, but the family owns a number of properties in London which are let. My mews house is a family property. I couldn’t possibly afford something like that on my salary,’ John said with a wry grin. ‘I’ll give Dad a bell and see what we have available and see if he has any suggestions if you wanted to buy a property. He and David have a number of contacts.’
‘I thought Uncle Patrick ran the Grantworth estate?’ Tony asked, a little puzzled.

‘He does, at least he and David do between them, but country estates make very little money these days. The properties are the one part of the family business which are actually profitable, and they keep the house and the estate going. Dad and David run them both between them. I just chose to make my career elsewhere.’

‘And you aren’t jealous at all?’

John looked surprised. ‘Why would I be? The estate and the properties don’t really belong to Dad or David. They, we, hold them for the next generation. We’re never more than custodians, not owners.’

The others nodded in various degrees of understanding while John waited to see if any further questions were forthcoming.

‘Okay, then. I’ll get on to Harry and see about a car for Donald and Tony, and arrange some transport for us all back to Fairburn Mews. My car is still in the garage there since Harry said not to use it while Rodney was in any danger. Thankfully, that’s all over now.’

He stood from the table but Rodney stopped him with a hand outstretched.

‘What did Harry mean about recommending you for a post at - Shrivenham was it?’

‘I think that’s a conversation you and I need to have together.’

‘But he wants you to leave MI5 and take a job as an instructor?’

‘Something like that, I think,’ John told him with a sigh.

‘And do you want to?’

John gazed at his partner. *Trust Rodney to get to the heart of it so quickly.*

———

**Chapter Twenty One**

Christmas was upon them before anyone realised.

‘I suppose we lost almost a month when I got kidnapped,’ Rodney said thoughtfully, sitting back on his heels on the living room floor in front of a packing case he was - slowly - filling with books from the shelves of John’s house.

John made a noise that could have been agreement or disagreement. ‘Tony, come and see just what you want to keep here,’ he called from the kitchen. ‘I know you’ve got your own stuff coming from Alexandria but is there anything here you want? We’ll have a fully equipped kitchen just from Rodney’s stuff, so this is all spare.’

Rodney heard Tony coming down the stairs from the bedroom where he was busy packing bedding
into another packing crate. ‘I want the Le Creuset saucepans you’ve got, John,’ he called before Tony appeared. ‘They’re far better than the old ones I’ve got, so don’t go giving those away. And I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I want to keep the dinner service that was your mother’s.’

‘Why can’t you believe you’re saying that?’ demanded Tony as he burst into the kitchen.

Rodney couldn’t help a smile coming to his lips as he surveyed his partner’s cousin. Tony was so excited about his new job and soon to be new home. ‘I can’t believe I’m having a conversation about which china I prefer with my gay boyfriend.’

He spent a couple of minutes watching Tony and John discuss the few odds and ends Tony didn’t already have then resumed the final packing of John’s books. A number were duplicates of ones he already had, but they’d decided to take all of them and work out which ones they’d keep once they were settled in their new home.

Harry had been right in his recommendation. Marlborough was a lovely place, and they’d eventually settled on one of the small villages just to the south of the town which was pretty much midway between Porton Down and John’s new place of work near Swindon.

Their new house was actually a very old one, a typically English thatched cottage with roses growing around the door. Rodney had complained about the thatch, the roses and the grade II listing the property had, but fell silent once he’d seen inside since it could have been built just for them. As well as a huge kitchen with an Aga, there were three large reception rooms on the ground floor, one of which was large enough to become a study they could share since it would hold a couple of desks and sofas, as well as all their books. Rodney could see it becoming their favourite room in the house, even though the sitting room had a large inglenook fireplace and lovely views of the garden. There were enough bedrooms and newly fitted bathrooms to allow their family and friends to be frequent visitors, and a garden large enough to make even Brian happy.

‘We’re definitely going to need a gardener, though,’ Rodney had informed John, who looked a little disappointed.

‘I thought I could have a ride along mower,’ John said, sadly.

‘You do know that they only go about five miles an hour, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, but I’m sure you could make it go much faster for me.’

Rodney’s house had been snatched up by Radek as soon as he learned Rodney would be moving.

‘It is a much nicer house and a bigger house than ours, and Meredith will no doubt have many brothers and sisters,’ Radek had said to Rodney, most earnestly.

‘Many?’ squawked Rodney. ‘If you think I’m going to be Godfather to many mini Zelenkas, you’ve got another think coming!’

‘No matter, since Miko and I both agree that John must be the next godfather, and after him, Tony will take a turn.’

Christmas was going to be spent at the new-old house, as Tony insisted on calling it. Donald was still in the US with his mother and John’s father and brother were invited to spend the holiday with Tony and themselves as they wanted to have Christmas in their first home together, even if John’s boxes hadn’t all been unpacked as yet and were being stored in an outhouse. They were being
joined by Harry Pearce who had accepted their invitation as soon as it had been given and while Rodney was initially a little concerned at having John’s former boss spend Christmas with them, he remembered the amount of time Harry had spent at Holly Lodge, and stopped worrying.

Finally, with Christmas dinner eaten, the Queen’s Speech watched, presents unwrapped, and drinks poured, the new owners of Osborne Cottage and their guests relaxed in the sitting room, a log fire burning brightly.

‘When do you start your new job, John?’ his father asked idly, scratching Brian’s tummy as he lay full length next to him on a sofa.

‘The first course I’ll teach will be at the end of January, but I actually begin work on the 8th. I just need time to settle in and prepare my lecture notes.’

‘And you’ve already begun as a full-time spook, haven’t you, Tony?’ Patrick Fitz-Sheppard asked his nephew.

‘Well, as John was keen to tell me back in October, that’s a word the CIA use to describe themselves.’ He grinned at his cousin. ‘But I officially left NCIS at the end of November.’ He glanced at Harry, wondering just how much his uncle knew about John’s former job, and how much he could say.

‘Don’t worry, Tony, Patrick knows all about us. He did a little bit of work for us himself at one time,’ Harry told his newest member of staff. ‘David is fully read into the dark side as well.’

There was a silence again as each man sipped his drink and gazed at the fire.

‘One thing I have been meaning to ask you, Rodney,’ Harry began, ‘was just how much can you tell us about the project that started all this,’ he waved a hand around, ‘in October?’

Rodney grinned. ‘Officially, I can’t tell you anything specific except that it’s moved on from being a purely theoretical project into something the Government is actually going spend money on, but since everyone here has a sufficiently high clearance level, John can tell you why it’s called Project Pegasus since he understood the reference when I first mentioned it.’

John grinned back. ‘I’m surprised no-one else got it, in fact I’m shocked. You all need to widen your TV viewing.’ He paused and looked around the room, his eyes dancing with mirth.

‘John,’ Tony said sweetly. ‘If you don’t tell us, I might have to hurt you. Badly.’

His cousin laughed. ‘Okay, I’ll put you out of your misery. There’s a Star Trek: Next Generation episode where the Enterprise goes to search for a badly damaged Starfleet vessel on a classified mission, and recover an experimental device. The episode’s called The Pegasus and the device which they needed to retrieve was a phase-shifting cloaking device, and when Rodney said he and Radek had called their project ‘Pegasus’, I realised what they were doing.’

‘So Rodney and Radek have made a phase-shifting cloaking device?’ Tony asked in awe, even if he didn’t really know what it was.

‘No!’ said Rodney rolling his eyes. ‘because that is pure science fiction, but…’ he stopped and looked to John for help.

‘Project Pegasus is about creating technology that will eventually enable us to cloak, or camouflage if
you like, planes or ships, or any other kind of military hardware,’ John explained. ‘My guess is that Rodney, Radek and Miko have been able to work out the formulae needed to begin proper research into developing cloaking technology.’

‘Even if that were the case,’ Rodney said carefully, ‘the actual development of such a device is years away, but if the basic information were to be discovered by three really brilliant astrophysicists, it would make a cloaking device a realistic proposition, probably within our own lifetimes.’

‘So any foreign power who kidnapped the three brilliant astrophysicists and got their hands on this technology would be a real threat to this country,’ Harry said slowly, finally understanding what had been at stake back in October and early November. ‘And failing that, they would try to kill the scientists to prevent the UK from developing it.’

‘And now a number of other people are involved so it’s almost impossible to steal the information and use it against us,’ Rodney explained. ‘The worst that could happen would be that other nations could try and create their own versions of it, but since they’d still need to create the actual equipment that is needed to take the idea forward, it’s unlikely.’

‘And you got all that from just the name, ‘Project Pegasus’, John?’ Tony asked.

‘The name rang a bell, and when I thought about it, it was the only thing that made sense,’ John admitted. ‘Especially as I know that all three of the brilliant astrophysicists watch Star Trek. Although I suppose you could have called it —’

‘—Project Enterprise?’ Rodney finished for him ‘Yeah, but doesn’t have the same ring to it. And names are very important, as you well know.’

‘I wanted to change the name of the cottage to Pegasus Cottage, but Rodney wouldn’t let me,’ John told the others.

‘Because it’s been Osborne Cottage for hundreds of years,’ Rodney retorted. ‘You can’t just go changing names willy-nilly.’

‘Willy-nil! Does anyone still say that?’ John teased, hugging Rodney to him.

Their bickering faded into the background as Tony gazed into the fire. It was a long way from Chudley St Peter and the Paddington estate, especially with detours through the USA and London, but Tony finally felt at ease, at home. He had some of his family around him, with more family still to come when Ducky and his mother moved to London in the new year; a family owned house his uncle was letting him have for a peppercorn rent; and a job he loved, a part of which would be to set up the two new departments he’d suggested. He’d also exchanged a couple of friendly emails with Jethro Gibbs who was now Acting Director at NCIS, much to his annoyance and Tony’s mirth. Life was good.

A cushion came flying his way and he caught it before it knocked something over, laughing as his uncle growled ‘Boys!’ just as he had long years before. What was it the French said?

‘Plus ça change…’ he began quietly,

‘…plus c’est la même chose,’ David finished for him. ‘You alright, Coz?’

‘Fine, thank you, David. Just fine.’
And he was.

*Fin*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!