The Not Dead Yet Affair

by georgiamagnolia

Summary

Someone from Ducky’s past makes a reappearance, and then so does Napoleon Solo.

Notes

I posted this somewhere, and then it disappeared. I might have deleted it, I can't remember. I wrote this purely as a "What If" and then decided I kind of liked it. I shared it because a couple other people liked it as well. It is entirely general even though I wanted some romance, I really did! My two favourite fandoms: two great tastes that probably confuse great together.

See the end of the work for more notes

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An NCIS/Man from UNCLE Crossover

By georgiamagnolia

All recognizable characters belong to the original creators and writers of the television shows, no profit is made from this work and no harm was intended.

Except to bad guys.
CHAPTER ONE

He watched from the doorway, out of sight. The girl on the desk was obviously not as young as she dressed but had the attitude to carry it off. Both of the men sitting behind the desk talking to her seemed to smile indulgently and often at her. The body language of the younger of these men came across as proprietary, and yet the watcher would guess that it was an unconscious effect. His years as an observer of human behavior only told him so much, but he would be willing to bet money on his guess. The older of the two men, the one he was here for, his behavior was that of a proud father toward a favourite child and he smiled a little at the thought. There were others seated at desks nearby, he spared them a glance but his gaze was drawn again and again to the three.

He smoothed his jacket and picked up his briefcase. He stepped forward into the line of sight of the older man, a man he thought never to see again. He took a deep breath, to settle his nerves maybe, or to build them up, he couldn’t decide which.

He felt the moment his presence was noticed.

“Napoleon,” a gasp, and the older man went sheet pale. The man was out of his chair mid-sentence to his companions and moving forward.

“Illya,” and he dropped his briefcase as his arms were full of this old friend. It was a strong hug and so long overdue.

“I thought you were dead, my friend.”

“And I you, partner mine.”

They stood back finally, hands on each other’s shoulders, reading reactions and expressions and years in one another’s faces. The connection opened between them like it had never been gone.

The others had all come out of seats, from behind desks, various reactions playing across features—curiosity and puzzlement chief among them. They had gathered behind their friend, a wall of protection perhaps, or support as his shock was still evident. Finally one of them broke the silence.

“Ducky, you gonna introduce your ghost?”

“Ghost indeed, Jethro,” Ducky said. “This is Napoleon Solo. A man I thought dead these last twenty years.”

Shock still plain in his voice, Ducky introduced Napoleon to Gibbs and his team. Napoleon shook hands all around, himself a little in shock at seeing in the flesh his old friend and partner, despite the fact that he thought he was prepared for this.

“Partner, we need to talk, perhaps somewhere less open, and I think you will want your friends here with us,” Napoleon addressed Ducky but looked around at the gathered circle. “I may be bearing less than good news.”

“Jethro, I would rather not see my old friend here in the morgue just now, could we…”

“Conference room,” Gibbs said.
“Your conference room is not big enough for all of us,” Ducky retained some humour.

“My lab!” Abby said, “It’s big enough and no bodies!”

“Right then,” Ducky led Napoleon toward the elevator. At a nod from Gibbs, his team followed. The doors opened on an empty car. Gibbs stepped in and Ducky and Napoleon followed.

“Ducky is right, this isn’t big enough,” Gibbs frowned.

“Stairs,” Tony said, and started toward them followed by Tim and Ziva, then Abby.

“Wait, Abby,” Ducky called. “Will you join us?”

The four stopped. Abby turned again to the elevator and joined the three men as the doors closed. Gibbs hit the switch and the car stopped and the lights dimmed.

“Ah, Conference Room,” Napoleon smiled.

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“Campfire.” Tony barked as the three entered Abby’s domain. “McGeek, find out who this Solo is with your McGoogle skills. Probette and I will get some more chairs and you better have something for us when we get back.”

On Tony and Ziva’s return, Tim had pulled up a list of hits on Abby’s computer.

“Napoleon Solo. He runs a huge non-profit out of New York City, owns a private security company and keeps a very low profile. He has a huge gap in history between leaving the Army~ Korean War vet, honorable discharge with multiple medals and commendations~ and starting his current companies. He’s loaded, but I am pretty sure that having money isn’t a crime yet.” Tim tapped a few keys. “There are some pictures from newspapers, mostly from the 1960s and 70s society pages.” More key tapping and on the wall monitor appeared a picture of a much younger Napoleon Solo in a tuxedo. Next to him, holding a champagne glass and not quite scowling at the camera while Napoleon beamed was an equally younger and tuxed Ducky, their own Dr. Mallard.

“Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin at the Met Benefit Saturday evening,” Ziva read the caption, squinting.

“What the hell?” Tony asked nobody in particular.

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Napoleon leaned against the back wall of the elevator car, seeming casual, but perhaps not. He watched. Again.

Abby was obviously not a woman used to doing anything still, yet she stood quietly watching Ducky with concern, biting her lip and ever so slightly tapping her fingers together. Napoleon was reminded of a sleek greyhound at a starting gate, ready to spring.

Gibbs, in counterpoint, stood utterly still. His eyes never left Ducky, but there was no betrayal of emotion, no expectation nor impatience, only an utter calmness. Napoleon imagined that this attitude would be terribly intimidating should Gibbs choose to display anything as mundane as anger.

Ducky, meanwhile, stood between them, his back to Napoleon, head bowed. Finally he spoke.
“Jethro, I must apologize again for my misplaced anger after your Mexican vacation a few years back.”

A look of pain touched Abby’s eyes, Napoleon noticed, quick and then gone. Nothing passed across Gibbs’ face.

“My anger was truly guilt,” Ducky continued. “I accused you of holding back information that was neither mine to know nor your obligation to share. If you had wanted to tell me, you would have. I was angry, perhaps entirely because while you would not allow me to share your burden of sorrow, I could not ask you to share mine. And often I have wanted to tell you what will now, no doubt, come into the light.”

Ducky turned to Abby then.

Napoleon saw just a flicker of something in Gibbs then, concern perhaps, then as quickly it was shuttered.

“Abigail, my dear. More than the others I am sorry that you may be disappointed in my silence on this matter. It has never been my intent to hurt you in any way. My deception may cause you pain and for that I am very sorry, my dear, for I would never want to injure you, not for anything.”

“Napoleon,” Ducky finally turned to his friend. “Ah, Napoleon, I was told you were dead, told you were lost and if I had suspected at all that you were not, I would have moved heaven and hell to find you.”

“I know, my friend, and I you,” Napoleon replied. “I was told you had been killed and your body returned home and…” he swallowed the pain. “I will never forgive myself for buying that meager story.”

“If you are here my cover is, or shortly will be, blown. Am I correct?”

“I suspect as much, yes.”

Ducky nodded. Once again he turned to his colleagues. He took a deep breath. And then one more. Napoleon leaned forward and put his hand on one shoulder, Ducky reached up and gave that hand a brief pat. Then one more deep breath and as Napoleon leaned away again he saw the change, shoulders and head up and the subtle body language differences appeared. When he finally spoke, it was not in the softly Scottish flavoured voice Ducky’s friends knew. In its place was a crisp Cambridge tone overlaying the Russian burr that Napoleon had missed so much.

“I was born Illya Nickovetch Kuryakin. I served in the Russian navy, attended University in the Ukraine, studied at the Sorbonne and received a PhD from Cambridge before going to work for an international law enforcement agency. There I was partnered with the most insufferable egotistical capitalist I would ever have the misfortune to meet.” His voice became softer, “He became the best friend I had ever had up to that point in my life. Together we did our best to protect the world at large from destructive and criminal forces. Most of the time we succeeded,” he finished a little ruefully.

“I was indeed home briefly, Napoleon,” he went on, turning slightly to include all three of his companions. “But I did not stay. My family was gone and I had no one. I was approached by another agency and asked to help them with a mission. They came to me with an offer, they needed a replacement for an agent that had been killed in a car accident. I was given his name and identity to fulfill the mission. I earned an MD out of the deal and one thing and another led me to staying. I have legally been Donald Mallard for so long now that this has become as real as anyone I have ever been. The woman I have taken care of these last several years was really the mother of the man who
died in that car wreck. She thought for years that I had been the victim of amnesia. Now that she rarely knows me, at least she will be spared the painful truth.”

The quiet in Gibbs conference room was deafening.

“Permission to hug?” Abby asked in what Napoleon was sure was the most uncertain voice he had ever heard.

Ducky turned toward her and simply held out his arms. The grateful look on his face said all he needed to for the moment.

“Ducky,” Abby said, still with a strangle hold hug on his neck, “I love you no matter who you are. You have been nothing but faithful in our friendship and I expect that won’t change with a name.” She finally let him go.

Ducky turned to Gibbs. And waited.

Gibbs put his hand out and when Ducky took it to shake, Gibbs gave him a more brief hug.

“Ducky,” Gibbs said, “I’d headslap you if I thought I could get away with it.”

CHAPTER TWO

Upon entering the lab Ducky turned to Abby, but not before seeing Tim turn off the computer feed of pictures on the wall monitor, “Some music perhaps, Abby,” he looked up at the security camera and back to Abby.

She also looked up, then back, “Of course,” she nodded, her usual mischief returned to her eyes. She used the remote to turn on a CD, already loud. Gibbs and Napoleon both winced. Tony and Tim both grinned and Ziva rolled her eyes at them all.

“You’ve gotten the new one,” Ducky sounded envious.

“Oh sure, last night. I was planning to bring it down to you this afternoon, I knew you would want to hear it,” she replied, beaming her usual smile at him.

Napoleon looked at Gibbs, “They think this is music?”

“Well guess it’ll cover conversation as well as anything.”

“He always did like the newest janglingest thing he could find.”

“The jazz I listened to was not jangling, Napoleon,” Ducky’s indignation was apparent, “and this is Android Lust, not noise. It’s hardly my fault you have no ear for modern music, in any decade.”

“I’m so relieved that nothing’s changed,” the sarcasm belied by the smirk on the corner of Napoleon’s lip. Then he became more serious, “I believe we have some larger issues to discuss.”

“Indeed, as you say.” Ducky gestured toward Abby’s office and desk, “May I, my dear?”

“Mi desk es su desk, Ducky.”

After Tony and Tim dragged the scavenged chairs into the smaller office, Abby shut the door and the
noise level of the questionable music lowered significantly.

Ducky seated himself behind the desk and Napoleon half sat on the edge, leaning toward his friend. Everyone took chairs except Gibbs who stood behind Abby’s chair.

Ducky looked over the top of his glasses at Napoleon, nodding as if to say it was his show to start. He could see the curiosity burning in at least two of the faces before him, though Ziva gave little away. They would wait, he was sure.

Napoleon sat his briefcase on the desk and removed two large folders. One he handed to Ducky.

“Two days ago I received this dossier in my personal mail. It lists every member of my family, pertinent information including unlisted phone numbers, work and home addresses, lists and pictures of frequent shops and restaurants visited as well as detailed daily schedules. My life and those of my family are no secret, these days. I am the administrator for a company concerned with many projects, including but not limited to rebuilding after natural disasters, digging clean water wells and building schools in developing nations, supporting various domestic shelters of many stripes. Because the work we support is often in difficult places, I also own a private security company. Mostly they get hired as protection detail for benefits and the occasional celebrity, when they aren’t escorting our relief workers both domestic and abroad. We have no political agenda and we do not ever work for or against any government or agency of government. Politics is no longer my game.” He paused and Ducky could see a moment of bitterness, fleeting. Ducky wondered if he were to guess, would he be right at the cause. Then Napoleon was continuing, “Yesterday I received another dossier. Again; personal and work information, addresses, birthdates, routines, pictures. No other communication was included, no threats nor demands. Nothing but this second packet.” He handed the next folder to Ducky and exchanged with him.

As Ducky opened it, Napoleon looked at the rest of the people gathered around the desk.

“You are…” he paused and looked back at Ducky again, then back at the rest, “Ducky’s family. This dossier includes all of you.”

The reactions around the room ranged from surprise and curiosity to enigmatic nothing.

“Last night, when I had already arrived here in D.C. with my plan to come here to see Ill… Ducky,” Napoleon paused again, “and become reacquainted, my sister called. Her granddaughter, the youngest member of my family, has gone missing. She is sixteen and the police, as you know, will not file a missing person report until their own good time. At sixteen they may very well write her off as a runaway. As we have received no demands, they are within their rights to think so.”

“You suspect she didn’t run away,” Gibbs made it a statement, not a question. Gibbs heard an indrawn breath from beside him and glared at Tony in a warning to listen and hold his question.

“Correct,” and Napoleon looked back to Ducky, as if to yield the floor.

“Napoleon and I, in another lifetime, worked for an international law enforcement agency. We made enemies. Many of them were powerful, most of them were crazy and obviously we were at least better enough than them to still be here today.” Ducky frowned, “After a fashion. But if one of them has crawled from the woodwork at this late date, that enemy has resources that may be very formidable. I say this because for the last two decades I have literally been someone other than that agent, with the help of my training and the U.S. Navy, among other agencies, I’ve been Dr. Donald Mallard. But I was not always. When Napoleon and I were partners in our original agency, I went by my birth name.” Ducky paused and again there was the subtle shift, the slightest difference in the way he held his head, the look in his eyes. The register of the voice and the accent. “My name is
Illya Kuryakin, officer in the Russian Navy, schooled at the University in Soviet Georgia, the Sorbonne and finally Cambridge before joining the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, an agency that no longer employs me, or even exists, but it would seem might still have enemies.”

The familiar, to Napoleon, accent was more pronounced. Napoleon recognized that his friend was feeling the stress of these revelations more than he would have liked to let on.

Ducky continued, “Mr. Palmer called in sick today. It may be prudent to verify that, in light of this dossier and its possible implications.”

There was a long moment of silence while the three team members who had taken the stairs absorbed this information. Abby appeared anxious watching her coworkers, perhaps planning her defense of Ducky strategy in case the agents took umbrage with his deceit, institutionalized as it may have been. Gibbs put his hands on her shoulders and she visibly relaxed.

“Wow,” McGee finally broke the silence. “Even I couldn’t write a plot like that.” He looked a little awed.

“Miles to go before you sleep, eh Ducky? Pass me the Telefon.” DiNozzo quipped.

Whatever Ziva David might have said was preempted as she turned to Tony, “What?!” She looked at his grinning face like she wanted to slap it, perhaps for derailing her train of thought with his odd reaction.

“Telefon, 1977, Charles Bronson and Lee Remick, as well as a very young and surprisingly lovely Tyne Daly. Chuck is a Russian agent sent to find the bad guy who has stolen a list of Russian sleeper agents living and working as American citizens with post-hypnotic triggers that when tripped turn them into unknowing one person terrorist cells. Housewives blowing up power plants, all kinds of mayhem. Great film.” He looked at Ducky, “Not that I think you are going to go on a rampage when I quote Robert Frost, really, I know you wouldn’t do that.” He looked back to Ziva, “That was the trigger, poetry by Robert Frost.”

Gibbs made a move and DiNozzo ducked. “Sorry Boss, shutting up about movies now. Honest.”

Gibbs refocused the group. “You think that one of these enemies from your past has targeted you and your family,” he addressed Napoleon, “and you think that we, as Ducky’s surrogate family, are also at risk.”

“It seems the logical conclusion to leap to, and since until yesterday morning I had believed my partner dead, it’s what makes sense to me. I would much rather no one be in danger, but experience advises caution.” Napoleon’s tone was equal parts apology and warning.

Gibbs looked to Ducky next, “How many people know about this identity switch of yours?”

“There is a file buried under a password only two people have knowledge of, the few people who set up the original mission are all either retired or dead. I spent a long time overseas at first. As far as I am aware, all the agencies involved sealed the information. I can’t imagine who could have put the two and two together to make this mess happen. I suspect we will need to read Director Vance in on this as soon as possible. The SecNav and I are the only two on this side of the pond with access to that file, I will give the password to the Director,” Ducky let out a sigh.

“The chips’ll fall on a winner, Ducky.” Gibbs was uncharacteristic in his vocal reassurance. Ducky looked gratefully at him. “We’ll call Fornell in on the kidnapping up North, what good is having a
friend in the FBI if you can’t abuse them from time to time?” Gibbs grinned in a particularly feral manner, then became serious again. “Did you talk to Jimmy Palmer this morning?”

Ducky shook himself, as if to shed the regret, or the self pity. His voice was all business when he answered Gibbs, “He left a voicemail. I will give Timothy the code for my phone, perhaps he can trace the call, I didn’t erase it.”

“Good. DiNozzo, David, Palmer’s place. If he is there, stay there until we get some protection in place, if he’s not, track him. I want his every movement today traced, find him if he can be found. Start with the surveillance this dirtbag’s already done, but do your own on top of it. Abbs, I need all that info copied for us to study. Then I want…”

Abby interrupted, “Fingerprints, trace, everything I can find on the files as soon as inhumanly possible, it will be yours, my silver fox.” She jumped up, saluting with the wrong hand as she did.

Napoleon handed over the files he held, looking down at Ducky for the other. “Miss Sciuto, I took the precaution of preserving these files as well as I could as soon as I became alarmed, I used page protectors, as you can see. The first file will have my prints all over it, the second I immediately put in sleeves using gloves.”

“You keep latex gloves at home, Napoleon?” asked Ducky with raised brows.

“No, I had to use the gloves my housekeeper uses to wash the dishes. I made sure they were dry first.”

The quirk of amusement on Ducky’s mouth said he was picturing Napoleon in his expensive suit with bright kitchen gloves on. Napoleon’s glower said that he could hear that thought. Napoleon pulled two zippered plastic bags from his briefcase and turned once again to Abby, “I also put the envelopes the dossiers came in into these bags, though after a trip through the postal system, I am sure this is too little, too late for your purposes. My apologies,” he handed the whole pile over to Abby.

“Please Mr. Solo, call me Abby, all my friends do.”

“I would like nothing better than to be your friend. Call me Napoleon.”

Abby beamed at him and turned toward her lab.

“You still can’t help yourself, can you?” Ducky smirked up at him, then called her back. “Abby, I have more photo here. And Jethro, this doesn’t look good.”

The photo he held showed Gibbs, outside, carrying a coffee and a Caf*Pow, the window of Abby’s lab clearly visible behind him.

“Telephoto lens I hope, because if this guy has access to the Navy Yard, things just got a lot uglier.” Gibbs.

Abby took the photo, “I can triangulate, just like with bullet trajectory, I may be able to tell where he took it from and if it was on the Yard or not.”

“Good,” Gibbs’ voice was harsh. “In the meantime, nobody goes anywhere alone. Not even on the Yard. Tony, Ziva, find Palmer or track his movements this morning as far as you can. And don’t let each other out of your sight. McGee, trace the phone call and then start tracking Palmer’s movements from this side with his cell phone or whatever you can. Abby, copies of those files for all of us to study and then do your magic with whatever trace you can find.”
There was a chorus of ‘on it boss’ as the three agents exited the office, followed by Abby and her parting ‘yes my silver fox’ as she slipped out the door.

The doors slid shut and Gibbs turned to Napoleon and Ducky, still at Abby’s desk. “Mr. Solo…”

“Napoleon, please.”

“Napoleon,” Gibbs nodded, “are you staying here in D.C., or were you planning to go back to your family now?”

“Originally, I had planned to stay in Washington for a while. As there is little I can do for my grand-niece at this point, I still plan to stay here. I have my own security. I’ve called in my best employees, all trained by me or known to me for years. Those that are not assigned to my family members are arriving this afternoon, though the New York and D.C. people are already here. I left them at the hotel, but they will meet me outside the Navy Yard when I go.” He pulled one more folder from his briefcase and held it out to Gibbs. “This is a list of those agents as well as the rest of my employees and five years worth of people our companies have dealings with, we do extensive background checks on everyone. You are welcome to check your own resources, of course.”

Gibbs looked at Ducky, “He always this prepared?”

“I’d know?” Ducky shrugged. “We had people back in the day, one call on the communicator and someone somewhere scurried off to find out whatever we asked.”

“Who do you think I hired?” Napoleon grinned.

“Ah ha. As usual, getting someone to think ahead for you.” Ducky gave Napoleon a sarcastic little grin, but it was softened by the genuine smile in his eyes.

“I prefer to think that I am utilizing resources to the best of their abilities.” The look he returned to Ducky was the old familiar confidence.

Gibbs could feel a current of friendship that ran deeper than he’d ever seen in anyone. He was about to speak when the door opened and they were momentarily blasted with whatever alien Abby had in the CD player.

“Napoleon,” Abby smiled, “I need your fingerprints for exclusion. I looked for them in your file, well, your file was already on my computer screen, the musketeers were busy while we were in the conference room, and your fingerprints aren’t on file, which is weird because it’s your military file and…”

“Abbs,” Gibbs interrupted softly.

“Right you are, oh great one, we don’t have time for this mystery, we have Jimmy Palmer to find and kidnappers to foil,” she took a breath finally.

Napoleon put out one arm and Abby took it. “Lead on, my sweet,” he smiled at her.

“Such a gentleman,” Abby beamed at him in return.

The doors slid open and then shut again after them, leaving Gibbs alone with his suddenly enigmatic friend.
Fornell’s escort ushered him into MTAC and left him at the top of the stairs to make his own way around. He surveyed the crowd, and there was one.

McGee and DiNozzo were at keyboards bickering as McGee told DiNozzo what buttons to push and codes to enter. David was on a phone next to them. Gibbs and Vance were huddled up intense and quiet, but neither looked angry yet so Tobias sighed a bit of relief at that. What surprised him was seeing the forensics goth and the M.E. down front standing with a stranger in a too-nice suit. The M.E. and The Suit sat as Abby poured tea from a pot that had been sitting on a metal tray. He stepped down to join them, they seemed the least occupied of anyone in the room.

“Ducky, please tell me you didn’t make a morgue tray into a tea trolley,” he smiled when he said it.

“No, indeed, Tobias. Abby did. May we offer you a cup?”

“How perfectly macabre. Yes, thank you.”

Abby grinned and handed him a cup of hot, strong tea, then sat next to Ducky and patted a seat in invitation. As he sat he saw The Suit take a packet of something out of his pocket and offer it to Ducky. He would swear it was a tiny packet of jam in metallic foil, but he couldn’t be sure. He watched as Ducky chuckled and then the two split whatever it was between their tea cups and never a word passed between them.

“Tobias, I’d like you to meet my old friend Napoleon Solo. Napoleon, this is Special Agent Fornell, F.B.I.”

Napoleon leaned around Ducky and Abby to offer a handshake. It was a firm handshake, Tobias noted, but with nothing to prove. There was charm there as well, maybe more than he would normally put up with, but then, he was used to Gibbs, so maybe he was just expecting too little. He suppressed a grin as he thought that.

“Solo, good to meet you,” though actually he felt mostly puzzled.

“Likewise, Agent Fornell. I’ve heard good things.”

Fornell was opening his mouth to respond when Gibbs and Vance stepped up.

“And you’ve heard nothing, I know,” Gibbs said to Fornell.

“I’d have been less blunt, I suppose, Gibbs.” Fornell stood.

Vance shook his hand next. “Thank you for coming to our party, Agent Fornell.”

“Director Vance,” he wondered as he shook hands with the N.C.I.S. director why there was so much politeness.

Vance looked toward the three agents still on phones and punching information into databases, then back to Fornell. “I know this seems a bit more cloak and dagger than normal for NCIS, but we have a potential situation and the longer we can keep it quiet, the better chance I think we have of resolving it quickly, so some precautions are in place,” he gestured around MTAC with its security protocols.
Ziva joined them, folding up her cell phone and pocketing it as she did. She shook her head at Vance’s look of expectation. Vance’s eyes got little more grim and he turned to McGee and DiNozzo, “Gentlemen?”

“Ready, Director,” McGee answered for them both, Tony finished his one and two fingered typing and turned to nod his agreement.

Tobias watched as Gibbs’ team ran through all the information they had so far. He felt Ducky’s tension, even two seats away, when the Kuryakin file flashed on the huge wall monitor and he understood the protective shield that Abby and Solo made on either side of him as Vance filled him in on the revelations from this file. He glanced sideways and mused on this Russian navy officer with a PhD. Who knew the unassuming M.E. with the longwinded stories could be such a font of mystery. Ducky glanced over at him, the look in his eyes part challenge and part… Fornell couldn’t put a name to it. He just nodded at him and toasted him with the tea cup almost forgotten in his hand.

Ducky sat back and both he and Solo relaxed, Solo eyeing Ducky then Fornell before giving his attention again to the screen and the team.

The NCIS agents took turns reporting their progress on the case so far, finally coming to David. “Tony and I went to Jimmy Palmer’s apartment, it was locked and undisturbed when we entered. His car was gone from the lot. We went to the café he often picks up his morning coffee from, it was listed in the report. He was there right on time this morning.” She gestured at the screen where a traffic camera picture showed Palmer’s car stopped at a traffic light. “He disappeared somewhere between the coffee shop and the Navy Yard. This is the last trace of him we have found.”

McGee took up the narrative, “His cell phone was used in this cell phone grid,” the picture on the wall changed to a city map with an arrow showing an approximate location, presumably Palmer’s last known. “This call came in within fifteen minutes of the traffic camera picture being taken.”

Tony continued, “We put a BOLO on his car and it’s been found, being towed to our garage so we can search it. Palmer’s cell phone was on the seat.”

“Osuzhdat,” Ducky muttered.

“Terpenie, partner mine,” Napoleon whispered, putting on hand on his friend’s arm, a brief comfort.

“Forgive me, I know you are also missing someone,” Ducky sighed. “Was it always this frustrating?”

“No. We were the ones taking the actions. It isn’t that fun to be on the other side of the mission, eh, tovarisch?”

Another sigh was the only answer.

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“Solo, your people are cleared, as you knew they would be.” Gibbs.

“We’ll prepare a briefing for you to give them and you can keep them guarding your family,” Vance said.

Gibbs continued, “Of course, we can’t officially allow them into the investigation here or elsewhere. But if they were to see something…”

“And if they were to, ah, call in some suspicious activities they might have observed,” Solo said, “while they were minding their own business nearby some residence or other…”
“Then they would just be doing their civic duty, wouldn’t they?” Gibbs finished, that feral grin again flashed and was gone.

“There might be some contact information in the briefing, for an appropriate agency one might call, for instance. But I didn’t hear this conversation, gentlemen.” Vance.

“Certainly, Director Vance, Agent Gibbs.” Solo echoed that look, there was a hunter in there still, under the charm.

Gibbs nodded. He looked toward Abby who was flipping through her copy of the files and becoming more and more agitated. “Abbs?”

“You know, something’s been bothering me. Look at this,” she held up some papers. “Look at these lists of names and addresses.” She held her hand out, fingers pulling air toward her palm, demandingly toward Tony who still held the remote for the wall monitor. “Gimme.” He handed it over.

On the monitor appeared the lists, side by side. “See here, these lists aren’t in any kind of order, not alphabetical, not by birth date, address, I can’t find any regular pattern to them and this file sending guy is awfully organized in his information, so this just seems hinky to me, unless it is in some order that only the kidnapper knows and it may be nothing at all but maybe it is something…” She finally paused for a breath, looking from Gibbs to Vance and back again.

“What do you see, Abbs?” Gibbs asked her, stepping into her personal space, knowing his presence would calm her, focus her.

“Well, see this first name on the list of Napoleon’s, Ally, his great-niece, the youngest of his family. She went missing last night,” agitation was plain in Abby’s voice. “And first on Ducky’s list is Jimmy, who went missing this morning and is youngest of all of us on Ducky’s list.”

Fornell caught it, “You think this is his hit list, his order of disappearance.”

“I don’t know!” Abby’s voice rose in pain. “It might be, but like I said, it could be nothing,” and she sounded dejected and anxious both.

Gibbs leaned in and spoke quietly, “What does your gut say?”

“Gibbs, I think we need to make sure the second people on the lists have someone watching them, right away.” She started to pace but Gibbs took her shoulders and stopped her. She looked at him, stilled for the moment, with fear and excitement both evident, adrenaline mixing with her usually caffeinated blood to make that stillness difficult.

“That’s good work, Abby,” Vance surprised her.

“Yep,” Gibbs agreed. He looked up at the lists. “Who’s Amy?”

“My quite elderly Aunt Amy, who already has bodyguards in place at the home she lives in,” Napoleon replied, giving Ducky a look that said, ‘yes, still alive, can you believe it’. “But I suggest we get someone to, ah, Ducky’s…”

Napoleon paused, so briefly that Ducky wondered if he was the only one who heard the hesitation, and Ducky finished his sentence, “Mother’s home. Next on the list.”

Napoleon wondered if he really heard the weariness in his old friend’s voice or if perhaps he imagined it there.
Activity flurried across MTAC. Ducky called the home that the woman he had called Mother for two decades lived in, assured that she was fine and comfortable, no strange visitors had been calling.

Napoleon dispatched trusted employees to watch over her and he and Ducky conferred with the retirement home on their identities and purpose. Fornell made calls, Vance made more. Gibbs looked over the background checks on Solo’s clients and employees, both original and those done by his agents. Abby checked her work on the fingerprints on the original dossiers sent to Napoleon. The files were still scrolling the screens, no matches coming up yet.

“Ugh,” Abby wanted to pull her hair and everyone knew it. “Good news, bad news, people,” she said. “We have unknown prints on some of the pages in the files. Unfortunately, they are very unknown, they aren’t showing up in any database I have,” her frustration was plain.

Vance looked over her shoulder at the small screen she was using to gain remote access to the computers in her lab, watching the scrolling prints. “Maybe that’s the problem,” he said to her. “Maybe the match is in a database we don’t have.” Vance looked over toward Fornell who was just slapping his cell phone shut.

“I’m going to owe someone a case of damn good scotch for this,” Fornell muttered, “and I wish someone owed me some scotch, we’re going to need it by the end of this.” He looked at Vance then. “My CIA contact is on board, we’ll have as many of the UNCLE records that they have as soon as they can send them, hopefully within the hour. The bad news is that they aren’t very complete. It was a hell of an explosion, the records the FBI has are partial at best. I can’t promise a lot.”

“What you’re saying is that all those reports I wrote couldn’t stand the test of time or the bad guys,” Napoleon commented.

“Reports that who wrote, my friend?”

“That we wrote, partner mine, that we wrote,” Napoleon sounded not a bit conciliatory.

Ducky harrumphed. Napoleon wondered if he really heard a Russian accent in that expression.

“What are we looking at, boxes of documents, or what?” McGee asked.

“Our New York headquarters suffered an explosion. It was also the central warehouse for reports on every affair ever staged by any of our agents worldwide. I believe that whatever was left after was farmed out to whichever agency might make the most use of them. Some went to the FBI, CIA, MI5, Interpol. After the Old Man’s death, the agency wasn’t the same. I was still in a coma in a hospital some way distant, our own medical facilities took heavy damage. I’m not entirely sure what exactly happened directly after the explosion.” Napoleon sighed. “I admit I didn’t have the heart to return even after my recovery, and by that time it was all over in any case.”

It was Ducky’s turn to put a comforting hand on his friend’s shoulder, Napoleon smiled at him in return.

“We’ll start with what we can get,” Vance said.

“I’ve got someone on the kidnapping up in New York,” Fornell said. “Aaron owes me a favour.” He addressed the room but looked at Napoleon as he spoke, “His team will be wheels up in half an hour and will coordinate a search. The locals won’t take a report yet which means that our team won’t need to wait for an invite. And as an extra bonus, his computer tech will help with the FBI records from their end.”

“Thank you, Tobias,” Ducky said. “I can’t tell you…”
“Hey, I still owe you for my suicide. We’re good,” he put one hand on Ducky’s shoulder. “We’ll call this a down payment.”

Ducky smiled and nodded. Napoleon looked from one to the other. Fornell saw it and added, “You ever need to fake your way out of a jail cell and out from under your own agency’s lock and key, Ducky’s your man, well, so is Gibbs, for that matter. But I guess you know how good Ducky is in a tight spot.”

“Oh yes,” Napoleon said, a smile lurking, “my partner got me out of a lot of unfortunate situations. He’s good to have at your back.”

“I’m right here, gentlemen.” Ducky scowled.

“And thank God for it, partner mine,” Napoleon’s voice was suddenly much more quiet and serious. A look passed between them, Fornell saw it but couldn’t quite decide how to read it. He could, however, see that these two men belonged to some older fraternity than he would know. He knew the value of a working relationship, the value of a partner you trusted. He could feel that between them, and more, he could see them communicate. He wondered how painful it must have been for each believe for so long the misinformation on their deaths. He didn’t want to have to imagine that.

“Car’s here,” DiNozzo announced.

Gibbs started issuing orders.

“First, nobody goes anywhere alone. Let me repeat that for a third time,” he glared at McGee. “NO one is LEFT ALONE, ANYWHERE. Not in an apartment, not on the Navy Yard, not in a car, NOT ANYWHERE. We clear?” Without raising his voice, law was laid down and the entire room understood it.

“Got it.”

“Yes Boss.”

“Understood.”

Gibbs looked at Abby.

“Yes.” She looked for a moment at her shoes.

“Ok. DiNozzo, David, Car. McGee, you’re with Abby on the records as soon as Fornell’s CIA contact comes through.” He turned to the former partners standing behind him, “Solo, here is the information to give your men,” he handed over a printout. “We can’t officially involve them, but anything they have to report will be welcomed. You can distribute their services as you see fit.” Napoleon nodded. Gibbs continued, “Ducky, I want extra eyes on you in case we guessed wrong with that list. And on you, Solo. I don’t trust this dirtbag to be predictable.”

Fornell and Vance slipped out while Gibbs was marshalling the troops. Outside MTAC, Fornell looked at Vance.

“I’ve got bourbon in my office. Sun’s down somewhere, isn’t it?” Vance offered.

“God, yes,” Fornell agreed.

Back in MTAC, Gibbs was still growling. “We’re on this until Ally and Palmer are found.”
“Ugh, I hate sleeping under my desk,” DiNozzo.

“You want to talk Vance into getting the Navy to spring for a safe house for everyone?”

“Well…”

“Gibbs, my name is after Ducky’s mother on that list,” Ziva interrupted Tony’s complaint. “Let me go home tonight and see if the kidnapper takes the, uh, date.”

“Bait, Ziva.” McGee.

“Bait, yes.” Ziva shook her head, as if to settle the idiom into it.

The thunderclouds in Gibbs’ eyes would have silenced a lesser mortal.

“Let’s just double up,” Abby suggested, “that way we aren’t alone, we are in one another’s sight and we aren’t sleeping under desks.” Despite circumstances, her voice sounded chipper.

Gibbs raised his brow at Abby. “Good work, Abbs. McGee, DiNozzo pick an apartment and bunk up. Abbs, you’re with me, Ziva, you too.” His voice brooked no arguments. He could see the mutiny on Ziva’s face. He gestured at Abby and then said to Ziva, “You know, trained assassins come in handy when guarding the support staff. And you gotta sleep sometime.” Light dawned and Ziva nodded.

“Uh, boss…” McGee.

“No sweat, McRoomie, my couch is a fold out.”

“Oh yay, Ziva, we can braid each other’s hair and tease the boys about it all day tomorrow.” Abby seemed gleeful, perhaps a bit too much so, Napoleon guessed it was to cover nerves, or fear. He continued to watch the team as they worked out arrangements and readied to pursue what they could of this case.

Gibbs turned to Ducky next. Ducky held up a hand to delay his next order and looked to Napoleon, speaking quietly. “Napoleon, there is too much room in my house now that Mother is away. Would you join me for the duration, we have so much catching up to do.”

“It would be my pleasure, thank you for the invitation, Illya.”

Ducky looked back to Gibbs then. Gibbs nodded. “You’ll have your men there,” Gibbs looked to Napoleon.

“En force.”

Gibbs nodded at them again, Napoleon got the impression that the stern look was to warn them to watch each other’s back, or maybe Gibbs was just always so stern. It reminded him of someone he used to know, and he glanced at his old partner, someone he would have to relearn after all this time, apparently.

“Did I hear you say the car was here, DiNozzo?”

“On it, Boss.” Both DiNozzo and David turned and started up the stairs out of MTAC.

“We got mail, Abby!” McGee.

“Hallelujah, that was fast!” Abby skipped to the keyboards at the side of the room.
“Abigail, we’re retiring to your office, if that suits you. I promise not to rearrange. Too much.” Ducky grinned at her.

“You just want to skype my CD collection, as usual. I know you, you sly thing.” She smiled back.

Ducky only continued to smile at her, thankful for the levity. And the acceptance, if he was going to be honest. “Thank you, my dear.”

Napoleon saw in that grin his old partner and friend, who wore both these lives. For the first time that day and since this whole affair began, he felt they might come through the other side ok.

Gibbs followed them as they left MTAC. He pushed the elevator button for them as they were schlepping the makeshift tea tray and cart.

“The order goes for you as well. Don’t go anywhere alone. I don’t care if you’re here in this building, you go no place alone. Ever.”

“Got it, Jethro. Napoleon won’t want to spend the morning on his knees for a toothbrush, I assure you,” Ducky said as the elevator doors opened to Gibbs’ grim look.

“What!” Napoleon.

“Well you see, Timothy was supposed to be on protection detail…”

Gibbs smirked as the elevator doors closed on Ducky’s story and Napoleon’s look of dismay.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Timmy!” Abby startled him with her alarm. McGee looked up from the scanned documents he was struggling to read on the computer screen. It wasn’t easy since the typewritten pages had been photographed then scanned into an electronic format. Where some of them were singed it was hard to read them, not to mention that whole pages were often missing making the information garbled. He was making what sense of them he could.

“What’s wrong Abby, did you find something?”

“No. No, no, no, dammit. Nothing to help Ducky and Napoleon,” she stood and started to pace, “or Ally or Jimmy.” She stopped abruptly and pulled out her phone. “I need Caf*Pow and Gibbs is all alone and he never follows rules that actually make sense,” she started pushing buttons on her phone.

“Not true, Abbs.” Gibbs said from the doorway to MTAC.

“Gibbs!” her relief was plain as she started bounding up the stairs.

“I’ve been at my desk in full view of several agents and,” he stepped forward and caught her as she threw herself into hugging him, “Vance has given us some reinforcements who kindly went on a coffee run for me.” He took the Caf*Pow and coffee off the agents that followed him into MTAC.

“Hey, Boss!” The two agents took the stairs.

“Long time, no see,” the two men greeted McGee. He looked up with surprise and then smiled. His reinforcements were his former coworkers from the computer team.
“Gibbs said you might could use some extra eyes up here.” They settled into chairs and awaited instructions.

“McGee,” Gibbs said from the doorway. When Tim looked up he continued, “One of these guys goes with you if you go anywhere. Consider it a new rule.”

“Got it, Boss.” He turned to his new old crew and explained that they were looking for names in the files in front of them, and continued to give them instructions as Gibbs drew Abby out of the secure MTAC room.

They waited for the elevator as Abby took a long drag on the cold caffeinated drink. She sighed. Gibbs put one hand in the small of her back and guided her into the elevator and hit the button for the garage. He didn’t move his hand. She smiled a contented smile until the elevator opened and they scanned their way into the evidence garage. They found DiNozzo and David bickering as they entered.

“I’m telling you Tony, this seat is too far forward. Palmer is too tall to drive this close to the steering wheel.”

“The rearview mirror isn’t adjusted for any driver at all so how are we going to know?”

Abby circled the car, sipping her drink. She completed a circuit and started again while Gibbs stood and glowered at the car as if it would give up some useful information if he glared hard enough.

Abby stopped again next to Gibbs.

“It’s sort of like in McGee’s last book, when Officer Lisa was attacked in the car.” Abby said.

“Yes! That is what is bothering me.” Ziva snapped her fingers and pointed at Abby. “Officer Lisa slammed the seat back into the bad guy, remember? She was getting her gun out from under the seat and slammed it back into the attacker to distract him, then pulled it forward again but left it there rather than hit him again because he moved across the seat. I thought that was not very realistic.”

Ziva couldn’t help editing the character that McGee had based on her.

Gibbs looked from Abby to Ziva and back to the car.

“You read the book already?” Tony was looking from Ziva to Abby with disbelief.

“Of course, as soon as they come out.” Ziva.

“Well, I have to make sure Timmy isn’t doing silly things with my character again, right?” Abby.

“Did Palmer read it, that’s the question. Is he trying to send us a message? Is this coincidence? What?” Gibbs.

“We’ll look under the seat to see if he caught something off an attacker, just in case.” DiNozzo.

“We’ll take anything you’ve got so far, Abby can get started on the phone at least.” Gibbs told them and held out a hand for evidence bags full of things they hoped would help them find their young medical assistant.

Ziva handed over several bags and Abby signed for them, there weren’t very many.

“As soon as you are done here, I want you to get the lists of names that McGee is collecting out of the files.” Gibbs continued to give them their marching orders. “Find out what happened to those
people and if they have the resources to grind this ax with Ducky and Solo.”

He turned and headed out of the garage with Abby in his wake.

~~~ another time, another place ~~~

“He should be waking by now, shouldn’t he?”

“Yes, there is no medical reason for him not to,” the doctor frowned as he studied the chart. This John Doe was healing well from his injuries, so much so that he had been taken out of their small intensive care unit and moved to the regular ward. But still he remained unconscious.

“If I could make a suggestion?” the head nurse started, wondering if the doctor would see what she had seen.

The doctor just looked up from the chart and raised an eyebrow.

“Our John Doe seems to respond a little to one of the newer nurses, perhaps if we put him in her care exclusively, he might come out of this faster.”

“It can’t hurt. And if he doesn’t wake up soon he is going to be shoved into some warehouse state facility, and that would be too bad, he doesn’t look like the sort that belongs there.”

“Very good,” she was pleased that this doctor was open to the idea, many were so full of their own ego that they never listened to the nurses and the aides that worked with the patients every day.

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“You don’t look like your name is John, you look like you have a much more distinguished name,” the little nurse said as she checked the vital signs of her patient. She talked to him softly as she checked his pulse and blood pressure, the IV drip, the bandages on his head and the cast on his leg. She kept up a steady patter to him, certain he would understand her somewhere under all those bandages and the coma he seemed to want to stay in. He must hear her since his steady pulse always picked up just a tiny bit when she talked to him or gently washed his face and changed the dressing on his head wound. “You have much too noble a face to be named John. Such fine features would be on a count or a prince in my homeland, a fine gentleman with a name like Alexei or Nickolay…” she paused as her patient’s brow creased. His pulse seemed to flutter under her fingertips. Was he waking? Finally? When she did not continue speaking he seemed to settle, not waking at all. She thought maybe she imagined it. She resumed her patter as she rolled him gently to change his sheets and then resettled him as comfortably as she could. She stood by his bed with her hand on his, just for another moment.

“I do wish you would wake, it is a beautiful day today, it would be a glorious day for your waking. The sun has come out and is promising us Spring soon. Wouldn’t you like to see that?”

There was a sound behind her and she turned to see the doctor at the door. She blushed prettily and stepped away from the bed.

“Don’t let me stop you, you seemed to be doing fine there,” he smiled at her.

“Oh, Doctor Keefer, I didn’t mean to keep you if you were here to examine him,” she gestured at the
man in the bed.

“No, no worry there. I actually came to see how he was with you,” he explained. “I understand you seem to have a good effect on our mysterious patient.”

“I do not know about that. I hope I am helping him properly.”

“I have no doubt of that, Miss…” the doctor stepped into the room and looked at her nametag.

“It’s Irina, Doctor, just Irina. No one can ever pronounce my last name so the Head Nurse stopped trying to make anyone do it.”

“Well then, Miss Irina, how is our patient today?” he smiled again at her and she wasn’t sure if he was making fun or not, she had yet to be here long enough to be able to decipher the humour of the people in her new home.

Just a little uncertainly, she explained that the patient seemed to stir just a bit earlier. The doctor walked up to the bed and put his fingers on the man’s wrist. Then he looked to Irina.

“Tell me what it was you said?” he prompted her gently.

“I was saying how that he did not look like someone named John, that he looked to me as if he should have a noble name, Alexei perhaps or Nickolay.”

Again there was just the shadow of movement across the brow and the flutter of pulse, and then the brow smoothed and the pulse settled again.

The doctor watched intently, and asked “Do you know the name Alex-ie?”

The patient did not respond. Nor when he asked about Nick-oh-lee.

Irina couldn’t help but let a small giggle escape, and was instantly mortified, her hand flying to her mouth and a look of abject terror in her eyes as she looked swiftly at the doctor and then down at the floor. Still with her hand in front of her lips she mumbled a small and quiet, “I am so sorry.”

“I’m butchering those names, aren’t I?” Dr. Keefer chuckled. Still not letting go of the patient’s wrist he reached out and touched his other hand to Irina’s shoulder, she looked up at him again, still showing terrible fear.

“Miss Irina,” he said gently, “Please don’t look so scared, I am not the big bad wolf to come and eat little girls in the forest, or even in hospital hallways. And it was funny, I obviously can’t wrap my tongue around your names, perhaps you will give me lessons?” He smiled so gently and charmingly that she had to relax and give a tentative smile in return. “Now then, please say the second name again?”

He looked back to his patient, and as Irina said the name Nickolay, there was the quick jump again, that steady pulse pushing just a hint faster.

He looked back to Irina, grinning. “I don’t think we imagined that, he seems to like the name. Perhaps you should call him that when you are in here tending him, it may invite him out finally. But only you, since I would guess that none of us will get that name quite right without a lesson or two.”

“Yes, of course I will be happy to call him Nickolay. I come in most afternoons to read to him or tell him the latest news from the television or newspaper, when I am on my break I visit. I think perhaps I imagine he likes the company.” She looked down at their mystery man a little sadly. “I will address
him by this name and tell him it is time to wake.”

“Surely he will be enticed from his slumber,” Dr. Keefer stepped away from the bed then, putting himself very close to Irina. He smiled again at her. “I will be back by later, perhaps you will give me some language lessons then.” He left Irina looking a little stunned and starstruck.

As the days passed, Irina continued to visit and read to her Nickolay. When Dr. Keefer stopped by, she taught him phrases in her language. He seemed to stop by more often and stay for longer each time. Irina wasn’t sure what to make of that, so she supposed that their mystery patient was as much a draw to the doctor as he was to her.

Weeks passed and the cast came off and the bandages on the head wound were finally gone, and Irina thought that her patient was a very handsome man, but not, perhaps as handsome as Dr. Keefer.

She was changing sheets and chatting softly to her Nickolay when he seemed to stir just a bit. She settled him back again in the bed and adjusted the tubes and machinery and sat next to his bed. His brow was creased with just the smallest line. Perhaps today was the day, and Irina wasn’t sure she was ready. If he woke, she would no longer have the excuse of him to visit with Dr. Keefer. And she had heard the other girls talking in the cafeteria about how Dr. Keefer never ever dated hospital staff, unlike most of his colleagues. She would be sad to not spend time with him anymore.

“Nickolay, you must wake. There must be someone out there looking for you. It is a lovely Spring and you wouldn’t want to miss anymore of it,” she held his hand as she spoke, hoping that today was the day he might squeeze her hand. “Of course, I will miss visiting with Dr. Keefer, but that is no reason for you to stay sleeping like this. The physical therapy man says that you are in such good shape that you will be up and walking again just as soon as you wake. There is nothing to wait for now, you need to wake, my Nickolay.”

Standing just outside the door, Dr. Keefer listened to Irina’s soft voice beckon their mystery patient out of his coma. He was certain that if she were to speak so softly and sweetly to him, he would follow her anywhere she felt like leading. Leaning against the doorjamb, he turned so he could see as well as hear her. He had rules, and one of them was never to date coworkers. It was a cliché he had never wanted to fall into, the doctor and the nurse romance. But he felt a deep need to break some rules, the longer he continued to stop by in his free moments to see Irina. He gave up weeks ago trying to pretend to himself that he was stopping in to see to his patient’s wellbeing. Though of course, he thought to himself, it was a great excuse. One he may not have for much longer, as the moments of response in their John Doe were happening more frequently. He sighed, and realized he had better decide to break a cardinal rule he had set for himself, or transfer his patient. He stood off the doorway and entered the room, knowing that his choice had been made some weeks ago. He greeted Irina softly, trying not to startle her as he walked up behind her chair.

“dObraye Utra, Miss Irina. How is he today?”

Irina looked over her shoulder up at him, smiling, and then back to their patient. “Good morning to you as well, Doctor. He seems to be good today.”

“Any more progress?” He moved to the end of the bed and looked at the chart, noting strong vital signs and the comments from the physical therapist that had been working to keep muscle tone while the patient was bed bound.

“He frowned a little while I was changing the sheets, but wouldn’t wake, no matter how nice I asked.”

“I cannot imagine anyone not doing as you ask when you are nice about it,” the smile in his voice
was apparent. He drew up the other chair and sat next to her. “I have a little time free, may we practice some more phrases?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

Keefer was pleased to see the smile and just the slightest blush across her cheeks, surely his interest wasn’t one sided, though he had overheard in the doctor’s lounge that she was standoffish and never accepted a date from anyone, doctor or not. Perhaps she was simply shy. He thought maybe it was that she was still relatively new here that made her seem so off-putting to the others, but she was so quiet and shy that he was sure those others had just not tried to see past that shield of silence she had.

As they spoke quietly, Dr. Keefer repeating the phrases Irina said to him, the heart monitor slowly increased.

“You can hear us, can’t you Nickolay. Would you like to be part of the conversation now?” Irina addressed the sleeping man in the bed. “All you have to do is open those pretty brown eyes. Come now, you want to see what a lovely morning it is, don’t you?”

“You should, you know,” Keefer said. “You have the prettiest nurse in the hospital taking care of you, you would be the envy of any patient.”

Keefer was pleased to see the blush make a quick reappearance.

They continued to talk, occasionally addressing the patient, as if he were part of the conversation and not just a reason to spend time together.

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Awareness sifted slowly through him like light separating itself from the darkness at dawn. He heard voices and didn’t recognize them, but there was a familiarity. Though one of them was similar, it was not the voice he expected, not the voice he wanted to hear. His training was ingrained and he assessed as he had been taught. He could feel tubes and wires, sheets against his skin, a dull ache below one knee but it didn’t feel threatening, one hand had a pinched feeling on the back but it wasn’t restrained. The other was held by a small hand, no stranger to hard work if the calluses were anything to go by, but held his softly, as if to give comfort. His head throbbed dully like it did when he slept too long or not long enough. He felt the radiant heat of sunlight through a window, so he wasn’t in Medical Section, no windows that far underground, but the sounds of hospital machines were distinctive and he knew them, all too well. ‘So I’m in a hospital somewhere, with unknown personnel, it’s more than I knew ten minutes ago,’ he thought silently. Perhaps if he opened his eyes, he would find who he was looking for in the next bed, that would be good, he thought. He slit his eyes and peeked from under lashes, there was no other bed in the room, so instead he stayed still to spy on his companions. He needn’t have bothered, they had eyes only for one another. He began to listen to them more closely. She was the one with the familiar accent, he was the one with the atrocious accent. He thought of all the times he had been teased for his lack of finesse with this particular language and simultaneously felt laughter and worry. Where was his teasing partner and why wasn’t he here for this return to wakefulness. He couldn’t remember how long it had been since he awoke in strange or even familiar medical surroundings and not find his partner watching him with concern or impatience, right now he would simply settle for his partner’s usual enigmatic silence. He opened his eyes fully and waited.

She noticed first. “Nickolay, tebya budit! You are awake, at last.” Her hand slipped from his as she stood so fast her chair slid back. She looked at her companion, smiling. He smiled in return, rose somewhat more slowly and moved both chairs away from where they stood beside the bed.
“Welcome back,” the man in the white coat said, taking the chart from the foot of the bed and making notes.

The woman moved to the sink and brought back a small plastic cup of cool water with a straw. “Now, sip a little of this before you try talking, you have been asleep a long while and you might find it a little difficult to start.” She held the cup for him, he leaned forward slightly from his inclined position to reach the straw. The coolness felt good on his unused throat. He leaned back again in the raised bed and continued to watch them.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I’d like a private word with Jethro, do you think…” Ducky nodded in the direction of the lab where the closed glass door separated him and Napoleon from Gibbs and Abby.

“You need me to send him in here and keep the lovely Abby amused,” he shrugged, “finesse it for you,” Napoleon finished.

“Yes. Thank you.” Ducky’s tone was equal parts grateful but sarcastic. “I would have thought you’d jump at the chance to chat up a pretty girl,” but it was the grin at the corner of his mouth that took the sting out of his words.

“Are you sure that he,” Napoleon nodded sideways at Gibbs, “will leave me alone with her?”

Ducky just quirked a brow in question.

“I realize that you have worked with these folks for years and so maybe you can’t see it since you are in the frame, so to speak. He is very pr...otective,” Napoleon changed his word choice at the last moment. “He runs a benign dictatorship with the others. He trusts David and may not be sure that’s wise but chooses to do so anyway. He trusts McGee because he knows he can. He trusts DiNozzo like the son he never had. He is part boss, part father and part confidant to all of them. But Abby is different. He knows he controls her only as far as she lets him, and he knows that is as far as he would ever think to ask, because she would follow him to hell if he asked. Father is the furthest role from his mind where she is concerned and he even hides that from himself when he can.”

“All this from a few hours interaction?”

“No. Most of that I got from the fifteen or twenty minutes I watched you all this morning before stepping forward. Incidentally, you are everyone’s favourite uncle, and they would shoot first and ask questions later to protect you.” Napoleon stood and straightened his jacket before looking down at Ducky still seated. He reached out without realizing he was going to, and ruffled Ducky’s hair. The half smirk, half growl he got in return was so familiar that his heart broke a little for the decades of gestures just like this that they’d missed. That hair was whiskey dark now, but just as soft as that shining beacon it had once been under his fingers. Napoleon tried not to sigh his loss like some adolescent.

“Just thought you’d like to know.” He turned and stepped toward the door, pausing as it slid open for him, over his shoulder he added with a wink, “As would I, Illya.”

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Gibbs walked into the office and as Ducky opened his mouth to speak he said, “Most important rule,
Duck.”

Ducky tried again and Gibbs said, “Rule Eighteen.”

“Am I then?”

“D’you ever lie to me with intent, Duck? Maliciously. Intending harm?”

“No, Jethro.”

“Nuff said. I’ve trusted you at my back. Nothing’s changed that.”

They spent a moment just looking at one another, relaxing back into the silence they recognized between friends.

“No rule against saying thank you, is there?”

“Nope, Duck, that’s ok.”

“You know, Jethro, you remind me a lot of that man I once was. Quiet, contained, resourceful, self reliant. It’s a lonely life, that one. You would do well to let someone in, just every once in a while.”

“I do. I have. You have someone in mind I’m guessing.”

Ducky nodded but Gibbs’ phone rang, saving him his friend’s thoughts on companionship. Ducky frowned.

He flipped out the phone and with an abruptly growled ‘Gibbs’, answered it. He listened for a moment and then, “What ya waitin’ for then, get up here to the lab,” and he hung up. “Evidence from the car on the way.” And he turned toward the door, expecting Ducky to follow.

Napoleon was leaning close to Abby, their heads bent toward some bit of effluvia under a microscope. She was telling him in her usual excitable tone about advances in investigative science and he was making the appropriate noises. They both looked up when Gibbs and Ducky joined them, then Ziva and Tony joined them from the opposite direction, depositing clear sealed bags on the table.

Abby whirled, pigtails flying and started signing for the evidence. Napoleon and Ducky retreated back by the coolers to watch as the four coordinated and discussed the facts so far.

Ducky watched his friend while he was distracted by the show at the table. So much had changed, and in some ways nothing had changed. Those chocolate eyes could still speak so eloquently one moment to him and the next be stone hard and serious. The dark hair had changed, was a shining beacon now, as his partner had once teased him that his own formerly bright mop had been. In some ways they had exchanged places, he hoped that in others, things might once more be the same. Napoleon looked at him then, and he was caught. Napoleon raised one brow at him.

“What are you thinking now, my inscrutable friend? That you don’t know me or that you find nothing changed?”

Ducky looked down and cursed the blush he knew would have been much more visible in his youth. It was a terrible thing to be caught so openly accessing, where had his spying subtlety gone to now? “Oh, well, some things change. You are a silver haired devil now, not just silver tongued. I think you have a new conquest. Abby seems to have taken a shine to you.”
“Well, what can I say. I haven’t lost my touch yet.”

And that insufferable smugness was as familiar to Ducky as his own face in a mirror. He had to grin.

This was how Director Vance and Agent Fornell found them.

Fornell went to join Gibbs, Vance came to Ducky and Napoleon.

“Gibbs,” Fornell started. “My agent up in New York hasn’t got much yet, but his team is investigating the kidnapping and sending as much information as they can as soon as they have it. And their computer tech is combing the FBI UNCLE files for names. She is good at what she does so we should have a list soon. I would have her contact you herself, but I am afraid that you would poach her, she’s that good. And Aaron would have my head if I lost him his tech. So she will send them to me and I will hand them over.”

“Tobias, I’m hurt.”

“Right, Gibbs.” Fornell rolled his eyes.

Vance, meanwhile, was handing papers to Ducky. “This is a concealed carry permit. You are going back on field status until this is done, and you need to go to the armory and get your weapon issued and then go to the range. Once they check you out you will be good to go. Is shooting going…” Vance stopped himself. “What the hell am I saying.”

“I can still shoot, Director, it hasn’t been that many years since Gibbs and I were causing trouble across France.”

“And you, Mr. Solo, I know you have a permit, where is your weapon?” Vance asked.

Napoleon pulled back his jacket to show his empty holster. “It’s currently locked in the glove box of my car, but I will be carrying as soon as I leave the Navy Yard,” and then he added, “sir,” with a charming smile that reminded Ducky of the tone he used when Waverly would ask obvious questions. Vance just nodded.

Napoleon looked down at Ducky then nudged him with one shoulder, “What do you say, partner, shall I give you some brush up practice at the range?”

Ducky drew himself up to his full height, not as much shorter than Napoleon as people expected and when he spoke the voice was a clipped Cambridge accent overlaying the Russian burr Napoleon was used to hearing. “I can still outshoot you, my friend, as I always could,” his indignation was challenge itself.

Everyone in the room stopped to watch.

Napoleon turned from Director Vance to face Ducky. He took a long leisurely look down and back up. He put his hands on his hips as Ducky crossed his arms and glowered. For just a moment they stood, measuring one another. “Want to try to take me best two out of three in the gym, too?”

“Your superior reach will not help you when I break your hip before you even get a half-Nelson on me, Napoleon.”

“You probably have a point,” Napoleon conceded. “Worst shot buys lunch.” There were looks and gestures exchanged.

“I will end up with the best target and buying lunch, as I always did, nothing’s changed that much, I
am willing to bet.” Ducky put his own hands on his hips and glared at Napoleon over the top of his glasses.

The barely suppressed grins each wore on the corners of their mouths belied the heat in their tones as they continued.

Across the room, the others watched.

“They have their own language, don’t they?” Tony mused under his breath, with no little awe.

“They obviously worked together a long time to have developed it,” Ziva replied.

“Kinda sexy, isn’t it?” Abby cocked her head to the side and watched them. Standing next to her, Gibbs elbowed her and when she tore her gaze off the other side of the room he signed to her. She giggled. Then she nodded. And went back to watching the older men bickering. It was like watching a prize fight and a ballet and a debate, all rolled into one, but neither man was moving as they argued.

Abby took several long strides and joined Napoleon and Ducky. “Now boys, there are so many Alpha Males in here I am going to get contact testosterone poisoning. Go play nicely or go play in traffic, but go. I need to commune with my babies so we can find the goods on this kidnapping stalker guy. Come back when you have worked off all your frustration at the range. And don’t you dare leave the Yard without seeing me first, you hear me?” She gave them both a patented Fierce Abby Look.

“Nobody argues much with this one, eh tovarisch?” Napoleon grinned at Ducky and then Abby.

“It isn’t wise, no, my friend,” Ducky said with mock seriousness.

“Oh course it isn’t wise, I am the Queen of this Lab,” Abby said as she swung around and started back toward the evidence, where Gibbs was giving Tony and Ziva their orders, Ziva to stay and help Abby and Tony to join McGee in MTAC.

Vance and Fornell had slipped out without anyone seeing. At the elevator Fornell turned to Vance, “It’s always like this.”

“Yes, Tobias, it is always a three ring circus. But it’s my three ring circus and I am getting tired of strangers thinking they can mess with it. I want Palmer back where he belongs and this kidnapper settled in a cell. And it would be nice if my best team were available again for assignment. And if you tell Gibbs I said that, I will deny it.” Vance glanced at Fornell. Fornell just nodded. Then they both looked behind themselves to check on where Gibbs actually was. The door to the stairs was closing. They looked back at one another. Vance sighed. Fornell grinned as the elevator opened in front of them.

CHAPTER SIX

Consciousness slammed back into him like an unexpected left hook and he started to access his surroundings. Movement, that of a car, he was in the backseat of a car. He was aware of a voice in the front seat, not a voice he recognized. He ached. His head felt split open and though he could detect nothing broken, his arms and legs felt heavy, sedatives perhaps. He focused on the voice.
“…no pulse, I wasn’t going to transport a dead body…” the voice was interrupted by static, a radio of some kind. “No I am sure he was dead, I dumped him along the road and rolled him down the borrow ditch and it isn’t my fault if your incompetent clean up crew couldn’t find him.” More static. “Look, he doesn’t have any ID on him, if someone else found him he’ll end up in some unmarked Potter’s Field. He’s history. You’re gonna have to be happy with the one I brought you.” More static. “Look, he has a head wound and sedatives on board and he isn’t going to wake up anytime before I get to you…” more static interrupted. “You’re breaking up, I think I’m going out of range…” and then there was a bang as the radio was thrown against the opposite door.

He took in this new information. He was obviously not among friends. He tried to think back to how he got here. Was he on a mission? The last affair he remembered took place in some desert in North Africa, and this didn’t feel like any car ride he would imagine taking place there. No, that affair was done. He remembered coming home from that one. He remembered being at the office. He and his partner doing paperwork, arguing as they usually did with good nature and humour, talking about where to go for lunch. Crashing, screaming, he remembered thinking that the research division must have had something go wrong with a new explosive. There were very worrying gaps in his memory. How did he get here? Where was here? Where the hell was his partner?

The voice up front started muttering. “Damn spies. Doesn’t matter what side they play, they all whine and bitch and blame everyone for their own damn fuckups. If you hadn’t set the damn charges so close together I wouldn’t’a had to try to keep damn Solo from bleeding out and now you bitch at me that you’ll only get half the information you want, well, next time you can just do the retrieval yourself ya dumb son of a bitch…” the muttering continued but he blocked the voice from the front seat. He knew enough. How the hell had the stupid bastard up front thought that using his own necktie to tie his hands was a good idea.

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Illya surveyed the wreck, it certainly looked accidental. He popped the trunk and found his jacket, shoes and ID. He stripped every bit of incriminating and explosive evidence out of his clothes. He had to hurry, the pain in his head let him know that he wasn’t going to be conscious for much longer. In the pocket of his jacket he found his badge and that of his partner, his thumb rubbing over the inscribed 11. A wave of pain hit him like a hurricane surge and his knees tried to buckle. He gently put the badges together and left them in the trunk, he couldn’t afford any evidence of any kind surviving. He used every bit of his hidden spyware and set the car to burn. He thanked the research department silently for developing a way to blow a car and make it look accidental and started to limp away from the wreck and the man whose neck was broken in the right hand drivers seat.

It might have been the concussion from the blast that knocked Illya on his face in the dirty snow alongside the road, or it may have been his own head trauma catching up with him, he wouldn’t know as he was lights out before his face took the brunt of his landing.

***

The next time he became aware of his surroundings, he was in a bed, bandages in place and hooked into machines and tubes. Only the sounds of the monitoring equipment came to his ears. He stayed still, eyes closed, awaiting the next revelations of this so far terrible day. Or maybe it was a new day, he couldn’t be sure now. Someone entered the room, quiet but without stealth. He watched from under his lashes as a nurse checked the machinery, laid her fingers along his wrist and looked at her watch. A doctor walked in and they stood at the end of his bed and spoke quietly.

“His signs are steady, we haven’t given him anymore sedatives, he should wake soon enough and tell us who he is, shouldn’t he?” her voice was soft and had a distinct Northern accent.
“His dental work is all too good, I am guessing American,” the doctor’s voice was pure London.

Illya wondered who would bring him to the British Isles and what information they had wanted. He waited for the medical uniforms to go before opening his eyes. It was evening, the doctor must have been on his last rounds when he stopped by, instructing the nurse to phone as soon as the patient woke up.

He bided his time, faking sleep every time anyone stopped in. It was easy to do, and he even dozed off a few times. When the shift changed late that night, he put his plan into action, having already seen the phone on the bedside.

None of the numbers for UNCLE London worked. He got desperate and tried an international number for a secure line to UNCLE New York. No dice. He gave up on that puzzle and called a number he knew would have someone on the other end.

“’lo?” a sleepy voice asked.

“Tom, Tom I need you to wake up, my friend.”

“Who the hell calls me at one in the bloody morning?” the voice sounded a little more awake.

“’They name thee before me,’” Illya recited, whispering in the phone as he heard someone in the hall.

“’A knell to mine ear,’” came the response. “Illya, what the hell?”

“Tom, I’m in a spot. I don’t know where I am or how I got here, but for the love of all you hold holy, I need to get out of here.”

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A day and a half later there was commotion in the hallway and then in strolled a tall skinny Brit who was bossing the doctors before he even got through the doorway.

“I think it is perfectly clear, Doctor, I am here to transfer this patient and since he is well enough to travel we will be taking him.”

“This patient is unresponsive to the point of catatonia, he has a serious head wound and needs close attention.”

“Understandable, which is why you will be happy to know that our facility is small and private and he will get the best, most individual care.” The man turned to the bed then, “Donald, old chap, good to see that hard head of yours in one piece still.”

Illya kept his eyes straight ahead and dull without recognition.

“I must protest again…”

The doctor was cut off, “And I must insist. We are taking him. Here is an address to submit any additional billing to,” he handed the doctor a business card. “We will be happy to recommend your facility in future, you have done a fine job. Now, let us get on with this.”

Two more men came in at a signal from the dark haired man. They started to unhook machines and bundle Illya, IV and all, onto a gurney. The tall man in charge searched out what little personal effects Illya had come in with in drawers and cupboards.
“Is this all?” he held up a set of clothes and shoes. The doctor just nodded. “Right then, we’re off.” With a signal to the men with the stretcher, they left as swiftly as they arrived.

In the ambulance, the two others got in front and closed a door between themselves and the back.

“Illya, what happened?”

“I wish I could tell you, Tom, thank you.” Illya took the fresh clothes that were handed to him, started pulling out the IV needle and getting dressed.

“Illya, how much do you know, about UNCLE New York and the current trouble?”

“I remember being in my office, there were sounds like an explosion and my partner and I went out to find the place in chaos. We ran for the Old Man’s office, the hall outside Waverly’s office was in shambles. Then there was another explosion and I woke up in the back of some car.”

“Illya, Waverly is confirmed dead. A lot, and I mean a lot of UNCLE New York is missing in action, presumed dead. Including you and your partner.” He paused at the wince his friend made at that comment. “The communications net is down, London only just got back into some kind of relay with some other offices. Russia has already declared you dead and there will be some kind of big deal funeral for you in three days. Lots of jabber about dying a hero in the cause of right and good and improved international relations.” Illya just rolled his eyes at his friend. “And can I just tell you that I about had heart failure when you called me with that ancient emergency code? How long ago was that? All the way back in Cambridge since I’ve heard that.”

Illya finished tying the borrowed shoes and looked up at his college friend. “I thank you for remembering it. I couldn’t get a phone call through to anywhere, my communicator was gone, I didn’t even know where I was, and all I wanted was out. Thank you.”

“Anytime, old chap. Anytime.” He handed a wallet to Illya. It was worn leather and when he opened it, Illya found an ID with his face but not his name. He looked a question at his friend.

“I didn’t know if there was someone looking for you under your real name, and as you couldn’t give me any information, I thought it best to improvise. Can you do a Scottish accent?”

“Aye, auld friend,” Illya drawled.

“Ok, maybe dial it back a tad bit.” Tom laughed.

“Right. Fill me in.”

“Donald is one of ours, MI5, he was killed in a car wreck, but he was on assignment and we haven’t released that information. In fact, as far as anyone knows, he’s been in a hospital in some backwater in Northern India with amnesia and has just been released from his convalescent care after a lot of plastic surgery. You are him until we can figure out what to do with you. And you have amnesia, so all you need to know at the moment is that your name is Dr. Donald Mallard and you are traveling back to London with your old friend Tom Davies. We’ll figure it all out as soon as we get back to civilization. I am part of the diplomatic party slated to attend the funeral of an important Russian patriot, want to come to your own funeral with me?”

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“You did what, with whom?” His superior, who rarely raised his voice, was yelling at top volume. The man’s second in command stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder.
“Shows some initiative, that. Quick thinking.” His eyes sparkled merrily, even while his hand kept his former partner and now boss in his chair.

The seated man looked up at the man restraining him, then back to his subordinate. He sighed, sat back in his leather chair and reached for the drink that wasn’t on the desk. It was too early in the day to drink. Dammit.

“He is very good, sir, everyone in the office is fooled, I’d wager if I hadn’t told you, he’d pass in here too.”

Behind the desk, the man in the chair looked up and back at his second and nodded. The other man went around the desk and crossed to the door. He leaned out and invited the blond in the outer office to join them, and after ushering him in he shut the door and leaned back on it to watch. He suppressed a grin. Tom was always a fast one, able to think through several moves in a game to keep himself ahead of his adversaries. That was why he was good at his job, and an asset in the field. And he just liked the guy, he always gave him reason to grin, sometimes at their superior’s expense, which was always fun.

The blond walked to the desk and stopped next to Tom’s chair. A soft Scottish accent flowed easily as he asked, “You wanted to see me now, Director Graham?”

“Bloody hell, you weren’t kidding.” Graham looked shellshocked. “He is every bit as good as you promised, Tom. Anderson, what about you? Think he can pass?”

The man across the room leaned off the door and took a few quiet steps forward and reached out, the blond was turned and had his hand in his before he had completed a third step and then had him spun and ready to twist that hand up between his shoulder blades. “Do you really want to try that, friend?” the voice was very low and very dangerous, and still every bit as Scot as it had been to start.

Anderson let his own accent out a bit, “Aye, no, I’d like to be able to shoot some billiards later, care ta join me?” The shorter man let him go and spun him back to face the desk.

“My apologies. Are we done with show me yours I’ll show you mine now?” He looked back to the desk, not letting the taller man out of his peripheral vision.

“Relax, please.” Graham said. Anderson moved then, back to his customary place leaning against the wall behind the Director’s chair.

“Please, Dr. ah, Mr.” the director stopped.

“Kuryakin. Illya Kuryakin.”

“Who has been buried in the homeland as far as anyone knows.”

“Indeed.”

“Mr. Davies has a plan, I am sure he has shared it with you.” Graham let it be a statement, not a question.

“Tom has told me he has a place for me, under certain circumstances. He hasn’t been wholly forthcoming in the details.” Illya gave Tom a glare.

“It’s a grand scheme.” Anderson added from his place holding up the wall.

“Yes, a scheme in any case,” Graham agreed. “Won’t you pull up a chair, please, Mr. Kuryakin.”

"..."
Illya sat. And waited.

Finally Graham spoke. “I am sure you have heard that THRUSH has taken responsibility for the bombing of UNCLE New York. UNCLE in response has sent agents to every known THRUSH outpost and done their best to exterminate the infestation. UNCLE is in disarray. THRUSH has been set back far enough that they will be hard pressed to be an annoyance any time in the next several years.”

“Mr. Waverly was the heart of UNCLE, it will be difficult to find another leader with the ability to inspire the loyalty he did.” Illya said.

“Indeed. He had chosen his successor, but with Napoleon Solo still missing, UNCLE is rudderless. They need someone to rally them, to keep them from anymore vengeful action, as understandable as it is.”

Nothing passed across Illya’s face. He sat stoic and calm, as if the presumed death of his partner hadn’t registered.

Graham continued, “Have you no wish to return to New York, or to contact UNCLE London?”

“I do not. My loyalty was to my homeland and then UNCLE and Mr. Waverly and my partner, and half of them are gone. The Soviet Union has written me off and the political mess that going back would create is a minefield I do not wish to negotiate. Let them think me dead. In a year, UNCLE will also declare me dead if my body has not been found. I am a man with no country, currently. I’m not sure why you should trust me, except that my years with UNCLE should have proven that my priorities are in a similar place as yours.”

“And going back to Russia for your own funeral?”

“I believe that Tom was giving me a chance to return to my homeland, if I chose. I did not choose that path.”

“And UNCLE?”

“My partner was the charming one, the one who could keep peace and negotiate the policies and politics. I am just the back up. Nobody wants me in his place, least of all me. UNCLE suffered a great loss to THRUSH. If it was THRUSH that set the bomb.”

“You think it wasn’t?”

“I have no way of knowing. The man in the car was nobody I knew, he said no names and there was no way to trace where he was going or who he was taking me to. I only know he told the man on the radio that he left,” there was the barest hint of a pause, but Illya’s composure never cracked, “Solo to bleed out if he wasn’t already dead. I have no idea how either of us came to be out of UNCLE HQ after the bombs went off, only that I awoke in a foreign nation no longer having one of my own. It is a bit of a problem, to need a job with the skill set I have.”

“And you truly have no problem with working for us?”

“None at all. There is nothing back in New York for me. No longer anything in Russia. And if what Tom tells me is true, UNCLE is imploding now that there is no central leadership. I can do nothing for them now. Hire me, and I will do my best to earn your trust.”

“You will have to become someone else.”
“I am aware. And that is what we do, is it not, we chameleons, spies.”

“Let’s see how it goes, shall we?” Graham put out a hand to shake. “Dr. Mallard, welcome to MI5. Again.”

“Great!” Tom was immediately enthusiastic. “I have this job coming up, joint thing with those boys in the US Naval Intelligence, they have this sting…”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two men, two guns, a lot of expended ammo, a dozen or more paper targets. Both men had their jackets off, in button down shirts and shoulder holsters, one in suspenders and a bow tie the other with a dark tie against a crisp white shirt, they continued to shoot at the targets, sometimes together, sometimes one would stop and watch the other. Their concentration was total and focused. They were alone on the range now, had been for some time. Every time they stopped and flipped the switches to bring the targets back, the taller of the two would find some excuse to adjust the other’s tie, or brush something off his shoulder, or fiddle with the shoulder holster he now wore. The shorter of the two didn’t seem to mind this unconscious grooming activity of the taller man, in fact he seemed occasionally to lean into the touch, as if in doing so he was verifying to both of them that they were in fact real after all, and every once in a while he would return the favour, as if to reassure himself his companion was still present. Then they would police their brass, set up another target and start the process over again.

Gibbs turned from the window behind the indoor range. “How long have they been at this?” he asked the Range Master.

“Oh, about two hours now. Director phoned down and told me to give them whatever they wanted, the taller fellow there, said he’d pay for extra rounds but I don’t guess Director Vance would be real happy with me charging his guests, so I told him not to worry about it. He made a big donation to the coffee fund though, so that’s ok, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Gibbs nodded.

“Was pretty exciting there for a bit, I thought they were gonna come to blows out there.”

Gibbs just raised his brows at the man and took a sip of his coffee, nodding for the man to continue.

“Well, these targets here, this was the first set, see,” he held up two paper targets, a black human figure on a white background, not one shot anywhere near center mass. “I guess they both thought they could trick the other into a bet or something, who was better, and then they started arguing about who was throwing the game and then there was so much yelling, I could hear ‘em even through the ear protectors. And then just that fast they both started laughing so hard I thought they’d fall down.”

Gibbs felt a grin tug a the corner of his mouth, imagining the scene.

“Then they really started shooting, see here,” he held up two more targets. Every shot center mass. The next set every shot was a heart shot. The one after that, the head. He put all the targets down as the door from the range opened.

Ducky walked in with a box of empty brass, Napoleon with the unused rounds and his borrowed
gun. They asked the Range Master for a cleaning kit and sat down to clean the guns they were using while he put the brass and box of ammo away in another room.

Gibbs watched them break down the guns and start to clean and reassemble them. They were fast, but thorough. He wasn’t about to tell them he was impressed, even if he was. He just watched. They passed items back and forth with out a sound, sometimes not even looking up from the part they were cleaning, as if knowing who needed what and when in a routine as usual and known to them as brushing their teeth or shaving in the morning, something done unconsciously and meditatively every day.

The Range Master returned with some paperwork and waited while the two finished. When Ducky holstered the gun and looked up, he handed over the paperwork and some unopened boxes of bullets and extra clips for his weapon.

“Thank you, Harold. I hope I will be returning all this to you soon, and unused.”

“If that means you stay safe, then I hope so too, Doctor. It sure has been my pleasure to help you out today.”

“How much are you making on the pool?” Ducky asked him as he shrugged into his jacket as Napoleon held it for him. Napoleon smoothed it over his shoulders as Ducky settled the front to drape over the newly acquired holster.

Harold looked down at his shoes and then back up with a little grin.

“Never mind, Harold, just don’t spend it all in one bar, right?”

“Right, Doctor.” Harold’s grin widened.

When the three had left, Harold hung up his favourite targets of the day. Both were head shots again, but if you squinted just right, one looked like a smiley face and one a frowny face. You had to kinda look for just a second, Harold thought, but he was sure they did it on purpose.

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"All these people are ..."

"Old, Tony?" Ducky interrupted him.

"No. I was going to say retired."

"Better than dead, eh Illya?" Napoleon nudged Ducky with one shoulder.

"That would make this easier, by process of elimination only those still alive would be the suspect pool."

Tony whistled. Ziva lifted an eyebrow.

Ducky looked up at Napoleon, "Too harsh?"

"Just a touch."

"Oops." Ducky, unrepentant. His shrug was pure Illya.

"Your point, DiNozzo?" Gibbs, getting them back on track.
"My point is that a lot of these people haven't been doing much of anything to be tracked. But you are partly right Ducky, a lot of people associated with THRUSH have been, uh, unavailable for comment since shortly after the explosions in New York."

"And what about that," McGee asked. "THRUSH claimed responsibility for it, but did they really do it?"

"And who took us out of the building?" Napoleon asked.

"You don't know?" Ziva.

"No."

"No." Napoleon looked at Ducky.

"No." Ducky's face was dark with unpleasant memories.

"We had infiltrations through the years," Napoleon addressed the assembled team. "THRUSH or any one of a dozen enemies could have gotten someone in, bombed headquarters, kidnapped us, but why? What could taking us after destroying the place gain them?"

"If their purpose was taking out Mr. Waverly, then you would be in charge as his successor, maybe they wanted to control you and through you the entire UNCLE organization."

"THRUSH certainly came up with worse schemes."

"That they did." Ducky agreed with his old partner.

"But," said Abby, hands waving with some emotion, perhaps fear for her friend, perhaps just to illustrate her point, "that doesn't explain who is doing this now and how they know that you aren't you, Ducky, er, they know you are you, Illya, or well." The look on Abby's face said she wasn't sure she had made sense to herself, let alone to the others. "It gets a little confusing, huh?" she shrugged.

"Do you think this is the same person now, that took you then?" Gibbs asked the partners.

Napoleon and Ducky looked at one another and then at Gibbs.

"And if it is the same person or agency, are we even looking in the right place?" Gibbs continued, "We should be looking at the UNCLE New York employee records as well as the case files, shouldn't we?"

Napoleon put one hand up to this face, palm spanning his eyes, fingers and thumb rubbing both temples at once. It was a gesture Ducky recognized, had seen countless times in meetings and briefings, during and after affairs. It could mean Napoleon was thinking his way through a puzzle, searching his memory for an escaped fact or figure or plan for getting out of enemy hands. Or he could have a headache. Ducky was hoping he was finding some brilliant strategy for solving the current issue since that would be convenient but most likely his friend had a headache from this affair, he knew he did.

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Gibbs dispatched the musketeers to continue the search of records, this time including any name there was in any record they found. He set Abby on searching the names they had so far found that they had yet to track down, and then he handed Napoleon and Ducky yellow tablets and a handful of pens.

“I want every detail you can remember from that day, from what you had for breakfast to who you
said hello to in the hall to the moment that the walls fell down, everything, no matter how small. And every name of every agent, janitor, secretary, or cafeteria worker you can remember, ever.” Gibbs looked from one to another of the partners. “Please,” he added very quietly.

Ducky’s eyes widened so very slightly and he nodded. Gibbs nodded at them and turned to leave. He paused behind Abby and she turned to him and they started signing.

“Rare, is it, that he uses that word?” Ducky only nodded at Napoleon and sat at Abby’s desk. “He’s talking about us, isn’t he?” Napoleon asked as he pulled up a chair next to Ducky.

Ducky glanced through the glass door. “Oh, that’s likely,” he nodded and scooted over a bit to give his partner room. “You can start with the secretaries, I’m sure you remember each and every one,” he said with a sly smirk at Napoleon.

“Oh, as I hope I, too, am remembered, fondly,” Napoleon’s voice was full of his old smug satisfaction. He gave Ducky a glance to the side and sniffed at him. “You know, you could have had more than me any time you wanted, while they liked my honey, those bees simply pined for what they couldn’t reach.”

“And you know my tastes were a bit more, ah, discriminating, Napoleon. And I liked to cultivate the elusive foreigner image, it saved me a lot of grief, one way and another, most of the time.”

Napoleon rolled his eyes and took up his pen to start writing. He looked up again when Ducky chuckled, raising his brows in silent question.

“I never thought I’d see the day that you voluntarily did your own paperwork. I will have to ask Abigail to take a picture,” Ducky smirked.

“Huh. I just haven’t yet figured out how to make you do it. But I will.”

Ducky only rolled his eyes and went back to his own paper.

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“So what you’re telling me is that you awoke in a hospital upstate, months after the explosion. No memory of how you got there?”

“Correct you are, partner mine. And I was mighty unhappy you weren’t there to greet me, let me tell you. Of course, once I got through to Aunt Amy and she told me what had happened, and that you had already been declared dead by your own country, well,” Napoleon paused. And didn’t start back up again.

“I am sorry, Napoleon. Truly, I am. I believed you were… you,” And Ducky also had to stop.

They sat there, lost in their own private experience of that horrible time. And when they finally looked up, each saw their own anger and sorrow and determination mirrored back to them.

“This, as Abigail would say, sucks. We need some more information. They were ultimately taking us to some backwater in the North of England because I ended up very close to the Scottish border and Tom had a hard time finding the tiny village, though no trouble getting me out at all, thankfully.”

Ducky stood and started pacing Abby’s office as Napoleon watched. “The man in the car said ‘you’ when he was ranting, I took that to mean the man he had been on the radio with. And he mentioned a cleanup crew looking for you. We weren’t dealing with an individual then, and maybe not now.”

Ducky stopped and leaned over the desk, into Napoleon’s space, “And there is no way to know if they infiltrated in the London office too, or were only running a scam in New York. We need some
records from overseas.”

“Still have a friend or two across the pond?”

“Maybe.”

Ducky went back to his chair and pulled the phone toward him. He wondered if the phone number would still work. The last time he had dialed it, he had gotten lucky. Would it still be rerouted as it used to be, was there even a chance his college friend was there to hear it ring? The questions troubled him. No other way but through, he decided. He picked up the receiver and started dialing the country and city codes for London.

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“You can go right in, gentlemen,” she waved them past her desk toward the door to Director Vance’s office, “he’s expecting you.”

“Thank you, Cynthia.” Ducky gave her a smaller smile than she was used to seeing on him. She smiled back, maybe a little more tentatively than she would have on another day, she had never seen him so distant. His friend though, she answered his charming smile with one of equal wattage, then caught herself, he was old enough to be her father. But he did smile so engagingly. She shrugged after the men went in the office and closed the door. It never hurt to enjoy a little moment, a little smile, did it? She continued to smile long after the door shut.

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“Ducky, I am so sorry about your friend, from what I hear, he was a good man, a good agent.”

“Thank you Director, he was that. Tom was, well, it is clichéd but no less true to say he was a life saver. And my only real contact over there anymore which means we will have to hope there are some official channels left we can use.”

“I’ve been working on that, Ducky,” Fornell said. “Nobody over there seems at all reluctant to share information, at least on this subject. So it would seem that we will have a whole new list of names in a few hours. In the meantime, my colleagues have little to report, but they suspect that this kidnapper has crossed state lines with your niece, Solo, so this case is firmly in FBI territory now.”

Fornell continued to explain what little evidence was found. Some traffic camera and security camera footage showing Ally on her way home from school and in a few of the shots, the same dark sedan showed up, but no driver could be seen. That same sedan entered a Southbound highway and showed up on a toll booth camera. The FBI had already put out a BOLO. Two of the agents would be driving the route, checking more security cameras, rest stops, looking for the sedan to leave the highway, or looking for the sedan itself if the kidnapper changed cars.

“Thank you, Agent Fornell, I appreciate you keeping me informed.” Napoleon sounded tired, Ducky reached out and put one hand on his arm, just briefly. Napoleon gave him a nod in thanks.

“I have agents posted at your house already, Ducky,” Vance said. “And they will be checking in with you when they change shift, another pair will be watching the house all night. I’d like for you to let us send you home with a car service. You have to agree, your car is rather distinctive. They will pick you up in the morning as well.”

Ducky nodded but Napoleon spoke up then, “I have a company car, Director, and plan a little bait and switch at my hotel, if you don’t mind. I need to go there anyway to pick up messages and since I will be staying at Illya’s this trip, it makes sense. And my cars are all rather more bullet resistant than
your motor pool probably is.”

All three men raised a questioning look at that.

Napoleon shrugged, hands open in front of himself. “Old habits.”

“I don’t have issue with that, if you don’t?” Vance looked to Fornell.

“Nah, they’ve been taking care of themselves longer than I’ve been in the FBI, I should probably pick their brains when I get a chance.” Fornell gave the former UNCLE partners a half grin.

“Though we should probably not tell Gibbs until they’ve left.”

“Too late.”

“Dammit, Gibbs, Cynthia is out there for a reason.” Vance.

“Yeah. And she always tells me you’re busy. Not her fault I don’t care.” Gibbs took a sip from his coffee and pulled up a chair.

“Make yourself at home,” Vance didn’t sound nearly as exasperated as he should have. Gibbs just toasted him with his coffee cup. Vance continued, “Your people are settled on a plan?”

“Yes, and they will check in with me regularly.” Gibbs’ voice promised that if they didn’t check in, there would be some trouble for whoever might keep his agents from calling. “All of my people.” He looked pointedly at Ducky.

“Yes, Jethro.”

“No going outside to check on dogs.”

“No, Jethro.”

“How do you do it, Gibbs? He’s never agreed with me so readily.” Napoleon broke the tension, and they were all glad of it.

“It’s a game we play, he pretends to be in charge and I pretend to listen.” Ducky was utterly deadpan.

“Yeah, and I’m right often enough that he only pretends to ignore me.” Gibbs finished his coffee and got up from the chair. “It’s late, and I have to go convince Abbs that my guest room will not look better with a coffin in it.” He nodded to Vance and Fornell, then looked at the partners one more time. “Phone in, I don’t want to have to come hunt you down.”

Napoleon’s look asked Ducky ‘what the hell’ and Ducky's look back said 'later'.

“Lock your damn door, Jethro.”

Gibbs just raised a hand on his way out the door.

“Just love that last word, don’t you, Illya?”

“Always did, my friend.”

CHAPTER EIGHT
Napoleon whistled. “The Director wasn’t kidding when he said you had a distinctive ride. Have we become a capitalist in our old age, Illya?”

The other man drew in a deep breath and straightened from putting his key in the door lock, “I’ll have you know that I rescued her from a scrap heap and gave her a whole new life, and recycling is good for everyone.” He glared across the roof of the car at his partner.

Napoleon laughed out loud, the voice he heard was pure Scotland and he was delighted. He wondered if Illya realized the tell. He would keep it to himself, in case his old friend wasn’t pulling his leg. “Well, do me a favour and don’t turn the key in the lock just yet, right?” He pulled something out of his pocket and started circling the car towards the driver’s side.

Ducky took a step back and watched Napoleon complete his circuit and come back to him. “Well?”

“Nothing. Though you should have let me do that before you stuck your key in.”

“How did I know you had pocket bomb sniffers? Any other gadgets you have hidden?”

Napoleon just cocked his head and grinned that old grin at his partner. “I like to keep things a surprise.”

“You would try the patience of the archangels, let alone the saints, Napoleon.” He rolled his eyes and opened the car door. He slid in to rummage around in the glove box, then reached in the back for a coat.

“Right. Let’s go look at your company car, no doubt much less esthetically pleasing than mine.”

“Sturdier though. It would be a sad thing to see that fine automobile with bullet holes.”

“You sound like you are expecting the shootout at OK Corral.”

“Can’t tell yet, really.”

***

The cold woke him, or maybe the pain in his head did it. He could feel a rising panic when he opened his eyes and it remained dark. He held his hands up to his face and still couldn’t see anything. It was profoundly dark. Sitting up made him dizzy so he didn’t try it again. He tried to calm himself. “What would Dr. Mallard do? Better yet, what would Agent Gibbs do?” he muttered.

A click. And then a point of light flickered.

“Who are Dr. Mallard and Agent Gibbs?” a voice said.

“Who’s there?” he squinted toward the small light and could only see the small flame.

“I asked first.” And the light went out.

“People I work with, er, for. For and with. I work…” He stopped.

“We have established that you work. So what would they do?” The voice was female, sounded young, maybe a bit more sarcastic than he would expect, then again, who knew how sitting in the dark would affect someone. Another flick, and the light came back and there was the sound of rustling clothing and the light came closer.
He could see now that she was indeed young. She knelt over him, he had a glimpse of long dark hair, dark eyes and pale skin before the light was gone again.

“I don’t want to run out of juice, it’s only a little lighter,” she said by way of explanation. “I’m Ally. Who are you?”

“Jimmy.”

“Welcome, Jimmy. I wouldn’t recommend the water.”

***

They pulled into the underground garage of the hotel and took the elevator up to the lobby. Two men in dark suits were at the elevator when the doors opened.

“Burns, Elsond.” Napoleon nodded to them. “News?”

“None, sir. The other teams have checked in, no activity.”

Napoleon raised half a shrug and turned toward the lobby desk, Ducky in step with him. The men looked at one another and then followed. If they noticed how the two older men unconsciously adjusted their stride to match one another, they didn’t comment.

The pretty young redhead at the desk lit up with a smile when Napoleon approached. “Oh, Mr. Solo, it’s so nice to see you again.” She beamed at him and held out a small stack of message slips. “Will you be needing some dinner reservations for this evening?”

“No my dear, I’ve had a better offer. Though I do appreciate the great care that you take of me, I will be dining with a friend this evening.” He quickly looked through the slips of paper, sliding them into a pocket. “Has anyone been by to see me today?”

“No sir, not since my shift started. Elaine didn’t say anything when I took over from her.” She sounded genuinely disappointed to report this.

“No matter, Christiania, I expect they will catch up with me later.”

“Have a good evening then, Mr. Solo.”

“And you, my sweet.”

Once again they went to the elevator, Ducky was quiet but a little smirk lurked around the corner of his mouth. When they left the elevator and the two men accompanying them went ahead of them towards a door and opened it leaving them in the hall alone, Napoleon turned to him. “Well, I can hear you holding back some biting remark, get it out of your system.”

“Not a thing, old friend, it is good to know that there are constants in the universe.”

Napoleon put one hand on Ducky’s back and pushed him toward the open door as he saw his men emerge and signal all clear.

Whatever Ducky was expecting, it wasn’t the modest room he found. Two double beds, a sitting area with table and chairs and an entertainment center. There was a desk in the corner with a laptop set up on it. Napoleon went there first and started to pack it up into a case on the chair.

“Make yourself at home, I’ll only be a moment,” he was coiling cable and fitting everything into the case, obviously something he was familiar with.
“Can I help?”

“Do you really want to pack my suitcase? Just relax, have a drink. I’ll really only be a moment.” Napoleon didn’t even look up.

Ducky took the suitcase and put it on one bed, opening it and then opening drawers in the bureau. “It’s not like it would be the first time I packed your suitcase.” Ducky grinned.

“There’s not that much, I hardly had time to unpack last night.”

The comfortable way that they moved around the room was as familiar a routine for them as breathing, and Ducky realized he had missed the easy camaraderie more than he thought.

“So you must stay here often?”

“I like it here, it’s quiet and comfortable and small enough that the staff is easy to remember. I get to D.C. every couple months, I like the place. Though the drawback is, of course, it’s known that I stay here.” There was a sigh then. “I had gotten rather used to the peaceful life, to tell you the truth.”

Everything packed up, Ducky looked to Napoleon. “So what’s the plan?”

A knock interrupted them.

Napoleon opened the door to Burns and Elsond, carrying a suitcase a piece.

“Here is my plan. My men here are going to stay, have dinner in and catch a movie,” he handed his cases over to Burns who took them and went out the door. “You and I are going to disappear out of here and have a similarly quiet evening at your place. Hopefully no one will be the wiser.”

Napoleon quietly conferred with Elsond and then his cell phone rang.

“Solo,” he answered. He listened for a moment then thanked the caller and folded the phone closed.

“We’re off then.” he checked his watch. “Johnson and Carter should be in place at your house. Shall we?”

Down the stairs and out the fire exit door, another dark sedan was waiting, a match to the one they had parked in the garage. Burns stood next to it with keys in hand. He held them out to Napoleon and Ducky snagged them.

Burns watched the two men, watched the looks and the shorthand conversation taking place, watched the way that they stood close and talked so quiet and the body language that said they knew what was going to be said before it happened.

“It’s my city and my house and I know all the blind turns.”

“It’s my car.”

“It’s not the Jag.”

“It’s my fault.”

“How the hell do you figure that?”

“Well, Ally was kidnapped first.”
“That hardly counts as blame. Get in the damn car.”

Burns watched them get in the car and made sure they had merged with the traffic where the alley let out to a quiet street. He checked one more time that the security camera was still covered by the mud he had thrown at it earlier in the day. It was. He smiled to himself as he climbed the stairs and emerged on the second floor to get in the elevator. The boss had promised to explain all as soon as this was done, and he couldn’t wait for that. He was pretty sure there was more than one betting pool going on, he chuckled and started planning what to do with his winnings because he was sure he had figured it all out. Next he wondered if he should share his theory with his partner or not. He let himself in the hotel room door and immediately shrugged out of his jacket. “Hey honey, I’m home. What’s for dinner?”

“Oh shut up, it’s your turn to order room service, smartass,” Elsond replied from behind his own laptop that had taken the place of the other on the desk. “Tell me that you have some information, damned Johnson and Carter have a theory based on the boxes in the trunk and if we want to win the pool we had better get a good one.”

“Well, let me tell you what happened when I gave them the keys…” Burns started as he propped himself up on the bed nearest the desk and pulled the menu out of the bedside drawer.

***

After much maneuvering and negotiation, Gibbs finally got his coworkers off the Navy Yard. He and Ziva both watched the streets but neither spotted a tail, even after stops at both women’s apartments and a pizza place to load up on dinner goods. Ziva headed upstairs and Gibbs checked the downstairs and basement, they met up at the front door again, where Abby had been waiting with suitcases and dinner.

“You look a little disappointed, David.”

“I was hoping the dirtbag was waiting and we could arrest him for trespassing and have done with this waiting.”

“It must be awful for Ally’s parents and family,” Abby sounded worried.

“We’ll find ‘em, Abbs.” Gibbs but an arm around her shoulders and led her into the kitchen where he started getting out plates and napkins while Abby unloaded the pizzas and things. Ziva followed, watching the pair from the doorway. They moved around the kitchen and each other with practiced ease and Ziva realized they had been doing this a long time. She sometimes forgot that the team had existed long before she came along, only Ducky had known Gibbs longer than Abby.

“May I help?” Ziva asked.

Abby picked up the plates and silver and handed them to her, “Sure, you can set the table.” Abby smiled. It wasn’t her usual beaming smile, but it was better than none, Ziva decided, and gave her what she hoped was an encouraging smile in return.

Gibbs’ cell rang and he checked the number, then answered a bit less abruptly than he usually would have. He thanked the caller and shut the phone. “We have surveillance, and so far nothing is going on.”

“Which is both good and bad,” Abby said.

Ziva, walking back into the kitchen, “What about Ducky’s … Mrs. Mallard, have they seen anyone there?”
Gibbs shrugged and shook his head, “Not a thing.”

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“Tim,” Tony put a hand on Tim’s shoulder, “you’ve got to stop staring out the window. First, because you are a big ol’ target standing there,” Tony pulled Tim away from the window. “Second, because dinner is served. And third, well, there is no third. Dinner should be enough reason.” Tony led his co-worker to the table and pushed him into a chair. “What gives, McParanoid?” He took a chair across from Tim and started dishing up pasta and salad.

“I should be at work. There are so many files to go through and,” he sighed, took the plate Tony handed him and sat staring at it.

“You didn’t even stop for lunch today, so eat. Then you’re going to sleep before you fall down, then, we can go back in early and by then the records will be arriving from overseas.’

Tim finally looked up from his contemplation of his pasta. He cocked his head and looked at Tony as he would examine some alien specimen in a zoo.

Tony pointed his fork at Tim, “McSuspicious, if you tell anyone that we did anything other than watch Magnum reruns and drink beer tonight, I will hack your server and erase your Elf Lord and all his gear. I have a rep to protect and you aren’t blowin’ it for me.” Then Tony twirled noodles onto his fork and continued dinner.

“Right, Tony.” Tim finally picked up his fork and took a bite. And then another, surprised. “Tony, when did you learn to cook?”

***

The drive was a long one, Ducky took his time and many false turns on the meandering trip. Napoleon kept an eye out but saw no tailing cars, no repeated sightings of anything.

"He knows where every one of us lives, he only needs to stake out one place and eventually someone will show up in his sights."

"True enough, but best to be cautious anyway," Napoleon answered, settling back to face front again and adjusting the mirror on the sun visor to watch their back trail.

They were quiet again for a time, a watchful silence.

As they approached his neighborhood, Ducky slowed a bit more, still circling his usual routes, looking for anything out of place, unusual.

"One of my team will be waiting for us a couple blocks away."

Ducky glanced over at Napoleon in question.

"He’ll garage your car and we’ll let them check the interior of the house."

Ducky shrugged an agreement, and when they saw the man walking down the residential street, he slowed more. Napoleon looked behind them once more and then nodded when Ducky looked to him for confirmation. He pulled the car over.

The man leaned down as Napoleon opened a window. "Nothing so far, Mr. Solo." Then he circled to the drivers side and waited.
Napoleon tugged Ducky's sleeve, motioned for him to slide toward him, as he did Solo's agent opened the door and took his place, putting the car into gear and driving toward Ducky's house.

Ducky took a deep breath, Napoleon's arm was across the back of the seat to give him more room in the suddenly cramped front seat of the sedan, and Ducky was surprised at the familiar comfort of the scent of his partner's aftershave and the spent gunpowder from their time on the range. His past and his present clicked into place and he suddenly felt overwhelmed by memories. The scent was one he knew so well, it had always meant so many things, comfort after torture by THRUSH, victory after bringing down enemy operatives, celebration when they returned to base safe, or as safe as they ever did. Here was a person he had been closer to than any coworker, closer than even his family, closer in some ways than he ever had been to a lover. This man had known him at his worst, his best, his every mood had never been a mystery; this partner had known his fears, his joys, and he had known in return, every mercurial emotion and reaction, every hope and desire. They had once been extensions of one another, acting in concert so often that they were each other's second nature. He felt, in that fleeting few blocks of a drive, home.

Ducky pulled his keys out of his coat pocket, wedged between his thigh and Napoleon's. He held them up and hit the garage opener on the key chain and they drove into the garage and it slid closed as the second man of Napoleon's team slipped under the closing door.

They piled out of the car and Napoleon nodded to the man standing by the door to the house, "Carter," and then the one getting out of the drivers side door, "Johnson." The men nodded, as did Ducky.

"We'll do a sweep of the inside, is there a security code?"

Ducky walked over to a small panel by the door and opened it then punched in a code and the lights on it flashed to green. He shut the door of the panel and gestured them inside, "Watch the dogs." he warned.

Napoleon took his arm and steered him toward the door at the back of the garage, "Let's do a perimeter check and give them a minute."

Ducky just raised his brows at his old friend.

"Humour me, will you?"

Ducky rolled his eyes and unlocked the door and let them out into the twilight shrouded back yard.

They went in opposite directions, passing one another in the middle and meeting up again at the garage door.

"You have a huge backyard."

"Mother likes to have room for the dogs."

"Dogs, Illya?"

"Indeed."

The other pair of partners joined them then. "Nothing. You're good to go, gentlemen."

***

While Napoleon conferred with his men on the plan for the evening and shift changes, Ducky went
into the kitchen and started getting down plates and bowls, sorting silverware from the drawer. Napoleon joined him and he heard the front door close. "They've gone then?"

"They've got a stakeout position, and another team will be joining them soon." Napoleon wandered over to the refrigerator and opened it. "Illya! There's food in your fridge."

"I am rarely gone for more than a night, food is safe to keep around these days." He came over and ducked under Napoleon's arm, taking a casserole dish from the bottom shelf. He headed for the oven, "There's salad things in the drawer, make yourself useful, will you? I hope you don't mind leftovers. Lasagna tonight."

Ducky set the timer as Napoleon started putting salads into the bowls. Then Ducky went to let the dogs out of their confinement, they circled his feet as he filled their bowls. Napoleon watched with a question in his eyes.

"Mother likes corgis. She doted on them when she lived at home, I haven't the heart to adopt them out. They have a door and a run on the side of the house, they are terrible watchdogs though, silly mutts," he said even as he leaned down and patted the head of the smallest one.

"You with dogs in the house, never thought I'd see such a thing."

"Life's strange, Napoleon."

"Too true, partner mine."

***

Napoleon set the table as Ducky checked the lock on the front door and got his mail from the slot. All junk, he put it on the kitchen counter and joined Napoleon in the dining room. "May I offer you a drink?"

"Just tea, if you don't mind, as much as I'd love a double of whatever you have, I think it best to wait, just in case."

"I agree, unfortunately. I have plenty of tea, or coffee if you prefer."

"Tea is fine."

The dogs had started up a clamor in the other room so Ducky put on a kettle to boil and went to see what they thought was so alarming, Napoleon trailing after.

In the living room sat four cardboard boxes and a guitar case. The tape on the boxes was brittle and peeling, but the boxes, though a little dusty, were intact. The guitar case showed scars and dings but was securely fastened shut.

Ducky turned to find Napoleon leaning against the doorjamb, ankles crossed, one hand in a pocket and the other on a hip, drawing back his jacket so the shoulder holster, now occupied, was visible. He had the faintest smile, the one he usually gave when he was hiding something, but Ducky, as he always could, saw through it. It was the look Napoleon got when he wasn't sure his well laid plans were going to play out in his favour.

"Perimeter check?"

"Ok, so I needed an excuse to give the guys time to empty the trunk. And it needed done." Napoleon winked, sure of himself again.
"What have you brought?"

"You remember when we were supposed to update our next of kin lists and they wouldn't let us put one another? I put Aunt Amy for both of us. She had all of our things, two apartments full, put into storage. When I finally made it home, it was all waiting. I only brought a few things I thought you might want, maybe couldn't replace."

Ducky had been opening the boxes. Two of them were filled with his phonograph records and player, another was journals that had published articles by him and the last box was diplomas and certificates and papers. He lifted the case and opened it, took the guitar and ran a finger over the strings, automatically turning pegs to tune it. His eyes were shining when he looked up at Napoleon again, who smiled at him, the old smile he knew so well, the one that said he was delighted to see that he had surprised and pleased his reserved partner.

Ducky sat the guitar on top of the boxes and walked toward Napoleon. Napoleon's own eyes shined just a hint as he opened his arms then hugged his long lost partner.

The tea kettle and the oven timer went off and the dogs started barking at the oven as if doing so would shut up the noise.

~~~

“So what would they do?”

“Who?”

“Those bosses of yours.”

“Well, they wouldn’t get kidnapped at all, I suppose,” Jimmy’s voice was a little dejected. “Although Dr. Mallard did get kidnapped once but they found him just in time and Agent Gibbs was a hostage, but he planned that so I don’t think it counts.”

“Well, that’s no help then.”

“Any idea why we’re here?”

“Because this is where kidnapper left us.”

“No. Well, yes, but no, why us? I’m not rich or anything, I don’t even have much of a clearance level at work, I don’t know any secrets or anything. So why take me? It doesn’t make much sense.”

“Where do you work?”

“At the Navy Yard, mostly, except when we go to pick up a body and then we go out in the field. And then usually we get lost and Dr. Mallard blames me, though he is always the one with the map. Isn’t that…”

“Navy Yard? Bodies?”

“Well, yes, I work for NCIS, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, we’re based at the Navy Yard. I assist the medical examiner, Dr. Mallard.”

“That’s not in New York, then.”

“Washington D.C.”
“Is that where we are?”

“It’s where I was when that guy jumped out of my backseat, anyway.”

***

He watched his partner move about the room, taking care of everyday tasks. It was a pleasure, as it always was, though the prowling cat wasn’t as much in evidence. The set of the shoulders remained and a hint of that grace showed itself in his gestures. Napoleon enjoyed just remembering and comparing and rediscovering his partner in this new friend who wasn’t really at all new.

Ducky felt a bit stalked with the watching but not bothered as much as amused. It reminded him of the early days of their partnership. Napoleon learned best by observation, always had. Others had often mistaken his watchfulness. Like any good magician with a little slight of hand here and misdirection there, you never really knew what Napoleon was up to, unless you knew him the way you knew yourself, and Ducky did. Still. So the watched feeling wasn’t one of discomfort, but was like a comfortable old blanket he hadn’t realized he’d missed.

Napoleon toed off his shoes and put his feet up as he watched Ducky set up the little turntable and set a vinyl disc on it. At the first scratching sounds of the record, Ducky sighed. He turned and the smile on his face illuminated the room. He sat on the loveseat next to Napoleon and they sat, as they had so many times in the past, shoulder to shoulder.

“It would be better with a drink, this reminiscing.”

“As soon as this kidnapping affair is over, then.”

“It’s a date Napoleon, agreed?”

“Agreed, partner mine.”

When the record ended, they looked at one another and with a nod of silent agreement they stood, Ducky turned off the player and followed Napoleon to the dining room table. They sat and started with the lists again.

“Recess is over.”

“As are the days when you could leave your paperwork on my desk.”

“More’s the pity.”

***

Gibbs watched her over the top of the file he was reading, it was a rare thing that she was still. It couldn’t last. But for the moment she was studying the series of pictures from the kidnapper’s file and she was sitting quietly at the other end of the couch. There was a little frown line between her brows and she bit her lower lip as she moved the photographs around on the coffee table like cards in solitaire.

She looked up and caught him. But he was surprised when she had no comment on it, instead she gestured at the pictures she had arranged, “Look at this, Gibbs.”

He slid down the couch next to her and looked at the rows of photos. “What am I looking at, Abbs?”

“This one here,” she pointed at the first in the top row of pictures of herself, “is three weeks ago.”
She tapped each in succession. “And these are all from the same week, and these,” she tapped the row below, “are the same time frame, all from three weeks ago.” The row below were all surveillance photos of Gibbs.

He looked from the photos back to her, so close he could count the lashes laying against her cheek, then her bright green eyes met his and she smiled, and it was a wicked smile.

“We can try a reverse surveillance on this guy. See this?” She picked up a picture of herself, an ATM behind her. “We just need to get the pictures from this ATM and see if the guy shows up. Of course, we don’t know who he is or what he looks like, but if we get enough pictures from all of our outings from this week, we might find someone keeps showing up.” For the first time that evening, Gibbs heard the usual Abby excitability.

“That’s good, Abbs, real good.” He leaned in and pressed his lips to her cheek, smiling. She gave him a grin and then threw her arms around his neck in a hug and bounced off the couch.

“I’m going to go find Ziva and get her to put her pictures in order so I can test the timeline.”

“Abbs, why do you have mine in order then, I didn’t help.”

“No, I remembered what you were wearing.” She grinned again and left for the kitchen where Ziva had set up her laptop.

Gibbs looked down at the pictures again, wondering.

***

“McTarget, stay away from the window, will ya?” Tony once more took McGee by the shoulders and led him to the couch, sitting him down. “If I have to tell you one more time, I’m gonna tie you to a chair and make you sleep there.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

McGee rolled his eyes at his temporary roommate and went back to studying the files he had brought from work. When his phone rang he startled and grabbed it from his pocket. The caller ID said Gibbs.

“Yes, boss?”

He nodded, even knowing his superior couldn’t see him, taking the pictures from the file as Gibbs explained what he wanted.

“I’ll call…” McGee sighed as Gibbs hung up, as he usually did, without so much as a ‘see ya later’.

“Tony, come look at these pictures, will you?”

CHAPTER NINE

“I made myself at home, hope you don’t mind.” Napoleon looked over his shoulder with a smile as Ducky came into the kitchen.
“That would be different how?”

“Still such a ray of sunshine, Illya.”

Ducky simply growled and poured himself some coffee. “I should have had a lot more fun last night for a morning after like this.”

“I’ll make it up to you, partner, don’t I always?” Napoleon said from his place at the stove.

“I can no longer be bought with a simple meal…” Ducky stopped speaking when Napoleon put a plate of French toast and bacon and scrambled eggs in front of him as he sat at the table. “My arteries do not thank you,” he leaned in and took a deep breath, “but my stomach does.” The smile was back in his voice.

“Oh, tomorrow you can go back to kashi or granola or whatever crime against breakfast you are perpetuating these days. That’s no way to celebrate our first breakfast together in decades. This,” he put his own plate on the table and opened the strawberry jam and tapped it with his spoon, “is.” He proceeded to spread jam on his French toast and watched as Ducky bit the crisp bacon and smiled. “Besides, all this came from your own refrigerator, so don’t be going all doctorly on me at this late date.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, old friend.”

Several quiet minutes passed as they enjoyed breakfast, Ducky got up to get more coffee. He had just turned to ask Napoleon if he wanted more when there was a musical little chime from under the table.

Still holding the coffee pot up, he raised a brow at Napoleon who patted his lips with a napkin then ducked under the table and came back up with a laptop computer. He opened it with one hand and held his coffee cup out with the other. Ducky poured. He sat back down and watched, bemused, as Napoleon positioned the laptop so that they both could see the screen, he scooted his chair and plate closer to Ducky’s and picked up his coffee again.

“We’ll be three for breakfast,” Napoleon smiled.

Napoleon reached out and tapped a few keys and the screen resolved into a blue logo, then the smiling face of a very old woman.

“Aunt Amy, how are you feeling?”

“Quite good, my dear.”

“I have a most pleasant surprise,” Napoleon reached out an arm and put it around Ducky’s shoulders, pulling him closer and more into the view of the web camera. “You remember my partner?”

“Illya!” she reached her hands toward the camera as if she could move through the screen to touch him. “How in the world are you? And where have you been all this time?” She sat back against the pillows propping her up and clapped her hands like a young child. “Oh, Napoleon, I am so glad you found him, so glad. Tell me you will bring him to visit? Will you come, Illya?” The men could see very clearly the tears gathering.

Ducky looked at Napoleon, then back to the old woman, “I would be most happy to see you again, though it may be a few days until I can free up some time.”
“Of course, this foul business.” A frown crossed her wrinkled face, “You are going to bring her home, you two boys, aren’t you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they answered.

The three finished breakfast together and then an aide came to pick up the tray and Amy signed off the computer, reminding Ducky to visit soon.

“Dear heavens, Napoleon, she is just as sharp as I remember.”

“Good genes, her mother lived to be 98 and was lucid to the end.”

“Are you implying that I’m stuck with you for another couple of decades?”

“At least.”

Napoleon smirked and Ducky hid the smile threatening to cover his face, and failed.

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“Do any of you sleep?” Fornell asked as he came down the steps of MTAC very early in the morning. He was followed by Vance, who shook his head though Fornell couldn't see him. Gibbs’ team was assembled and working at various computers and phones, except Gibbs himself who sat in the front row of chairs and was reading through the information they had accumulated so far, looking for something to trigger an idea.

“Where are Dr. Mallard and his friend?” Vance asked as he joined Gibbs.

“Ducky wanted to check on his mother in person, so I sent them and their keepers on a field trip.”

“Was that wise?”

“Do you think I was going to stop them?”

“Point taken.” Vance didn’t say anything about traps and bait, Gibbs didn’t acknowledge any of the other possibilities of sending the former agents outside the control of the Navy Yard.

“Abby has an idea, but we might need some cooperation getting what we need. She thinks we can reverse the surveillance on this kidnapper by backtracking the photos, getting ATM photos and traffic cam information and more along those lines.”

“I can help with that,” Fornell joined the conversation. He handed a disk to Gibbs, “Here is the information our agents got from the traffic cameras along the highway route South. The same dark sedan keeps showing up, and still has the plate obscured. But it’s a start. We might be able to get a shot of the driver if we go frame by frame. Perhaps something to compare to anything you find with Abby’s idea. There’s still no word from the kidnapper at that end.”

“It’s been too long already, we need a break.” Vance.

“I’m afraid we may have to make our own.” Fornell.

Gibbs handed the disk off to McGee and gestured toward the screen and McGee knew exactly what he wanted, shortly there were more pictures crowding the wall size screen.

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“What do you mean, she’s to be transferred?” The deepened Scottish accent made his anger somehow more immediate, and Napoleon stood back and watched his friend tear into the staff at the rest home. Though he sounded polite and never raised his voice, the point was made and the head nurse lost no time in sending for someone higher up the food chain to unruffle Dr. Mallard. He wasn’t waiting though, he took Napoleon’s arm and led him toward his mother’s room. Ducky pulled his phone out of a pocket and punched a speed dial button for Gibbs as he dragged Napoleon down the hall.

“How in the world do they think they are going to get better results at another facility, she is an old woman and she has been waiting to join her family for years, and she can’t take the stress…” he switched gears as the phone on the other end was answered. “Gibbs! Gibbs, some fool doctor thinks they need to move mother to another hospital, today of all days… no this wasn’t in her treatment plan, it isn’t anything… oh, you have a point, yes. Yes, I will check. Thank you, I’ll be in touch.” The Northern accent still strong, Ducky turned in at a doorway and softly greeted the woman in the bed. She was small and frail, her head looking too large for the shoulders holding it up and in her eyes a vague look, as if she were seeing some other place and time, one that was much more pleasing than the one around her now.

Napoleon hung back, leaning on the door and monitoring the comings and goings in the hall as Ducky greeted the woman who had been his mother for almost the entire time that he’d been gone from Napoleon’s life. His heart broke a little watching the pair. He distracted himself from it by noting exits and places he could station guards and devising a strategy to protect his friend and his loved ones.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Ducky took a chair at the bedside and reached out to pat the thin hand on top of the covers.

“Who are you? It’s so nice to have visitors. Are you here to see Donald? He should be back soon. He was just here a while ago for breakfast.”

Ducky bowed his head and took a deep breath. There was resolve and a great deal of reserve in his eyes when he looked up again. “No ma’am, I’m here to see you, to see how you are doing.”

“Well, I’m just fine, aren’t I.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are a friend of Donald’s, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“He’ll be back in a little while. He usually comes before breakfast. Sometimes at night just before bedtime. He is such a good boy, my Donald.”

“I’m sure he’s a fine son, ma’am.”

“Oh certainly. He says his place is almost ready for me, he has invited me to come with him. Soon, he says. He’ll take good care of me you know, no need to worry.”

“Of course, you’re right.”

Napoleon could hear his friend’s tension, see the stiff set of shoulders and the way he breathed shallow and fast, as if he was struggling with a fight or flight instinct. He shuffled his feet a little, hoping to distract one or both occupants in the room with his remembered presence.
The frail woman in the bed looked up and her gaze became sharp for just a second, “Donald, did you bring another Italian home? What have I told you?”

“Oh mother, this is a friend from… ah, school, long ago.”

“Oh, another doctor like you? Well that’s something else altogether. Come here young man.” She held up one hand as if for him to bow over, and it came naturally to do so. He smiled his most charming smile and thought better of it as soon as her eyes lost their sharpness again.

“Untrustworthy, those Italians. I tell you, Donald, watch this one. Watch him close!”

“Oh, I intend to, Mother, yes I do.”

She closed her eyes and her head nodded a little and soon she had fallen into a sleep accompanied with a delicate little snoring.

Ducky stood and nodded toward the hall, then followed Napoleon out.

“Come, my untrustworthy friend, shall we see about this transfer? Gibbs thinks perhaps it might lead us to our quarry, or perhaps a clue at any rate. She won’t wake again until after lunch.”

Napoleon reached out and put a hand on his friend’s arm. “This must be very difficult, her loss of memory.”

“Yes and no. She very often imagines Donald visiting, I wonder sometimes if it is her subconscious that knows the truth trying to come out. Or perhaps it really is just random synapses firing and she imagines I am here. Or both. It is truly a mystery, this disease. Fascinating and cruel and difficult for all involved. Well, perhaps not for the one who has lost all memory of recent self, but who can tell.”

There was a sigh, and then he turned again, leading the way down the hall in search of the doctor in charge of Mrs. Mallard’s current care.

***

“I want you to go back over that morning again, the last morning.” Vance said as Napoleon sat down with him in his office.

“Well, it was a pretty usual morning, I picked Illya up, we drove to work in my car. We reported to Mr. Waverly, checked a company sedan out and drove a visiting doctor to the airport. We saw him onto his flight, went back to the office and had been there maybe an hour. We were in our office, I think we may have been talking about lunch, maybe there was a discussion about some upcoming conference. Mr. Waverly wanted both of us to go but neither of us wanted to leave headquarters that long. We didn’t anymore, really, leave HQ without one of us there.”

“Mr. Waverly was putting more and more responsibility on you.” Vance made it a statement, not a question.

“Yes,” Napoleon agreed. “I was his number two, Illya was mine. But truth be told, Illya and I had equal amounts of responsibility for most of the day to day functions of Alexander’s job. He was still sharp as a tack, but frail, and after his wife passed, well… I think the job was the only anchor he had left.” A sorrow flickered in his eyes, very briefly, if Vance hadn’t been watching closely he would have missed it. Vance wondered just for a moment which of them that that sorrow was for, Mr. Waverly or Mr. Kuryakin or any of the others lost that day. Or maybe for himself, Vance didn’t know and it was gone so fast he realized that Mr. Solo wasn’t a man to dwell. He let the moment go.
“You know that the charter was never dissolved.”

“I was told, yes, when I finally found my way back to New York. But it was…” Napoleon stopped, his hand washing over his eyes and then fingers and thumb rubbing his temples in a gesture Vance had seen several times in last twenty-four hours. “I didn’t have the heart to go on with it. I hate to sound sentimental, but there you have it. I went off to our family home upstate and licked my wounds until Aunt Amy was sick of me and then I returned to New York and started the foundation and here we are.” He smiled a charming smile that Vance could see hid more than it didn’t.

“And by the time you ’found your way back’ as you put it, UNCLE had taken out every enemy it could find and was in the process of closing up shop.”

“That is pretty much the shape of it, yes. I heard that they had taken THRUSH’s word for it as the responsible party and against everything that Waverly would have done, burned their nests to the ground. And by that time, well, there was little I could do, or wanted to do. I like to think I would have been more benign, as Waverly would have wanted. He was a great one for getting facts first and not acting on blind revenge. I like to think it, but the truth is that I was,” a sigh, “I was glad someone had taken them out.” He was silent for a moment. “Only later did I wonder if they had actually done it. We had the occasional mole or spy, but THRUSH had become more cagey those last years, looking for information more often than trying to outright destroy us as a pest in the way of their plans. And they were always more about the surgical strike than the all out war. But who was there to listen to my misgivings? I did my best to remove myself from that playing field, so by the time I really thought it through, it didn’t much matter anymore.”

“I’m listening.”

“Thank you director, but what difference does ancient history have to do with it now? I’m pretty sure THRUSH, if it still exists, has better things to do than exact late revenge on me.”

“What if you’re right and it wasn’t THRUSH that set the bombs, that kidnapped you and your Mr. Kuryakin? Who would it have been?”

“Dear lord, Director, the list goes on and on. We made a lot of enemies, professionally and personally because of work.”

“They’ve come home to roost, perhaps. It may be time to start thinking again about who could have hated you enough then to threaten you now.”

“Not a memory lane I am all that pleased to revisit, but it seems it is where the journey takes us, hmmm?”

***

“Do you think that he’d take the post if it were offered?” Fornell asked the medical examiner.

“I… used to be able to answer that question, Agent Fornell,” Ducky replied. “Without a doubt he was ready to take over twenty years ago. Now, well, I don’t know the man he’s become. I think though, after our short reacquaintance, that he has other priorities these days.” Ducky finished gathering the papers he came for and gestured toward the door with a questioning look. Fornell stopped leaning on the sink and led the way to the elevator.

Once inside the elevator Fornell still had questions. “What if this is some kind of scheme to get him to reopen the charter and put UNCLE in the hands of some, well, less than savory powers?”

“You and the Director have been working overtime on flamboyant theories, have you?” The look
Ducky gave Fornell was only partly kidding.

“The charter was never dissolved. There has been speculation on more than one occasion that UNCLE could still do some good in the world.”

Ducky was still laughing as the elevator opened at the hall in front of MTAC where Napoleon and Director Vance had just stopped so Vance could scan them in to the high security room. Napoleon raised a brow, rocking forward heel to toe towards his advancing friend then back again and waiting for the mirth to subside.

“Finally get enough coffee there, tovarisch?”

Fornell gave both of them a look, neither felt inclined to explain.

“How was your interrogation?”

“I’ve had worse. And you, partner?”

“Oh, certainly, this was quite gentle. Mr. Waverly would be so disappointed.”

“Subtle, were you, Vance?”

Vance gave Fornell a look that would have done Gibbs proud, “At least I didn’t incapacitate anyone with laughter, since when is there Nitrous in the morgue?”

The door to MTAC swung open and ended any more conversation when Abby almost ran smack into Director Vance. She grabbed the hands of Napoleon and Ducky and started to drag them into MTAC, already speaking a mile a minute at them as she did.

“Where have you been? How’s your mother, Ducky?” There were more questions as she led them down the stairs, Napoleon followed Ducky’s lead and didn’t try to answer or follow the jumping logic.

At the bottom of the stairs Abby let go and the men sat while she continued to pace, hands waving and pigtails flying, explaining the idea she had about trying to track the kidnapper with his own surveillance. By finding as many public cameras in the area on the days that the photos were taken, they had been seeing if they could catch him, her or them on film themselves, taking the pictures of the NCIS team.

Abby was interrupted when Gibbs came down the steps and stopped her, handing over another disc with more photos, she took it and whirled to the computer to add them to the wall screen.

Gibbs handed a folder to Ducky. “Here is everything we can find on this Dr. Hicklson that was listed on the transfer papers at the rest home, including a picture, see if you recognize him.”

Napoleon put his arm along the back of Ducky’s seatback so he could lean in and read the file and study the picture along with his friend. They commented to one another about the file and then Napoleon was startled when Ducky pushed the whole folder into his chest and threw himself out of his chair with a cry of ‘oh dear God, how could I forget’.

Napoleon pulled the photo out again and looked from it to Ducky and back again. “Do you know him, Illya, who is it?”

“No, I have no idea, well, he looks familiar but at my age, who doesn’t look like someone you know, correct?” Ducky started to pace. “No. It’s Mr. Palmer, it’s been twenty four hours, and all this
time I had forgotten, how could I have forgotten?”

Napoleon stood and stopped Ducky’s pacing, hands on his friend’s shoulders. “What did you forget?”

“Jimmy Palmer. He’s diabetic. We are out of time, we have to find him, immediately may not be soon enough.”

“Oh,” Napoleon said, squeezing the shoulders in his hands. “You’re right, oh dear God doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Look, we haven’t suffocated in here, so there must be air getting in from somewhere. How much of that lighter is left, do you think, enough to look for a vent or something?” Jimmy had kept up a conversation with his fellow inmate, mostly to keep himself from panicking in the cold dark, though Ally went along with the conversation, so maybe it was soothing her as well.

“I think, maybe it’s half full, I didn’t use it very much.”

“Good. I’d rather be lost in some ductwork than be trapped in here waiting for the bad guy to come back.”

“Is this what your Gibbs or Doctor would do?”

“I think it’s as close as we’re going to get. You ok with that?”

“I’m fine with anything that involves not being in here anymore.”

“Well, good. Then I’m betting that there’s a vent in the ceiling. Let’s hope it isn’t welded in place or something.”

“If you don’t mind my saying, Jimmy, you need to work on the bedside manner, who welds air ducts?”

“Bad guys who plan ahead?” Ally couldn’t see his expression in the dark but could hear his voice shake a little. She reached out in the dark, feeling her way toward his voice and pressed the lighter into his hand when she found it. He grabbed it tight, then sighed.

***

“That chemical signature is ours, Napoleon.”

“Someone used our own ordinance against us?”

They looked at one another for a moment, “Inside job,” they said together.

“Diabolical!” Abby said. “THRUSH came in and raided your own weapons?”

“Not likely.” Napoleon.

“One of the distinctive markings of that particular bird is that they believe their own toys to be
superior, they would have brought their own.” Ducky.

“So, sabotage? A traitor? And why? Did someone want to defect and thought this would show their dedication?” Ziva asked.

“I don’t know. If so, it backfired, THRUSH was destroyed after, as much as UNCLE.” Napoleon told her.

“Why would they destroy UNCLE Headquarters in New York but then kidnap you both, isn’t that kind of, well, overkill?”

“Perhaps they didn’t intend to destroy UNCLE, Ziva. Maybe it was a revolution, a coup, or they thought Napoleon would be a good figurehead for their plan.” Ducky answered her.

“I’m not good at being a puppet. Been there, hated it, slashed the strings.”

“Indeed,” Ducky said, remembering a pretty girl in long ago Japan that had walked away with Alexander Waverly, much to Napoleon’s surprise. Remembering the look on Napoleon’s face, he ran his hand over the back of his head, smoothing his hair, and the sensory memory was strong for just that moment, giving him the barest little smile. He focused again on the present and their current predicament.

“Gibbs’ gut is telling him there is a connection, kidnapping to kidnapping. It’s the best we’ve got so far, so let’s keep looking at this ancient history. Maybe we’ll catch the break we need.” Ducky refocused, worry still threading his voice. He started again at the beginning of the report, an UNCLE file that had been completed while he was undercover and beginning his new life as Donald Mallard and Napoleon was still in a coma in some backwater. He missed the watchful gaze that his old partner gave him.

Napoleon leaned back in the chair. Sitting next to Illya like this, sharing a desk, it brought back memories he hadn’t contemplated for years. Between them, Fornell and Vance had gotten all of the information they could hunt up about the UNCLE bombing and had instructed the partners to study it for anything they could remember that wasn’t in the reports. And now all those memories were flooding him and he wondered if his partner was as overwhelmed as he was feeling. He shrugged it off, determined that it shouldn’t affect his concentration. Just like old times, he thought, focus on the job, the rest would shake out eventually. For a moment as he watched the frown line come and go between Illya’s brows, he saw that too young looking new UNCLE agent Waverly had introduced as the one chosen to be his new partner, so many years ago. He leaned in and took the pages Illya had already read for the third time and started to study the detached descriptions of the aftermath of the end of his former life.

Abby and Ziva had gone back into the lab, leaving the men at Abby’s desk. From the corner of his eye he could see them through the glass door, both of the women trying to look like they weren’t looking at them every few minutes. Abby trying not to look worried, Ziva just trying not to get caught looking.

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“The last mission I went on was that North African affair, mopping up some revolution, remember?”

“Yes, I had just been to that conference in Canada, it was your turn out.”

“And then Mr. Waverly was hosting that doctor, the psychologist. He was looking at some new techniques for choosing agents and doing evaluations. That took forever.”
“Nothing that seems very ominous.”

“There must have been something in those last weeks that could shed some light on what happened, on who or why.”

“I can’t think of what it could be.” Napoleon’s frustration was controlled, a tightening in his voice was all that betrayed him.

“Well, let’s try Vance’s interrogation, what do you remember about that last day?”

Napoleon turned his chair to face his old partner, scrubbed both hands across his tired eyes and then leaned back in the chair, legs extended to cross ankles under the desk. He got a look that he remembered well as his partner adjusted his own chair’s position to make way for the space that was just stolen from him. But there was just a moment of grin before the frown as he crossed his arms and leaned back in his own chair.

“Ok, from the top. I picked you up, we drove to headquarters. Traffic was apparently unmemorable, I don’t remember there being anything outstanding anyway.”

“And you were early, I remember that.”

Napoleon shrugged. “I’d had an early night.”

Ducky raised a brow but kept quiet. Napoleon rolled his eyes and continued, “We took the doctor to the airport in a car from the motor pool. Mr. Waverly insisted that we both escort him.”

“Yes, and he seemed agitated that morning, but he didn’t say what was the matter.”

“Then, when we got back, we were in the office for a while. Mr. Waverly had wanted us to come in after lunch, but we hadn’t had lunch yet when everything went pear shaped, so I have no idea what he wanted to see us about. The upcoming conference, perhaps. He wanted us to both go and of course we were trying to convince him one of us should stay in New York.”

“Do you think he suspected something was going on, and if he did, why didn’t he say immediately? What was he waiting for? More importantly, why didn’t we suspect?”

“He spent a lot of time with that doctor, do you suppose he found something out about one of our agents or employees and put a bug in Alexander’s ear?”

“I honestly have no idea. But I think we should find out where that doctor is, maybe he remembers something Alexander said, or did, or some interaction with a staff member. What was that doctor’s name?”

Napoleon sat up again and scooted his chair back to the desk next to his partner and started looking through the files and papers they had scattered over it. Elbow to elbow they searched through the information and that is how Gibbs found them.

The door slid open. “Gentlemen, we have evidence.” He put several clear plastic bags on the desk, closed with red tape. Inside the bags were wallets, one folded leather and another of cloth, ID and credit cards as well as various bills, coins and scraps of paper.

Both men paled, recognizing the faces on the cards.

“These were found about three blocks from Palmer’s last known, we’ve got people combing the area for more.”
Gibbs could see their expressions turn determined, and recognized hunters on a scent. It was something he had seen in the mirror, once or twice.

***

It seemed like hours they had been crawling along this endless ductwork. He was sure it wasn’t hours, but he couldn’t tell any longer. Ally’s cheerful voice, even in a whisper, was nagging at his last nerve and he realized that the cranky feeling was a sign of his lowering blood sugar. It wasn’t that she was annoying, in fact she was surprisingly resilient. He was sure she was pretty young, and yet she seemed to take all this in stride. Maybe she was just a good actress. He figured he was about to find out, for he was going to have to tell her before too long that she may have to continue along this endless damn duct alone. And he really didn’t want to be left in this cramped dark little place, but he decided if he was passed out, it wouldn’t much matter. The feeling of vertigo was increasing. He knew that he was either going to have to eat or pass out, sooner rather than later. They passed another vent, pausing and discovering that it was another dark empty room.

“What do you think this place is?”

“Seems like empty storage so far,” he replied. They had been whispering in case anyone was nearby, but so far they had heard and seen no one in any of the featureless empty spaces they passed.

Ally sighed. “Forward ho, yes?” Jimmy could hear the forced cheer now.

“Let’s take a moment, please?”

“Sure.” Ally wiggled until she was on her back in the space ahead of him. “Thanks, I didn’t realize how sore my elbows and knees could get. A break feels good.”

Jimmy made a similar adjustment and had to silently agree that it was a relief to lie on his back and rest for a moment. And then he realized that he felt like he was in a coffin. “I wonder how Abby stands it?”

“Who’s Abby and what does she stand?”

“She is the best lab tech in the universe and she sleeps in a coffin. Sometimes.”

“You’ve slept with a girl in a coffin?”

“What!? No!” Jimmy’s voice was loud in the echoing ductwork. “Oops,” he said in a whisper again. “No, I don’t sleep with Abby. I mean, she is beautiful but, I, she, no.” His fluster distracted him from the tight space and he realized he felt more relaxed, maybe too much, but he ignored it. “No. I have never slept with Abby. She told me about the coffin. I haven’t ever seen it. McGee has. Seen it, that is. I don’t think he slept in it. Or, um…” Jimmy’s voice trailed off and he was trying to pick up the thread of what he was really trying to say, and failed.

“So this Abby, she actually owns a coffin. And sleeps in it. Sometimes.”

“Yes. Or so I have been told. By her.”

“Great, so she’s like what, goth tech?”

“Uh, I don’t think there is any label for her other than Abby. She is her own thing, really.”

“Cool. I wanna meet her. So we hafta get out of here. In a minute. I don’t think I can crawl again just yet.”
There was another moment of silence, in which Jimmy listened to their combined breathing in the closed space, and felt more dizzy, though he knew he was laying still as could be. He was going to have to say something. Soon. In a minute.

“JIMMY,” it was a loud whisper, but in the quiet it was enough to startle him.

“What?”

“You aren’t falling asleep there, are you? Your breathing changed, it scared me.”

“No, sorry. Not asleep.” Yet, he thought to himself. “Uh, Ally, how old are you? I mean, I know it’s not polite to ask a lady her age, but, um…” he lost his train of thought again. He just wanted the spinning to stop and he wanted to rest.

“I’ll be seventeen in a few weeks.”

Jimmy groaned.

“Yes, you’ve been trapped in a small dark space with jailbait. I promise to tell everyone that your virtue remains intact,” there was a little bit of a giggle at the end. Jimmy decided it didn’t sound like hysteria. She could handle whatever life threw at her, apparently, and with some humour.

“Ally, you may have to go on alone, I might pass out.” That was subtle, Palmer, he thought to himself, then thought about giving himself a headslap, but didn’t have the energy to wiggle his hand up behind his head.

“We’ve been crawling along just fine, what’s changed?” No judgment in that soft voice, just concern, to Jimmy’s surprise. “I know you didn’t like the ducts and figured you were a little claustrophobic, but who isn’t in this kind of situation, right? Not that I’ve been in this kind of situation before, mind you.” Jimmy could hear her turning again, onto her stomach to continue crawling forward.

“How could you tell?”

“You sounded like you were suggesting we jump off the high dive into an empty pool when you asked if I wanted to try the duct.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, I guess I don’t like this much, but I didn’t like it in there either, so…”

“Yeah. This at least feels like we’re trying, right?”

“Yes. But look, I wasn’t talking about the small space. I’m diabetic. I keep it under control, but I don’t even know how long it’s been since I was kidnapped. The good news is that I had breakfast and took my meds. The bad news is that I’m not feeling so well. Stress is not good. And this is stress. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for what you can’t control.”

“Now you sound like Gibbs. He has these rules. That’s one. Don’t apologize.” While he was speaking, he was doing his best to turn again to start crawling after Ally. It took more effort than he expected, but he got the job done.

There was the sound of more wiggling and some unladylike words that Ally didn’t apologize for, then she started scooting backwards, her feet came in contact with his hands held out in front of him, above his head.
“I’ve tied my shirt to my belt loop by a sleeve. If you tie the arm of your shirt to mine, then the other to you, I can drag you when you pass out. It would be easier with a belt but that kidnapper took my belt. And my shoe laces. And my backpack, where I had beef jerky, dammit.”

“Yeah, he took my belt and tie and jacket and even my glasses.” Jimmy started trying to shrug out of his shirt in the tiny space. “So how did you still have the lighter?”

“I had it in my tee-shirt pocket, it works better in the cold if I keep it in my pocket and not in my pack. I guess he didn’t think to check.”

“Why’d you have a lighter anyway?”

“It’s useful and I have a friend and she never has a lighter when she’s having a smoke. I got tired of half empty books of matches laying around in my backpack.”

Jimmy wasn’t sure how any of that made sense, but didn’t care, his arm was stuck in his dress shirt, the cuff hung up on his wrist, and the metal of the duct was cool on his tee-shirt covered body and he wasn’t sure any of this was going to do any good, but he took a deep breath and kept at it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Abby had an array of various sized bags spread across her lab table, and everyone of them had something in it from the backpacks that sat in their own plastic bags in an evidence bin on the floor underneath.

A vast array of initials were inscribed on the red tape that sealed the bags. She was explaining to Ducky and Napoleon where the initials and evidence had come from, “Mrs. Clemson’s fourth grade class is having a field trip today, cleaning up the park down the road from their school, that’s why the money wasn’t gone from the wallets, the kids turned it over to her. She called the police when they found the ID and then the local LEOs called us and here we are. Since every bit of this is compromised anyway, the musketeers let the kids sign off on the evidence bags. Every kid in that class had something in their trash bag from these backpacks. This guy just spread it all around when he dumped it.” She picked up a couple of the bags. “But what I don’t get is this here. Maybe it’s not from Jimmy and Ally at all?” In her hand were bags containing shoelaces and belts.

Napoleon and Ducky looked at the bags and then at each other and then back to Abby.

Ducky was finally the one to speak. “Jimmy doesn’t have an exploding belt buckle.”

“And Ally wouldn’t be likely to have shoe laces that she can use to cut through bars on windows.” Napoleon agreed.

“But we would have” Ducky said softly, “back then.”

“When I was found, so I am told, I had no shoe laces nor belt.”

Ducky reached for his partner with one hand, laying it over the one Napoleon had braced on the lab table. With the other hand he picked up a bag half covered by several others, this one contained a pair of dark rimmed glasses. He held them up for Abby to see. She frowned, so did Ducky. “No hidden camera here.”
“The kidnapper might be pointing out the fact that he knows we used to carry artillery in our shoes or he could be making a link between this kidnapping and the one back then. Or it could just be craziness on his part and nothing to do with anything from the past.” Napoleon mused aloud.

“You believe that coincidence?”

“I never believe coincidence.” Napoleon turned to reply to Gibbs who had spoken from the doorway.

“Hey, why are you the one not surprised by Gibbs coming in all quiet like that?” Abby tapped Napoleon on the shoulder, and Ducky was glad she had broken the sudden tense feeling he was getting.

“He was a spy, Abbs, what’d you expect?” Gibbs.

“Huh. Well, that’ll do for now, but it isn’t the best answer.” She took the Caf*Pow he handed her and smiled at him, then proceeded to take her time with her first long draw on the straw as he watched.

Meanwhile, Ducky and Napoleon were having a completely different conversation without words. After a moment of looks and shrugs and a nod from Napoleon, Ducky spoke again, “Jethro, we do think there is a link, and we need to find the doctor we took to the airport that last morning. He may have suspected something, or perhaps knew what Mr. Waverly had been upset about that day.”

Napoleon continued, “We were supposed to go see Mr. Waverly after lunch, but lunch never happened that day, the explosions did. We think this doctor may be able to give us an idea about what was going on.”

Gibbs just nodded.

Ducky was pacing again, Napoleon leaned against the table, arms crossed. It was surprisingly quiet and Ducky realized that Abby had no music playing. He wished she would turn it on so it would distract him.

“You can’t remember his name.”

“Got it in one, Jethro.” Ducky stopped pacing to stand next to Napoleon.

Gibbs turned away and pulled out his cell phone. Abby sorted the evidence bags but was interrupted when the musketeers trooped in and McGee’s phone started ringing. Gibbs turned and flipped his phone shut as McGee took his out and looked at the caller ID, then up at Gibbs. “You rang?”

“Good timing, McGee. I need you to find a file for Ducky.”

“Ok, boss,” McGee said, puzzlement obvious. “There are a lot to choose from, which…” he was cut off by a buzzing from Abby’s computer.

Abby went to the computer and hit a button and Vance’s face appeared on the computer monitor above her keyboard. “Director? What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Solo is in your office still with Dr. Mallard?”

Ducky took Napoleon’s elbow and crowded him next to Abby so the three of them were in view of the webcam that showed Vance who he was talking to.
“Good. Gibbs?” Vance asked, knowing that not everyone was going to fit in view of the camera.

“My whole team is here, Director, what ya got?”

“We need a voice ID, Mr. Solo, can you do that?”

“Won’t know until I try, Director,” Napoleon’s voice was low and Ducky knew he might be the only one that could hear the tension because Napoleon always sounded cool when he was either cornered or dreading what came next.

Vance picked up a phone receiver from his desk and punched a button, “We’re a go,” he said into the phone. He looked at the camera again, “Miss Sciuto, line three, you might want to put it on speaker. We are working on tracing the call, the information is being routed to your computer from MTAC, if you want to help out.”

Abby leaned across Ducky and Napoleon and punched the buttons on the landline phone with one hand and started tapping the mouse of her computer with the other to open the programme on her computer that she would need. The line opened and the smooth voice of an operator could be heard.

“Miss, could you repeat that?”

“I don’t know where I am, that’s the problem.” The voice was young and had a calm that was obviously artificial, this was a girl on an edge.

“Alexandra Nickola!” Napoleon breathed the name out, relief evident, but a renewed concern also present.

“Uncle Napoleon!” the girl on the other end of the phone gasped. “What are you doing at a police station?”

“I am not at the police station, Ally, but I am nearby, and ready to come get you as soon as I can.”

“You need to hurry, Uncle Pol, I can’t wake Jimmy up any more.”

Ducky winced. Abby continued to punch buttons on the keyboard, McGee had joined her at another keyboard and was holding his phone to his ear while coordinating with his former teammates in MTAC. They were still up there with UNCLE files coming in, but had paused to help with the phone trace.

Mcgee looked over his shoulder at Gibbs and spoke in a whisper, “The phone is in a new development, not on the 911 search yet.”

Tony and Ziva had retreated to the back of the lab, out of the way. Gibbs went to them and quietly instructed them to get the evidence truck ready and coordinate with an ambulance from Bethesda, he wanted to be ready to go. The pair left the lab at a run.

“What can you tell me about where you are, Ally?” Napoleon spoke quietly to his grand-niece, trying to keep that hysterical edge from growing nearer. In either of them, he realized.

“I’m in an air vent or something, we’ve been crawling in the ducts forever. Ok, maybe it only seems like forever.” Everyone could hear the sigh she let out, and the deep breath she took. Her voice was calm again when she continued, “We were in an empty room, Jimmy thinks it’s a storage place. We got tired of waiting so we went in the duct to see if we could get out.” Another deep breath and sigh. She was doing her best to regain her calm and focus. “Um, we crawled for a long time and then Jimmy felt sick so we tied ourselves together like mountain climbers so I could drag him if he passed
out. He didn’t though, well, he did, but we had found a room with some things in it, then he passed out.”

“So you found what, in the room?”

“Well, an office, but nothing is in the drawers or anything, and the door has a lock that you need a key for, you know, the bolt kind. We’re still trapped. And Jimmy is still up in the vent because I am afraid if I try to get him out I’ll drop him, and well, what if that man comes in here, and…”

“Ok, Ally, you’ve done fine, deep breaths, Ally my sweet, deep breaths, ok?”

“Ok.” And again everyone could hear her taking deep breaths, sighing on the exhale.

“Good girl, you’re doing fine my sweet, keep breathing like that, good.” Napoleon kept speaking quietly to her, leaning on the table close to the phone, hands fisted and eyes tight shut.

She was calmer again, “I’m sorry, Uncle Pol, I’m just really tired.”

“Don’t apologize for what’s not your fault, Alexandra,” Napoleon’s voice was soft but firm. “You are a very brave young woman and I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

“I tried to remember all the things you told us to do, but I…”

“Ally, darling, you are doing fine, we are going to find you,” he glared in McGee’s direction as if that would make the information appear faster.

“Uncle Pol, is Mom ok? She isn’t …”

“She’s worried, but we’ve had lots of people looking for you and …”

McGee let out a yell and pointed to his screen. Abby kept tapping her keyboard and then pointed out to Gibbs the area on the map where they found the phone call coming from. Gibbs gave Abby a quick peck of a kiss before he made a fast exit with McGee on his heels.

“What’s happening? Uncle Napoleon?”

“We found you, Ally, someone will be there soon.”

“You, Uncle Pol, will you be here too?”

“I don’t want to hang up, ok, honey, I’ll stay here…”

Abby was gesturing and shaking her head hard, making her pigtails fly. She mimed talking on a phone and then was pointing from her landline to Napoleon and he understood instantly, taking out his cell phone he handed it to her and she started fiddling with things on his phone and then the computer and then his phone again, while Ducky got their coats from the inner office.

Abby whispered to Napoleon, “You have to …” she explained how to get the call transferred while he got in his coat and double checked his weapon, Ducky doing the same.

“Ally, my sweet, I’m on my way and I am going to be right back on the phone, ok, I just need to go outside and Abby here is going to …”

“Abby! You are at Abby’s Lab!?”

Napoleon looked at Abby then Ducky. “How do you know about Abby’s Lab?” Napoleon had
visions of the kidnapper telling his plans to show up here to Ally and suppressed the desire to do some violence.

“Well Jimmy told me, didn’t he? Oh, I made him tell me everything he knew. He promised that I could go there and meet her.”

“Well of course you can, Ally, I would be happy to give you the deluxe tour.” Abby said.

“Come quick, Uncle Pol, please? Jimmy’s feeling kind of icky and feverish and I want to get him out of the duct. Ok? Then I want to see you and Abby and Mom. Um, maybe not in that order,” she whispered.

Napoleon and Ducky were already out of the lab. Abby sat on her lab chair, swinging back and forth while she kept Ally talking until Napoleon could resume his conversation with his niece. Ally told Abby all about her favourite uncle.

***

The chain link fence was a left over from the construction company, circling the entire storage facility. Gibbs was out of the car and inspecting the gate. McGee was bringing DiNozzo and David up to speed, the three of them standing back from the gate and their boss, who was grim and none of them wanted to have that aimed at them. The chain was wrapped so the padlock was inside the gate, but there was a gap, Gibbs reached through to pull the lock around where he could see it clearly.

“This complex was finished several months ago, but the construction company has a lien on it for failure to pay, coincidentally enough, for the climate control system.” The very ductwork that Ally and Jimmy had been using to crawl out.

“So why did the phone work?” Ziva asked as she watched Gibbs.

“The manager of the soon to be opened storage facility got a little ahead of themselves, paid for the phone and water and electric bills, thinking that they would be open soon, but the owners insist that the contractor went over budget and won’t pay the overage and now it’s in litigation and won’t open until that gets settled.”

There was a rattle and Gibbs came toward them holding the lock and chain. “Bag this.” He held it up and they could clearly see where the hasp of the padlock was cut. “We didn’t do this, so we want to know who did.” Ziva pulled gloves out of her pocket, noting that Gibbs already had a pair on, and took the chain back to the van.

A dark sedan led the way with another behind it, braking hard behind the evidence truck, Ducky and Napoleon were out, not even bothering to turn the key off, leaving the engine running.

“What are we waiting for, an invitation?” Ducky’s voice was harder than Gibbs had ever heard it, and the accent was harsh and clipped in a way he rarely heard from his friend.

“Any way I can convince you two to stay here at the gate?”

Both former UNCLE agents glared.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t either.” Gibbs nodded to his team and went back to swing the gates open. “Solo,” he called before the others could get back in their cars, “tell your men to stay here at the gate, nobody gets in until local LEOs catch up with us and set up a perimeter.”

Leaving them to sort themselves, Gibbs gunned the car into the parking lot of the storage facility,
followed by the NCIS truck and a dark sedan, none of them paying attention to the posted ten mile per hour speed suggestion.

***

Napoleon’s voice was gentle when he got back on the phone with his niece, “We’re almost there now, my sweet, we’re in the parking lot, and we’ll be there to get you out in just a minute, ok, hang in there.”

Ally’s voice was filled with relief, “Ok, Uncle Napoleon, thank you.”

The emergency operator, still connected to the call, interrupted to confirm the address. She relayed information to the local law enforcement officers and told Napoleon that they were still fifteen minutes out.

Abby, hearing all this, couldn’t sit still, she paced and was startled when she turned on her circuit of her lab to find both Director Vance and Agent Fornell entering.

“News?” Fornell asked.

“They are in the parking lot, almost to Jimmy and Ally now.”

“Abby! Abby, I can hear someone at the door!” Ally’s voice from the speaker phone.

Abby went back to the phone and leaned over it, unconsciously mimicking Napoleon’s stance from earlier, her elbows braced on the counter and fists clenched on either side of the phone.

“That’s Agent David, Ally,” came Napoleon’s voice on the phone, “she’s going to get us inside.”

“Can you pick a deadbolt?” Ally asked.

“With the right tools, pretty much anything can be done, Ally.” There was surprised humour in Napoleon’s voice as the door could be heard swinging open and banging against the wall.

“Don’t hang up, ok, Ally?” Abby asked.

“I wouldn’t!”

And then there was a confused babble of voices as the team plus two entered the small windowless office.

***

They entered as they would any potentially unknown scene, Gibbs and DiNozzo high and McGee and David low, guns drawn and looking for potential criminals, the light coming in from the door showed an empty room with a chair, a desk and an empty cordless phone base sitting on the floor. High up near the ceiling was a square opening, the covering to the duct hanging open by its hinge.

“Clear,” Gibbs declared and Ducky and Napoleon followed the NCIS team into the room. Ducky found the light switch while Gibbs was already pushing the desk against the wall and jumping up on it to look in the opening.

He hadn’t even gotten all the way up when a pale face looked out of the opening, long dark hair and huge dark eyes making her look younger than Gibbs had expected. He did his best to soften the grim look he knew he was showing the world and reached out a hand, “Ally Walters?”
The smile that lit her face was a relief. “You must be Gibbs. You look just like Abby said.” Gibbs could hear Abby’s excited voice through the phone that Ally kept to her ear.

“I do, huh?” He wondered for just a moment how Abby would describe him, and wondered what about that description made Ally look at him now like she expected that he had left his shining armor and charging steed in the parking lot. “Would you like to come down here with us?”

Ally looked over at Jimmy, she still held his hand with the one that wasn’t clutching the phone to her ear, then back to Gibbs.

“We’re getting him down next, ok?”

“Yes, ok.” Ally turned, still holding the phone and telling Abby everything as she did it, then swung her feet through the vent and Gibbs standing on the desk and Napoleon standing on the floor below guided her through and then down off the desk. With a wordless cry she wrapped her arms around her uncle’s neck and hugged him. After a long moment she leaned back. “Jimmy’s gonna be ok, right?”

“I hope so, my sweet, come outside now and let these folks do what they do, shall we?”

Ziva took Ally’s place in the ductwork, pulling Jimmy down so that Tim and Tony could catch the unconscious young man and lay him carefully on the floor. Ducky got to work checking him over, wrapping him in a blanket from the NCIS truck. Tony handed him a small zippered bag. Inside was the emergency stash Jimmy kept at work. Ducky gave Tony a small smile of thanks and started to administer first aid.

Just outside the door, Napoleon and his niece stood together, he had wrapped his jacket around her and she leaned on him, cradling the phone to her ear still and telling Abby and the emergency operator what was happening, Napoleon had tried to take the phone from her and she had just shaken her head and clutched the phone.

“Abby says that the FBI is bringing Mom and Dad here, they’ll be here in an hour.” Ally looked up at her uncle. “They have a jet, the FBI, and will bring them right to the hospital or wherever we are.” Ally sighed and leaned her head against her uncle’s shoulder. “I can still come meet you, right Abby?” she asked into the phone. Abby obviously answered in the affirmative, as Ally smiled and nodded as if Abby could see her, then listened as Abby spoke for a bit.

***

The ambulance finally took Jimmy off to Bethesda, Ducky riding along with him and Napoleon following with Ally, who refused to be parted from her uncle and the only person she knew in DC. The EMTs had checked her over and decided that it may be better for her to feel safe than feel further separated from what made her feel safe. It wasn’t standard procedure, but none of them felt like arguing with both the older man and the guy running the investigation, both of whom were glaring hard at them while they looked the young girl over. She appeared to be suffering only from dehydration but didn’t seem in danger of starving or passing out before they got where they were going.

Napoleon had convinced her to take his cell phone and leave the other behind, reconnecting the call with Abby and without the emergency operator. Abby kept up a steady line of chatter with the younger girl, asking her questions and keeping her talking and calm while they followed the ambulance, a matching dark sedan bringing up the rear of their little caravan to the hospital.

***
“Hand me up a flashlight, Tim, I will follow Jimmy’s tracks back to see where they were kept, maybe we’ll finally get lucky with some prints from this guy.” Ziva, still hanging out of the ductwork waved a hand down in Tim’s direction.

“What tracks?” Gibbs asked her.

“There are scuff marks on the bottom and sides of the duct here, black marks, like from Jimmy’s shoes. Ally was wearing sneakers with white soles, so it has to be Jimmy’s. It will take too long for us to check every storage locker when we can just follow from here first.”

“Good. Where’s the flashlight?” Gibbs looked to McGee expectantly.

“Here, and this too, so we know where to go.” McGee handed Ziva a flashlight and a two way radio. Ziva stashed the radio in a pocket and took the flashlight into the duct, crawling in the way Jimmy and Ally had come out.

Gibbs turned to Tony and Tim, “Get that door open and follow along, we need to get what we can before the locals decide they want a piece of it.”

“On it, boss,” Tony said and turned to work on the lock while Tim got the two way radio out and established contact with Ziva in the ducts.

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At the first ninety degree turn in the ductwork, Ziva paused and clicked the flashlight off. The darkness was utter and disorienting. She punched the button to turn the light back on and looked ahead, the long narrow corridor reflected the shine of the light back to her and the whole thing looked impossibly long. She shuddered when she imagined Jimmy and Ally crawling down this in the pitch black. She continued to follow the faint traces of marks left by Jimmy’s shoes.

Her radio crackled and she heard Tim’s voice, “Ziva, you doing ok?”

“Yes, Tim, fine. Did you come to a corner?”

“Yes. Only one way to go. This is a really long hallway.”

“You should see it from up here,” came her answer.

McGee winced. Tony just smirked. They moved along slowly, trying to keep pace with Ziva.

Ziva was counting the vents she passed as Tony was counting the doors to the storage lockers down the long dark corridor. “I think we’ve found it, hang on while I get the vent cover off,” Ziva radioed to her teammates.

“Tony, look at the locks on these doors, these padlocks don’t match the others on the doors.”

“Get some pictures of these, will you? I’ll see if we can get some prints off the door here.”

In the quiet of the building Ziva could hear Tim and Tony on the other side of the door as she pushed herself part of the way into the dark room. She played the flashlight around the room and something reflected the light and she shined the light back toward it then started to yell at her coworkers, “Tony, get away from the door, don’t touch it! Tim, get the hell back!”

Her radio crackled with Tim’s voice, “Are you ok, what’s wrong?”

Ziva swallowed and took a calming breath, then fumbled the radio out of her pocket, “There are
explosives wired to the ceiling in the tracks of the door, if you lift it, I think it will trigger a very big bang.”

“Oh shit,” she heard Tony say on the other side of the door.

“I don’t see a timer, but I suggest we get out as fast as possible anyway.”

“I’m marking the door off with tape and then we’re out of here. Ziva are you going to be ok getting back out?” Tim’s voice was steady on the other end of the radio.

“I’m fine, just make it fast, McGee,” she was already backing out and crawling down the duct again, leaving the duct cover off and throwing the flashlight ahead of her and crawling after it as fast as she could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“They’re gonna make you turn the phone off in the emergency room, Ally.”

“I know, Abby, I just don’t want to hang up.”

“It’s ok, we’ll have plenty of time to chat more after they check you out and make sure you’re fine, right?”

“Right.”

“Agent Fornell will meet you at the hospital, and he is a good guy even though he’s FBI, and your mom and dad will be there real soon so it’s all gonna be just great, ok?”

“Thank you Abby, you’ve been really nice.”

“Well, you’re pretty easy to be nice to, ya know.”

“We’re at the parking lot now. I guess I better go then.”

“I’ll see you soon, ok, you hang tough.”

“I will. Bye.” Ally shut the phone and just held it for a moment, then passed it back to her uncle who pocketed it. They were making the turn into the lot, following the ambulance to the emergency entrance. Napoleon pulled up and put the car in park, his men right behind him. He went around and guided Ally out of the car.

“I’ll park the car, Mr. Solo.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burns. I appreciate that.” Napoleon led Ally toward the door that was just opening as the gurney that held a still unconscious Jimmy Palmer was wheeled in, Ducky following behind. Napoleon reached out and pulled his partner to his side, guiding both him and Ally inside in the wake of several scrub clad professionals that had been waiting for them to arrive. Inside, Fornell was at the check in desk and came forward, leading the three of them around the metal detector and showing his credentials to the guard there. A doctor led them back to a curtained off space, one directly next to where Jimmy had been put.

“Say, that’s nice Agent Fornell, no waiting in line.” Napoleon smiled.
“It’s nice to have the right friends, isn’t it?” Fornell said. “Besides, the guard would have made a fuss about the hardware and I wasn’t in the mood for it. As I am sure you understand.”

“Indeed,” Ducky said, “thank you.”

A very young doctor entered the curtained cubicle and the men stood back, Ducky close to the curtain that separated Ally from Jimmy so he could keep an eye on the young man. Napoleon could see he was waiting for a chance sneak in there as soon as the doctors weren’t paying attention, perhaps sooner. Ducky looked over at him, as if aware of the attention. Napoleon just nodded his head toward the curtain and gave him an understanding quirk of a smile. Ducky nodded back and slipped from one cubicle to the other.

“Now then young lady, I hear you have had a little more excitement than usual, hmmm?” The doctor held out a hand, “I’m Doctor Shore and I’m just going to do some checking here, ok?”

Ally hesitated and then shook his hand, “Ok.” The doctor started to check her temperature and blood pressure. “Don’t nurses usually do this part?” she asked.

“Well, sure, but you are a V.I.P., Very Important Patient, and so you get a doctor right away.” He smiled and continued with checking her vital signs. “Have you been nauseous? Dizzy? Headache? Chills?”

“It was kinda cold in that place, but then crawling in the ducts was making me warm. And I felt ok, there was water there, but I think something was wrong with it, I fell asleep and then when I woke up that man had left Jimmy there. I never heard anything though. I told Jimmy not to drink it.” She took a deep breath, “I feel a little dizzy. My stomach feels funny, like I’m hungry but not at the same time, like I want to eat but then thinking about food makes me kind of queasy.”

“Was there anything else there?” Fornell leaned forward past the doctor.

“No, sir. The room was all empty, just four or five bottles of water. And me. And then Jimmy.”

Fornell exchanged a look with Napoleon.

“Here’s what I’m going to do, Miss Walters, I’m going to put an IV in your arm and we’re going to get you some fluids built back up, you are a little dehydrated. And I’m going to bring you some ice chips, so you will get some more fluids in you but not too fast, ok? Then when you keep that down, I’ll bring you something that will be gentle on your poor empty tummy, ok?”

Ally shrugged. “I guess, ok.” She smiled weakly.

“Fine, you sit tight and I will be right back.”

“Could you ask how Jimmy is? Please?”

Dr. Shore smiled at her and nodded. He ducked out of the curtain and they could hear his quiet voice in the next cubicle.

“Do you feel like telling us what happened?” Fornell asked as gently as he knew how.

“Well, sure. I was in a dark little room and then I wasn’t.” She looked at him, puzzled.

Napoleon stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. “I think he means earlier than that, my sweet,” he said quietly.
“Oh.” She looked up at her uncle and then back to Agent Fornell. Then she looked from one to the
other again, noting the very careful looks on their faces. And she burst out laughing. She finally
calmed and saw that the men looked even more alarmed. “I’m sorry, Uncle Napoleon, you look just
like Daddy did the first time I went on a date and he wanted to know if Mom had had ‘the Talk’ with
me,” she air quoted the words, “but didn’t know how to ask me. It was seriously one of the funniest
looks I have ever seen. Well, maybe not as funny as the time cousin Rufus stuck the jelly bean up his
nose, but really close.” She laughed again, as relaxed as they had seen her since coming into the
hospital. “Nothing like that happened. Honestly. Jimmy was a perfect gentleman,” she looked very
prim all of a sudden.

“I don’t think your uncle was afraid of Jimmy Palmer’s intentions.”

“Well, nothing else happened either,” she assured them. “I was on my way home from the library,
some guy bumped into me on the street and then he grabbed my arm. I pulled away but he slapped
something on my face and then the next thing I knew, it was dark and cold and my face hurt from
laying on the cement and so I stumbled around for a bit. I didn’t have my backpack or anything. But
I still had my lighter,” she took it from her pocket, “see?” She held up a smooth steel lighter,
Napoleon recognized it as one his grandfather had owned. “Grammy Jo let me have it. It still works
fine, I just had to replace the felty bit inside and the flint and then it was as good as new, can you
believe it? It’s about out of lighter fluid though. I had it in my shirt pocket, so I guess he missed it
when he took everything else.” She held up her feet, dangling off the exam table, “Even took my
shoelaces. Isn’t that weird?” She turned the lighter over and over in her fingers, running the tips of
her fingers over the smooth steel and then tracing the faint engraving of an anchor on one face of it.

“Any drugs he gave her will be long gone from her system by now, but maybe they can get
something from the bottles left behind.” Napoleon said to the FBI agent.

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ve bagged and tagged it by now, I’ll let them know to test it.” Fornell looked at
Ally again, “Do you think you could describe the man?”

“Well, I didn’t see much. But I’ll try. I guess he was maybe dad’s age, a little older maybe, he had
red hair and was taller than me, not as tall as Uncle Napoleon, but close.”

The doctor came back in then, carrying a tray with a plastic cup of ice chips and a pitcher. He also
had an IV bag in his hand. He sat the tray down on a wheeled table and pulled it close to Ally.

“Why don’t you lie back here, we’ll get you set up with this IV. You can start with that ice there in
just a second.” He was smiling and friendly. “You will need to take off the jacket though, alright? I
will get you some blankets so you won’t be cold, that ok with you?”

“Yes, thank you,” Ally shrugged out of the jacket and handed it to her uncle. He folded it over his
arm and stepped closer to the doctor.

“A moment, Doctor?”

Dr. Shore looked up from the tray he was setting up with IV tubing, needles and alcohol swabs at
Napoleon and then over at the FBI agent, both had grim looks.

Ally whispered to the doctor, “They think I was drugged.” Then in a normal tone she continued, “I
was right here for the conversation, Uncle Pol, I know you’re going to ask him to take a blood
sample.”

Napoleon rolled his eyes, “Remind me to tell you about the impudent streak you got from one of
your namesakes, Alexandra Nickola,” but he was smiling when he said it. He looked at the doctor,
“Yes, we think she was drugged and more than likely it’s no longer traceable, but before you dilute her system with the IV, can you get a vial of blood to test, just in case?”

The doctor looked at the FBI agent and then back at the uncle of his patient. “Well, yes, you are the responsible party listed on her paperwork, so I can do that for you.”

“Good, I’ll get an evidence bag for it.” Fornell nodded to the two men and gave Ally a small smile and slipped between the privacy curtains and out of the cubicle.

Dr. Shore set up his equipment and got a few empty vials out of a drawer then pulled a stool over and started to prepare Ally’s arm for his needle.

“Do you remember how you got this?” he asked her.

On the inside of her elbow where the veins showed blue under her fair skin, there was a bruise. In the center was a small red needle mark.

“I don’t know. I don’t do drugs or anything.”

Dr. Shore got back up and went to the cupboard over the sink and got down an instant camera. He came back and took a picture of Ally’s arm. Then he put the camera away and moved all his equipment to the other side of the bed. “I think we’ll just use the other arm anyway, and I bet you won’t have any bruises at all on that side, how about that?” He smiled at Ally.

“I’d like to not have more, if it’s all the same to you, they clash with my eyes.”

Napoleon couldn’t help but chuckle. “You really do need to meet your namesake, young lady, you have no idea how much alike I am discovering you are.”

“I thought they were gone?”

“Well, not nearly as gone as we thought all this time, I am happy to report.”

“Ow, hey, no fair sticking when I’m not paying attention!”

“That’s the best time to do it, you don’t get all tense, see how quick that was?” The doctor had already filled three small vials with blood and was exchanging the needle with the IV butterfly and taping it off. Then he hung the IV bag of solution and adjusted the drip.

“Now, I want you to try to keep some of this ice down, take it slow and if you feel nauseated or anything, stop and try in a while, got that?” He handed her the cup of ice and a plastic spoon. He got a blanket out of a drawer and laid it over her legs. “If you get cold, there are more blankets over there and I bet your uncle will get them for you. I am going to go for a bit, but I will be back to check on you shortly, so don’t cause too much trouble while I’m gone.”

Ally nodded to him and he was gone out the curtain.

“He didn’t tell me how Jimmy is.” Ally said, a little forlornly.

Napoleon took the stool that the Doctor had left by the bed and sat next to his niece. “I’m pretty sure he’s in good hands and if I’m not mistaken, Illya will be back in a few minutes to update us.”

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“He’s coming around, Doctor.”
“Good.” The doctor stepped to the head of the bed, “Mr. Palmer. Mr. Palmer can you hear me?” He leaned over the head of the bed and the patient in it. “Do you know where you are?”

There was a garbled answer. But at least it was an answer. Ducky sighed in relief and felt the tension in his shoulders, that he hadn’t realized was there, ease a bit. He kept back, out of the way of the staff, but didn’t want to leave yet. There was more Jimmy had to say but nobody seemed to understand him. The doctor looked up then, seeing him and motioned him closer.

“A familiar face might help, Doctor, ah, Mallard, right?”

Ducky realized he had met this doctor before, when Jethro had been here in this hospital after the explosion and memory loss that left him stuck in his own past. Ducky stepped forward, and took the hand that wasn’t wired and full of IV tubes, squeezing gently to let Jimmy know he was there. He leaned forward, much as the other doctor had done and spoke quietly, “Jimmy, you’re safe. You’re going to be ok, now.”

He hoped he wasn’t lying to his young assistant, he hoped that he really was going to be fine, he looked at the doctor who nodded, understanding the question that Ducky asked in that look.

“He wasn’t in a coma, but it was a close thing. He really will be fine with some rest and proper care. We’re going to have to admit him for at least today and tonight.”

“Good, that’s good, thank you.”

One of the nurses pushed a stool over and Ducky sat, keeping close where Jimmy could see him from the raised bed.

Now that the danger was passed, the extra staff filtered out of the cubicle, leaving Ducky and the doctor with Jimmy.

“It’s going to take a while to get his paperwork done and Agent Fornell wants to have his men in place. I’ll be back to check on him, but you can stay, I think it will help. Your Agent Gibbs will want to ask questions, I suppose.”

“Yes, thank you, Doctor.” Ducky looked from the doctor back to Jimmy. “He is going to be fine.”

“Of course he is.” The doctor smiled as he said it. “He’s a lot tougher than he looks, a lot like everyone over in your neck of the woods, it would seem.”

“We do tend to find the best, don’t we?” Ducky gave the doctor a small smile.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Thank you, doctor, see you soon.”

Alone with Jimmy, Ducky took a deep breath and realized that the worst was over, for now, but knew from experience that things could change very quickly. He leaned over and pulled back the curtain just a little way, so he could see Napoleon in the next space with his niece. Ally noticed first and whispered, “How is he?”

Ducky gave her a slightly bigger smile than he had given the doctor, “He is much better, Miss Walters, thank you for asking.”

Napoleon turned, looked over at Jimmy and back to his partner, “And you?”

“Fine.”
“Right.”

Ally whispered again “He doesn’t believe you.”

“Ally.” Napoleon’s voice wasn’t as reprimanding as it was amused. She just grinned and took another bite of ice.

“She reminds me of Mother, why do the very old and the very young feel safe to say whatever they are thinking and the rest of us never do?”

“Are you implying that learning politeness is somehow dishonest?”

Ducky only raised his eyebrows and tried not to smile at Napoleon.

“Tact is just a well dressed lie.”

“Ally, you are not allowed to quote me when it can get me in trouble,” Napoleon told her.

“I thought that rule only applied in front of Mom.” Unconcerned, she continued to crunch ice in her teeth. “I’m feeling better, do you think they are going to bring food soon?”

“Dear lord, you really are just like him.”

“You keep saying that. Who?” Another bite of ice disappeared in a crunch.

Napoleon didn’t have a chance to answer because Jimmy came awake again and Ducky stood. Ally and Napoleon found themselves holding their breath, waiting.

In a very faint voice Jimmy spoke, “It’s too warm for the morgue. I’m not dead yet, am I?”

“No, Jimmy, you’re going to be just fine.” Ducky took the cup of water off the tray by Jimmy’s bed and bent the straw so Jimmy could sip. “Not too much to start, ok, just a little bit.”

Jimmy nodded and squinted at Ducky after he took a little water. “How, that is, um.” He stopped and thought for a minute. “Where’s Ally? There was someone with me, wasn’t there?”

“Yes, Mr. Palmer and she has been very impatiently waiting for you to wake up so she could see that you were alright.” Ducky stepped back and sat down again, gesturing at the opened curtain. Jimmy squinted toward the next cubicle and smiled when he saw Ally.

“You really were there. And you got us out. That’s great.”

“It was your idea to get out through the ducts, see, it was a team effort.” Ally smiled at Jimmy. Jimmy smiled back and shrugged.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Doctors returned to check on patients and shortly after, nurses arrived bearing trays with food, not the five course banquet Ally was requesting but simple things that would be easy on their systems. Jimmy and Ally compared notes on their lunches while Ducky and Napoleon scooted their chairs close to one another and compared notes of other sorts.
“Fornell left to call Gibbs an awfully long time ago.”

“Something’s come up, maybe they found helpful clues at the storage facility.” Ducky speculated.

Napoleon shrugged. “Or, speak of the devil,” he said as Fornell ducked into the cubicle. He was followed by two more people.

“Mom! Dad, I am so happy to see you guys!” Ally pushed her empty tray aside and held out her arms. Her parents came to either side of the bed and hugged her. There was a quiet confusion of voices as they assured one another that they were fine and finally the hugging and tears passed.

“Mom, Dad, I want you to meet Jimmy Palmer,” she gestured toward the bed in the next cubicle. “It was his idea how we got out, and his coworkers that came and got us. They are really great and Abby, she’s the Queen of the Lab, she said I could come visit, I didn’t get to meet her yet and can we go there? Soon? And this is Dr. Mallard, Jimmy works for him, and he’s been really nice, too.”

Her father gave half a smile, obviously used to her enthusiastic communication style, and the look on his face was entirely relief, glad to have her babbling merrily away. Her mother turned to look behind her at the man in the next bed and the smile left her face and she went pale. Then she started to cry again, and smiled weakly through her tears.

“Illya?” came her soft voiced question.

Ducky stood then, as did Napoleon. “Yes, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth took a step forward, it only took one to bring her to Ducky. She looked up at him, reaching out a tentative hand and touching his shoulder. “Illya. It’s really you.” There was wonder and sorrow and joy all mixed up together. “You,” she swallowed and took a deep breath, “you were,” she paused again, her voice fading to a whisper, “gone.” And she sounded so forlorn that Ducky couldn’t think of a thing to say, so he decided to take a page from Abby’s playbook and hugged Elizabeth.

“I am so sorry, Elizabeth. If there had been another way, if I had known that Napoleon hadn’t,” and Ducky found his own voice wasn’t reliable. “If I had known that he survived, if I had thought for a minute that UNCLE could have been salvaged, nothing would have kept me from returning. Nothing. But I was stuck in England, and thought there was nothing left for me here. I am so sorry for the hurt that decision caused. To all of us.”

Elizabeth just hugged him harder. “I’m just so happy to see you, to have you back, oh Illya, we have so much to get caught up on.” She stepped back then, smiling brilliantly. “I guess you have met my daughter Alexandra…” A look passed across Elizabeth’s face then and she looked to her daughter and back at Ducky. “Dr. Mallard?”

“Who’s Illya?” Jimmy asked.

“As you said, there is a lot to catch up on.” Napoleon said.

“Oh dear,” was all Ducky had to say.

***

Once Jimmy was settled in a room with a door that closed and Fornell had guards posted outside, a shortened explanation was given to Jimmy and Ally and her parents.

“So, you were a real secret agent?” Jimmy asked, no little awe in his voice.
“That’s pretty much the basics of it, yes,” Ducky said.

“Are you sure I’m really awake and not just dreaming this all up after reading too much of one of Tim’s books?”

“Oh, this is all too real, though I won’t be surprised if Pimmy Jalmer gets himself kidnapped in the next installment.”

“That’s a character from Deep Six, isn’t it?” Ally’s father Daniel, who had been very quiet so far, asked.

Jimmy groaned. “Yes. And I promise it is all fiction. All of it.”

“You mean you know Thom E. Gemcity?”

“To my undying dismay, yes. I work with him.”

“Really!?”

“Tim McGee is his real name and he works for NCIS, and I am sure if you would like to meet him, we can arrange it. But be careful, he puts everyone he knows into his books,” Jimmy replied. “He really is a good guy, and a good agent, but he goes a little far with his characters, I think.” Jimmy still sounded disgruntled.

“Elizabeth, Daniel, I would be happy to extend an invitation to you to come and meet all my coworkers. I suspect, however, that you will find yourselves at the Navy Yard eventually, as Gibbs will want a statement from Alexandra,” Ducky added.

There was a knock at the door and then Agent Fornell entered. “I am sorry to break up old home week, but we have a hotel room ready for you and the doctor is about to release Miss Walters here, so I suggest we wrap it up and get a move on.”

Fornell took Daniel Walters out to the hall and explained that they were going to be under an FBI guard and would need to be in town for a few days while the investigation continued.

Ally and Jimmy said their goodbyes, and then she and her mother joined the men in the hall, leaving Ducky and Napoleon alone with Jimmy.

“I’m going to check with Agent Fornell about the hotel arrangements for Lizzy and her family, I’ll be right outside. You take your time.” Napoleon put a band on Ducky’s elbow briefly, then at Ducky’s nod he turned and left his friend and the young assistant alone.

Ducky stepped close to the bed and looked down at Jimmy, who was starting to look tired, now that the excitement was done for a moment. “I am so sorry, Jimmy, that this happened.”

“But, Dr. Mallard, you didn’t kidnap me.”

“No, but this kidnapper is obviously after our families, Napoleon’s and mine. And you are family, Jimmy, though I haven’t been honest with you, and for that I also apologize.”

“It’s a sign of weakness, you know.”

“You’ve been paying too much attention to Gibbs.” There was a hint of a smile in his voice.

“If I hadn’t, Ally and I would still be there. I kept asking myself what you would do, or what Gibbs would do. I figured you would look for a way out. Thank you.”
“I am glad we found you in time,” Ducky smiled down at his assistant.

“Me too, Doctor, me too.”

***

“My guys are going to escort the Walters family to their hotel to give them a chance to clean up and settle in and then bring them in to NCIS. We’ll be sharing the interview to save time and effort. But I wanted a word with you two before we go to meet them at the Navy Yard,” Fornell had walked the partners to their car where Napoleon’s men were waiting. “There’s been a new development.”

“You’re looking pretty grim, Tobias, has someone else gone missing?” Ducky asked.

“No.” Fornell stopped and turned to face the pair. “The team I sent up to New York, they do more than specialize in kidnappings. They specialize in a lot of things, one of those things is profiling. And they are having a hard time pinning this guy down. Did you think it odd that there was no ransom demand. No demands at all? No contact.”

“Well, yes, now that you mention it,” Napoleon said.

Ducky frowned. “I’ve been thinking like a target and not like a forensic psychologist. You’re right. That is unusual behavior.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Ducky, it took us a while to catch, and we may not have put it together if David hadn’t found what she did in time.”

“What do you mean?” Napoleon asked.

“David found marks in the ductwork that Palmer and Miss Walters were crawling through, marks from Palmer’s shoes apparently. She followed them back to the storage locker that they had been held in. And it was wired to blow as soon as anyone opened the door.”

“Oh, no. No. Tell me it didn’t…” Ducky paled.

“No, nothing like that happened. Everyone is fine. They got the bomb squad out there and it’s been disarmed. But there were two storage lockers set to blow, this guy obviously intended to have more victims in there.”

“Oh dear god, Napoleon, who the hell is this bastard?” Ducky looked at his old friend, no little horror on his face.

“I suggest we try to figure that out, as fast as possible, partner mine.”

***

“There is no Dr. Hicklson, at least not anymore. Dr. Hicklson died five years ago. Someone is impersonating him.” Abby started talking as soon as Gibbs walked in the lab.

“So who’s trying to transfer Ducky’s mother?”

“I’m working on that.” Abby turned back to the computer as Gibbs walked up to stand behind her.

“What’s this?”

“Security footage from the nursing home. I’m trying to find a picture of this guy. The nurses I talked to said he was sort of middle aged, sort of tall but not too tall and had red hair.”
“Do you think McGee can continue this search, I need you on something else for the moment.”

Abby could hear something in Gibbs’ voice, not a happy sound. She turned and found Gibbs too close to let her turn her stool all the way around and she bumped into his hip with her knees. “Sure. Did you find some great trace for me at the storage center?”

Gibbs just took a bagged chunk of something from behind his back, and in the other hand he brought out a piece of bagged hardware. He held them up and Abby took them, and when she stood, Gibbs was still close. Light dawned in Abby’s eyes and Gibbs put an arm around her shoulders, “Nothing happened, Abby, everyone is fine. But I need to know where that,” he nodded at the detonator and the chunk of explosive in the bags, “came from and who could have made it or had access to it.”

Abby, eyes wide, looked from the bags in her hands to Gibbs and back again. She swallowed hard and then in a quiet voice said “Where?”

“The door to the storage locker was wired to blow. If we had gone in that way, or Jimmy and Ally had figured out how to unlock it and open it, the movement of the door would have set it off. But they went out the vent, and the kidnapper hadn’t wired that.”

“Oh, dear god, Gibbs.” Abby breathed out and then flung her arms around his neck in a hard hug. He hesitated and then put his arms around her. Still in a whisper, Abby went on, “That’s just,” she paused, trying to find the right word, “evil, Gibbs, it’s evil. How are we gonna find this guy? He’s a ghost and we have to find him. Now. And stop him.”

“We’ve found ghosts before Abbs,” his voice in her ear was quiet, reassuring. “This scumbag can’t hide from us forever.”

Abby leaned back, wrists resting on Gibbs’ shoulders, hands still full of bags of mass destruction. “You are exactly right. Of course you are, as always, my fox. We will find this evil bastard and we will make him go far away, forever and ever. Right now!” She turned to her lab table and put the bags down. “Tell Timmy that I will send all this data to MTAC,” she gestured toward her computer screen. “He and his computer team can find the guy while I figure out where this came from. This dirtbag can run but he can’t hide, not for long.” Her determination overcame her fear for her friends and co-workers.

Gibbs watched her start the process of signing in the evidence and setting up the things she would need to run the tests, knowing that he had been forgotten while she worked. He was ok with that, just glad they had returned safely to the Navy Yard, for now.

***

Napoleon didn’t argue when Illya took the driver’s seat again, the look in his eye was not one to argue with, and he knew better than to disturb the concentration that showed with it. The ride back to the Navy Yard was uneventful in that there was no one following them but his own men in the matching sedan, but he was rather glad they didn’t encounter any patrolmen with speed guns. He wondered if the Morgan got driven like this, hell for leather and little regard for fellow travelers on the streets of DC. But even as he wondered that, a little voice in the very back of his head, a voice that he thought buried and gone for years, was joyful. Here was his friend, his partner, his other half, and there was a fierceness in that look that he knew found a mirror in his, and he reveled in the sheer aliveness of that feeling, if only for the moment.

They were close to the Navy Yard when the silence was finally broken.

“She adopted me, you know.”
Napoleon was startled, this was not the topic he had expected his partner to address. “Your, er, Mrs. Mallard?”

“Yes. She was afraid that there would be questions, since we were leaving the country, moving to the United States. She didn’t want there to be some dispute later down the line about inheritance or problems with my loss of memory. She said she wanted to make sure nobody took me away again.” There was a bitter laugh then. “And the sad fact is, I was a cuckoo in the nest all along. And you know something, it was nice to have a place to belong again.” He was quiet for a while. “How can this bastard think that threatening an old forgetful woman is going to get him anything he wants, and why can’t the jackass just come out and confront me, us, if that’s what he wants?”

The growl that Napoleon heard in that question was familiar to him, and usually did not bode well for the one it was directed toward. The flavour and quality of all Illya’s moods were familiar to him still, and he hoped that someone else got the guy before his partner, or for that matter before he did. They had long since gone past the point in their lives where they feared for what they had to lose. This bastard was playing with fire he didn’t even know about.

“I really have no idea how this guy is planning his moves. Nothing about this has made sense to me so far. He has kidnapped our family, or tried to, hasn’t tried to get a ransom, booby trapped the…” Napoleon trailed off, thinking.

Illya spared him a glance, seeing the strategist he once knew so well resurface in his friend’s eyes. He didn’t take his eyes off the streets they were driving for long, as he was going a tad over the suggested speed limit. He was impressed with Napoleon’s men behind not only for keeping up but for being willing to keep up. He wondered if it was because they were good or because they were loyal. Knowing Napoleon as he had, he supposed it was both. He slowed just a bit, in deference to the possible speeding ticket Napoleon was going to have to pay if they got caught. Then thought better of that and resumed his offensive driving attitude. Napoleon continued to have that calculating look on his face, the one he recognized in his friend, his partner when he was about to pull an idea out of thin air that would be a gamble and a brilliant strategy. And usually worked like magic, in that very often they couldn’t explain why it worked or how, only that it did. He pressed the accelerator harder and was relieved to see the gates to the Navy Yard ahead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The former UNCLE agents went straight to Abby’s office, where she looked up from her microscope at their entrance to the Lab, her eyes wide. She could see by the looks on their faces that they knew about the explosives.

“Ducky!” She stepped away from her table but then hesitated, halted by the fierce look on her friend’s face. Certainly she had seen him in many moods, but this was a different kind of focus than she had seen before, he looked intimidating, not a word she would have ever imagined using to describe the doctor she had known for so long.

“Abigail.” He took a step toward her and saw her hesitate. Napoleon touched his arm and when he looked over at his partner, Napoleon nodded toward Abby’s office and he understood that Napoleon was offering a moment alone. He nodded in return and Napoleon went to Abby’s desk, shutting the door.

Illya took another step forward and reached up to put his hands on the young woman’s shoulders,
rubbing his hands down to her elbows and back up again. “My apologies Abby, I know this is a
difficult adjustment for you, and I am, ah,” he paused, “distracted.” He thought for a moment, “It
isn’t easy when the consistencies of one’s friends are suddenly shaken out of place.”

“It must be just as difficult for you.”

He looked up into her eyes and saw nothing but her affection. “Yes, Abigail, it has been. But life has
a way of balancing, doesn’t it?” His gaze went to the glass office door where Napoleon was standing
with his back to them, giving his friend as much privacy as the place let him. When he looked back
at Abby, he saw her smiling.

“I hope so, Duc… uh. Do you want…?”

“We are who we make of ourselves, and I worked hard to be Ducky. I rather like him.”

“Me too.” Abby’s voice was soft, so subdued, so unlike her usual enthusiasm for everything.

“Abigail, I need you to do what you usually do, and just the way you usually do it, efficiently and
quickly and with all your usual vigor and drive. No more uncertainly, no more wondering, we have
far too much of that at the moment, yes?”

“You are very right, of course!” She put her hands on his and took them in hers, swinging them at
their sides just as she would have the week before, when her friend was just Ducky the M.E. and not
Some Former Spy.

“Abigail, thank you.”

She beamed at him as one of her machines started ringing an alarm. “Oh hey, something’s done!”
She pressed a quick peck of a kiss to Ducky’s forehead and then, with pigtails and short skirt
swinging, she turned to check which of her babies was giving her results.

Illya turned and went in Abby’s office to join his partner in searching the records and lists they had,
knowing that their quarry was there somewhere. Napoleon looked over his shoulder at his entry, then
went back to flipping through the legal pads covered in lists and notes. Illya sat at the desk, Napoleon
joined him and shoulder to shoulder they started again with the lists. They started talking about their
last day with UNCLE, and everything they could remember about the young doctor they had
delivered to the airport. More and more they wanted to find this doctor, hoping he could shed some
light on their employer’s last day with them.

“His name was Billingsly or Boynton or something like that. He was based in London and Waverly
was hosting him on a recommendation from the London HQ, wasn’t he?”

“Burrington.” Illya hit the table with one fist. “Harry Burrington. Psychologist specializing in human
behaviour under stress and work conditions. He said he was developing a system for choosing the
best candidates for field operations all the way down to secretaries and janitors. I think he was trying
to convince Waverly to let him observe a training class on the island. And he wanted to do a bunch
of tests on field agents and recruits, written exams and the like.”

“Yes!” Napoleon turned to Illya then, “And remember how he kept asking questions all the way to
the airport, he just wouldn’t take no comment as an answer. Had we killed in the line of duty, how
did we deal with that, did we still feel guilt, was the greater good served, what did we think the
greater good was, on and on and he just wouldn’t shut up. No wonder I blocked it out, he was so
intrusive, so, so…” Napoleon paused, searching for the right word, “whining and accusatory. Like
we had offended him personally by doing our jobs.”
“I wonder.”

Napoleon looked hard at his partner. There was a look there, Illya was putting two and two together and getting too many.

“Napoleon, who did the background check on this Burrington?”

“I suppose that the London HQ did, he had been asking around there about observations, and they kicked him up to Waverly.”

“Does it seem odd that Waverly brought him in without our knowing all about it at the time, we were mostly running the show by then.”

“You think the old man was checking up on us?”

“No, I suspect the old man was duped by him. We really need to get those London records over here and find who put this Burrington forward.”

“You don’t believe it’s an accident that you ended up in Great Britain.”

“You were supposed to be with me. I suspect you were the original target, but someone figured out that to control you they would need to control the both of us.”

“Much like they are now.”

Illya cocked his head toward Napoleon and thought about it. “Yes.”

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“Hicklson really was a doctor, he ran a small nursing home specializing in Alzheimer’s patients. There was a fire and he died of smoke inhalation, but got his patients to safety. He was an MD and a PhD in Behavioral Psychology. He was survived by a sister and left everything split between her and several Alzheimer charities. She lives in California.” Ziva summed up the late Doctor’s details succinctly, shrugged and turned from the screen where the driver’s license picture of the late doctor was showing a middle aged man with dark hair and nothing particularly memorable in his features.

“We’ve got one security camera picture of the guy we think is using his name.” McGee tapped his keyboard and the picture on the screen changed to a fuzzy black and white still of a man in a hat and long rain coat. He was standing at a counter talking to a woman in a nurse’s uniform. “We’re trying to find out from the staff at Mrs. Mallard’s facility if this is the guy who said he was Hicklson.”

“What about Abby’s reverse surveillance, we got anything off that yet? Anything matching this guy?” Gibbs asked.

“We’re working on it,” Tony said.

“Work faster, DiNozzo.”

“On it, Boss.”

All three of the musketeers went back to their computers. Gibbs went upstairs to MTAC to check the progress on the records, still being handled by McGee’s former computer team. Vance was at the top of the stairs.

“Gibbs.”
“Director.”

“Agent Fornell just called, he’s on his way in with Solo’s family. He says the niece is holding up alright, and thinks she can give a description to a sketch artist.”

“Good news.”

“We’re going to continue working this as a joint investigation with the FBI. Fornell will want to be in on the questioning.”

Gibbs just nodded.

“You get along well with Fornell.”

Gibbs shrugged. “We understand each other, yeah.”

“Good,” was all Vance said. “I’ll have a conference room cleared…”

“Ah, about that.”

“You have some other plan? You always have another plan. Fine. As long as the interview will stand up in court.”

“Fornell will be there, it will be legal, we’ll get what we need.”

Vance just gave Gibbs his usual directorial look that said the less he knew, the better. Gibbs smirked, which said Vance shouldn’t worry. And that always made Vance worry.

The elevator door opened and Solo and Kuryakin emerged. Gibbs could see that it was former UNCLE Agent Kuryakin, not his old friend Ducky. He wondered if he were the only one who could see it. No, he saw the look in Solo’s eyes, who also knew that his friend had come fully back from wherever he had been hibernating inside the talkative and sweetly charming Dr. Mallard.

“Gentlemen,” Vance acknowledged them.

“Director,” Solo said.

“We might have a lead, please tell me we have received records from the London archive,” Kuryakin’s voice was clipped and cool.

Vance didn’t bat an eye, as if he knew everything there was to know about hidden identities and the usefulness of same. “They arrived while you were,” Vance paused, “out.”

A look passed between Solo and Kuryakin. Solo spoke, “Director, we want to find a doctor named Burrington, he spent a great deal of time with our chief in the days leading up to the, ah, last. Harry Burrington. He was a psychologist, and we think he may know something helpful.”

Vance nodded once and then looked at Gibbs. “Fornell is,” he looked at his watch, “about fifteen minutes out. You need these agents with you?” he nodded at the UNCLE partners.

Gibbs nodded.

“Let me get the gentlemen in MTAC on the job and then I will send Fornell and company to…”

“Send ‘em down to the Lab, that’s where I’ll be.”
Gibbs didn’t wait, just nodded to the UNCLE agents and then went to the elevator, it opened immediately and he could see the three men disappear into MTAC as the doors slid shut.

“Someone is impersonating Hicklson, he’s been dead for a few years,” Vance was catching Solo and Kuryakin up on the latest information as they took the stairs to the nerve center of MTAC.

“That name is familiar.” Kuryakin.

Vance turned at the bottom of the stairs to look up at the agents behind him. Very quietly he said, “Hicklson specialized in Alzheimer’s patients.”

The look of pain that flashed in the eyes of the NCIS M.E. was pure Ducky, and shuttered just as fast as it appeared. “That makes sense then, I am sure he is one of the doctors that I spoke with early on in,” he paused, “Mother’s decline.”

Napoleon had been on the step behind his partner. He stepped down one more and stood near enough to brush his shoulder against his friend’s, close enough for comfort but not intrusive. Vance thought that if he hadn’t seen the lightning flash of compassion and understanding that the two exchanged, he wouldn’t have thought a thing about the gesture. Now the two provided the kind of united front that he imagined must have been formidable in their active agent days. He had a fleeting thought to wonder what kind of man their Waverly must have been to command them, and to command the kind of focused intent he could see in them, even now.

“Let’s get these men on the case here, shall we, and you need to be in the Lab in,” he looked at his watch, “twelve minutes. Gibbs won’t appreciate my keeping you.”

“Let’s get to it then,” Solo said. He and his partner came the rest of the way down the stairs and over to the agents working at keyboards.

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Gibbs walked in and stood directly behind Abby, waiting. Her head came up and she whirled around from the keyboard, pigtails nearly swiping his face as he leaned back to avoid them, then straightened again. “Ya got something,” it was a statement, as it usually was.

“Of course, don’t I always for you, my silver fox?” and Abby leaned to take the again bagged bomb evidence off the table behind Gibbs.

Gibbs just watched.

She leaned back again, holding up the bag with the grey block of explosive. “This,” she shook the bag, “matches nothing in our database.” She held up the bag with wires and circuitry, “And this is also like nothing in our database.” She grinned.

“Why are you so happy if it doesn’t match anything?”

“Now, Gibbs, I didn’t say it didn’t match anything.” Her chipper voice told him that something was up.

She tossed the bags back to the table and he winced.

“Gibbs! It’s disarmed.” She swung around again to tap on her keyboard, leaning slightly forward.

Gibbs sighed. “Timetable, Abbs. We’re on one.”
She looked over her shoulder at him, still tapping keys, “Well aware, oh great one.” And she stood again and walked to the wall screen, he followed.

“See here,” she pointed at squiggly lines on a chart. “This is the formula used on that explosive.” She pointed to the table behind them with a thumb, stuck out like she was hitchhiking. “And this here,” she pointed to another squiggle, “this is the explosive used on the UNCLE headquarters in New York. Chemically identical.”

“Is it from UNCLE’s arsenal?”

“Well, it was made to appear like it, at least. Hinky, huh?”

“Can you do some test on it to see if it’s from that time period?”

“You can’t carbon 14 test explosives, Gibbs. Well you could, but that test is accurate to a lot more years than twenty and all that the test would tell us was that…” she took a deep breath. “Sorry, back on topic now.” She nodded and went back to the keyboard. He followed. “No, not accurately, but I think what is important here is that it is a match for UNCLE and for no other in any database we have, including any private mad bombers we have on file,” she tapped more keys and the squiggly lines moved into one graph and did, in fact, match perfectly.

Abby turned again, Gibbs leaned to avoid flying hair and then kissed her forehead. “Good work.”

She beamed at him and then Solo and Kuryakin walked in. Abby and Gibbs both turned their heads to look, then turned fully to face the men, standing shoulder to shoulder, Abby’s platform boots giving her the two inches she needed to match Gibbs’ height.

“They’re so, ah, synchronized. Do you think they practice?” Napoleon grinned at Illya, raising a brow at him.

Illya rolled his eyes at Napoleon. “I’m sure they wouldn’t tell us if they did,” but the little smirk at the corner of his mouth negated the sarcasm and they turned toward the NCIS pair. “We’re reporting as requested.”

Abby looked from the UNCLE agents to Gibbs and back again.

“I have a plan. I need you two to keep Miss Walters’ parents occupied while Abby gets the sketch done of her kidnapper. And I need it to look…” he paused. Illya interrupted, interpreting the pause, “Not like an interrogation?”

“We are not interrogating suspects, we are interviewing witnesses and family. But it does need to be, well, yeah, not an interrogation. We know they didn’t kidnap their own daughter, but she might be a little more relaxed if they aren’t listening. But they’ll be right there on the other side of the glass,” he waved a hand at Abby’s office, “with you two.” He turned toward Abby. “You promised a tour of the Lab, do that while our friends here,” he gestured to the older men, “keep the parents busy, and then show her how the computer sketching works, right?”

“Sneaky, Gibbs, I like it. What will you be doing?”

“Strategy meeting with Fornell.”

“So if I need you, you’ll be in the conference room?”

“We’ll be in the hall, Abbs.” Gibbs said it with a tone she recognized, others might hear stern but she
heard the affection underneath. She glanced over and saw that the other men could hear it as well. She smiled and cocked her head to one side, then saluted with her wrong hand and grinned when she saw Gibbs trying not to grin, himself.

Abby turned to open the software on her computer that she needed as Gibbs turned to leave. On his way out, he heard Solo ask his partner, “She does know that’s the wrong…”

“Secret codes, even here, Napoleon.”

They grinned, if only briefly, and went to clean the desk and get ready for guests in their borrowed office.

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He stood over the body on the morgue table. He wouldn’t be doing the autopsy, which was only a formality anyway. The man had clearly died of multiple gunshot wounds. But he looked at the body anyway, this body that was once a man, one who had schemed and connived and conned. A man that could have been, who had been a formidable power, if only in his own mind.

He turned and walked away. The temporary replacement, his temporary replacement, passed him on his way in, started to say something but the look he gave brooked no conversation. What was there to say? The man on the table was dead. He was not.

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Several Hours Earlier

“This guy’s MO is to disappear at the critical moment, he doesn’t like the wetwork. How the hell are we supposed to catch him in the act if he’s already miles away?” Tony’s frustration was wearing him thin. They had spent hours already trying to find any lead, any connection between the bombing from decades before and the current kidnappings. He threw himself into his desk chair and leaned back to stare up at the ceiling.

“Does it not seem odd that we have not seen him tailing us these last couple of days?” Ziva asked. “He should be following one of us, if he intends to continue the kidnappings.”

“Maybe he doesn’t have the time, or manpower?” Tim was also sounding tired. He rubbed his face with his hands, trying to clear his retinas of the scrolling reports he could still see when he closed his eyes.

“Yes, Tim, manpower,” Ziva snapped her fingers and pointed at him, then stood to pace. “Remember Ducky saying that the man in the car that he escaped from was talking to what sounded like his boss, the man in charge. And that man died in the car fire. That leaves only the voice on the other end of the radio to be the kidnapper from back then.” She stopped between he fellow agent’s desks. “So if we can successfully leap to the idea…”

“Conclusion,” Tony interjected.

“Right, if we leap to the conclusion that the kidnapper today is the bomber and kidnapper from years ago, who is he working with? If he was working with such a small crew then, he may not trust anyone now to get the job done.”

“The only help we have from Abby’s reverse surveillance is a bunch of trenchcoats and hats that look alike. So either it’s a coincidence,” Tony frowned and shook his head, “or Trenchcoat is the surveillance guy. And the kidnapper as well.”
“Where’s the picture from the nursing home?” Tim started to look through the piles of pictures on his desk.

“Everything’s on the computer, let’s go upstairs and check on Team Geek and see if they’ve got anything to add and we can compare the photos there.” Tony suggested even as he was getting up from the desk and heading for the stairs.

In MTAC, Tim’s former team was still tracking down names from old files and combining files as they came in from other parts of the globe.

Tony took up the remote and started filling the huge wall sized screen with blurry photo stills from security cameras as Tim quietly spoke with the men working the computers. Ziva watched the photos fill the screen.

“What we need is some way to compare these to determine if it is even the same man.”

“And even if it is, what does that prove, Ziva, that every one of us could have been encountering this ghost?”

“Maybe, but it is not a coincidence that he shows up in all the places we are. We don’t bank at the same places, or eat breakfast or shop or even live in the same areas. How could the same man be showing up in the background for all of us?”

“But that’s not proof he was watching any of us.”

“Wait, look here!” Tim pointed. “There, see that? Can you blow that one up?”

The man in the photo clearly had a camera in his hand.

“Still not gonna hold up for a warrant, let alone a court.”

“It’s better than we had five minutes ago.”

The last picture Tony brought up was from the nursing home security camera. A man in a long coat, face turned mostly away from the lens of the camera. In his hand a hat, very like the one worn in all the other pictures.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“He had red hair, kind of dark, but red. And he had mean little eyes, squinty, like he needed sunglasses all the time.” Ally sat on one of the stools next to Abby who was tapping her keyboard and moving the mouse, making the face of the man who kidnapped Jimmy and Ally appear on the computer screen. “His brows were more narrow,” Ally reached one hand toward the screen then drew back. She was hunched over a little, one arm hugging her middle. The other hand she fisted and put up to her mouth, concentrating on the screen.

“That’s good, Ally. Take your time,” Abby said softly, encouraging.

“More lines, around the mouth there, kinda frowny lines. And his eyes too, lots of squinty lines there.”

Ally was silent for a while. Abby looked over at her and saw that she was still fixated on the screen,
as if staring at it would make it clearer, put a name on the face. She reached out and put one hand on Ally’s shoulder. “Do you want a little break?”

“What? Uh, no. No, um. Maybe in a minute. Ok?” Ally looked at her then, then back to the screen. “Thinner lips, and his forehead was higher.”

Abby made the adjustments. Ally paused again. She listened for Gibbs’ voice in the hall, she couldn’t make out words, but could hear him talking with Fornell. She glanced over her shoulder and could see the men leaning against the wall, watching.

“Could you, well, make his face a little rounder, I think.”

With another few taps of keys and a few mouse clicks, Ally gave a shudder and turned to Abby.

“I think, um,” Ally sighed and then continued in a very soft voice, “could we, um, maybe you could show me where the restroom is?”

Abby saved the file and pressed a few more keys then stood. Ally slid off her stool and followed her out the door and down the short hall. On the way by, Abby signed quickly to Gibbs that they should go look at the screen.

In the restroom, Ally went into a stall but didn’t shut the door, just stood bent at the waist, hands on knees. She stood like that a long time. Then stood and went to the sink and ran the cold water and splashed her face then patted herself dry with the paper towels that Abby handed her.

“Do you want me to get your mom or…” Abby wasn’t sure who else to get.

“No! I… oh, she. No.” Ally closed her eyes for a moment, then squared her shoulders. She took a deep breath and then opened her eyes and looked at Abby. “I’m sorry, Abby.” Another deep breath and a sigh. “Every time I get upset she gets upset and I hate that, we just spiral down into crying and that isn’t going to help. I just thought, when I saw that sketch on the computer, I remembered how scared I was and it looks so much like him and, well,” Ally took another deep breath. “I’m ok now. I just really want to scream really loud. I’m just so angry. So angry I want to spit.” Ally’s hands were fists.

“I know just the thing. Come with me!” Abby took her hand, unclenched now. Abby hurried through the Lab past Gibbs and Fornell and led Ally into the ballistics room, completely soundproof.

“Now. Let ‘er rip!”

Ally looked around at the small room, one that Abby had shown her on the tour earlier. The door was closed and the room was dim. She closed her eyes tight and opened her mouth wide and screamed louder than Abby imagined she could. Then she started laughing. She doubled over with it and Abby put her hands on the younger girl’s shoulders. Ally stood again, wrapping her arms around Abby’s neck and Abby realized she was laughing and crying at once. Abby stroked her hair and whispered comfort to her, like she would a child or a scared kitten. Finally with a few hiccups, Ally quieted.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, it’s…”

“A sign of weakness, I know.”

“I was going to say unnecessary, actually.” Abby pulled back just a bit and brushed the hair off
Ally’s face, putting her hands on her cheeks to frame her face and make her look up. “You are so brave. You did a great job in there. You saved Jimmy and yourself and it has been an awful couple of days. If you want to scream or laugh or cry or all of them at once, you do whatever you want. And if you don’t want your mom to see it, well, I understand that, too. Sometimes we just need, well, just, someone who doesn’t know us as much. And sometimes we need someone who knows us really well. I get that.”

“Thank you, Abby, you’ve been really great,” Ally said quietly. “I wish this hadn’t happened, but I am glad I got to meet you, and Jimmy. And, I guess, I got meet someone I was named after, too, huh. That’s all good stuff. So maybe it will all turn out alright after all.”

“Yes, it will. We’ll make sure of it.” Abby wrapped her arms around the girl then, a hug of comfort and new friendship and Ally relaxed into the hug and kept whispering ‘thank you’ softly.

Ally finally leaned back and dug in a pocket, coming up with a handkerchief. She held it up, “Uncle Pol’s, he’s always prepared.” She wiped her face of tears and then put it back in her pocket. “I think I’m done being crazy now.” She gave Abby a little smile.

“Right then. Ready?”

“Yes, I am.” Ally followed Abby again, back to the computer where Gibbs and Fornell were studying the sketch.

Gibbs turned, signing to Abby, ‘she ok?’

Abby nodded.

“Miss Walters, is this the man that kidnapped you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No sir needed, just call me Gibbs.”

“Yes, Gibbs.” Ally smiled.

The look on Gibbs’ face softened just a bit. “Good work.” He turned to Abby and started to say something but Abby interrupted.

“Here you go, bossman,” and handed him a stack of papers, “there’s a couple dozen copies of the sketch. And I have a file to email as well, Agent Fornell?” Abby turned to him, poised to send the picture to his agents.

Fornell handed her a card with an address written on it and turned back to Gibbs, “Maybe I’ll try poaching your tech, Gibbs.”

“Try it, Tobias, just try,” Gibbs growled and glowered. Fornell rolled his eyes and Abby and Ally both tried to hide a giggle, but not very hard.

“I doubt you can keep me in the Caf*Pow to which I have become accustomed, Agent Fornell,” Abby said with a toss of her pig tails. The grin she gave both the agents was full of mischievous glee.

Abby took another few copies of the sketch from the printer and turned back to Ally, “Is it time to show this to your parents and your uncle?” She looked at Gibbs who nodded and looked at Ally as well.
“Yes. I’m ready. I just needed to get a hold of things before, well, before mom goes all crazy again. I may be grounded for life now, not because I was bad but because some jer…” Ally paused, obviously editing herself, “jerk had to ruin my day.” She sighed. “Promise you’ll write and tell me what the outside world is like, Abby?” Her voice was so plaintive that Abby almost bought it, but the grin she was suppressing ruined her cry for mercy.

Abby laughed. “I think you’re going to be ok, kiddo.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

Gibbs and Fornell watched them go toward Abby’s office.

The door whispered open and four faces turned toward them with differing levels of worry showing plainly. Abby handed out the copies of the computer generated sketch. Then she stood back, an arm around Ally’s shoulders, and watched as they all studied the picture.

Napoleon and Illya looked from the sketch to one another and then back to Ally.

“Ally, my sweet, did this man say anything to you? Anything at all that you can remember?” Napoleon asked.

“No, Uncle Pol, I’m sorry.”

“No need for apologies, my dear,” Illya spoke then, looking from her back to Napoleon. A look passed between the partners. Illya nodded then and got up silently and left to talk to Gibbs and Fornell, still in the outer Lab. The door snicked shut behind him.

“Uncle Napoleon,” Ally asked quietly, “you know this man?”

“I think so,” he looked over at his niece and her husband. “I think you three should go back to your hotel now, the FBI and my men will be there, and you will be safe. This will be over as soon as we can make it happen.”

“But what about you?”

“Lizzy, I can still take care of myself, I promise.” Napoleon smiled at her. “I’m not as out to pasture as you might think.”

“I would never think such a thing, Uncle Pol, not ever.” Her smile was less shaky than it had been.

Daniel stood then, taking his wife’s arm. “We will be waiting to hear from you, at the hotel. Keep us in the loop, will you?”

“Of course, Daniel, of course.”

Ally turned to Abby and hugged her again.

“You take care of yourself, now.”

“I will, Abby. Can I come see you again before we go home?”

“Absolutely.”

Daniel Walters gathered up his daughter and wife and the three left, Fornell meeting them at the door and escorting them out.
Abby stepped closer to Napoleon, putting out one hand and then pulling back, suddenly unsure at the grim look of introspection she saw on his face. He looked up at her and gave her a small smile.

“I don’t suppose you have one of those for me?” Napoleon gauged Abby’s mood and determined that she was the kind of woman that hugged for reassurance, not just affection. And she looked like she needed the reassurance as much as he now felt the need for it, brief and false as that hope might be.

“Hugs are a continually renewable resource, Napoleon, the more you give, the more you get.” Her platform boots made her just slightly taller than him, and when she wrapped her arms around his neck, she could rest her chin on his shoulder. And she did.

“Thank you, Abby, for being so gentle with Ally. She is a strong girl, but she is still our little girl, you know.” He hugged her and then leaned back to look in her eyes. “You are truly a wonder, Miss Sciuto, and NCIS is lucky to have you.” He smiled, a warm genuine smile, and let her go. “Thank you, that was just what I needed.”

“Any time at all, Mr. Solo, any time. And thank you. But I think Ally is going to be ok now, she has a great family to support her.”

They left the office then, back to the Lab where Illya and Gibbs were comparing the sketch to the photo from the nursing home security camera.

“If I hadn’t shot him myself, I would swear that sketch was of Harold Bufferton.” Illya sounded mystified, but determined as he spoke to Gibbs.

“Who’s Harold Bufferton?” Abby asked.

“A man who inherited several fortunes worth of diamonds and who could not say no to his manipulative wife when she wanted to rule the world. We had a few run-ins with them, ending in a small South American backwater where he was killed and his wife put in prison,” Napoleon explained. “And where we thought she would rot for the rest of her miserable little life. But perhaps she didn’t.”

“If she had a child, the time would be about right.” Illya said.

“Abby, can you do that thing where you change the age of a person in a picture?”

“Sure Gibbs, what are you thinking?” She went to her computer then, and started tapping keys and clicking the mouse, a look of concentration on her face as she bit her lip and manipulated the sketch on the screen.

“I’m thinking we need to see what this guy looked like twenty years ago.”

***

Fornell and Vance stood at the top of the stairs just inside MTAC. Solo and Kuryakin were seated in the front row of chairs while Gibbs and Abby conferred over the sketches. McGee and DiNozzo were working with the two computer experts and David was on the phone on the opposite side of the room, talking low and fast and not in English.

“I think this is where we came in.”

“Yes, Tobias, I think we did.”
“My colleagues have nothing on this guy so far, under any name, but they are still looking. Burrington, Bufferton, whatever his name is, he had to have left a trail somewhere.”

“We have the storage facility staked out, but so far there is no activity. I don’t imagine there will be if he runs true to the past and abandons ship before the fireworks.”

“Maybe we’ll catch a break and…” Fornell broke off when he saw Napoleon stand and answer his cell phone.

Napoleon walked a few paces away from the others. First there was a look of puzzlement, and then sly interest replaced it when whatever the caller said registered. He snapped the phone shut and started up the stairs, followed by his partner.

“Director, we’re in play.”

“What’ve you got?”

“Someone left an envelope for me at my hotel. The receptionist called up to my room where one of my men was playing decoy. He had her send it up and called me. I asked him to open it. It contained a key and instructions to be at an address at nine tonight.”

Vance and Fornell both looked at their watches.

“We have two hours, and the address is for the storage facility.” Illya said.

***

Illya drove, Napoleon spoke on the phone, coordinating with Gibbs and his team who in turn was organizing with Fornell and FBI team.

“Tony says that Jimmy confirms the sketch, he says he can ID the guy,” Napoleon relayed to Illya. “The FBI reports that there has been no one near the storage facility since the bomb squad left.”

Illya nodded grimly, and kept a steady five miles an hour over the speed limit.

“You think he’s not going to show.”

“I think the possibility is slight.” Illya’s voice had edged back into the Cambridge overlaying Russian again, familiar to Napoleon, but disturbing since it meant that his partner was growing more tense. He wondered if that Scottish accent had ever once slipped before he’d found his way back into Illya’s life again.

“Illya.”

“Napoleon?”

There was a long pause and when they pulled to a stop at a red light, Illya looked over at his partner.

“It’s just, ah, good to have you back.”

“And you, my friend.”

“You, ah, that is…” Napoleon stopped. “Light’s green.”

Illya kept looking at his partner a moment longer. Then he nodded and pulled out.
“Gibbs, we have movement.” DiNozzo reported. The back of the surveillance van was dark and cramped. The camera was picking up a single figure entering through the chain link fence behind the storage building. The bright reds and oranges of the figure stood out in the dark like a beacon.

“Ah the wonders of infrared,” DiNozzo remarked.

Gibbs contacted Fornell and everyone went on alert. He checked his watch, “They should be hitting the parking lot in five minutes. No traffic this time of night.”

The door opened and Ziva stepped in. “I’ve got some information, Gibbs. Records of a live birth to a Gervaise Ravel, in prison. She was reported to have died in childbirth. But immigration has a G. Burrington entering France six months later, with an infant child.” She took a seat at the back of the van. “A death certificate for G. Burrington was issued in 1985, in Paris.”

“And a few years later Burrington was making a nuisance of himself at UNCLE in London and New York,” McGee said.

“Just so,” she agreed.

“Here are our agents, right on time,” DiNozzo said then.

“Our trespassing guest is at the back door of the building,” McGee added.

“Allright, people, you know what to do. McGee, keep us informed.” Gibbs slipped out of the van, David and DiNozzo followed. All of them dressed in black and well armed. “Check?”

“Loud and clear, boss,” came McGee’s voice in his earpiece. The other two nodded and the three slipped into the dark.

***

“You can stop there, thank you,” the voice came from the doorway as Illya and Napoleon approached. “And you can drop whatever weapons you brought with you.”

“You said no weapons,” Illya.

“And I am sure you listened.”

Napoleon and Illya both took the guns from their holsters and dropped them.

“Anything else too.”

“That’s it.” Napoleon.

“I’m sure you have more.”

“They don’t let retired agents have the good stuff.”

“Good then, you have the key.”

“I do.”

“All right, Mr. Solo, you can go inside and get your niece, and the doctor’s assistant.” The snide tone when he said ‘doctor’ grated on Illya’s nerves, the jump of muscles in his jaw was hidden by the
shadows. “Dr. Kuryakin can wait out here with me.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t trust you, I think we should all go in together.”

“No.” The man moved and what little light there was from the half moon glinted on the gun he held. He motioned with it for Solo to head for the door.

When Napoleon drew even with the man, he stepped quickly to the side and when the man turned to follow him with the gun, Illya went to one knee and grabbed the gun from the ground. There was a shot and Illya saw his partner go down. With a growl he started shooting. He emptied the clip then rolled and picked up the second gun, but the man wasn’t moving. Three more black clad figures came from three directions and Gibbs was already shouting orders to McGee to call for the ambulance and for DiNozzo and David to secure the suspect. Illya was up and moving to his partner.

“It’s just in the fleshy part, tovarisch, best place to have it, really,” Napoleon was reassuring his partner, who had cradled him and clamped a hand on the bleeding arm.

“There is no good place for a gunshot at our age, Napoleon, none at all.” The grumpy Russian accent was the best thing Napoleon had heard in a long time, he thought as his vision dimmed.

***

The emergency room was surprisingly quiet, Illya thought, sitting beside the bed and waiting for his partner to wake. The quiet beeps and machine sounds were familiar but not very comforting, reminding him of all the times he had found himself waiting like this. And all the times he had been the one in the bed waking. They both had a broad range of scars and battle souvenirs from their agent days. Napoleon would have one more. The bullet really had only grazed him, the kidnapper had been a lousy shot, even from six feet away.

Napoleon opened his eyes, saw the dimmed lights and heard the monitors beeping a steady rhythm. He turned his head and smiled when he found Illya there beside him.

“Hey, partner mine.”

“Hey, yourself.”

“How fast can you spring me?”

“Not fast enough, I’m starving.”

“You didn’t even get shot, how are you the hungry one?”

“It’s the heart failure from watching you get shot.”

“I’ll try to avoid it in future, then. I think Abby would hurt me if anything happened to you because of me.”

“I am certain you are right.”

“Go get someone in charge so we can go, I hate hanging out in these depressing places.”

“Everyone is waiting for us up in Jimmy’s room. Gibbs glared until they extended visiting hours just for the team. And the doctor coming back and telling the head nurse to let them in might have helped.”

“Useful, that glaring.”
“I’ve always found it to be so.”

Napoleon rolled his eyes at his partner and lifted one hand and shooed him toward the curtained hall. “Get some paperwork so I can sign myself out against medical advice.”

Illya took some papers out of his jacket and showed them to his partner. “You always were good at forging my signature.” “And you mine, Napoleon.”

They both laughed, just a little. The relief of a mission complete was the same as it always was. The reassurance that they had once more managed to come back behind their shields and not on them was there, too. That they had once not managed it wasn’t erased, but it was eased. And Illya helped Napoleon into his shredded jacket, a purloined scrubs shirt in place of the shirt he had been cut out of on arrival.

An enthusiastic Abby waited for them in the hall outside Palmer’s room. Gentle hugs were given and returned and they quietly slipped in the door.

“So this guy had a clipping in his wallet about Dr. Mallard’s run in with the knife wielding sister from last year?”

“Conveniently, yes, Jimmy. He must have recognized him from the picture.” Ziva said. “And he had more clippings in a file in his car trunk. He’s been watching us off and on all year.”

“That is really creepy. Group stalking. Yuck,” Abby said with a little shiver. Gibbs put an arm around her shoulders.

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He stopped long enough to leave a forwarding number with personnel as he planned to use some accumulated leave to travel, and then left the building. The dead man on the table in his morgue wasn’t going to get up any time soon, not under his own steam and not to come back from the grave and try to seek more revenge for the death of his father and madness of his mother. Madness that obviously ran in the family. He was glad to be off the Navy Yard and heading home. There was a gathering of friends there, a gathering of family, and he was looking forward to enjoying the peacefulness of that for a few hours. Well, as peaceful as any gathering of sibling rivalry and pranks and good natured teasing could be, which right now he determined was just what this doctor ordered, for all of them.

Illya hit the gas a little harder, the sleek Morgan responding as she always did, purring as he guided her down the quiet streets toward his real home, Napoleon and his NCIS family and the newfound family of Lizzy and her daughter and husband who had already claimed him for their own. His excuse that he needed to pick up lunch was thin, he knew, but he had to check that his world was safe from the past. And it was.

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End Notes
Thank you very much for reading!
((originally posted January-June 2K10))

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