Ripples

by Gottahavemyncis

Summary

Second story in the Serendipity ‘verse. More adventures for Tim and the gang with some twists, turns, and surprises. Team as family; romance, family, adventure. Rated T for occasional language.

Notes

This story has 53 chapters, divided into three parts.
Chapter 1

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Tim listened to Ty's recitation of his day while they headed home. Usually a very conscientious driver, these last few days his attention was diverted to the road behind him. Tonight was no different; his suspicions were finally confirmed. He cleared his throat. "Tyler, I need your help for a few minutes. Need you and Brynie to be as quiet as you can be while I call Poppy."

"Then can I tell you more after?"

"Yes, when we get home."

"Ok Daddy."

Using his headset, Tim contacted his father.

"Gibbs. Tim, you on the way home?"

"Being followed, this is the third time this week; didn't see them yesterday. There are two or three different cars; looks like they rotate."

"Where are you now? We'll notify Metro PD and have them escort you home and I'll tell Vance, we'll set up a protection detail. Notice anything outside of the house?"

"Coordinates are on my GPS. Haven't noticed anything at the house, but I'm mostly too busy to look and you're usually there in the evenings."

"Good point and I haven't noticed anything." There was a pause before Gibbs continued, "Tony's got your GPS and talking with Metro. Stay on the line, let me know when they get there."

There was silence on the line for a few minutes and then his father heard Tim sigh in relief. "Ok, two squads with us and it looks like they're going to take us home."

"Good, I need to update Vance and then I'm on my way. DiNozzo says Metro will stay with you for protection until we can get a detail over there."

Before children, Tim would have scoffed but things were different now.

Aboard the Navy Yard, Gibbs flew upstairs and met Vance just coming out of MTAC. "Tim's got trouble, he's being followed. We got Metro in place and they'll stay at the house until we can get a detail over there."

Vance nodded to his Lead agent, "Any idea who or why?"

"Don't know what he's working on; he said it's pretty hot."

Vance knew the case Gibbs referred to; while it was a possibility, it wasn't a strong one. "All right, a team of four. Two front, two back. Overnight and in the meantime see what we can find out and then we'll figure out how to proceed."
He made the necessary call as he watched Gibbs hurry back to the bullpen. As expected the older man grabbed his jacket and weapon, ready to get home to his son and grandchildren.

Tony was waiting. "Boss, Tim sent us the plate for tonight’s vehicle, Ellie's running it."

"I've got a hit."

The two men were joined at the plasma by Bob Chalmers, now a permanent member of the team, and Ellie, who grabbed the remote.

"It's a government vehicle, currently shows in use by the Marshals Services."

"Shit!"

Gibbs flew back up the stairs and into Vance's office. He was on the phone and not looking happy. He hung up, "Gibbs,"

The older man interrupted, "Tail car is in use by the U.S. Marshals. Is Tim under a protection detail he doesn't know about?"

Vance looked deeply disturbed. "We need to talk, but not here. Send your team home, tell them it was a false alarm, all is well."

"Leon!"

The steely glance from his boss meant it was useless to protest. Pulling his cell from his pocket, he called his second in command. "DiNozzo, Vance has new information. Tim and the kids are safe, false alarm. Take off for the day, all of you. We'll start fresh in the morning."

"Boss!"

"21." Rule 21, simply put, said to follow orders without asking questions.

"Will do, but under protest."

Gibbs disconnected and looked at Vance. "They're leaving and won't go any further with it."

"Good. You should go and I'll meet you at Tim's in two hours."

Gibbs had a bad feeling about that. "Anything we can do in the meantime?"

Vance shook his head, rubbing his eyebrow with his left index finger; Gibbs nodded, turned and left the office. Grabbing his weapon and jacket, he took a couple of other items from his desk. Rather than drive his car, he signed out an agency vehicle, calling his son as he drove off the Yard. "Tail is in use by the Marshals. Vance called off the NCIS protection detail and is meeting us at your place in two hours."

There was dead silence before Tim said, "You driving your car?"

"No, agency car. I just signed it out."

"Stop at the bank and get cash. Wipe out the family savings account, but only in cash. You're on my bank account if you have time withdraw mine too, including savings. Leave the siblings' account alone though please."

"Will do, I'll be there soon."
They'd opened a joint savings account a few months ago, to start saving for the kids' educations. Gibbs left a hundred dollars in that, took the rest in cash, and then emptied his checking and personal savings as well as Tim's. If nothing happened, they could re-deposit it all.

He pulled into Tim's driveway and when the garage door opened, drove forward. Tim was in the kitchen, feeding the kids. "I've got bags packed for us, but I didn't have time for you."

"Go bag's in the sedan and I'll pack more, be back in 15."

"Dad."

"Leon gave me a signal. As long as we're all together."

"Yeah ok. Love you."

"Me too."

Gibbs was glad he never sauntered anywhere; right now, he wanted to run down the sidewalk to his house. Once there, he quickly packed including photos of his parents, Shannon and Kelly, Tim and the kids, one of the team and one with Franks and Fornell. He was back at Tim's in fourteen minutes.

"You know, we don't know if they'll allow us to take our stuff."

"At least we'll have the cash."

Tim nodded and the two of them divided the cash between them, Gibbs insisting his son take two-thirds of it. "Just in case we're separated."

"I sure hope we're jumping to wrong conclusions."

"Makes sense, though, with Leon's warning. But I hope you're right; then we unpack and put the money back in the bank."

"I've been trying to think what this could be about."

Gibbs just shook his head. "Too many cases to think about."

Vance showed up nearly a half hour earlier than expected. He nodded to them and kissed the kids who had early baths and were in their jammies.

While Tim put Ty and Brynie to bed, Vance avoided Gibbs, wandering restlessly around the house. Finally, Tim returned to the living room and Vance started talking.

"I have not received orders to keep quiet, so here it is. From what little information I've been able to get, the inquiries into Tim's kidnapping by Joann Fielding, adoption by the McGees and your team's questions to the Navy about Tim's letters have caused a problem somewhere and DHS called in the Marshals. They'll be here in a few minutes. Don't know any more than that."

He reached into his jacket pocket, removing an envelope. "I pulled together what I could; IDs and passports for the four of you if you decide to go elsewhere. Backstories are included. Where are Rob and Sarah?"

"In the UK. Rob's in medical school, Sarah in a graduate program. We talk once a week, just spoke last night."

While his son was talking, Gibbs took the envelope from Leon and put it in his sea bag. 
Shoulders slumping, Tim looked at their boss, "What about Ellie? We're in a serious relationship with Leon; I don't want to hurt her."

"Tell the marshals but I don't think there will be anything they can do. And you know they're the ones responsible for the cover story." He looked at the luggage. "Good thinking. Need cash?"

"No, thanks, Leon. I drove an agency sedan home; it's here in the garage."

"All right, I'll worry about it later. Use burn phones to call, you know my emergency number?"

Both men shook their heads. "Yes but no, whatever this is, we won't endanger you or your family."

Tim took a deep breath, "What about Abby?"

The three men looked at each other and then Gibbs rolled his head around to release some of the tension before saying, "I need to leave her a message, something that sounds plausible so she won't freak out and try to track us."

He picked up his cell phone and punched Abby's work number. "Hey Abs, sorry this is last minute but couldn't say anything before. Tim and I are going to be away for a while. Don't worry; it's something that has to be done but not dangerous. Kids are safe; don't worry about them either. I'm counting on you to be strong; don't expect to hear from us. I know you can do this, Abs, I have faith in you."

He hung up and made a face. "That's not far from the truth."

Vance nodded. "Thank you. I also have an idea to keep her busy." He stood looking at them before throwing protocol out the window and wrapping his arms around both of them. "Stay safe, stay together, good luck, I'll watch over the others and hope and pray you're home soon. Damn proud of both of you."

They hugged back and he left, going out through the back gate to the alley behind the house where he'd left his car. The two men did more preparation, watching the sky grow darker, figuring the marshals would show when it was full dark. Shortly before 2100 hours, a van pulled into the driveway and two men walked to the front door.

Tim waited until they knocked and then spoke through the door. "Badges and IDs out where I can read them."

Those were presented and held up to the peephole. He opened the door to a question from one of the Marshals as they walked in, "You were expecting us?"

"You've been following me, right?"

"Not us specifically but yes, you've been under protection."

"So, yeah when Metro PD was called off we figured I was under a protection detail of some sort. What happens now? My children are asleep in bed."

The taller man shook his head, "We have orders to place you in Witness Protection and you've got to go tonight. I'm Tompkins, he's Davis."

"All of us are going?"

"You four."
"What about my girlfriend?"

"Is she here and have you said anything to her?"

"She's also a federal agent, knows I was being followed and probably that Metro and NCIS got pulled off."

Gibbs nodded. "Yeah, she knows that."

"No, just you four." He looked at the luggage. "Got anything with your names, address, anything personal?"

"Photos."

"No photos, letters or anything that can link you to anything here. Clothes, books, and toys for the kids that's it."

The other marshal started going through the bags, removing all of Gibbs' photos and stopping to look through the envelope from Vance. "You can keep this but if you decide to leave the program, let us know."

They nodded as Tim's suitcase and then the kids' were searched. The rejected photos were set around the living and family rooms as if they belonged; other rejected items were thrown on Tim's bed. Tim handed over his electronics: laptop, phone, iPad and other devices. He was allowed to take the portable DVD player, DVDs and what few CDs he still had. Gibbs handed over his phone without being asked for it, saying, "I don't have a computer or any other electronics."

Watching the men go through everything, Tim was very glad his latest book was due to be released in a week; the advance he'd been paid was a big part of the cash Dad had withdrawn and his royalty checks went straight into the siblings' joint account. He'd started doing that with his first check when they were still in recovery mode after years of poverty and he'd never stopped, withdrawing funds only when he truly needed something. There was also an offshore account that automatically received a percentage of each royalty check.

"Can you tell us why?"

"Not us, not now."

Later then, that gave them some hope. The Gibbeses went upstairs to get the kids, wrapping them in blankets and carrying them out to the van where they found safety seats for Ty and Brynie. After strapping them in, Tim settled between his children while Dad climbed into the seat in the back, their bags were loaded and they drove off into the night.
Chapter 2

Stopping at an airfield, they were escorted onto a plane with no markings, the safety seats coming with them, both kids still asleep. Once in the air, Tim tried to stay awake but his dad pulled him close. "Get some shuteye while the kids sleep. We're in good hands."

"You gonna sleep?"

"Don't I always sleep on a plane?"

Understanding the deflection to mean Dad would remain on guard while Tim slept, he kissed him and leaned back, one hand on Ty's blanketed foot. He managed a wan smile when he felt Dad take his other hand. At least they were together. He didn't want to think about anything else. Not until they knew more.

He jolted awake a couple of hours later and found his father reading a paperback book. At the raised eyebrow, Dad pointed to the storage pocket on the back of the seat in front of him. Tim looked in his and found a tiny deck of cards. Shrugging, he pulled his tray down, shuffled the cards and laid out a game of solitaire. Eventually, Dad got tired of reading and the two of them played rummy and gin rummy.

They'd been in the air about four hours when the plane started to descend. Tim wondered aloud where they were and Dad replied he hoped it was somewhere warm, with no snow.

"Hawaii maybe."

"Or Palm Springs?" They both snorted, knowing they hadn't been in the air long enough for either location.

"San Diego!"

One of the marshals turned around, "None of the above. We're landing near Albuquerque, New Mexico. For the next couple of days, you'll have a suite of rooms in the same building as our offices. Then you'll be moved into your new place. For the rest of tonight, try to get some sleep; you'll meet with the Chief Inspector later."

As they landed, Ty woke, crying. "Daddy, my ears hurt."

That woke Bryn; one of the marshals handed Tim a piece of gum for Ty and in a few minutes the little boy said his ears were better. Daddy and Poppy comforted the youngsters who were confused by their surroundings.

Tim mustered up a smile, hoping the dim lighting hid his worried eyes. "We're having an adventure! We'll get to our room in a few minutes, then you can go back to sleep."

"You too?"

"Yes, sweet pea, Poppy and I will be with you."

They were ushered into another unmarked panel van, the kids' seats and their luggage swiftly
stashed in the back. Driving for several minutes, they pulled up to a full security gate fronting an eight-story office building with lights twinkling in the windows here and there. Punching in a code, the gate lifted and they drove through an entrance to an underground parking garage. The marshals loaded their bags onto a wheeled cart and then one of them led the way, pushing the cart, Tim and Gibbs carrying the children while the second deputy marshal followed behind them.

An elevator took them to the fifth floor where they exited and walked down a dimly lit hallway. Marshal Davis stopped at a door and unlocked it, holding his arm out to indicate they should wait. Tim wondered just who was after them that they needed to exercise so much caution in a presumably safe building but rationalized that the marshals were probably always this cautious with their witnesses.

They heard the sound of drapes being pulled shut, then lights came on, rooms were cleared and they were told to enter. The first room they saw had a sofa, two overstuffed chairs, and a TV. There was one window, covered with blackout drapes. Off to the left side of the living area was an alcove with a microwave, toaster oven, coffeemaker, refrigerator, sink, a double cabinet overhead, and three below. A table with four chairs stood between the kitchen alcove and the living area. Down a hallway were two bedrooms. One had a toddler bed and a crib, a chest of drawers, closet and a rocking chair. Tim was glad someone thought to include a rocking chair. Across the hall, the second bedroom had two queen beds, two chests of drawers, closet and a half bath. The hallway and the suite ended at a full bathroom.

The marshals pointed out the old-fashioned wall phone and gave them a number to call after 7:00 AM local time. They left after showing them the cabinets and refrigerator, stocked with food and drink for them. They were not given a key to the front door as they were not allowed to leave; once they called, someone would come to escort them to the Chief Inspector's office.

Tim raised an eyebrow at his father when Tompkins settled in on the sofa; he supposed Davis was standing guard outside the suite. Gibbs just shrugged with a sigh. They tucked the kids in, kissing them good night again. When they were convinced Ty and Bryn were soundly asleep, both men crashed, asleep in minutes.

When Gibbs woke, he was surprised to find it was 0800 ET, hours beyond his usual 0500 routine. Although they hadn't gotten in until 0245, so maybe not that much of a surprise. As Tim looked like he was sleeping pretty solidly, Gibbs walked quietly out to the living room only to discover Davis asleep on the sofa. He frowned and then brightening, grabbed the coffeemaker and took it to their en suite bathroom. Back to the kitchen for the coffee and two mugs, then to the bedroom for the deck of cards and the book he'd been reading. He laughed to himself as he closed the bathroom door, the things he'd do for coffee!

He may have closed the door but the smell of fresh coffee still percolated through the bedroom and soon enough Tim was softly knocking on the door. "Dad, what are you doing?"

He walked in, laughing when he saw the setup. "Come on, let's move all this into the room, it'll be more comfortable. And there's a TV in there, we can watch the news."

Quietly they moved everything and for another couple of hours they watched the news, played cards, drank coffee and changed their watches to Mountain Time. When Tim's stomach growled, he took a container of yogurt from the refrigerator, found a spoon and reported that Davis was still asleep. The kids woke up at 0700; Tim got Bryn out of the crib and down the hall to the bathroom. Ty was next and finally Tim went into the main room and turned the lights on. Davis sat up immediately. "What time is it?"

"After 7, my kids need to eat breakfast."
"Sure; how long have you been awake? You should have woken me up."

Tim smirked, "We're feds too, just as used to crazy hours as you are. We were awake at 0600. Coffee's in the bedroom. You want any, grab a mug and help yourself."

He found a skillet, mixing bowl and a large spoon, calling out, "Anyone want pancakes?" Three eager faces quickly appeared. "We do!"

"Dad, there's bacon, want to get that going? I'm feeling the need for comfort food this morning."

Tim mixed the pancake batter and got a batch going while his dad found another skillet. Finding sippy cups, Tim poured juice, gave them to the kids, and then realized there wasn't a high chair or booster seat. Davis saw him look at the table and then around the room and guessed, "Kids need booster seats, right? I think they're in here..." he walked to what Tim thought was a coat closet, opened it and dragged out two booster seats. "Here you go. There's a double stroller in there too."

"Thanks." He secured the booster seats to two of the chairs. "Ok kids; let's get you settled in here."

"Daddy is dis a new house?"

"No, this is a hotel room we're staying in for a few days."

Ty looked at him, frowning. "I don' like 'otel rooms. Mama and Mum got took to be angels after a 'otel room."

Tim took both kids into his arms. "Yes they did, but this is a different kind of hotel room, a safer one. Poppy and I will be with you."

Ty's lower lip trembled but he nodded, burying his head on his father's shoulder. Bryn emerged a minute later, "M hungwy!"

Tim tweaked her nose, "Me too sweet pea."

With his head still buried between Tim's shoulder and neck, Ty mumbled his agreement. Tim resumed securing the kids into the booster seats and then went back to the stovetop to discover his dad had flipped the pancakes; they were nearly done. After a messy but tasty breakfast, Tim took the kids for their bath while Dad loaded the dishwasher. Once the kids were out, dried off and dressed, Poppy played with them while Daddy took a shower. After he was out and dressed, it was Poppy's turn. In the meantime, Davis and Tompkins had been relieved by two other deputy marshals, both outside the suite.

After placing the call for their meeting, Tim popped a DVD of the kids' favorite movie into the DVD player. When he'd first brought the kids home he'd scoffed at buying DVDs, saying he could just download movies for them. Then Uncle Tony showed up with a dozen DVDs of Disney classics and the kids' collection grew from there. Now Tim was thankful they had the DVDs; with no laptop, iPad or phone, things could have been difficult. He just wished he could tell Tony.

Ten minutes later, a third deputy marshal showed up. "Hello, I'm Booker, here to take the four of you upstairs for your meeting. We have a DVD player up there if you want to bring a movie for the kids. We'll have Marshal Maggie stay with the kids, but you'll be able to see them from the conference room."

Tim paused the movie. "Ty, Brynie, the four of us are going to a different room for a while and you can watch the movie there. Let's bring Thomas and Neigh with us too."
"Daddy, will you stay with us?"

"No, son but Poppy and I will be in a room right next to you. There are windows so we can see you and you can see us. But we have to do some work."

"Oh ok."

Poppy smiled, that was smart; the kids were used to Tim occasionally doing some work at home. As they followed the marshals to the elevator, he wondered how his team was doing.
Chapter 3

His team was not happy, to say the least. They'd been told McGee had been pulled in on a long-term undercover operation and Gibbs had taken the kids to parts unknown for safety. That was the story Homeland concocted and gave Vance, telling him to be glad they hadn't blown up the house and faked the deaths of all four Gibbses. He called the team, including Mallard and Palmer into his office, relieved that Ms. Sciuto was in court that day and likely the next.

After he put on his best poker face and told the story, there was dead silence. Palmer and Mallard looked concerned and a little confused. Chalmers' face was blank, Bishop frowned and DiNozzo just stared at Vance. He stared back, finally saying, "Rule 21."

"From you or Gibbs?"

"From your director."

"Using Gibbs' rules."

Vance shrugged and then said, "Agent DiNozzo, you have the team. You'll have a TAD by the end of the week," he raised his hand to hold off the protests he saw forming, "at least for the field; you'll need another agent with you out there."

DiNozzo gave an abrupt nod, agreeing to that. Vance dismissed them with a nod and wasn't surprised when Dr. Mallard stayed behind.

"Are they together – and safe?"

"I believe yes to both."

"Will we ever see them again?"

Vance took a breath, looked at the doctor and nodded. "I hope so."

"Will you tell Abigail? She'll need more convincing than Anthony did. He's a field agent and understands that some things may not be poked at or discussed. Abby has no such understanding, particularly where Jethro is concerned."

"She'd willingly endanger their lives?"

"She won't believe Gibbs can't fix whatever it is." Ducky sighed, "And it will do no good to relieve her of duty or suspend her. She will merely do her poking from elsewhere and you will have lost the ability to monitor her actions."

"Gibbs left her a message telling her not to worry. I also have an idea that might help her through this. Let me make some calls." Ducky nodded and left the office. Wincing at the time, Leon made his first phone call.

By the time the sun set that evening, he and Hetty Lange in the Los Angeles OSP had cobbled together several forensic classes to be taught on the West Coast by Abby Sciuto. That way Hetty
and her team could keep covert eyes on her. Her students would be NCIS and other federal agency forensic techs as well as college students. Hetty had also pulled strings to have Abby welcomed as a guest lecturer at several colleges and universities. The college lectures would be a week apiece, including labs; the employee training would be two weeks per session, with two sessions planned. Overall, Ms. Sciuto would be away from DC for three months. Vance hoped the recognition would distract her and the amount of preparation would keep her too busy to meddle.

He had to admit this could be very helpful to her career; he was happy to find a beneficial solution for his forensic scientist. He'd call her at home this evening, her first class would be Monday so she'd only have a few days to travel west and prepare. In the meantime, he'd call her vacation fill-in and hope she was available for the next twelve weeks!

Abby listened to Gibbs' message several times and decided to do what he asked, to the best of her abilities. His voice had been calm and relaxed; she'd do her best to be the same. When Vance called, she was surprised and then excited about his plans for her. While she hated leaving her lab, she was thrilled that her knowledge, contributions to cases, hard work, dedication, and education were finally being recognized.

Relieved at her enthusiastic response, Vance disconnected and resumed worrying about his agents and friends, wondering how their first day away was going.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

After showing Ty and Bryn the window to the room where he and Poppy would be, the two men handed the kids and the DVD off to 'Marshal Maggie', an older woman who in Tim's eyes looked like a stereotypical grandmother. After they were ushered into the conference room, Chief Inspector Stan McQueen introduced himself and another Deputy Marshal, a man incongruously named Marshall Miller, so he was Marshal Marshall Miller. Tim wished he thought it was funny while Gibbs ignored the name, glaring at McQueen. "Why are we here?"

"Because your investigation into the false reports of your infant son's death and his kidnapping involves a person of interest in a case near and dear to DHS. Your team has also been making inquiries into some lost letters to the Navy and that too has DHS's panties in a twist. Someone knows how you two operate, didn't think you'd back off so here you are. When they've busted the case, you can go home. This isn't going to be a lifetime deal."

Tim frowned. "What case and who is their person of interest?"

McQueen gave a short bark of sardonic laughter, completely unamused, "You're good, just like your old man."

"Thanks; what case and who is the POI?"

"Don't know and wouldn't tell you if I did. Now, here's what's going to happen."

They were to live in a rental home together, the four of them, under different names. Their new names and backstories were handed to them for study along with stacks of forms for each of them to read, initial and sign. One of the forms they signed stipulated there would be no attempts to contact anyone from their previous lives. If they did, they'd be kicked out of the program.

"The house won't be ready until the middle of next week; you'll be here until Tuesday or Wednesday. By then all of you need to be using your new names. As soon as the kids do that, they can start daycare and you two can look for jobs. Your work experiences are in your backstories. No law enforcement work and you," he turned to Tim, "can't take on work like teaching writing. You
can write but not the same series or about law enforcement. You'll need a different nom de plume and publisher. You," he swiveled back to Gibbs, "can do woodwork or whatever else you want to do. But no law enforcement for either of you."

Tim looked at his backstory. "I've taught? I can go out and get a teaching job without having a clue how to teach?"

"Yeah. You can teach math or science, but nothing to do with computers, forensics, criminal justice or creative writing."

Gibbs pursed his lips as he looked at his backstory, "I could teach shop."

"Uh huh and we'll provide references and letters of recommendation."

"What about a car? And my dad will need a workshop at the house."

Marshal Miller finally spoke, "There's a workbench in the garage of the house. And DHS is funding vehicles for you."

He smiled when both men looked surprised. He was amused that nothing else had phased them but they were surprised that the agency who'd forced them out of their lives would pay for a vehicle for each of them. He said as much and the older Gibbs made a noise, "Just tells us how much they wanted us out of their hair."

Tim nodded, softly saying, "Morrow and Fornell."

The Chief Inspector recognized the name Morrow, Senior Division Chief of DHS. He tilted his head, "If Fornell is FBI, that's who said you'd need a workshop; Morrow insisted on the vehicles."

Gibbs smiled, "Morrow is my former boss and he personally hired Tim to NCIS; Fornell and I share an ex-wife."

That got attention and he felt smug, especially because he could tell his son was vastly amused at his tactics. It wasn't going to change much but he was letting these people know they weren't their ordinary everyday garden-variety WITSEC witnesses.

Tim frowned, "What about online activities? Obviously, I'll stay away from anything about our former lives but please tell me I can at least have e-mail? I'll need that for job interviews and daycare anyway."

"Yes, that's another thing DHS insisted on, an upgraded laptop for you. Miller here will give you your e-mail addresses; those are the only ones you can use in WITSEC. You'll use our secured network and IP address; the FBI guy said for us to be prepared because you'll want to increase our security. Tell us what you want to do first, please. You're no longer federal employees so you can't see much about your former lives anyway. And no porn! You can download movies and TV shows but we have a block on anything rated X. Can't have that on our servers!"

Marshal Miller added, "You'll also have cell phones but they're no contract, you'll have to add minutes and you'll need to use a prepaid anonymous Visa card to do that. The phones have call, text, and camera capabilities with a decent memory and limited access to the internet. They're not very secure so be careful. By the way, they do have the ability to send photos, but do not, not even to each other; one of the forms covers that. No smartphones and no GPS. We'll give you both detailed paper maps of the area. Don't go more than 30 miles outside city limits without speaking with us first. That does not mean leaving a message; you'll need to speak with either Marshal Shepherd or myself, you'll meet Shepherd later. We're in charge of your protection and need to
"Questions?"

Tim sighed, "Yeah I have some. Where can we take the kids to play while we're here? They need fresh air; they'll never sleep if they don't burn off some of their energy and neither will we! We're both active adults, used to working long hours, sitting around in our rooms until the house is ready sounds like hell to me. What are we supposed to do?"

"We have a rooftop play area for the kids, it's safe and secure; there are picnic tables and a grill up there too so you can eat out and have all the fresh air you need, even a small garden if pulling weeds makes you feel better. I believe we still have squash growing, help yourself to that and I know there are two or three pumpkins left. There's also a gym and pool in the basement here."

"Good to know; we had a vegetable garden at home, growing tomatoes, peas, squash, and pumpkins. Everything is done except the hardier squashes and pumpkins."

Marshal Miller nodded, "Different climate here. We get a little snow every year; the average is 11 inches. We didn't have any snow in October this year, but November has a 45% chance and December rockets up to 85%. Nothing like the mid-Atlantic though."

Gibbs quirked his lips, "Finally, some good news! What about seeing the city while we're here?"

Miller nodded, "Yes, as a matter of fact, that's something Marshal Shepherd or I usually do. Would you like to do that before naps today?"

Tim stood and watched the kids through the glass, "Actually, tomorrow morning would be better if that works with your schedule. I need to get them upstairs to the play area today before they get any wigglier than they are. And who do we see about grocery shopping?"

"That's Marshal Shepherd and me. I'll take the list today as she's working on getting your new home ready. The Marshal's Service just acquired the house and it's being renovated, but not fast enough."

Gibbs' eyes lit up, "Any carpentry that needs doing? Love to help with that."

Tim added, "And I can do the wiring."

"You licensed as an electrician?"

Tim nodded, "As Timothy Gibbs."

Chief Inspector McQueen shook his head, "No to both of you, sorry. It's an intriguing idea but you know, a federal agency, we'd have to get permission and by the time we had the request into the Powers That Be, the house will be done."

Miller smiled, "But if you want to work construction, Mr. Hull, there's plenty going on!"

Gibbs looked surprised, "I can do that."

"And you, young Mr. Hull, you can get your electrician's license here if you want."

Tim nodded, "Might come in handy, especially if I bomb out teaching!"

Dad snorted, "You won't bomb out; you're great at training!"
"Adults not kids, and training is different from teaching. Sort of."

"If you say so, Brian."

"I do, Mark."

Dad smiled, "Love the name!"

Tim looked through the window to the playroom, "Movie is just about over and Tommy and little Brinley are already bored. Brinley?"

"She's not quite 2, right? For very young children we try to use the same first letter of their former names."

Tim blinked, "This is their second name change in less than a year."

"Yeah, we know, can't be helped. So, the Hull family, Mark the grandfather, Brian the adult son, Tommy and Brinley, his children. Mark, what was your wife's name and do you have other children?"

"Samantha and yes, we had a daughter, uh, Kathleen, who died with her mother in a boating accident."

"Good. Brian, tell me about the kids' mother."

"Her name was Jamie and she died shortly after Brinley's first birthday. She was a librarian. Uh, well Deeny and Sue both loved books so I guess that works."

"Maiden names of both mothers?"

Tim had caught a glimpse on the backstory, "My mother's was Turner and that's my middle name. My wife's was Mason and it's Tommy's middle name."

"Other family?"

Tim shook his head, suddenly swamped by emotion as everything started to close in. Sarah, Rob, and Geordie had just been wiped from his life along with his brother Patrick, lost so many years ago. His kids' two mothers had been morphed into one individual, Ellie wasn't even mentioned nor were Tony, Jimmy, Breena, Victoria, Ducky, Bob, Abby, Lara or the Vances. Dad pulled him close, "Please God it'll only be temporary, son. And not saying their names does not mean we forget them, none of them, not ever!"

Tim nodded, "I know, but we can't even say their names in front of the kids. None of our family, not Grandpa Mac or Grandpa Jack or Uncle Tony. Dad, I lost everyone but Sarah once, I don't know if I can do this again."

"You lost your memory. You have them this time."

"I lost them physically too. Patrick and Dad McGee. I lost my childhood and now…" He sat down heavily on one of the chairs, breathing heavily.

His father sat next to him and talked to him softly while the other two quietly left the room. Miller detoured to the kids' room where he was cheerfully greeted by Marshal Maggie. The kids hung back, not sure who this was and where Daddy and Poppy were. When Tim heard his little girl calling for him, he shot up and raced out of the room, his father on his heels.
"I'm here, Sweet Pea, Snuggly Boy, and so is Poppy." Ty was trying to be brave but his little shoulders relaxed when he was pulled into Daddy's arms. "We're here sweeties, sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

When the children were calm again, they were introduced to Mr. Miller. Ty stuck out his hand, "Hello, I'm Ty."

"Hmm, I think I'm going to call you 'T', is that all right?" Ty's dad was smiling so Tyler nodded yes.

Brynie usually gave kisses when meeting people and she thought this person was all right but everything was suddenly different and she didn't know. She held her hand out for a shake and Mr. Miller shook it. "'M Brynie."

"Is it all right if I call you 'B'?" She looked at Daddy who was smiling so she agreed.

"Ok."

Tim thought they just might be able to handle the name changes.

While he went up to the roof to check out the deck, Poppy took the kids back to their suite, first getting a key from Marshal Miller who handed him two, saying, "We've met, now I know I can trust you not to take off."

Gibbs huffed, "Not easy to do with two little ones."

By the time the kids used the bathroom, Tim was back and they all brightened up when he announced it was time for some fun. Gibbs realized the marshals had never answered Tim's question about what they were supposed to do while waiting for the house. Huh.

Poppy grabbed sweaters while Tim made sandwiches and packed them into an insulated bag he found underneath the kitchen sink. Adding juice boxes, a few cookies and apple slices, an orange and banana for the adults, they were ready to go. Holding hands, they informed their guard that they were going up to the roof to play. Ty giggled, "On the roof, like Rudolph and Santa!"

Into the elevator and out on the very top floor, the kids' (and Poppy's) eyes widened as they took it all in. The roof was huge, the edge of it surrounded by an 8 ft. tall Plexiglas fence. Poppy could see a smaller fence in front of it that created a 'no man's land' close to the edge and Tim said there were sensors that would set off alarms if anyone got too close to the edge.

There was a large swatch of lawn, raised beds set on mulched ground with flowers and some late season vegetables and pumpkins in them. A double swing set and slide were close by and Tim spotted a set up for net games such as badminton, tennis or volleyball. A few trees were near the center, just tall enough to provide a wide shady spot with a fountain just big enough for small feet to wade in, two picnic tables, a faucet, a grill and a fire pit.

A metal storage shed sat on the right side. When they investigated they found a croquet set, badminton rackets, net and shuttlecocks, a ping pong table on wheels, complete with net, paddles and balls and a bowling game with 'pins' made from soda bottles and decorated to look like gnomes. Further exploration uncovered two big wheels and tiki torches that were in reality LED light poles.

Putting their lunch on one of the shaded picnic tables, they took the big wheels out of the shed, wiped them off, the kids climbed on and took off. Dad and Poppy ran after them, getting some exercise. They did several laps of the deck of the roof before Ty stopped at the lawn. "Daddy, can
we play slip 'n slide?"

"Let's do that after lunch. Then we can get all messy." Tim had a container of baby wipes with him but he was hoping the temperature would go up a few more degrees. It wasn't quite sweater weather but it wasn't very warm either. "How about a game of tag?"

"Yay!" Both kids loved to chase whoever was 'it' and played it frequently with Victoria and their daycare friends.

"Ok, I'm it, you two catch me. Here I go!" Tim took off at a brisk walk which quickly turned into a genuine run as his little speed demons nearly caught him. He hid behind the trees, the shed and their grandfather, but they always found him! After nearly 30 minutes of leading them down one path or another, Ty tagged his daddy and the kids decided it was Poppy's turn. Poppy was just glad the kids had already run off some of their energy.

While Poppy and the kids ran, Tim went back to the trees. They weren't very tall, maybe 14 feet, just perfect for two little kids to be lifted up into them. Except he didn't want to teach them how to climb, not yet. The kids had been with him for a little over 6 months and they'd grown and developed a lot in that time. Ty figured out how to pronounce 'th', while Brynie mastered "Ls" although both regressed a little when scared, overly tired, or stressed. They were taller; Ty looked more like a preschooler than a toddler and Bryn was losing her baby self, looking more like a young toddler. Their father was just glad he'd experienced them as young as they'd been when he brought them home.

The kids were hungry; everyone's hands and faces were cleaned and the four of them sat on the lawn to eat. Picnic table benches also needed booster seats and neither Daddy nor Poppy thought to bring them. They were surprised when they took their shoes off and stepped on the lawn; it wasn't real grass. Nevertheless, it was soft and green, perfect for two little kids rolling around with their father and grandfather.

Before naps, the kids had their slip and slide and wore themselves and their dad out quite nicely. Poppy wished their new cell phones were charged so he could take photos, thinking he'd caption them, Exile, Day One.

After naps, they went back to the roof and played in the wading pool while the adults took turning playing with them and getting in more exercise. This time the cell phones were ready and several photos were taken. Tim walked, ran, pulled weeds and eyed the roller skates they'd found in the shed. Deciding this was not a good time to risk a twisted ankle or worse, he went back to running. He was amused when Ty started counting every time he ran by the pool; his steps were adding up on his watch, a stripped down model of a smart watch that he'd built with help from Ellie. He had apps on it but as they didn't access the internet, he was allowed to keep it.

When he got close to his distance goal, he slowed down and came to a halt by the pool. While the afternoon had warmed up enough for the kids to wade, it was already cooling down.

"Ok, that's enough water for today. We'll come back up here to play tomorrow and if it's warm enough, you can swim again."

Ty raised his arm in a fist pump, "Yes!"

Poppy raised his eyebrows, "Maybe I'll cook our dinner up here some night. We'll have yummy, grilled chicken in our apartment!"

The kids chattered about playing on the roof all the way back to the room while Poppy and Daddy
decided that once the kids were asleep, they could take turns getting a swim or time in at the gym. They stopped to ask one of the marshals who said the fitness center was open until midnight.

Poppy took his turn first. After kissing the kids goodnight, he changed into his swim trunks, threw a pair of sweatpants and tee shirt over them, grabbed one of their beach towels, dug out one of the keys and slipped out the door. The facility was easy to find as it took up most of the basement and there were people in the pool and gym. He knew it was a private facility and figured everyone in there was an employee of the US Marshal's Service. He decided tonight he'd swim and tomorrow he'd work out. The Olympic sized pool was a little cool, perfect for lap swimming.

When he'd done enough laps to be able to sleep, he dried off as much as he could, throwing his towel around him and making a mental note to bring his gym bag and dry clothes next time; he could shower down here. When he returned to the suite, he told his son whatshisname, Brian, and he threw dry clothes in a bag along with a towel. Tim swam his laps in a daze, still trying to come to grips with everything that had happened.

Chapter End Notes

1) In this story the Marshals Service and WITSEC are part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), not the Department of Justice (DOJ), see below.

2) I would call this a 'borrow' more than a crossover with "In Plain Sight". If you've never seen the show, no worries, the characters only interact with the NCIS characters. The marshals assigned to our family are Marshal Mary Shepherd (real surname Shannon) and Marshal Marshall Miller (real surname Mann). Their boss is Chief Inspector Stan McQueen and there are three or four other marshals, all OCs. I had the story all outlined with OC marshals when I realized there was a whole show I could pick from, one I used to watch regularly. Most of the rules and operations they use here came from my head.

3) WITSEC is the United States Federal Witness Protection Program, also known as the Witness Security Program which is a witness protection program administered (in real life) by the United States Department of Justice.
Chapter 4

Having first checked with Vance, DiNozzo drove to Alexandria after work to make sure the homes his family had been forced to vacate were secure. He wasn't surprised to see Bishop's car in Tim's driveway; parking at Gibbs', he walked down the sidewalk.

She was in the living room and turned when he walked in. "These pictures don't belong here."

Tony picked one up and smiled, "Gotta love the Gibbses, they always find ways to communicate."

"I don't understand."

"These came from Gibbs' house, from the mantle and bookcases. I can see it: they must have decided to pack up just in case. You know, because we were called off the protection detail, Metro too. Boss knew the tail car belonged to the Marshal's Service. Tim's here, he packs up the kids' clothes, toys, and books. You been upstairs yet?"

She shook her head.

"Come on, I bet there are a lot of things missing."

She followed him upstairs, blinking at the mess in the kids' rooms. "Tim would never do this."

"Sure he would if he was about to be forced away from home. He wouldn't stop to clean up the mess, Ellie. Not just because they didn't know how long they had but also to leave a message for us. They had time to pack; they were not expecting trouble. I'll bet that if we looked at their financials, we'd see some hefty cash withdrawals yesterday. That would be Gibbs on his way home. Probably came here to give Tim the cash, then went home and packed his own bags. And he included photos. If they weren't allowed, they'd probably be left behind at Tim's so we'd know they were together, the four of them. And now we do."

"I hope I would have gotten all that eventually."

"You would have gotten it right away if you weren't upset and all gaga about Tim."

She looked at him, "That obvious?"

"Mm, he's my best friend; he might have said something about it. If he hasn't said the words, I know he's crazy about you."

"We were trying to take things slowly, you know with my divorce and the disaster with Delilah and Tim adjusting to being a father. But we've said we love each other, we've even said the "M" and "B" words."

"B? Babies? Yikes!"

"Well, baby. One thing at a time but Brynie's almost two and three years between siblings sounds about right."

"Wow…so uh, this little interlude might stretch that a bit."

"Or I could go to the Massachusetts Cryobank and get started."
"Bishop!"

She smirked, "I'm kidding…maybe." She looked at Tony, "Vance doesn't seem too worried."

"Doesn't mean he isn't. Anytime people are taken out of their homes by the U.S. Marshals, we should worry. Even if it's supposedly for their own good. I'm gonna look at Tim's room."

The master suite was also a mess although not as chaotic as the kids' rooms. As Tony sorted through clothes that were apparently discarded, he felt something in a pocket and fished for it. It was a thumb drive and Tony slipped it into his own pocket as Ellie joined him.

"You found something?"

"Yes. First, his Ohio State tee shirt was on top of the pile, kind of half folded, half thrown. He and I exchanged college tee shirts one Christmas, just for fun. He wasn't allowed to take it, probably because of the connection to me and it was the only shirt with a name or logo on it. Second is a thumb drive in one of his shirt pockets. I've never seen him put one in a shirt pocket, have you?"

"No, he doesn't like to put anything in his shirt pockets, says he's geeky enough. He puts them in his laptop case; he has a bag in there that locks. But his laptop and the case aren't here, nor are his other electronics."

"Yeah, figures they'd be confiscated."

She looked around the room and focused on the top of the dresser, "He switched watches."

"What?"

"Look, this is his smartwatch. He has another one, a stripped down version that only does standalone things like counting his steps and reminding him of calendar events. It has memory but no internet access, no GPS. I don't see it here; bet they let him take it."

"Does that mean anything? Nothing to track him with, not that we would but still…"

"He built that watch a few months ago and I helped him. It's significant to me and he'd know that. And it means he had some time to prepare, to think about what messages to leave us and what to take."

She looked up, "What about the rent?"

Tony shrugged, "Vance will let us know if we need to pack everything again."

"And Gibbs' house?"

"I'm thinking I might sell or rent my place and move in there. I'll pay the property taxes and insurance; keep an eye on both homes."

"What if it's dangerous to live there?"

Tony thought about that, "I'll run it by Vance."

"Good."

They both took photos before putting everything away. Back in Ty's room, they found alphabet blocks that had been put together to say, "J T T AND B LOVE E UT UR AS UG GM GD JBVBP AA MB L TV."
"Look, he figured it would be us and they sent a message for all of us."

"Who are UG, MB, JBVBP and TV and what about Rob and Sarah? Oh, UG is Uncle Geordie and MB is Mister Bob."

Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah and JBVBP is Jimmy, Breena, Victoria and B…oh, baby Palmer. TV…well the L is for Lara so TV must be the Vances. As for Rob and Sarah, the four siblings have a joint savings account and Tim's royalty checks are automatically deposited. I bet they didn't take any money out of it so the siblings would be all right financially. I wonder if Geordie will come home."

"That would be great for Sarah and Rob; Geordie hasn't been stateside in 3 years." She thought for a minute, "Tim told me last week his latest book is supposed to be released in three weeks, two weeks now."

"That's good, helps the cover if plans don't change and it means the account will be fed soon. I think his federal paycheck might go in there too. For now, he's officially undercover, don't know whether he gets paid or not." He sighed, "Fornell might know about Gibbs' financial arrangements. I'll see if I can find out anything."

"Come on, we're done in here, let's check the kitchen."

The kitchen was neat as a pin, the dishwasher held clean dishes. Tony snorted, "Only McGee, I mean Gibbs Jr., would make sure he left clean dishes."

"Probably because most people don't have time, they're on the run."

"Yeah, something about that, I can't put my finger on it. Ok, we're done here, you have a key?"

Ellie nodded and Tony held up his. "We keep them until ordered to give them up."

"Right!"

"I'm gonna check Boss's place, you coming?"

"Yes."

"Let's move your car…oh we forgot the garage!"

They went into the garage and blinked in surprise at the agency sedan. Tony laughed at the note on the dashboard, "TD, get back to NY. TLJG."

"Why the 'T'?"

"Thanks."

They found the keys in a kitchen drawer and checking the trunk saw Gibbs' go bag was gone. "Hope he took more than that!"

Ellie nodded. They locked up the house, first making sure the system running the lights, heat, and air conditioning was still functioning, and then she moved her car into the alley behind Gibbs' house. They found a smaller mess upstairs in Gibbs' room. Tony looked around, "I don't think anyone but Boss was in here."

Ellie held up a shirt she'd found neatly folded on top. "Then he was the one who left this."
Tony nodded with a small smile, "Figures he'd leave that for us to find. Said it last time he left too." The lettering on the shirt spelled "Semper Fi".

They took photos and folded everything else; Tony said he'd put them away next time he came over. He knew Boss wouldn't be thrilled with Bishop putting things in his underwear drawer. They headed down to the basement and DiNozzo smiled as he saw the empty spaces where Boss's favorite tools usually hung. They weren't on the workbench or near the almost finished toys he'd been working on; he must have taken them with him. They weren't at Tim's so he guessed the marshals had allowed them. That was good news; at least one of the Gibbsses would retain his sanity!

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Friday afternoon after the city tour, Marshal Maggie arrived to stay with the kids while their father and grandfather went for their 'makeovers'. Both would wear colored contact lenses to change the color of their eyes, Gibbs from blue to brown, Tim from green to hazel. Gibbs' hair was dyed a rich brown and the Marine cut, luckily shaggy, was banished for something stylish but comfortable for the older man. Tim's hair was colored almost black and shaped a little differently; he was told to come back in a month to have it fully styled. Both would wear glasses full time. Tim's had a very slight correction in them while his dad suddenly found he could see a lot better. Tim had to bite his tongue to keep from reminding him that Ducky had been telling him that for years.

By midmorning Saturday, the Gibbs men were restless, taking care of the children their only focus. While the littles were happy to spend their day playing on the rooftop with their father and grandfather nearby, the adults needed more variety and their time in the gym and pool in the evenings wasn't enough. Tim had his new laptop, already had a few story ideas outlined and surfed the web looking for stuff for the kids but he wasn't yet cleared to download and the only people he was allowed to e-mail were his father and the marshals. Once they met new people, they could be added but for now, the list was limited.

Gibbs hadn't set up his e-mail account yet, probably wouldn't until he started the hunt for a job. He was also missing his workshop. He'd spent some time going through his tools and cleaning them; he'd stuck a couple of the smaller toys he'd been making for his grandkids in with his tools and he really wanted to get back to work on them or anything!

Marshal Miller noted their changing moods and stepped in. "We've received the money for your vehicles if you want to go car shopping."

He chuckled as two faces lit up and Tim asked. "What kind of funds are we talking about?"

After hearing the amount, the two excused themselves for a conference. Tim wanted to split the money in half while Gibbs disagreed. "You get what you need for the children and their stuff; we can trade cars like we did at home. Or I'll get an extended cab pickup so either vehicle is kid safe. Either way, yours is gonna cost more."

Tim stood in thought and then turned to Miller. "Marshal, are we allowed to have electronics in the cars? If not, we're stuck buying really old vehicles or if you'll allow it, I can remove the GPS and other electronics."

"You can have a clock, AM/FM radio, CD and DVD players. No GPS and no links for any devices that can download or use satellite, etc. We have mechanics who will remove anything once you have the vehicles."

"They have experience?" At Miller's nod, Tim continued, "All right. Dad, I'm going to start car
shopping online; same criteria I used last spring except I won't have the Boxster to trade in. Won't have any trade-in. Might go for a few years older. Want me to look for your truck too?"

"Yeah but I want to look online with you."

"All right, we can look for your truck during naps and my car tonight."

"Or I can watch the kids after naps and you can have the time to look. Then we can test drive them tomorrow." He turned to Miller, "Does that work for you?"

"Sure."

Tim frowned, "When are your days off?"

Miller chuckled, "My partner and I find that new witnesses tend to have more issues on weekends, so we generally work weekends and then we're off Tuesdays and Wednesdays. This week you'll be moving on Wednesday so we're splitting days. I'm off Tuesday and Friday, Shepherd will be off Thursday and Friday."

"Fluid schedule."

"Goes with the job."

The Gibbses huffed at that, how well they knew!

"If we get WiFi up here, I can get started now."

Miller shook his head, "No WiFi on the roof. There's a scrambler in use whenever anyone is up here and it doesn't play well with our WiFi. He looked at Tim, "Porsche Boxster?"

"Yeah, second income pays a lot more than federal."

"Second...oh writing! Wow, a Porsche, nice!"

Tim smiled, "Yeah had a lot of fun with her. But you know, time to grow up, especially with two babies, no room for car seats in a 2-seater."

"Guess not. For your car search, I'm going to give you a generic sign on to use rather than your new id. That way anyone snooping won't automatically think it's someone new to WITSEC."

"Thought your system is airtight?"

Miller gave him a look, "I've seen your history, you know that 'airtight'/ top security, whatever you want to call it, only works until a more determined or talented hacker comes along. And yeah, you're here to be out of DHS's way and to keep you all safe, you're lower risk than most of our witnesses, but we're not taking any chances."

Talking about hacking made Tim think of the job he'd been forced to leave, manager of Cyber Crimes and he nodded quietly. He'd really been enjoying his new role, changing things that needed changing, strengthening other things. Idly he wondered if he could score another position like that when they were freed from the Marshals Services' tender loving care. Vance would have hired someone else for NCIS but maybe the FBI; he probably didn't have enough experience for the NSA and he wasn't at all sure he wanted to work for them. He shook it off, things to think about in the future.

After their picnic lunch, the family returned to the suite for naptime. The kids tucked in, Tim
grabbed his laptop and joined his father at the table. "Ok, know what you want?"

"A Ford half-ton with an extended cab."

"Great, that's specific. Do you care about color, exterior, interior? Four Wheel or All Wheel drive? Radio, CD? Year?"

"Year really depends on the mileage, want something under 100,000. Need to consider safety features though so maybe anything from 2005 on up. Color, dark interior, no white for the exterior, otherwise I don't care. Yes to either four wheel or All Wheel drive. Full back seats, none of the jump-seat looking things I've seen. Radio's fine, CD's ok, I brought the ones I have, power locks and windows so I can have those rear door and window locks like you have on the Acura."

"Good, that's plenty to get started. You want to drive the keyboard?"

His father laughed, "Heck no, we'll be here all week!"

"Just checking. Ok, we log in as Rocky Hourrer, huh, cute."

"Mm, oh the Rocky Horror Show, yeah that's clever."

They stopped to look up the new zip code for use in their search and then Tim set up the truck search. He left the price out of the criteria; first, he wanted to see what was available. He gave a low whistle at the search results. "Apparently used pickups are popular here! Look at that!" The results showed a long list of vehicles and dealers.

"Willing to buy from a private party?"

"Rather go to a dealer."

"And we want a history, carfax or whatever the dealers use."

It took some time to comb through and compare mileage, condition, price and the other criteria but finally they had it down to three trucks at two dealerships.

As Ty and Brynie were still asleep, Tim started setting up the search for his vehicle. Safety record, mileage, condition, variable year, interior color, price. He ended up with a results list that was easily winnowed down to three vehicles.

Late Sunday morning the five of them set out in one of the Marshals' SUVs. They'd mapped out the dealerships and called to confirm the vehicles were still available. By Sunday evening, two additional vehicles were parked in the underground garage.

Poppy's choice was a 2005 dark blue F-250 XL SuperCab with a full backseat for the kids and a hard shell locked cover for the bed of the truck. The original owner had ordered it without GPS. There were power locks and windows and the music system was CD and radio, all of which suited Poppy just fine. With only 57,600 miles on it, he thought when they were able to go home he'd take the truck with him. Who knew what was happening with his other trucks and car?

Tim's choice was a 2012 deep red Buick Enclave. The #2 safest SUV for its model year, the first was too expensive. It had everything they would be able to keep as well as the electronic systems that had to be removed. Marshal Miller had already talked with the mechanics who would remove the electronics; they were scheduled to do the work the next day. Tim was glad to have wheels again. He wasn't in love with it but it would do. He wondered what was happening with his Acura.
Chapter 5

DiNozzo spoke with Ducky over the weekend and was relieved to find him in full support of the plan to move into Gibbs’ house. Ducky wasn’t quite sure about Ellie’s similar decision but supposed it would be fine. He was heartened to find that both agents believed the Gibbses would return home in the not too distant future; he just hoped they were right.

Meeting with Director Vance first thing Monday morning, DiNozzo and Bishop presented their plans. Their hope and determination to keep positive attitudes made Vance feel better; he’d been preoccupied with the situation since his last talk with his senior Team Lead and CCU Manager. He knew people were actually released from WITSEC although he couldn’t think of any he’d heard about. Although that was the whole idea - discretion and secrecy.

“I’ll call Senior Division Chief Morrow this morning and let you know. For what it’s worth, I hope you’ll be able to do this and I’m sure Jethro and Timothy would be very happy to know you’re living in their homes, taking care of them. I’ll help both of you move and let me know if there’s anything I can do beyond that.”

Both agents nodded in thanks. DiNozzo cleared his throat, “There’s an agency sedan in Tim’s garage with a note from Boss asking me to return it to the Navy Yard. If Morrow clears us, I’ll go over tonight and drive it in tomorrow.”

Vance made a face, “Gibbs told me about it; with everything going on I forgot. Thanks, DiNozzo, appreciate it, but do it this morning, no reason to use your own time.”

After they left, he called Morrow. Tom was hesitant to approve. “I need to check with our team, Leon. The danger is specific to the Gibbses, so your agents Bishop and DiNozzo should be all right, but I want to make sure our POIs aren’t about to instigate drive by shootings or home invasions.”

“I understand, Tom, thanks. Any idea how much longer?”

“We’re moving faster now that we don’t have to sidestep the other issues but it’s a big case and we want to wrap it all up at once.”

“I see, so more than a few weeks.”

“I’d love to say it’ll be all over in the next month or so but we both know how these things go. I’m just damn sorry the Gibbses were caught in the mess. I have a status meeting in an hour; I’ll raise the question and let you know as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, Tom, appreciate your help.”

“Least I can do.” Morrow hung up the phone feeling as depressed as he had when he’d given the
order to have the Gibbs family put into Witness Protection. He’d fought against it for weeks, had pulled Tobias Fornell in to help him make his case only to find the FBI agent reluctantly agreeing with the DHS team. The Gibbeses were at risk and there were two very young children involved. Their suspect, Tom only used the less accusatory Person of Interest tag outside the team, was a stone cold killer; had already injured and killed with no hesitation. When Tobias said Jethro didn’t have it in him to continue after losing a second family, Tom realized how right he was. Timothy was in the same boat, having lost his adopted parents, brother, his birth mother and sister.

When Tobias arrived a few minutes early for the weekly status meeting, he was called into Morrow’s office. He was amused that Director Vance and Senior Division Chief Morrow both seemed to regard him as part ‘theirs’. Now when Morrow told him of Vance’s call and the agents’ request, Fornell shook his head. “No, it’s too soon. They’ve only been gone five days, either could be away on cases, undercover operations, anything like that and the kids staying with friends or even family, we don’t know if they’ve researched the kids’ background or how thoroughly. We need another couple of weeks to establish they’re gone. And we need to move the cars into secured storage. Once that’s done and with time passing, then having ‘new’ people move in will be more believable. We should probably put a ‘For Rent’ sign up for a few days.”

Morrow sighed, “All right, I see your point, I’ll let Leon know.”

Vance wasn’t surprised at Morrow’s response, he himself thought it was too soon but he was in the dark about the case or cases that were driving this and no one was willing to enlighten him. Waiting a month was doable as he told DiNozzo. He also informed him that DHS would be moving all three vehicles to a secured parking facility and told him to make sure the NCIS sedan didn’t get into their hands. Who knew how much red tape they’d have to go through to get it back!

DiNozzo and Chalmers headed over to Alexandria before lunchtime. Bob backed the agency sedan out of Tim’s garage, intent on delivering it to the Navy Yard. As he drove down E. Laurel Ave., Bob spotted an old Crown Victoria parked against the curb, the person in the driver’s seat sitting and watching. As he continued down the street, he swore he could feel eyeballs boring into his back; the watcher was a little too interested in his departure. He called DiNozzo who was in the alley behind Tim’s house.

Thinking fast, Tony grabbed the bag with what he and Tim called their ‘Ready Freddy Gear’, plain ball cap, plain jacket, printed adhesive labels Tim kept in stock, small mirror, clipboard, pen, generic form and one of Tim’s favorite stealth toys, a tiny camera. Attaching that onto the clipboard and peeling off the backing of two of the sticky labels, a fake company logo, and putting them on the jacket and ball cap, he was ready to go. Today he was posing as an employee of a local water company.

He walked down the alley to the street, turned left and went around the corner as if he’d just emerged from the yard of the house next to Tim’s. Stopping as if to check the address, he used the palm-sized mirror to find the Crown Victoria. Not that it was difficult to do, the car stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, a large, old, brightly polished blue sedan with out of state plates. He memorized the plate number, wrote it down and then disappeared around the back of the house. Walking to the other end of the house, he used the telescopic lens on the tiny camera to capture images of the car, license plate, and the driver.

He didn’t bother returning to the sidewalk, disappearing through the back gate. Once in his car, he decided not to send the photo, he’d wait until he got back to the office. He thought about sending the plate number to Bishop but refrained as NCIS was not supposed to be involved. Turning to put everything down, he shook his head to find a guy wearing a jacket with the standard “Federal Agent” lettering standing outside his car. Tony recognized him from a joint operation a few years
back. “Good, if you’ll show me your badge and id, I have info for you.”

The guy looked surprised but did as he asked.

“You probably know this but there’s someone watching the street and probably the houses. Here’s the plate number.” He handed it to the man, adding, “My director sent us over to pick up one of our agency sedans which was parked in Agent Gibbs’, the younger Gibbs, garage. He said you were going to move their cars and we didn’t want to lose the sedan. I have a photo too; shall I send it straight to you or someone else?”

While he spoke, Tony hated himself for cooperating like this. It should be an NCIS case! But if it meant his family would be safer and could return home sooner, he’d do anything.

“Send it to Agent Fornell. Thank you Agent DiNozzo, this is very helpful.”

Finding the words he wanted to say stuck in his throat; Tony nodded and drove back to the office. If he was unusually quiet that afternoon, no one mentioned it. He let Vance know about Bob’s discovery and his own actions. Vance nodded and patted him on the back, as curious, worried, upset, and depressed as his agent.

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On Monday, the Gibbs’ family borrowed the kids’ car seats from the Marshals, installed them in the pickup and went shopping for the first time as the Hull family. Marshal Shepherd had furniture set aside for them to choose and then they had personal shopping to do. Marshal Miller rode behind them in an SUV, waiting outside the stores while they shopped.

At the furniture store, Tim went to the Customer Service Desk, “Hello, I’m Brian Hull. Our designer Mary Shepherd asked my father and me to make a selection of some furniture she set aside for our new house.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Hull, we’ve been expecting you. If you’ll follow me?” The woman caught sight of the children in the double stroller and smiled, “Oh they’re lovely, look just like you.”

Tim gave her a genuine smile, “Thank you.”

“Now I think Ms. Shepherd’s first items were these sofas. The fabric will be treated so it won’t stain but she liked both patterns and decided to have you make the final decision.”

Dad and the kids joined him and they stood looking. Tim liked one but not the other and saw his dad felt the same way. He looked at the kids, “Thomas, Brinley, which one do you like?”

Bryn pointed at the same one they liked, “That one, Daddy.”

Ty nodded, “Me too.”

Over the past three days, they’d been practicing their new names. To Tim’s relief, the kids considered it a game and loved that he and Poppy also had new names. The only hiccup was the name Tommy. When Ty made a face at the name, Tim pointed out that it was a nickname for Thomas and he loved Thomas the Tank Engine.

Ty smiled, “I’m Thomas!”

“Not Tommy?”
“No, I like Thomas because he’s my friend.”

When Tim told Miller, he laughed, “That’s fine, an easy fix. We’ll give you your final documents before you move on Wednesday.”

And with that, Tyler Dean Gibbs became Thomas Mason Hull. And Suzanna Bryn Gibbs became Brinley Carolyn Hull, which amused Tim no end. He’d done a lot of research into Deeny and Sue’s childhoods and Carolyn was the name of the mother of the neighbor who’d raised Deeny after her parents were killed. It was a tiny oddity that Tim didn’t bother mentioning but he would tell Bryn when she got older.

They called each other by their new names. The kids had fun, calling Poppy “Mark” and Daddy “Brian”. Both adults knew their new life history well enough to carry on a conversation although Tim said that all they needed to say was both their wives were deceased and that should kill any chance of further discussion. He made sure he knew what schools he’d attended and the college from which he’d graduated. He’d never heard of it but that was fine, probably meant no one else had either. After checking with Marshal Shepherd who they’d finally met during their city tour on Friday, he googled the college and his new name, studying the information carefully. He laughed when he saw reviews from the last class he’d supposedly taught: most were positive but the creator of his record was careful to include some negative ones as well. Apparently, he stuttered, was sarcastic and flailed his hands when he became agitated. Not all that far from the truth.

He wondered how one was hired to write backstories for new identities and then insert them into the various institutions the fictitious person attended or worked in. An interesting job and his writer’s mind instantly started creating a new identity, just for fun. But if it was fun why was it such a pain to create new characters?

He returned to reality when a calloused hand patted the back of his head. Oh yeah, furniture store, pay attention! They were following Ms. Cramer, the saleswoman, toward a group of chairs, happy when they stopped in front of two recliners. Tim nodded at them, “Oh good, my dad and I each need one.”

“I’m afraid Ms. Shepherd only arranged for one.”

He looked at his father, “Huh, I could have sworn we asked for two.”

“Yeah, me too.” They had not been consulted on any of the furniture but Tim was following the ruse that Marshal Shepherd was their designer.

“We can certainly add another one.”

“Wonderful!” Tim remembered he had cash with him and then realized the cost needed to go on the bill to Mary; he’d pay the Marshals Service for it. They picked one of the recliners and chose a second one in the same style but a different color. Then they hiked back through the store to the table and chairs that Mary selected. Tim barely kept from making a face. The table was white; the chairs padded with white cushions and the style wouldn’t work with booster seats. They found another model and chairs they liked better, with no white upholstery, for the same price and thought they were done with the furniture. Until Ms. Cramer decided to go over the entire list with them and Tim noticed there were two queen beds ordered, no king. He needed a California King to keep his feet on a solid surface. That was soon upgraded; he laid out on the display mattress and found it comfortable, much to his relief. He made a mental note to offer to pay the difference.

Finally done, Marshal Miller led them to the closest big box store. There they purchased booster chairs, 4 car seats, a potty seat, a portable potty seat, a toddler bed for Brin, who’d climbed out of
the crib twice since they’d been here, linens for the beds, toiletry items for the men, toddler sized
uttery, plates and bowls, a few sippy cups and a few grocery staples. They’d brought their winter
clothes but the kids needed rain boots, so while Tim distracted them looking at boots, Poppy
sneaked off to buy two Big Wheels, which Miller smuggled into his SUV.

By the time the truck and SUV pulled out of the parking lot, the truck bed was full and the SUV
pretty close to full. The only thing they were really missing now, besides the house, were personal
touches such as photos and artwork. Knowing New Mexico was famous for its artists Tim thought
they’d look around town and maybe travel to Santa Fe and Taos. Might as well get to know the
area while they were here. They could go on their days off once they had jobs.
Chapter 6

Back at the office building, they left everything for the house in the back of the truck, the cover securely locked. Tim was happy to see his new wheels parked nearby, the internet-electronics successfully disabled and ready to roll.

That night after the kids were in bed, Tim sat down with his laptop and wrote a love letter to Ellie. Addressing it to 'Sweetie', he told her how much he missed her, how strange their first few days had been, never mentioning being in protective custody. Mostly he told her how he felt about her and talked about their relationship.

The next morning was too chilly for the rooftop and they asked if they could take their purchases over to the new house. That was acceptable. As Miller was off and Shepherd was still working at the house their guards were none other than Tompkins and Davis, the two marshals who'd accompanied them here from home.

Miller drove by the house during their city tour on Friday but it was being painted and there was a five-foot adobe wall enclosing the front so they couldn't see much. Except for the gate, which was housed in a graceful adobe, wood and tile arch. Now Tim smiled when he saw a white adobe house with a traditional tile roof and wood framing. A two-car garage was off to one side of the courtyard wall although it looked like it was attached to the house at the back. They parked in front of the wall and walked through the gate into the courtyard. Two shade trees anchored the space, with gracious benches crafted from a mix of wrought iron and wood underneath them. Planters of varying sizes with blooming plants were scattered around the patio, a fountain inset with colorful tiles burbled as the water flowed. They walked along the pavers to the front door, which was under an overhang.

When Tim backed up to look at the whole thing, Davis nodded, "You'll love the shade that provides! That turned out nice." He turned to quietly explain. "When the government bought this, it was a wreck and was practically handed to them. They found the original plans and then started to bring it back to life. When we heard you were coming to us Marshal Shepherd was determined you should live here. She's been here for parts of every day making sure the contractor and crews were on top of things."

Tim smiled; he already loved this house. "I can't wait to see the rest!"

His dad was looking at the construction, fascinated by the smooth corners and the occasional wood beam. "I've never seen an adobe building before. Be great to see the adobe made and how it's used in buildings."

The marshal smiled, "I'm sure that can be arranged. Might be something you want to learn, huh? There's always work for builders with adobe skills."

The inside was warm and inviting, with traditional Saltillo tiles for the flooring with an occasional throw rug in the living room, to the left of the entrance. A fire was burning in the rounded, arched fireplace topped with a graceful chimney and the wood smell increased their smiles, reminding them of home. There were windows on each side of the door and a window set in the left side of the house, lighting up the space.

To the right was another large room, a combination dining and family room with the kitchen at the
A sliding door led to the side and back yards and the adults were happy to see a fence. In the kitchen, a half wall, four feet long and a little over four feet in height, separated the kitchen and living room. It stood at a 90-degree angle from the back wall, leaving room for an entrance, giving the kitchen two entrances, from the front of the house and at the back of the common area. The short wall housed the sink, dishwasher, and additional cabinets while a peninsula set the border between the kitchen and dining/family room. Noting that someone had measured carefully so that open cabinet doors and drawers would not inhibit passage into the kitchen, Tim nodded in approval.

Other than the kitchen half wall and the peninsula, the entire front of the house was open. At the back of the large room, an arched passageway led to a hallway. There they found a secondary hallway branching off to the right. That had a powder room, a large double storage closet and a door that opened to a laundry room, which in turn had a door leading outside. Back in the main hallway, they found two bedrooms across from each other, a full bathroom next to the one on the left. A few more steps took them to a third bedroom; that door was also open and they saw it was larger than the other two, with an en suite bath. A few more steps and a fourth bedroom, the master, appeared on the right. As they peeked in, Tim grinned, oh yeah; the Cal King would fit nicely in either of the larger bedrooms.

The master bedroom had French doors whose tops had been curved into more arches to match the architecture of the rest of the house; those led to a patio and yard. It was beautiful with mature trees, gardens, and another fountain. They could see an area had been leveled but there wasn't anything there yet; they were told that would be a play area. The patio surrounded the back and right side of the house with plenty of room for a grill, patio table, and chairs. Davis smiled, "At some point, the home had a swimming pool but it's been filled in. You'll notice there's lawn, that's xeric, it takes very little water or maintenance. And the water in the fountain up front is reclaimed shower or laundry water, not potable."

Tim nodded; they'd have to tell the kids and then realized, "I haven't even asked what the rent will be!"

"Miller said you might bring it up." They told him and he nodded, it was within their means, whatever kind of work they found.

Gibbs went back into the house to the third bedroom. He loved the built-in chest of drawers he found, stained the same color as the wood beams on the outside of the house. In his opinion, this qualified as a second master. He would have been fine with anything but this was special. He went back to the master where he found the others. "Can we see the garage?"

"Sure."

They'd turned right to the master bedroom not noticing that a few steps further the hall turned to the left and took them through a door and then along an enclosed walkway to the garage which also had a door. Tim noticed both doors had sturdy locks; the kids couldn't get in there without help. He and Dad smiled happily at each other when they entered the garage and saw the workbench, complete with hooks and hangers for his tools.

Tompkins chuckled, "When we noticed you brought your hand tools we let Mary, uh, Marshal Shepherd know."

"Thanks, this is great! I brought some of my smaller projects, now I can finish them!"

They caught sight of what looked like a large storage room, but before they could explore they heard the sounds of work in progress. Not wanting to delay the work or their move, they went
straight from the garage to the front courtyard, quickly bringing their purchases in before leaving.

The kids chattered about the new house all the way back to the office building and their father had no problem persuading them to gather their toys and books to help pack. Gibbs laughed at the bags stacked by the front door. "I know this is more than we brought!"

Tim grinned, "Well you know, stuff the kids needed."

"Yeah, the kids...sure!" He ruffled Tim's hair.

Bath time was easy that night, Ty and Bryn understood that after breakfast the next day, they were moving into their new house. Tim had to bite back a smile when Ty determinedly closed his eyes after story time, "See Daddy, I'm asleep already!"

"All right son, that's good." He leaned in to kiss him, "I love you, my Snuggly Boy, pleasant dreams."

"Love you Daddy."

Bryn had consented to one more night in the crib so her new bed could stay at the new house. As Tim kissed her goodnight she whispered, "I promise not to climb out, Daddy."

"Thank you, Sweet Pea. I love you."

"Love you Daddy."

Tim smiled as he pulled the door partially closed. In their bedroom, Dad was packing, softly whistling to himself. He looked up, "I thought we'd pack the non-perishables tonight and the rest after breakfast in the morning. Know what time we're leaving?"

Tim nodded, "Miller's coming by at 0900, said he's bringing a cart for all our stuff."

"Good, gonna need one. Think the kids will sleep tonight?"

Chuckling Tim said, "Forget about the kids, *I'm* not going to sleep tonight." He paused, "Sure wish we could let everyone know we're all right."

"Yeah, I know son, me too. And as much as we like the house, I hope we won't be here long."

Tim agreed, "Wish we could be home for Christmas. I know Grandpa, Ellie, Ducky, Tony, and Abby were looking forward to seeing the kids go crazy Christmas morning." He sighed, "And I was looking forward to Skyping with Sarah and Rob."

His father patted his neck with a light squeeze, "If not this Christmas then the next one. At least you and the kids spent a lot of time with Mac last summer. He knows Ellie, Tony, and the others pretty well. New topic and we haven't talked about this but I really want that third bedroom."

His son grinned at him, "I saw you checking out that built-in! That's okay with me; I'll take the master if I absolutely have to."

Settling into bed, Tim fell asleep while his father made some plans for Christmas and other days before closing his eyes.

Moving day Wednesday dawned bright and sunny although chilly. Tim woke up thinking that today was Veteran's Day; Friday was his real birthday and Sunday his McGee birthday. That one he didn't want to think about but he would wish his father a Happy Veteran's Day and once again
thank him for his service. He rooted through his bag of miscellaneous items and pulled out the American flag pin they'd all worn at work last Veteran's Day. He stood quietly for a minute thinking of a ritual Gibbs had introduced Tony and him to after the death of Mike Franks. Tony would be on his own this year.

Dad was still asleep as Tim quietly hurried to the kitchen and made coffee. Then he put pancake batter together, found blueberry syrup in the cabinet and ham in the fridge. Blue, red (pink but close enough), now he needed white. Smiling he found the can of spray whipped cream in the fridge, perfect for pancake topping! By the time the ham and the first batch of pancakes were cooking, Dad was up and trying to look over his shoulder. "That looks yummy!"

"Good, it's for you. Happy Veteran's Day, Dad!" Tim turned and kissed his father's cheek and then attached the pin to his shirt.

"Thanks, son. I'd forgotten all about it. Hmm, makes me think of something else coming up, now what could it be?"

Tim smiled as his dad winked and then disappeared to get the kids. When he returned, a child in each arm, Tim kissed each of them a good morning before saying. "From now on, I'm celebrating my real birthday."

"Even if it's on Friday the 13th?"

"That's just this year; I was born on a Sunday. And yes."

"Great!"

Breakfast was served and that was the end of any type of discussion other than "where are we going to put this?" for a couple of days. Considering that it was Tim's 4th move in 6 months, starting with leaving Delilah and their apartment with just his clothes and electronics, he was proud of himself for not totally losing it. It helped that all the furniture was delivered, placed and assembled by the delivery team. They even set up the beds and other items that needed screwdrivers and patience.

There were some funny moments: when Poppy was trapped in his closet for a few minutes while the delivery folks were moving his furniture in, or Tim's bed collapsing under him when he tried it out, not realizing the delivery people hadn't finished assembling it; they had the wrong bolts and had run out to the nearest hardware store. Whoever installed the washer and dryer mixed them up, putting the dryer on the left instead of the right. Tim liked that, said obviously they'd been installed by a leftie and he approved. One of the upper cabinet doors in the kitchen stuck and when Miller pulled, the whole door came off in his hands. Dad told him not to worry; the repair would be his first project.

By bedtime, the chaos had been tamed, if not completely subdued. The kitchen, kids' rooms, and bathrooms were in order, they'd eaten, had beds to sleep on and blankets to cover them and that was all they needed or cared about.
Chapter 7

Their first weeks in the house sped by, as their new lives became reality. Tim and Gibbs learned to react to their new names, both successfully shutting down their impulse to look around for other people when someone said "Brian" or "Mark". Ty and Bryn were better at dealing with "Thomas" and "Brinley" than the adults were. Although Bryn didn't have much of a change to deal with as the family continued to call her Bryn or Brynie.

Tim's birthday that Friday was as festive as his little family could make it. Dad ordered a cake and sent Tim out for the afternoon so he and the kids could decorate. It was also the first outing for the family's (Poppy's) new grill. Miller, Shepherd, McQueen, Maggie and a couple of the other marshals came over and enjoyed Poppy's grilling skills and the cake. Tim loved the paintings the kids made him; he eventually framed them and hung them on the wall in his room. After clearing it with their marshals and with help from Miller, Dad bought his son a 5th generation iPod touch. Now that they were living under new identities, he could download what he wanted, use the camera or FaceTime chat, although only with his current contacts. Tim's face lit up when he opened his gift, which in turn made his father very happy.

This was Tim's first birthday as a Gibbs and his first celebration of the actual day he was born; his father wanted to make it as special as possible. Dad had some other gifts for him but he'd give them to him after their guests left.

DiNozzo hadn't mentioned the thumb drive to Vance. He thought, hoped it was personal and wanted to run through it with Ellie first. He'd prefer to view it alone the first time but she'd seen him pocketing it so that was that. He and Ellie waited until everyone else was gone one evening before slipping into a conference room with her laptop.

It was personal, full of love, hope, and hints of despair. Tim attached a couple of photos, one showing the kids sound asleep, another showing the pile of suitcases in the living room. Tim was the first one to speak and he was talking quickly. "They're not here yet, we figure as soon as it's full dark. It's weird because we know this is for our protection against whatever the threat is (we have no idea) but it feels like we're waiting to be hauled off to jail. Exile at least. Vance came by and that felt good and horrible, hard to explain except that he's as mystified and upset as we are. Maybe not quite as upset. Right now, I'm trying to be calm but I admit I'm scared and I can't believe I have to give up another family, another forced abandonment. If Dad is separated from us, I don't know how I'll do or how he'll do. Ellie, after Dad talks, the last part is just for you. Tony, you'll always be my big brother; please make sure Sarah, Rob, and if possible Geordie get a chance to listen? Thanks, love you all!"

Gibbs started talking, "At this point, we're worried and relieved we've had time to pack and make some preparations. You know, the two of us could live in sweats if we had to but the kids need their stuff. Tim's included a lot of their books but left out the ones that were signed by any of you." There was a sigh, "You know we love each of you and with the history we have together, all of us, we won't let you go and we have faith you won't let us go either. Don't become tangled in this, I'm invoking Rule 21 again. Neither of us could bear any of you getting hurt and anything you do might hurt us." They both went on to say goodbye and then there was some dead air, giving Tony time to leave the room so Tim could speak to Ellie.
"Eleanor Bishop, I love you so much. I'm so thankful for the time we've spent together; that we know we love each other and know what we want in our relationship. For you above all, I hope and pray we won't be gone long. I'll always have you in my heart. I know this is smooshy and corny but I don't have any other words right now. Damn, there's a van in the driveway, gotta tuck this somewhere you or Tony will find it. Love you Ellie!"

She sat for a minute and then ran for the restroom, throwing up everything she'd eaten that day. Tony came in and helped her clean up. When she could talk she asked him how he knew she was in there and throwing up.

"Because I needed some privacy when I left the room and heard the door squeak. This is tough, Bishop, there's not a damn thing we can do and it's going to get tougher."

She nodded, "For everyone. Don't forget I'm tougher than I look. And the others need to hear this."

"I won't forget that. Maybe tomorrow night. Not something to do during work."

She was silent for a minute; he waited. "I worry about Abby. Do you think we should tell her what we know?"

He sighed, "Don't know. I don't know when she'll be back; guess I'll talk to Ducky about it. Maybe Vance told him what his plan is for her."

"Tony, maybe you could ask Vance? You're Team Leader now."

He huffed, "You're right, I should do that. C'mon, let's get out of here."

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At DHS headquarters, Morrow looked at the information on the screen, shaking his head. "I can understand how she had Gibbs' address; he's lived there forever, before he joined the agency. You believe she was just watching, getting a feel for…what?"

One of his agents spoke, "I believe she was on the lookout for his son. It was broad daylight so she probably wasn't going to do anything but look."

Another agent, a profiler, shook his head, "I disagree; at least that she wasn't going to do anything in broad daylight. Everything we know about her says she normally works during the daytime. More people around, easier to create a distraction and slip away."

A third agent made a frustrated noise, "Has she ever done anything herself?"

"Yes, the first things we have on her, the deal in California and the one in Texas. A few other events we know about were hired out and we're sure there are more kills we haven't found yet."

They mapped out what they still needed on her and their plans for getting all of it. Tobias Fornell again reminded them she had been wreaking havoc in Timothy Gibbs' life since the day he was born and that he had now been torn away from two families by her. The team nodded, they knew this; they just couldn't seem to pull everything together.

Fornell walked back to Morrow's office with him. "I know what I said when this started but I was wrong. This kind of case is one of the things Gibbs' team eats for breakfast."

"Does that extend to DiNozzo's new team?"
"Two Gibbs' trained agents, a third one who worked with him for 6 months? Absolutely!"

Morrow sighed, "I can't justify it, Tobias."

"But you can justify the tens of thousands of dollars for their vehicles and whatever you've put into their housing?"

When Morrow turned on him, a frustrated and angry look on his face, Fornell threw up his hands. "I'm just saying - food for thought. Must be nice to have such a big budget."

As he walked away, he wasn't sure with whom he was angrier, Morrow for having turned into a politician or himself for knowing that and throwing in with him anyway. At this rate by the time the Gibbses were let loose, Jethro would be Ducky's age and Tim a grandfather. He wished he knew where they were; he knew about the money Morrow gave the Marshals but not much else.
Tim looked at the turkey he was holding. Three days before Thanksgiving and he was searching for the smallest turkey he could find. There would only be the four of them, the kids didn't eat much and he and Dad weren't big turkey fans. He'd rather have a standing rib roast. Making a noise, he put the 10-pound bird back in the refrigerated case and headed for the beef. They could be just as thankful eating beef as turkey and far happier.

Still smiling when he walked into the house, he made an announcement. "I'm afraid there were no turkeys left. In fact, there aren't any left in Albuquerque for us to eat."

His father chuckled, "That's a darn shame. So what'd you get? Tuna? Mac and cheese? Peanut butter?"

"Standing rib roast."

"Wow! Do we have to wait for Thursday?"

"Mm, good question and the answer is no, we can do whatever we want. Are you working tomorrow?"

Gibbs was working with a general contractor, helping renovate a house that would then be sold, a practice commonly referred to as 'flipping'. "No, crew's off until Monday."

"Nice boss!"

"He's got a buyer lined up and they're not back in town 'til after the first of the year."

"Great! I have two classes, at 9 and 11, and then I'm done until Monday. So we can have our yummy Turbeefrost tomorrow."

Ty tilted his head, frowning as he tried to figure out the new word. "Daddy, what's that? Our what?"

"Just a silly name I made up, son. Tur for turkey but it's a beef roast, so tur beef roast."

The kids laughed at that.

"Dad, I should know this but what's your favorite pie?"

"It's apple crisp, not a pie, just the way your grandmother made it when I was a kid."

"Cool, we'll have that for dessert. Mashed potatoes and vegetables for dinner."

"Wait a minute, what kinds of pie do you like? Doesn't have to be what I like! And will there be gravy?"

"Yes for the gravy and my favorite pie is boysenberry but that's not something I'm gonna find anywhere this time of year. I'll make one when the berries are available."

"I'm gonna to hold you to that. Stuffing?"
"Thought we'd have leftovers on Thursday with beef flavored stuffing, add some of the juices from today, it'll be pretty tasty."

"You are truly a genius, son!"

Tim sat next to him, speaking softly, "What do you think about a road trip over the weekend? I'm thinking Santa Fe, Taos or Ruidoso. I'd like some artwork for the house and all three places have things for the kids to do."

"Is Ruidoso in the mountains?"

"Yep."

"Any way we could see both Santa Fe and Taos? You know, the whole Santa Fe Trail cowboy thing would be fun to see in a museum and I've always heard Taos is pretty interesting."

"We can do that. Santa Fe is on the way to Taos. How about we hit the road, spend the day in Santa Fe, then head to Taos, have dinner and stay over there, then see whatever on Sunday and head home. Hmm."

"What?"

"We could do the same itinerary but leave on Friday instead, spend the day in Santa Fe, stay over two nights in Taos; come home early Sunday."

"I like that idea! If we can find rooms this late."

"Ah, but we love challenges, don't we? First let's ask our friends if this is even allowed."

While his dad determinedly refrained from rolling his eyes, Tim called Mary, remembering Marshall was working with a probie marshal today. After they'd moved, the family had been invited to call Marshals Shepherd and Miller by their first names.

"Shepherd."

"Hi, Mary. It's Brian Hull; do you have a couple of minutes? Got a question, not a problem."

"Hi, Brian and sure! I love questions."

He explained the plan and she said she would check and let him know; also telling him the Marshals would need to know where they were staying.

"I haven't looked yet, thought we'd better call you first."

"All right, well since you're here due to an active case, we need to check before saying yay or nay."

"Understood."

They disconnected and Mary Shannon frowned at the phone. She was sure the answer would be no, not without at least one marshal to escort them and she didn't think Stan would okay the expense.

Her supposition was correct; Stan said the case was nowhere near being closed; it was currently running hot and the family needed to stay within the 30-mile limit, where the marshals could get to them faster.
As he hung up, Tim looked at his dad, "Think we'd better take a look at what's happening around here."

"She said no?" Gibbs was frustrated and angry, already tired of not having any control over his own life. And they'd been in WITSEC less than a month.

"She said she had to check but from her tone of voice, I'd say probably not." He sighed, feeling the same way his father did.

While they waited for Mary to call back, Tim went online to see what was happening that weekend. Explora in Old Town was first on the list, that would be great for the kids. Next came a Bio Park that sounded like fun and interesting for all of them. It had an aquarium, zoo, botanical garden, and a fishing lake. Probably not the lake, they could save that for warmer weather if they were still here. He smiled when he noticed a narrow gauge railroad that ran through the park, the kids would love that! The museum there had dinosaur exhibits; that would be fun. Poppy recently bought the kids a book about dinosaurs that they could look at it before they went.

They really hadn't had time to relax and get to know what was inside their 30-mile bubble yet. The same week they'd moved, Tim applied for an online teaching position and got it, much to his shock. He'd started the next week, the same week the kids started daycare. Toward the end of the week, Dad got a call from the general contractor who'd worked on the house, wanting to know if he was interested in doing carpentry work on a house renovation. He didn't have to think about that!

With both of them employed at something, they began to feel better. Tim taught three days a week, writing and studying for his electrician's licensing exam during his off days. He wasn't sure how much electrical work he'd do but he couldn't do any if he wasn't licensed. Dad's contractor boss, Steve Ortiz promised him all the work he could handle; he'd wait and see.

They both liked Steve, he was a little older than Tim and had deep roots in Albuquerque; his 2 times great-grandparents had settled here on a huge ranch when New Mexico became a state in 1912. Over a century later, much of the acreage had been sold off but his great uncle Tomas still had cattle as well as guesthouses and a converted bunkhouse on the thousand acres still held by the family. That was another thing, he wondered if the kids were old enough to learn to ride horses. He'd be learning right along with them! He or Dad could ask Steve if lessons were given at his family's ranch.

When Mary called back to give him the bad news, Tim cheerfully told her he'd already found several things for them to do locally with the kids over the long weekend. She wanted to know what he had in mind and approved of his choices, cautioning him to do Explora on Friday; it would be less crowded than over the weekend. As it was in Old Town and Tim was very interested in the native dancing, the architecture, and cultural aspects, going a day early was fine with him. For that matter, if it was open, they could go Thanksgiving Day.

Unfortunately, not much was open Thanksgiving Day so they contented themselves with playing games, watching movies and enjoying the leftovers from their turbeefroast feast on Tuesday. Friday morning they were among the first in line for Explora and had a wonderful time with the children. After lunch out at a family friendly restaurant, they took the kids home for naps. Marshal Maggie, a retired marshal, had offered to babysit anytime and they'd taken her up on it for the afternoon.

The men returned to Old Town and spent the afternoon enjoying the festivities and the ambiance. Both were fascinated by the native dancing and the western museum while Tim also loved the street vendors, the specialty shops, and the art galleries. He purchased two paintings, one for his
father for Christmas with a cowboy who reminded him of Mike Franks, sitting on a fence watching a bucking horse. The other painting was for him, a beautiful landscape of the Sandia Mountains with the Rio Grande in the forefront. He also purchased several framed Native American prints. He arranged to have everything delivered when Dad would be at work.

His dad joined him and they walked around, stopping to look at this and that. When they returned to the car, their arms were full of Christmas presents for the children. Remembering the storage room at the back of the garage, they decided it was the best place to stash everything. When Gibbs realized he already had things stashed back there, he offered to put everything away. Tim nodded, reminding him he was not someone who looked for hidden gifts. He and his younger brother Patrick McGee had found their father's stash of Christmas gifts for them one year and it totally ruined the fun and surprise of Christmas morning. Tim hadn't gone looking since.

They spent the rest of Thanksgiving weekend exploring Albuquerque, having a great time. There were plenty of fun and interesting things to do with the kids and Poppy made a list of places they either couldn't get to or wanted to go back for another visit. When his boss Steve heard about their explorations he smiled, "You should come out to the ranch sometime. My cousin's wife gives horseback riding and swimming lessons. Little late in the year for swimming but not for horseback riding. And it's a pretty cool place, a lot of history there."

Poppy told Tim who nodded, "Yeah, I'd love to see the place and I wouldn't mind learning to ride. Kids will probably do better than me but I'd still like to know."

When they met with Tamara, Steve's cousin-in-law, she explained that Thomas and Brinley were too young for horseback riding lessons. What she would do is pair each of them with an experienced rider on a pony; they'd be led around until they were used to the movement and then taught some of the commands. Until they were at least 7, they couldn't ride alone. Even after being told the change to their plans the kids were just as excited about their 'lessons'; Tim didn't think they really cared whether they rode alone or not.

However, before they had their first lesson the Christmas season arrived and the family took advantage of all the fun things the city had to offer. From Las Posadas celebrations, new to the entire family, to the "Holiday Stroll" event in Old Town which included a visit from Rudolph, to Explora where the kids also learned how to make Christmas cards and paper snowflakes, to viewing the huge Christmas Tree light up, watching dancing, listening to carolers and generally enjoying themselves. The men were entranced with the customs that were new to them, from the luminaries lighting their way around Old Town to the traditional Las Posadas. The latter involved families participating in nightly Christmas processions that re-created the Christian religions' pilgrimage of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem.

In the midst of the Christmas season events, Brynie had her second birthday and the Hull family had a birthday party for her. They invited a few of her daycare pals and had a fairy themed party. No sprinklers and sand castles for this party! They ordered her cake from a local bakery and smiled when they saw the deep purples, lavenders, pinks, greens and blues adorning the various fairies. New to them was a piñata in the shape of a fairy and it took Tim awhile to get the height just right so the little kids could not only reach it with the stick provided but be able to hit it hard enough to break open and let the candy and little gifts inside fly out. Tim recorded everything while Dad took many photos, both knowing Brynie wouldn't remember her party as she grew older. And for themselves too, wanting to capture her happy squeals and look of rapture when she first saw her Fairy cake and her toddler chortles as she played with her friends.

They also found a church to attend with the children. Gibbs brought attendance up to Tim, knowing his son was a professed agnostic. Tim agreed, saying they needed to make an effort to be part of
the community and to meet people in addition to the parents they were meeting through daycare. He also felt additional structure would be good for the children although he admitted that might be a holdover from the days when Sarah and Rob were toddlers. The men knew they couldn't take any leadership roles, spotlights are strongly discouraged when you're in WITSEC, but the kids needed other children around, playdates would be wonderful and the men also needed to make friends. The first service they attended was the first Sunday in December; by their third Sunday Tim admitted it felt good to belong to something.

The weekend after Brynie's party, they took the pickup to a tree farm conveniently located 26.73 miles out of town to select their first family Christmas tree. Whenever they were out, the men bought an ornament or two, purchasing many handmade ornaments from vendors in Old Town. The kids worked hard on decorations at their daycare and when the family put their tree up, it was beautifully decorated with plenty of sparkly ornaments that caught the lights, the professionally handmade decorations and best of all, the children's snowflakes, snowmen, skates and other figures they'd made from paper, felt, yarn or bread dough. Tim presented each of his children with a Winnie the Pooh character ornament while Poppy made ornaments for them. Ty's was a hand carved Thomas the Tank Engine and Brynie's was Neigh the horse. The ornament he made for his son was a reflection of their new family, two tall figures, one slightly taller than the other, standing over two small children. Tim fought tears as he hugged his father. "Thank you, this is wonderful. I hope you signed and dated it!" His dad nodded, turning it over and showing him. "I put the date and Dad; when we get home I'll sign it with my real initials."

As they became part of the community, neither forgot their home and the family they'd been forced to leave behind. Gibbs noticed his son purchasing items for his siblings and the team, stashing them in one of his suitcases. He liked the idea so much he did the same thing and then spent a few weeks making each of them an ornament.

After the discovery that Tim was his son, Gibbs spoke with him about the possibility of adopting Sarah, Rob, and Geordie. While Tim loved the idea, he cautioned his father his siblings would need to become far better acquainted with Jethro before they'd be comfortable accepting him as their father. He agreed and spent time with Sarah and Rob before their departures for London and made plans for the two of them to surprise their brother at Christmas. Unless something happened in the next few weeks that wasn't going to happen. Gibbs prayed that the plans he and Tim made to visit the two the following summer would turn to reality.
Chapter 9

As the Gibbses reluctantly settled in, Tim's siblings became worried when they didn't hear from him. At first, they thought he was caught up in a case, forgetting he was no longer a field agent and now kept regular hours. They left messages, sent emails but never heard back. They did the same with Gibbs with the same results.

When Director Vance called, they started to panic. If something had happened to Tim, why hadn't Gibbs called? He repeated the same explanation he'd given the others and Sarah and Rob sighed. "They're all right, both of them and the children?"

Resisting the urge to cross his fingers, Vance replied, "I'm not in daily contact with them, but yes, they're all right. I don't know how long this will take but I do know it is imperative they be out of contact."

Neither knew what to say to that. After a long and intense discussion, they made a first ever call to the number Geordie had given them to get an emergency message to him. They followed the prompts, giving Geo's service number, their names and relationship, phone numbers and a message. They'd written that out ahead of time: "Geo, we need you. Tim and Gibbs are supposedly on some long-term operation, we don't know where the kids are although we're told they're safe. Director Vance said he doesn't know how long they'll be gone but they have to be out of contact. We're afraid they're being held hostage or something even worse. Geordie, we don't know what to do." They added their address and phone numbers in the UK before they disconnected.

The pair felt better after leaving the message, hoping it would get to Geordie and he'd contact them. They talked about leaving the UK and their respective schools and going home; to that end they contacted Vance, telling him they would come home and take custody of the children. Vance nearly choked on his tongue but managed to tell them he'd have to contact the children's caregivers. Sarah got mad, "They're our nephew and niece. We're two of the guardians Tim named, why weren't we notified before someone else took them? Or are they with Ducky or Tony or one of the others?"

Vance answered as vaguely as possible and wasn't surprised although a bit relieved when Sarah abruptly disconnected. The McGees' next call was to Tony who had been toying with the idea of calling them. It was early morning on the East Coast and when he saw the ID on his phone, he was very glad he was still at home.

"Tony, this is Sarah and Rob McGee and we're hoping you'll talk with us."

"Hello, McGees. I know you're calling about Tim, the kids, and Gibbs. I'm sorry I haven't called. Not supposed to talk about it."

"Oh geez, what's going on?"

Tony sighed; the way he saw it, the only way to keep this from exploding was to tell them at least part of the truth.

"Look, I really can't say much, it could make things worse. You two have to promise not to tell anyone. Don't talk about it in public or to your best friend. Seriously."
"We promise but we already left a message for our brother Geordie."

"He's a Marine; he'll probably figure it out pretty quickly."

Even mild-mannered Rob was annoyed.

"What is 'it'?"

"They're in protective custody."

"Does that mean they've been arrested?"

"No, it means they're being protected from something or someone. The four of them."

"The kids are with them?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, NCIS is not involved. We'd like to be, to know what's going on, but a bigger agency is handling whatever it is and won't let us in."

"Oh geez, any idea where they are or how long they'll be gone?"

"No to both and those are questions that nobody will answer for you. Just trust they're safe."

"But we can't contact them."

"Correct. Nor can they contact any of us."

"You don't know anything you can tell us?"

"Just this: the whole situation happened very quickly. Tim noticed cars following him on his way home one night and the kids were with him. He called us for backup and we sent Metro PD because they were closer. Gibbs stayed on the phone with Tim until the squad cars got there; the plan was they'd escort him home. Vance ordered guards for the house and then got a phone call from someone higher up than him, ordering him to call off Metro and the guards. The cars following your brother were actually meant to protect him. Gibbs went home, they packed clothes, the kids' toys and the protective people picked them up that night."

"I repeat NONE of this is to be mentioned to anyone. No googling protective custody or anything. For all we know, we're all being watched, especially you two if this is something personal. Don't come home, you're probably safer over there. I wouldn't be surprised if you two already have people watching over you. If Geordie calls have him contact me."

"I hate this!"

"I understand. We love them too Sarah, we're also upset. But doing anything, anything could make it worse, more dangerous for them."

"And Tim would be really angry with us."

"Yes."

Reluctantly they agreed and disconnected. Not sure what to think when they didn't hear anything from Geordie, they were surprised one afternoon when a knock on the door of their flat revealed their eldest brother.

"Geordie!"
He swept them into his arms and held on for long minutes. When they pulled apart, he shook his head, "I forget you're all grown up. I know it, but I still expect to see two high school kids."

Settled in their lounge, he took a deep breath, "Tell me what you know."

They looked at each other and then shook their heads. "Tony, that's Tony DiNozzo, said for you to call him when we heard from you."

"Ok, got a phone and a number and somewhere private I can talk?"

He smirked as he was shown into Rob's room at the very back of the flat. It was, of course, neat as a pin, Rob had learned a lot from his Timpa.

When his call was picked up, he grimaced at the sleepy voice. "DiNozzo."

"Agent DiNozzo, this is Major Perry, sorry, I'm Geordie Perry, Tim, Sarah, and Rob's brother."

"I know who you are, Major. Your sister and brother ask you to call me?"

"More or less told me to, but yes."

"And they didn't tell you anything."

He said it as a statement and Geordie confirmed it.

"They're in protective custody. Tim, Tyler, Bryn, and Gibbs."

Geordie exhaled a sigh of relief. "Ok, good. To tell you the truth, that was the best scenario I could come up with."

"I thought you'd figure it out."

"And there's nothing else you can tell me."

"I know they're together and that the original order was for Tim; he was the one being followed by a protective detail. That's how we found out. He'd picked up the kids from daycare and was driving them home. Gibbs was still at the office. After our director was ordered to call off Metro PD and our own protective detail, Gibbs took his weapon and some personal items and left. The two of them managed to let us know they were together with the kids. There's more, Major. They made a recording before they left. I can't send it or even e-mail it to you; no one outside of our group here knows it exists. It's personal and it's for the three of you too. Your sister and brother don't know about it, they were pretty upset and I was afraid they'd hop on the first flight home and blow the lid off this, whatever it is."

"Not following."

"At the time I wasn't sure, but a friendly source has since confirmed that Sarah and Rob have their own protectors. Guessing they haven't noticed and that's a good thing."

"Ok, I see, so if they'd headed for the states, any baddies also watching would be tipped off?"

"Possible; anything's possible since I have no idea what this is about."

"And your director?"
"As depressed and upset as the rest of us. He knows as much as I do. Well, he doesn't know about my friendly source."

"Agent DiNozzo, I understand what you're saying but I'd really like to go home and bring my siblings with me."

"It's Tony and I think with you along, that'll be fine. Your time off is probably limited and you naturally want to go home."

"It'll look that way but I took a family emergency leave so I'm not limited and there's more. Tony, I'm Geordie or Geo. Let me talk with the ki...uh, Sarah and Rob, can't call them kids anymore, they're all grown up. Anyway, I'll see what their schedules look like; figure out when we can come home."

"Good! One more thing and I didn't mention this either. We, the rest of Gibbs' team, didn't want anything to happen to their belongings or the houses. You know Tim is renting a house on the same street as his dad?"

"Yes."

"I've been living at Gibbs' place and Ellie Bishop is staying at Tim's. Uh, do you uh know who she is?"

"Yes."

"Ok good. Anyway either of us can move out or share, whatever you three want to do."

"Tim's house has four bedrooms, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll ask the sibs, but my preference would be to stay at Tim's with Agent Bishop if she doesn't mind. I've never met Gibbs and well, it would just be weird. Not that the whole thing isn't strange."

"Copy that."

They disconnected and Geo returned to the lounge to find his siblings waiting for him. He smiled at the fresh coffee, "Thanks!" He drank a few sips and then put the cup down. "Ok, Tony had a little more to tell me, something he's learned since you spoke with him. One, he's confirmed that you two are being protected."

Rob nodded, he'd noticed the same people, apparently rotating, always seemed to be somewhere around him when he was in public. Sarah's eyes widened, she hadn't noticed anyone!

"And two, Tim and Gibbs left a recording with a personal message for us and their NCIS friends. It can't be sent or e-mailed or anything so we'll have to go there to see it."

"Three and I don't know if you already know this, but Ellie Bishop is staying at Tim's house and Tony is staying at Gibbs' place. I said we'd stay at Tim's with Ellie because I thought we'd be more comfortable there. I've never met Gibbs and it would just be too weird."

"Ok. Did he say anything about Tim and Ellie?"

Geo chuckled, "No but it seemed more like he very carefully didn't say anything about them."

"They're dating, or they were before this happened, and the last time we talked to Tim he told us
they're serious, that they've said they loved each other and talked about more permanent things."
"Wow, that's good. Man, this must be really hard on her, though."

His siblings nodded.

"All right, next order of business, do you have any room in your schedules to take time off?"

His eyes narrowed as his sister and brother looked at each other and back at him. "We do. We
planned all along to go home for Christmas, to surprise Tim. We told Gibbs so someone would
know. We couldn't stand the thought of not seeing the kids having their first Christmas with Tim,
and Tim with Gibbs."

A tear slipped down Sarah's cheek and she angrily wiped it away. She hated crying; it gave her a
headache and accomplished nothing.

Geordie held his arms out and his siblings crowded in. "We'll go home then. It'll just be us but we'll
be with Tim's love, his friends and work family."

"And maybe we can ask his grandfather to come up?"

"Huh? Do you mean Ducky? I know the babies call him Granducky."

"No, his mother's father, Mac Fielding. He helped them figure out the kidnapping, he'd been told
Tim died shortly after his birth."

"Oh geez. Well yeah, that would be nice; we've never had a grandfather. Where's he live?"

"Florida."

"Ok, well let's get over there first before we start making other plans."

"When do you have to go back?"

Geo had a funny look on his face and Rob guessed, "You're not going back?"

"Not to Special Ops, no. I'm on a three-month leave and then I'll find out my new posting. I
requested the East Coast, so maybe Quantico or who knows, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina,
could even be the Navy Yard."

"Oh Geordie, that's so great! Now I want to move home."

"How much longer do you two have over here?"

Sarah spoke first, "I can transfer and finish my program at home."

Rob looked thoughtful, "There were several locations to pick from; I chose this one because it
sounded like fun, Sarah was already here and they speak English, sort of. " They laughed and he
continued. "And it was a chance to have my airfare paid and see some of Europe, which we've
done; Sarah and I travel every chance we get. But I can transfer to a school in the U.S.; Johns
Hopkins is on the list and my grades should be good enough if there's room in the class."

"Ok. So while you guys get the paperwork going on that, I'll hang out here, if that's ok. I can sleep
on the couch."

"Absolutely although you don't need to sleep on the couch, Geo. There's one of those rollaway beds
with a mattress in the closet, came with the flat. You can sleep on that or sleep in my bed and I'll sleep on that."

"I'm good with sleeping on the rollaway and I'll do better out here, Rob. I tend to sleep in bits and pieces; I get restless when I'm awake."

"Ok, we'll roll the bed out here then."

That settled, Geordie grabbed his sea bag and went to take a shower.

Three weeks later they stepped off a plane at Dulles International, relieved to be home. As planned, they were met by Ellie Bishop and Tony DiNozzo. Although Tony had discreetly let his friendly source know the McGees were on their way home to stay, there was no update about Tim, the kids, Gibbs or the mystery case.
Chapter 10

Fornell looked around the room as he relayed DiNozzo's information to the DHS team. "Sarah and Rob McGee and their brother Major Geordie Perry will leave London tomorrow, the 17th. They're taking Virgin Atlantic flight 55 to Dulles, arriving the morning of the 18th. Sarah McGee has transferred her masters' program to George Washington University, Rob McGee his medical schooling to Johns Hopkins. Major Perry is on leave and then hopes to be posted on the East Coast."

"So we need details over here for them."

"Yes, certainly for Sarah McGee and Rob McGee. Major Perry may decline protection, but we need to offer it."

"Offer it…do they know?"

"I don't know what they know but it wouldn't surprise me if the major figured out his brother and family are in protective custody and reached the conclusion that his siblings are also being protected."

There were nods all around and Tobias sat back. They hadn't made any progress since the last meeting and he could not understand why. While his superiors had assigned him other duties, he was still involved in this, still doing his work. Were there others on the team who were no longer working toward their goal? Why would that change? Morrow committed to a dedicated team. Unless…he made a mental note to check into something.

"Tobias, how do you know their schedules and plans?"

"After their chat with Vance who told them what we ordered him to, the siblings left an emergency message for Major Perry and then contacted Agent DiNozzo to find out what was going on. They're civilians, the baby sister and brother of Timothy Gibbs; in fact, he raised them. No way were they going to accept our party line but we tied Vance's hands. They called DiNozzo and he told them a little more, enough to reassure them. As you know, I've frequently worked with Gibbs' team, so after his chat with them, he let me know. When Major Perry called him to tell him the three of them were coming home, DiNozzo let me know the details. He said he figured the siblings had protection details and didn't want anyone to be concerned when they packed up and left."

Tobias saw and heard mutterings and knew at least two team members were unhappy that anyone from NCIS knew anything about this at all. He tucked that away for further research. While he hated to think that agency bias was the reason this case was stalled, this was Washington DC, it was more than possible, probably edging closer to likely.

After the meeting, he stopped in to see Morrow, asking a couple of simple questions. Disturbed by the answers, he left, heading back to the Hoover. After brooding about the situation for over an hour, he decided he needed another opinion. Walking down the corridor, he was happy to see that his boss, Assistant Director Callaway, was in his office.

He walked out of Callaway's office nearly an hour later, not feeling any better. While his boss had listened to him, he'd quietly pointed out that Tobias was only involved in this because Tom Morrow brought him in. This was not an FBI case. He supposed it could have been; it seemed to be
a case with a slight overlap between the Bureau and DHS. But DHS jumped on it first. In the end, he advised his senior agent to give it more time.

The more Fornell thought about it, the more he fumed. Part of the case was clearly NCIS jurisdiction but that had been kept quiet; in fact, it was the reason Director Vance had not been told the whole story. Or any of the story for that matter.

When he reached the office the next day he had a message to report to Callaway. His boss shook his head, "Tobias, I don't know what you said in your meeting yesterday, but someone bitched about it to someone here and Director Beldon has moved you to the Haase case."

"Sir, I'm their only advocate on that case. If I'm not there, that family will be kept away from their lives for who knows how long."

"I understand your concern Tobias, however, orders are orders."

Fornell looked at him in despair and then caught a slight movement as AD Callaway rubbed his eyebrow. *Huh, did he get that from Vance or the other way around? I always thought Gibbs and Vance cooked that up.*

"Sorry, I guess I'm more tired than I thought."

"Why don't we head out to Joe's and I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

Tobias nodded, sure he was about to be given somewhat different instructions.

As they walked the three blocks to the coffee shop, familiar faces dropped away the farther they got farther from the Hoover building. Finally, Callaway spoke.

"I listened yesterday, Tobias, but I didn't want you to do anything rash, at least not until I'd spoken with the director. We spent a couple of hours looking over your notes and the case notes, yes he has access to those and came to the same conclusion you did. Something or someone has caused this case to stall. We both agree that agency bias is very likely part of the stall. It could even be more personal than that. Jethro Gibbs has pissed off more than his fair share of federal agents; even entire agencies in his time, so much so that we fear professionalism and compassion have been tossed aside in favor of politics. In this case leaving the Gibbs' family stuck and NCIS in the dark. Unless you've communicated more than I know?"

"No, just what I've told you and nothing to Vance. Wanted him to have plausible deniability if necessary."

"Understood. He's a good man in a very difficult situation and unfortunately he's had to put his trust in someone who no longer seems to have the Gibbeses' best interests at heart."

"If you mean Morrow, I agree. He's been a help to Vance in the past but I think he's being misled now and frankly he's more involved in Washington politics than anything else."

"Given the nature of Homeland Security, I can understand that to a point. Now, here's what the director and I would like you to do."

They found a private booth and Callaway outlined the plan. Fornell would, on paper, be working the Haase case while in reality, he would start (or continue, Callaway said with a smile) his own investigation, a parallel investigation into the Gibbs' situation. In the meantime, their director would make DHS an offer to provide the protection detail for the McGee siblings, relieving them of some expense. It was possible, Fornell's boss said, that the detail would then be discreetly
outsourced to NCIS, which would in effect bring the agency into the picture.

Tobias couldn't help himself, he laughed. When he stopped he shook his head in amusement, "You two still miss the field, don't you? I bet you enjoyed putting this together."

"As a matter of fact we did and you should know we dismissed at least a dozen wilder schemes. But this one is for real; Director Beldon is contacting Morrow this morning."

"Understood. I'll pack and head west."

"Good, call me when you get in and I'll give you an update."

"It'll be late here, how about I send a text first?"

"Fine, if I'm asleep it'll wait until morning. But I'm certain I won't be!"

"Lawrence, you are as giddy as a young agent on his first operation!"

"It's been far too long. Now I understand why you refuse every promotion you're offered."

As Tobias stepped off the Bureau's jet the next day he inhaled a breath of air far warmer than the frigid winter cold he'd left behind. "Ah, December in Southern California, thank you, AD Callaway!"

Once in his room, he notified his boss and had a call back almost immediately.

"That was a long flight! How many stops?"

"About the usual, four. Wasn't bad, slept part of the way, worked the other part."

"You'll be happy to know Morrow took our offer. Beldon is going to wait until the end of the week to approach Vance. They're both scheduled for a meeting with DOD; he'll talk to him then."

"Excellent! Now that's in motion, I'll clean up and get to work."

Feeling better about the situation than he had since it started, Fornell got busy.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Despite their continued exile, the Gibbses had a wonderful Christmas. They'd taken advantage of every Christmas event in the area, including those at their new church. Always mindful of Christmases past, in late November Tim contacted one of the shelters in town, volunteering to help shelter residents celebrate Christmas.

In the years since he and his siblings left the shelter, camp, and Baltimore, they'd made it a point to return each Christmas and help the residents celebrate the holidays. It was always a particular joy to treat the children to some fun. Practical was always covered too but watching a child's eyes light up over something they'd wanted was something special. The manager at the Albuquerque shelter gave him a list of practical items and sizes and then grinned happily when Tim asked what surprises the children might like. He went on to explain that he had a close friend who'd lived at a shelter, using Geordie's life story: a young boy whose father died while they were staying at a shelter, leaving him to spend the rest of his childhood in a homeless camp.

The manager invited him and his family to come meet the children and after telling Ty and Brynie where they were going and why, the four of them went to the shelter late one afternoon. Tim thought his children were a little too young to understand what being homeless meant but
considering Sarah and Rob had been homeless when they were Ty's age, he was grateful. However, it was important to him that they grow up knowing not every child had a bed or a place to live in and that they do what they could to help.

They had a good time; the Gibbs kids were not at all shy about talking and playing with the shelter kids. While Poppy kept an eye on the children, Tim slipped away to meet with the manager. She'd done some homework with the parents and handed Tim a list of possible treats for each of the 9 children staying there. Smiling, he told her the story of his friend's little brother who received a play doctor's kit from Toys for Tots when he was five years old and grew up to be a physician. This one was Rob's story.

All during the Christmas season as Tim and Jethro went about buying gifts for the children and each other they also purchased gifts for the shelter kids. One of the grocery stores had an angel tree and after explaining the concept, the kids each picked a tag as did their father and grandfather. That added to the fun as well as to the spirit of the season and the kids enjoyed helping their father find the items requested. However, the children were not consulted on the shelter gifts as they went back a few times to visit and Tim was afraid the temptation to tell the kids they were getting something extra would be too much.

They did get to help with a few fun things. At the shelter, there was a counter separating the main room from the kitchen, perfect for hanging stockings. The Gibbes bought red and white Christmas stockings for all of the shelter residents and after Tim wrote the names on with red and green sharpies, Ty and Brynie decorated each stocking. Then they had fun picking out little things to put in them. For the 9 children, they bought Tube toys, packages of Magic Snow, Origami squares, Silly Putty, Lego Minifigures, Quick Milk Magic Straws, Hex Bugs and batteries, Sunprint Paper, flashlights with batteries and several practical items.

All of the adults received toothbrushes and toothpaste, packets of tissues, combs, lip balm, small first aid and sewing kits, hand wipes, two round-trip bus passes each, food items, batteries, and a gift certificate to a nearby thrift store. In addition, the adult Gibbes visited the thrift store, paid off all the layaways and set up a 'penny' jar for anyone who needed a few cents (or dollars) to complete a purchase or for use in an emergency. During Tim's childhood on the street, money from a similar penny jar fed his small family on two desperate occasions.

Their church donated a Christmas tree and decorations to the shelter and on Christmas Eve when it was lit up, the Gibbs' family arrived bringing their gifts as well as food for the shelter's day after Christmas feast. The shelter kids watched in awe as boxes of brightly wrapped gifts were brought in. With the kids gathered around the tree with their adults, Tim and Poppy called out each child's name for a special gift. A toy truck, a fire engine, a classic car, each with three sets of extra batteries, a doll with two outfits, a Lego kit, an action figure (or two), a small train set, a tool kit and a stuffed Winnie the Pooh bear for the youngest child were welcomed with joyous cries. Along with his or her individual gift, each child also got at least one age-appropriate book and one educational toy. Tim knew to keep the gifts light, as just like him back in the day, each child or parent had to carry all their belongings with them every day. Just in case, each adult with a child was given an extra shoulder bag secured by a zipper and that could be attached to the top of a suitcase.

The Gibses hadn't forgotten the rest of the residents and with some help from the manager provided them with that something extra they wanted or needed, along with their Christmas stockings. Gift cards for grocery stores, clothing and shoe stores, hair salons – useful for job seekers, new suitcases, no contract cell phones with generous airtime cards, three months of bus passes for an individual who'd just started working but couldn't yet afford transportation, insulated bags with two ice packs each so items needing refrigeration would keep during the day. Along with
that, Poppy gave everyone in the shelter, including the manager and staff, a pair of warm socks, hat, scarf and gloves, handmade by a wonderful vendor he'd found in Old Town.

Everyone had a wonderful time opening and 'oohing and aahing' over their gifts. Before the family left, Tim gave the manager a box with all the stockings and asked her to hang them from the side of the kitchen counter, he'd provided big push pins to keep them hanging. That way they'd all have more fun Christmas morning. They'd feast all day long as the area churches worked together to provide a special breakfast and dinner.

Tim felt a little less homesick as they traveled home that evening, knowing his friends Barry, Bill, Freddie, and Jose were doing the same thing that same evening at 'their' shelter and camp. He hoped that in the U.K. Rob and Sarah would also find some way to honor their past.
On Christmas morning, Tim and Jethro had a blast watching the kids open their presents; they'd gone a little overboard, perhaps to compensate for the lack of other family but after all, it was their first Christmas together. Tim set up his phone for a video recording and as the kids came into the family room and saw the tree with the mounds of gifts, it captured their facial expressions and squeals of glee.

Gibbs used the pretext of the characters from "The Wizard of Oz" movie to carve the likenesses of their friends back home for his son. He laughed when Tim asked him how he'd remembered the characters so well. "I didn't; I went out and bought a copy of the movie and watched it a couple of times at night. Took me a while to figure out who should be who, finally decided to use who I thought you'd want. Ellie is Dorothy, Ducky is Toto because he'd get a kick out of it, Jimmy is the Scarecrow, Tony is the Tin Man, I'm the Cowardly Lion, Vance is Oz, Abby is Glinda the Good Witch, Diane is the Wicked Witch of the West and Tobias is Uncle Henry."

"Dad, this is just mind blowing, I love it! How did you decide on the movie?"

"It was pretty popular when I was growing up, they played it on TV every spring and my mom and I knew all the songs and the lyrics. I thought about it when I was humming "If I only had a brain". I was trying to do a complicated angle on Thomas, the ornament, not our boy, and had been wishing I'd listened closer to DiNozzo's movie references and then I got it - the song and then the movie."

"I'm impressed, you always do beautiful work but you've outdone yourself on this one. The likenesses are wonderful; you even included the toothpick and the bowtie!"

"Yeah, too bad you can't show it to anyone."

"That's ok; it's great to see their faces again. I could kiss them, well, maybe just Dorothy!" Tim put it in his room where he wouldn't have to worry about visiting marshals asking about it. And he did kiss Ellie/Dorothy before he returned to the living room.

The kids played with their toys most of the day, stopping long enough to try on new clothes while Daddy and Poppy took pictures, lots and lots of pictures. Ty loved the long sleeved shirt Santa brought him with his name across the top, "Thomas" with an applique of Thomas the Tank Engine below. He had to be persuaded not to try his new inline skates until they were outside and both kids wore their new cowboy hats and boots the rest of the day. He also got a doctor kit, complete with scrubs and a small piano keyboard, a real one, not a flimsy toy, because he loved to play Tim's piano app. Other gifts included a box of gears designed to get little engineers building, new overalls, jeans, cowboy boots, garden boots, a take apart airplane, a pretend and play fishing set, a foam pogo stick designed for toddlers, bowling game, Leap Frog Scribble and Write, a Spelling game that matched words to pictures, Legos, drawing kit and a big tub of dinosaurs. All of which made the little boy very excited.

Bryn was thrilled with everything, from the princess dress, shoes and cape all in her favorite purple with a sparkly tiara to her new overalls, gardening boots, cowgirl boots, cowgirl hat and perhaps most of all, her very own Bryn sized tool box complete with Bryn sized tools, and long sleeve tee shirt that said, "Poppy's Apprentice". She'd been showing a lot of interest in Poppy's workshop and now she had her own tools so Poppy could teach her how to make all the cool things he did! She got her own box of gears, fishing gear, squealed over the Dancing Tunes Music Mat and the bag of
Building Blocks, the box of Legos and all the other toys, books, and treasures. Some of her favorites were her own drawing kit and Leap Frog Scribble and Write; the kids were so close in age that Tim doubled up on the educational toys.

Of course, the Big Wheels Poppy bought their first week in New Mexico were a huge hit. It was about then that Tim realized they needed a playroom; one where they could ride their Big Wheels, color, skate, build, paste, anything. He said as much to his father who nodded, "Next house."

He got an eye roll for that but then Tim got thoughtful. "We can use the garage here if all the tools are stashed away and the cars are parked in the driveway. One of us would have to be in there with them."

"That's a good idea. It's not as cold here as DC so the cars won't be iced over. We can run a space heater when we're out there with them."

Although Tim and his father had agreed not to go crazy with each other's gifts, they'd certainly had fun. Poppy got a long sleeve soft blue shirt that said "Poppy" on it. Another shirt said, "I'm the dad!" which Tim had matched with one for himself that said, "I'm the son!" Gibbs laughed long and hard when he opened his 'I'm the dad' shirt because he'd also bought one in light green for Tim. He was happy to find a chisel just like one he'd left behind and a slimmer, easier-to-use handsaw, along with a gift card to his new favorite home center.

Tim unwrapped a package with a ball cap that said, "Electrician" and grinned. His doppelgänger Brian Hull was now a licensed electrician.

There were also items they'd found for each other in town. Dad teared up when he saw the painting with the cowboy that looked so much like Mike Franks and Tim laughed at the pen and ink drawing of a cowboy in a Porsche Boxster herding cows. He laughed harder when his father leaned in to say, "Special order." They'd made a recording of things to tell Tony and added that to it.

They'd bought new winter jackets for each other and wrapped them up even though they'd been together when they bought them. They also had new cowboy boots, the first ever for Tim. Dad had had a pair when he was a kid but never as an adult. His were silver and a soft gray with deep blue accents while Tim's were tan and cream with rich green accents. They'd also purchased new watchbands, Dad's in the traditional blue turquoise, Tim's in a green turquoise. While they weren't Christmas gifts, the men also purchased a beautiful Native American blanket they draped over their sofa, some accent pieces and a few lovely throw rugs that were keeping their feet warm in the mornings.

Because all four of them now had cowboy/girl boots and hats, they decided they should wear them the rest of the day. The kids also put on their vests, jeans, and chaps and Tim set his new camera on Dad's new tripod to take a family photo, all while his phone continued recording the festivities. He wanted a record of as much of the day as possible. For the still photo, they left the mess of wrapping paper, bows, ribbon, boxes, toys, books, and clothes visible, cleared space for the four of them in front of their tree and took several photos. They enjoyed the reaction when days later they took the kids to the Marshals' office to drop off their post-Christmas cookie treats. All four again wore their new cowboy hats and boots. They'd never seen McQueen laugh but he did, laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. When he'd finally stopped, he wiped his eyes and said, "I don't think I've ever seen such a complete transformation. From DC hard-core feds to southwestern cowboys. The weird thing is it works! You, Brian, I would never think you could get away with that getup but you're totally rocking it and Mark, yeah you were born to be a cowboy! And of course, the kids are adorable."

Miller was amused while Mary couldn't stop staring at Brian. She jumped and blushed when her
partner elbowed her, quietly reminding her later they were not allowed to drool over their witnesses. She slugged him, he knew she would but it was worth it.

Marshal Maggie was off the day they were there, so they left her gift with Stan. Their next stop was to buy a trampoline designed for toddlers. Tim was more nervous about this than he'd been about the pogo stick but once he saw it, he felt better. It was a few inches above ground level, just enough to have some spring to it and there was a wide (and soft) enough apron that the kids would never hit the ground. Nevertheless, Tim bought thick foam pads to surround the entire area. Once again, he wished they had a playroom.

After the fun of Christmas, they were afraid New Year's would be depressing but on the 27th Steve Ortiz called to invite the four of them out to the ranch for a New Year's Eve party, staying overnight in the bunkhouse. He explained the party would start out with dinner for everyone and then as the kids went to bed, the party would segue into a more adult party but many people turned in early. He laughed, "There's never anything risqué or much alcohol, too many of the kids stay up with us."

After clearing it with the marshals, the Hull family accepted. They'd been told to bring their new western duds and arrived in jeans, flannel shirts, their Stetsons, and boots. They fit right in and had a great time; it was fun meeting new people, greeting the ones they knew, mostly from Steve's construction crews and several of his relatives, enjoying the traditional foods and drinks. Tim realized they hadn't been to a party or with a group of people who weren't marshals since Dad and Ty's birthday party in September. They carried the kids off to bed around 8:30 and were happy to see a few of the Ortiz family teenagers taking turns watching over the little kids while they slept. Tim also linked a baby monitor to his watch so if either of his kids needed him he'd be alerted. He'd written the app himself but still ran it by the marshals before setting it up.

He made it to 0230, his dad turned in a little after 0100. They gave each other a tired smile the next morning, the shortened sleep was totally worth it; they really needed some adult fun. Breakfast was buffet style in the main house and there was plenty of coffee. They left for home before 1100 and the kids played with their new toys while their father and grandfather took turns napping.

The holidays over, they got back in their everyday groove. Tim added more electrical work to his non-teaching days and finally felt like he was gainfully employed. Sure, he wasn't busting bad guys, but he was training young minds and making homes and businesses safer and more efficient. Before Christmas, the crew finished the house they were flipping and Steve purchased another one to renovate. A duplex, it needed a lot of work and to Tim's satisfaction, a total rewire. He really enjoyed doing his bit and being done. No paperwork!
Chapter 12

January was cold with a few inches of snow; February was even colder with ice and snow. March had its moments but by then the family was all about waiting for spring. Ty started preschool in January, which almost broke Tim's heart. He hadn't even known his little boy for a year and here he was off to school. Sure, it was part-time and called preschool for a reason but it was still school. He seriously considered homeschooling the kids, that way he'd have them to himself for longer. He realized that was probably the worst reason ever for homeschooling and his children needed to be with other children, not just their selfish, maudlin father. He kept quiet, receiving a few extra shoulder squeezes and hair ruffles from his dad, surviving the first weeks of preschool.

Late March and April brought spring bulbs and blooms and the family went to "Daffodil Hill" and a massive tulip garden. Tim watched the gardening columns for clues as to when he could start planting. He mentioned it to his father and they stared at each other, realizing neither had even questioned whether they'd still be here. Dad said, "They've forgotten about us, whoever is working the case they didn't want us involved in."

"Looks like it. We could ask Stan for an update."

"We could but if there was any good news Mary or Miller would tell us."

Tim nodded and the two were silent before Tim said, "So, I'm thinking tomatoes, vegetables, squashes, and flowers. What do you think about planting an apple tree? Then we could make apple crisp from our own apples."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. Let's see if we can get one that's a few years old so we don't have to wait as long."

"Sure and we can plan out the drip system we've been talking about. It's already set up in the courtyard; we can use that as our template."

"I picked up a brochure from a company that makes all the components; it has suggestions for mapping out a system."

"Good thinking, thanks Dad!"

They were amused when they went to their favorite home center; they weren't the only ones with spring fever. The kids wore their gardening boots and were a big hit with the other customers. And they saw people they knew! Steve's cousin's wife Tamara and her daughter Chase were there buying early tomatoes, they saw a couple of people from church and a family they knew from daycare. Tamara advised that the tomatoes would need to be cared for to avoid damage from late season frost. The men nodded, they would do that as the prospect of homegrown tomatoes made their mouths water. It was a good thing they brought the truck and left the cover at home, because
they bought supplies to protect as well as tomato plants, several pots of flowers with seeds for more, vegetables, a five-foot apple tree, and yards of drip piping with dozens of components, two adult sized shovels and two small ones for the kids. Gloves, hats, several buckets, a big and small watering can and they were ready to garden!

By Saturday evening, they had the tree planted with a water line in a wide line around the skinny trunk. They had netting to protect the blossoms and fruit from birds and mulch to keep the roots moist and protect from frost. The plants in nursery pots had been planted in a new raised bed that Poppy built and those too had a water line with little drip connectors to individually water each plant. That saved water, very important in the high desert terrain of Albuquerque. By Sunday evening, the tomatoes were in another of the raised beds, complete with drip line and a framework to hold up the plastic covers that would be pulled over them on frosty nights.

No garden was ever tended so carefully as each member of the family checked every flower, every twig, every plant for bugs, growth, too much water, too little every day. Countless photos were taken as their garden flourished. By the end of April, the tomatoes were in cages and sporting many yellow blossoms. The apple tree was starting to sprout new growth and the flowers were still blooming. The seeds they planted were thinned out, much to the horror of the children, and continued to grow.

May came in sunny and hot and the kids started swimming lessons at the Ortiz ranch. Tim was still learning to ride horseback as were the kids with their escorts on ponies, but as expected, the little ones were having an easier time of it.

Tamara jokingly told him it was because his legs were too long. "We have to put you on our bigger horses and they're the ones who love to run."

He nodded as he rubbed his sore backside, having been bounced around again. "Too bad you don't have big tall elephants to ride."

It got better once he learned to move with the animal and the swimming on the ranch was excellent. They had lessons, swimming or riding, sometimes both, nearly every weekend and Daddy and Poppy loved riding with Ty and Brynie down to the stream where they could wade in the shallow pools. Other days it was so hot they just hung out in the pool. Despite the gallons of sunscreen Tim and his children slathered on, by mid-June the three of them were browning up nicely. Tim was astounded, "I've never tanned, the best I can do is lobster red. I have a friend who's always said my skin tone is either parchment white or beet red."

His father grinned at him, "Must be something special in the atmosphere here."

Tim rolled his eyes at him, "Or possibly I'm in the sun more often so instead of a two hour block once a month that gives me a nice red glow, it's happened gradually."

"And all the vitamin D you're getting is good for you."

With Tim's online classes on summer hiatus, he was tending the garden and picking up more electrical jobs, working for three different contractors. In the meantime, Dad learned how to build with adobe and practiced by making a fort for the kids. When he was more confident, he planned to make an adobe playroom attached to the breezeway.

While they were enjoying their lives, neither Tim nor Gibbs ever forgot they were not allowed to drive more than 30 miles outside of town in any direction, nor could they use their real names, stop coloring their hair or wearing colored contacts or worst of all, contact any of their family and friends. Anything that fell out of the Marshals' guidelines had to be approved beforehand. They
weren't prisoners but neither were they free, they were quarantined exiles. Adding more frustration and exasperation, the choice was theirs to stay or go. However, they still did not know precisely what the danger was and neither man would jeopardize the children's safety.

Tim rebelled; he stopped having his hair colored. With blond, almost platinum streaks, his unusual tan and hazel eyes, their marshals decided he looked different enough and let it ride. Once the tan started to fade after summer, they'd reinstate the hair coloring.

On the other hand, his father, while hating the coloring process, was thoroughly enjoying not having gray hair, amazed to find that it made him feel younger as well as looking younger. When a woman at church engaged him in conversation, he replied and they had coffee together. Coffee led to a few dates but Jethro didn't feel he should get serious, as he had no intention of anything permanent. Someday he and his family were going home. Telling his new friend he wasn't ready for anything serious, she agreed and the fledgling relationship evolved into a warm friendship.

As the months passed, Tim continued writing a chronicle of their lives in exile and wrote countless letters to Ellie, his siblings and his grandfather. While the letters to Grandpa, Sarah, Rob, Geordie, and Tony were mostly lighthearted, the words to Ellie were sometimes hot and heavy, sometimes poetic, sometimes humorous, sometimes melancholic. They were always full of his love for her. Someday he hoped to deliver the letters personally.

Spending the Fourth of July at the Ortiz ranch, they swam, rode, oohed, and aahed with the rest of the guests over the festivities. Tim and the kids laughed when Dad was invited to help grill their dinner. However, after their own fireworks, someone turned on the TV to watch the fireworks show on the National Mall and Gibbs turned away; he couldn't bear to look.

END OF PART ONE
Chapter 13

PART TWO

Busy with work and the children the rest of the month, it was early August when trouble suddenly surfaced. One night shortly after midnight, Miller called to tell them he, Shepherd, Davis, and Booker were outside on protection detail and the Hulls should make sure the doors and windows were locked. The Gibbs men had firearms, a concession from McQueen, and now made sure their weapons were nearby with extra clips. They used the same firing range as the marshals and both men had recently scored the same as their last ratings as federal agents.

By daylight the alert was lifted, a false alarm. The Gibbsses were philosophical, no one was hurt, the kids never woke, they'd been prepared and their suspicions were confirmed. Since the Chief Inspector had first told them DHS wanted them out of the way, they'd both known it was something more. For one thing, all anyone had to do was to say the children were in danger and they would have stopped the inquiries. For another, vehicles and houses aren't purchased for anyone because they're "in the way". They'd been speculating for months, agreeing that Tim was the target. He'd been the one who'd been followed; the marshals had come to his home, not Gibbs' house. They couldn't think who would be interested in the inquiries into Tim's supposed death and the lack of Navy response to his letters unless it was Joann Fielding. However, that only made sense for his kidnapping. Unless she was responsible for other criminal activity unknown to them, aside from the murder of Captain Norton.

Now as Miller, Mary, and the others prepared to leave, Booker let something slip. "Glad it wasn't her, but who else would have a car like that?"

"What kind of car?" The other marshals were refilling their mugs, out of earshot.

"Bright blue 1992 Crown Victoria, geesh."

He stopped talking when he realized what he'd said while Gibbs and Tim played dumb as if he'd just mentioned the weather, getting their own coffee and chatting with the others. Finally, they left and the two men looked at each other. "It's a woman and she drives an old car."

Tim sat in front of his laptop, pulling up and reviewing the notes he'd written over the last 9 months. "Did we ever get any information about who helped Fielding kidnap me?"

"Not much, dark hair, thick Slavic or Russian accent, small eyes. One person called them mean eyes."

Tim was silent and then to his father's astonishment lost nearly all color in his face, even with the tan. "Oh my God. It can't be...oh God. Dad...Shit!"

"Timothy?"

"Small mean eyes, dark hair, thick Russian accent. Loves blue cars, oh my freaking..."

"Who?"

"Natalie, my stepmother. That's too big a coincidence to be anyone else."
"But this was years before and she was a nurse."

"Not that many years, we moved to Okinawa when I was three, I'd already had my third birthday and we stayed in Puerto Rico for the holidays, so it would have been 1981. I think the Commander hired her within a few months. I remember ladies coming to take care of us and then we'd never see them again."

He started putting together a tentative timeline, "So in November 1977, she was in Pennsylvania, not living in Asia as she told Dad McGee. She helps Fielding kidnap me and then turns up in 1981 in Japan and somehow meets the Commander, probably recognizes him if she saw him at Bethesda, at least recognizes the name and pretends to be a nanny. He hires her and in 1982, she becomes the gestational host for Sarah. Dad tells us to call her Mother, that they're married now. What is she doing in the meantime? Certainly not taking care of Patrick and me, we were nearly self-sufficient by the time she'd been there a year. The laundry was sent out and she only cleaned right before Dad was due home. I remember blue things, lots of them. Towels, dishes, her clothes. Even Sarah's baby clothes – I remember Dad teasing that she'd hoped Sarah would be a boy because she had so much blue for her instead of pink or any other color. She got packages all the time and was on the phone a lot, talking in Russian. Which I didn't know until I heard you and Ziva and recognized it. Pat and I took care of the baby after she was past infancy. Dad and my brother died in March, 1986, Natalie abandoned us three months later."

"What color car did she drive? And what about the attack at the shelter in Baltimore?"

Tim got even paler. "Dad bought her a blue Honda in San Diego. She picked it out, had to have blue and I remember she had to wait for it to arrive, maybe from Japan. She loved that car, wouldn't let us near it without her. She and Sarah picked me up from the hospital in a cab and when I asked where her car was she said she'd sold it for the money and started crying." He thought for a minute before continuing, "I was told the guy at the shelter who stabbed me was strung out on drugs, although they never found him. Why?"

"If she discovered you were still alive, she might have hired someone to kill you. What year was that?"

"1989 but why then? She could have done it while I was in a coma or even just still in the hospital or at the house."

"Did anyone come in to help you once you were out of the hospital?"

"Yeah, a lady came to bathe me every day and she made meals for Sarah and me because no one else was feeding us. I think she was a home health aide."

"So that's why not at the house and I don't know why not in the hospital. You didn't see anyone?"

"The chaplain, he's the one that told me Dad and Patrick were dead. He said he'd tell Natalie that I was awake. Huh, how did he know her name?"

"Hospital records?"

"But who filled them out? No one ever visited me, no one. I remember having to tell the doctors my name."

"Don't know son."

"As far as I know, she's been out of our lives since she put us on the bus. So why would she be after me now?"
"We were looking into your supposed death and kidnapping. There's no statute of limitations for kidnapping a minor or child endangerment."

"Yeah but Shannon was a minor, technically her mother could do whatever she wanted with me."

"What Mac told us and Bishop confirmed: there were two people who signed Shannon into that place, both parents."

"So for the adoption to be legal she needed Mac's signature too?"

"Maybe. And don't forget at least one medical person on staff told Shannon the baby was dead when you obviously weren't."

"Damn. So Natalie finds out kidnapping would be a valid charge and decides to kill me? Not like I remember her being there!"

"But you do know her. You lived with her for several years. You may have some knowledge you don't know you have."

"Like what she was doing with the packages and the phone calls?"

"Yes."

"There's got to be more than this, I can't believe we got dragged out here because of Natalie."

"Who killed your father and Patrick?"

"Hit and run, never found the other driver."

"Who had the case?"

"NIS and yes it's a cold case. But how would she know I work there, how would she find me? We keep our names and photos out of the media and I know neither of us ever tells people what we do until we know them pretty well…oh no."

"Tim?"

"We did that interview with Stars and Stripes about Sue and Deeny. They printed our names, mentioned we worked at HQ. We asked them not to, remember how angry we were?"

"That's how she found you? Crap!"

"Must be. If it is Natalie, why is DHS after her instead of NCIS or the FBI? And why the hell haven't they arrested her? It's been 9 months!"

"I've been thinking about that. Thinking of all the people I pissed off over the years. Thinking I'm why we got shipped off in the first place and why we're still here."

"Dad! You only piss off incompetent people. I haven't seen one yet who didn't deserve it."

"Doesn't mean they won't go for revenge when the opportunity presents itself."

"Geez. So Natalie was some sort of threat and we were shipped out and are being held here because of politics. You know any way you look at the thing, it's political."

"Yes."
"And they kept NCIS out of it because they knew Vance would fight for us, that Secretary Porter would."

"Yes."

Tim looked out at the garage. "That's why they paid for our vehicles and I'll bet you anything they helped pay for the house renovation, might even have bought the house. Buying themselves out of the guilt for what they were doing. Enough! You and I are going to break whatever effing case they have and go home. Think the tomatoes and the apple tree can make the trip in the back of your truck?"

His father chuckled as he ruffled his hair. "Sure, why not? Do you still have those burner phones you brought with us?"

"Yeah and the envelope from Vance with his burner number. He's our first call."

Neither went to work that day, telling Steve they had personal business they needed to handle. Tim took the kids to daycare and preschool, kissing them goodbye and noticing the marshals who were outside each building. That told him it hadn't been a false alarm. Although he supposed they could be there for some other witnesses' children or even one of the teachers. His gut was telling him otherwise and it was far too big of a coincidence.
Chapter 14

When he returned home, Dad was charging one of the burner phones. Tim had stopped to purchase airtime cards, paying cash and staying out of range of security cameras.

“Dad, we need to get this done fast. There are marshals over at the daycare and the preschool. I tried to convince myself that they could be there for some other witnesses, but my gut tells me no, that wasn’t a false alarm and this…whatever it is…is going down soon.”

“I agree. The phone’s been charging for 90 minutes, is that enough?”

“Leave it a few more minutes.”

“How much airtime did you get?”

“23 hours; we need to plan what we’re going to tell Vance.”

“First of all, he needs the DHS file, if they even opened one.”

“Good point but you know Fornell would insist and why is he participating in this crap? You’d think he’d be our advocate.”

“McQueen said he was the one who said neither of us would back down.” Gibbs paused, “Actually he said if he was the FBI guy he was the one. Could be more than one FBI guy.”

“Another good point, still I would have expected Fornell to get this done. Another thing Dad, whoever said that was dead wrong. As we said earlier, all either of us had to be told was that the kids could be in danger if we didn’t back off and we would have done so immediately.”

“Yeah kiddo, been thinking about that too. When it was just me I didn’t care and our team could handle anything, but the babies, no way I would have continued.”

Tim sighed, “All right, back to Vance. He needs the DHS file and any notes. If we can get access to Fornell, that would be good, that is if he’s still involved in this. We need help as soon as possible. I don’t know how these marshals will do in a stealth fight. Yeah, I know marshals are as well trained as we are but I really want our team here. I want combat gear for the two of us and how do we protect the kids?”

“You and I will be their last line of defense.”

“No, I don’t want them to be collateral damage. I want to take them somewhere they’ll be safe.”

“You’re right and I think the four of us need to get to the Marshals’ building.”

Tim nodded, “Better security for us, the house looks empty, and the neighbors aren’t scared to death or worse.”

“Ok, let’s talk to Vance and then pack up.”

The phone was fully charged, they’d memorized Vance’s burner number and now they just hoped he was still carrying it with him. Tim punched in the number; first making sure the speaker was on. He grabbed his father’s hand when they heard a voice.
“Hello?”

“Director Vance, this is Tim and Jethro Gibbs. We’re in trouble and need to talk, would you please engage SCIF?”

“Yes, hang on.” While Vance turned to his computer, he kept talking. “Do we have a two-minute time limit?”

“No Sir, we’re on a new burner phone.”

“Good. Very glad to hear your voices. SCIF is on, what’s happening?”

“We’re still not sure what this is all about but we have a working theory. Before we get into that, we believe an attack on the four of us is imminent. We woke to an alert early this morning; the marshals were outside until daylight and then said it was a false alarm. However, there were marshals at the daycare and Ty’s preschool and our guts are telling us it’s not a false alarm, something’s up. Marshals won’t tell us and we want NCIS, our team, in on this, whatever ‘it’ is. We don’t trust DHS and we believe part of the delay is pure politics.”

“I’ve come to the same conclusion and how many people do you need? I’m assuming full gear?”

“Yes Sir and two extra for us, please. We have firearms but not our Sigs, nor do we have vests or helmets.”

“All right, want to hang on while I get DiNozzo in on this?”

“Absolutely.”

They heard him call Tony and order him to his office. While they were waiting, they told him how the kids were doing. They heard the door open and Tony’s entrance.

“Agent DiNozzo, I need your team, hang on, you want them all?”

“Tony, Ellie, and Bob if he’s still there. If there’s anyone new on the team, we don’t know him or her. Another agent we’ve worked with is fine. As we said, we don’t trust anyone we don’t know right now.”

In DC, Tony was listening and trying to hold on to his emotions.

“All right, we’ll add Fuller from Carter’s team. Where are they going?”

Across from him, Tony was vibrating with emotion as he listened to Tim.

“Albuquerque, New Mexico, to a private airfield the Marshal’s Service uses. If they fly in there we can pick them up although I’m sure we’ll have marshals with us. And yeah, Fuller’s a good add.”

Tony cleared his throat, “Hi Tim! Boss, can you please say something and what are we doing?”

“Helping us, Tony, we’re preparing for trouble; probable attack.”

“Oh geez, so full gear.”

“And two extra weapons would be great, we have firearms but we weren’t allowed to purchase Sigs.”

“All right. Director?”
“You, Bishop, Chalmers, and Fuller. Take your go bags, full gear, extra gear, and weapons, get over to Bolling and keep this quiet in the squad room. I’ll let Carter know. I’m going to push for SecNav’s jet. Rather you be over there and ready to go.”

“Yes, Director. See you soon guys, love you both.”

“Us too, Tony.”

Tony caught Ellie’s eye from the mezzanine and tilted his head toward Bob and the elevator. Tim and Jethro listened while Vance called Rick Carter and told him to send Evan Fuller to DiNozzo, that they had a combat mission for which they needed him. Rick’s only comment was to ask if they needed anyone else.

Finishing the other call, Vance came back to them; they talked about the mystery case and their theories, pointing out the possibilities of a bright blue 1992 Crown Victoria belonging to someone other than Natalie McGee suddenly arriving in New Mexico.

While they talked, Vance did some research, reporting the car was registered to Annette Prospero in Tampa, Florida. He also received permission to use the Secretary’s jet and sent a text to DiNozzo. Once he understood what his two exiled agents needed, they disconnected and he got to work. First, he explained the situation to the SecNav and she told him she’d help in any way. She took on the responsibility of calling Morrow to determine case status and to make immediate arrangements for the case file to be sent to NCIS. She had the backing of her superiors; no one would dare put a stop to it.

After Vance got his agents squared away, he contacted Fornell and told him what was going on. Although Tobias had gotten further on the case, he was stymied by the DHS team while FBI Director Beldon continued to get the runaround from Morrow’s second in command. Unfortunately, the DHS team had figured out the FBI’s play with the McGees’ protection details and very little information was forthcoming after that.

When Secretary Porter was unable to reach Morrow, she called her boss who made the call through his office. The call was put through right away.

Within two hours of the Gibbses’ phone call, help was on the way. Their team was in the air; Fornell was en route from Southern California and Rick Carter’s team arrived at DHS to pick up the case files. Senior Division Chief Morrow knew he was in serious trouble and the Gibbs family, both vehicles and several suitcases were on their way to the Marshal’s building.

As they approached the building, Tim called McQueen, noticing he didn’t hear a ringtone. “Chief Inspector, this is Brian Hull and family. We’re asking for asylum, we believe there’s an imminent attack.”

“I was just calling you to come in. How soon can you get here and do you want an escort?”

“We have both vehicles and are turning into your lot now; like to park underground.”

“Use my code.” He rattled it off and the security gate lifted.

“Come up to the office, do you have luggage?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll send someone down with the cart; you can have your former suite for the duration.”
The kids were quiet. They knew something was wrong; their father had never pulled them out of school or daycare before. However, they still felt secure; Daddy and Poppy were carrying them and they knew this building was safe.

Up in the elevator to the office where Marshal Maggie was waiting for the children. “Thomas, Brinley, it’s good to see you! Would you like to watch a movie? Your father and grandfather will be in the room with the windows again.”

They looked at Daddy who nodded so they followed Marshal Maggie.

The Gibbs men stood in McQueen’s office. “We know that wasn’t a false alarm last night.”

“Correct. We were first told it was by DHS and then that it wasn’t by Albuquerque PD and they were right. What happened is that about 2330 last night, a 1992 blue Crown Victoria rolled into the county. Background on that is DHS warned us about this vehicle months ago, that particular year, color, model and we’d passed the word to local law enforcement. There’s a nationwide BOLO on it, although to observe and report, not to stop or engage.

“State troopers and Sheriff’s deputies saw it and reported, PD heard the report and alerted their patrols, notified us. We sent the detail to your place while the PD observed the vehicle as it entered the city limits. It drove around the city for three hours, including your neighborhood. Finally, it stopped at a hotel and we were able to get a good look at the driver. It was not the woman we expected but a man. The license plate was badly damaged and it took our techs a few hours to get the digital image cleaned up enough to read. It’s the right vehicle, wrong driver.

“PD kept an eye on him anyway and when the man called for room service, one of our marshals delivered the food. He was able to take a photo and facial recognition just found the driver, Rik Krose, about forty-five minutes ago. We ran his record, which is lengthy and violent; he’s a sociopath and a known associate of the woman who’s been after you for the past year. I sent marshals out to bring you in and was literally calling you when you called.”

Tim had a weird feeling in his gut as he asked, “May I see the photo?”

McQueen handed him a 5x7 and Tim again paled under his tan.

“Tim?”

“You were right Dad; there was an attempt while I was in the hospital. Maybe more than one. This is Rev. Potter, the chaplain who told me my father and brother were dead, the one that somehow knew Natalie’s name when nobody knew who I was.”

McQueen frowned, “How long ago was that?”

“28 years”.

“You were just a kid.”

“Who’d been thrown from his father’s car during a hit and run. Which is still a cold case.”

“So is that what DHS has been dragging its ass on? The reason you’re here?”

“We believe it’s at least part of it. Is the woman who owns the car called Natalie McGee? We know it’s registered in another name.”

McQueen looked at a page in the file he had open, “That’s one of her aliases; it’s believed her real
Tim turned to look at his father, “If I had internet access, I bet I could find her employment records at that maternity clinic.”

“Good, we can do that during clean up. Chief Inspector, this woman has been involved in my son’s life literally since the day he was born. We believe she was an accomplice to his kidnapping when he was less than 24 hours old. Three years later, she attached herself to his adoptive father, faking a marriage to him. We believe she was the one who eventually killed him and Tim’s brother in the hit and run, abandoning Tim and his sister. That forced them into homelessness that lasted until Tim turned 18. We don’t know what else she’s done although she may also be responsible for an attack on Tim when he was 12.”

“However, we took action this morning. We contacted Leon Vance, Director of NCIS and our boss; he’s sending an armed team to assist. They’re the rest of my team, three of us worked together for 12 years and we’ve had hundreds of armed situations, firefights, taken out entire terrorist cells, serial killers, and gangs. Tim and I have been in firefights in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as at home. We are combat ready.

“With the new information, I believe Svetlana is not far behind Krose and this is her endgame, to finally kill Timothy McGee, as she knows him. We know our actions mean we’re out of the program, we only ask for your help in bringing Svetlana Stacevyko and her accomplices to justice. Director Vance and the Secretary of the Navy have confirmed our employment as armed Federal Agents with NCIS, you should have an e-mail and fax soon. Our team is in the air, ETA is now 1 hour, 30 minutes; they’re traveling in Secretary Porter’s jet and will touch down at the airfield you use. Neither of us has contacted DHS, our problems with them have been bumped up to the President’s Chief of Staff who has taken it to the President.”

He stopped as the burner phone Tim brought with them beeped with a text. Tim read it, showed his dad and smiled grimly, “FBI Senior Agent Tobias Fornell is also on his way here from California, says he wants in on the action. His ETA is 1 hour 10 minutes via the FBI jet which will also land at that airfield.”

McQueen took a deep breath, “Thank you for your candor and the information. We will, of course, work with you; it will be a pleasure to bring that monster to justice.”

“One more thing, Chief Inspector.”

“How she found you here?”

“Yes.”

“Starting with the first report of that vehicle entering the county, three of my marshals and I have examined every piece of communication that has left this office in the last three months and they’re continuing to work their way backward. So far we haven’t found the leak.”

“Did anyone on the DHS team know our location?”

“It’s possible. It wouldn’t have come from here but it is possible someone at our National headquarters updated the team leader with your location. It’s not our usual protocol but it’s likely they would not have thought it a risk because it was the same team that ordered your protection.” He paused, “You know that whoever leaked your location to Svetlana committed an act of treason?”
Tim closed his eyes, “Yes, I did know that.” He shook his head, “I’m far more likely to believe the leak came from DHS than your service. There has been so much political crap involved in this, why not add treason to the mix? The traitor may have figured Dad and I would be dead and the Marshals would be blamed.”

“What kind of surveillance is Staceyvyko under? And how do you expect her to arrive?”

“Every LEO in the state has been alerted to her appearance, especially the description of her eyes. Albuquerque PD has Krose in custody on an old warrant; they can keep him for another 10 hours. If NCIS or the FBI gets a warrant, you can pick him up and he can sit in our lockup.”

“We don’t have our badges or id. They were confiscated.”

McQueen smiled, “And arrived here with you because I was told your stay would be two to three months, maximum. I wanted to get you back to your lives as quickly as possible. I did start getting suspicious when DHS first sent us a check for your expenses and then an additional one for housing. That’s never happened before, not in my experience.”

“Remember who they were signed by?”

“I made copies of them. Both were signed by Senior Division Chief Morrow.”

Tim turned to his father, “So he moves from good guy to dirtbag with a tiny bit of conscience.”

“Yeah. Looks like politics ruined him.”

McQueen unlocked a file cabinet drawer, sorted through a pile of plastic bags and pulled several out.

“Special Agent Timothy Gibbs, your badge and id, your Sig, your phone and uh…your iPod, iPad, and laptop. And here, we have the same model phone; I’ll swap batteries with you so your phone is all set to go.”

“Thanks.” He immediately fastened his badge to his jeans and slipped his ID into his pocket. The marshals had kept the holster with his Sig. Tim removed the weapon from the holster, “Chief, you have someplace I can clean my weapon?”

The Chief was in the process of handing Gibbs senior his things and looked up. “Of course, Tompkins will take you to the armory. You’ll need gear anyway.”

Gibbs smiled, “Unless you have something we don’t, we’ll have our own, thanks. The team is bringing our gear and extra weapons. Any snipers in your bunch?”

“Not here, no.”

“Ok, Tim and I will take those positions then, if needed. I served as a sniper in the Marines and I trained him.”

“Too bad Ziva isn’t here.”

“Yeah.” When McQueen looked curious, he explained. “Ziva David was with us for 8 years, the first 6 as a liaison between Mossad and NCIS; she was a Mossad operative. Then she left Mossad, became an American citizen and an NCIS agent. Served for two years before leaving. She was also a sniper, did a lot of wet work before coming to us.”
Stan just stared at him, finally saying, “I had no idea you, your son, and team had led such interesting lives.” He huffed, “No wonder you were so bored! Are you going back to the field?”

Tim shook his head, “I left it after my children came to live with me. They’d just lost their mothers, there was no way I would risk leaving them orphans. Before we were taken, I was the manager of the DC Cyber Crimes unit.”

“Will you get that back?”

Tim shrugged, “Doubt it, not a position that can be left empty for long.”

“I’m truly sorry.”

“Not your fault, you were caught in this as much as we were.”

“Thank you for your understanding. Gibbs senior, are you going back to the field?”

Gibbs winced at the ‘senior’, it reminded him too much of Tony’s father. “No, my second in command has been leading for 9 months, I’m not going to force the issue and I know he’s doing a wonderful job. Anyway, I have other things I want to do now. My first priority now is my family.”

With their newly returned belongings in hand, father and son popped their heads into the ‘playroom’ to tell the kids they were going to stay in the same rooms they’d been in before. The kids could stay and play, Daddy and Poppy had some work to do. The kids were somewhat preoccupied with the movie and nodded, although Tyler gave his father a curious look. They kissed and hugged Tyler and Bryn before continuing on their way.

Entering the suite again felt a bit off but neither man commented. Their bags had been delivered and the food in the cooler put in the refrigerator and freezer. Tim tucked his laptop, iPod, iPad and other electronics into a sports bag and put it in the closet in the adults’ bedroom. Putting the charged battery in his phone, he smiled as he called his sister.

“Tim? Oh please be you!”

“It is me, sweetie, me and Dad. And the kids but they’re watching a movie upstairs.”

“Are you all right? Where are you, can you say? When are you coming home? We’ve missed you so much and Geordie’s here now too.”

“We’re all right, the kids are doing great; they’ve grown a lot. This is almost over, have some dirty work to do but Dad and I brought NCIS into it so Tony, Ellie, and the rest of the team are coming to help us finish. Don’t know when we’ll be home, I’ll let you know as soon as we know. I’m glad Geo’s there, did you send for him, how long is he staying? Where are you? I forgot to put a country code in, so you must be back in the States.”

“Yes, we came back at Christmastime when Geordie showed up and yes we sent for him. We’re in Alexandria; we’ve been living in your house with Ellie. Oh, you might not know that, she moved in here and Tony moved into Gibbs’ house. Geo transferred out of Special Ops, he’s stationed at Quantico. And you still haven’t said where you are.”

“That’s great about Geordie and the house; we’re in Albuquerque, New Mexico.”

“Wow that actually sounds pretty cool.”

“We haven’t seen much outside the city. Tell you all about it when we see you. Have to go meet
Tony’s plane! Love you and our brothers more than I can ever express.”

“And I – we – love you, the kids and Gibbs. Good luck with the dirty work, is that like what’s called wet work?”

“Uh, sorta. Gotta run Sari, bye!”

He took a moment to even out his breathing; he couldn’t believe he’d just spoken with his baby sister! Calloused hands rubbed his shoulders and he leaned into them.

“We have to finish this, she has to be stopped, let us live our lives.”

“Agreed. The kids are playing, no rooftop for them today. Your gut telling you anything more?”

“That’s she’s close by. Not here yet. I don’t understand why - never mind, DHS can just go to hell with her.”

“C’mon, let’s go get reacquainted with our Sigs, then it’ll be time to pick up Tobias and our team.”

Agreeing, Tim followed his father to the armory where they found Tompkins waiting for them. They cleaned their weapons and inspected the sniper rifles he showed them. They could handle them, would handle them if the situation called for it. They looked at the combat gear and noticed the add-ons to protect the area where the vests stopped, leaving the undersides of arms, clavicles and necks unprotected. Each add-on had maximum strength hook and loop fasteners.

They each tried a vest on, agreeing it felt fine; Tompkins helped them attach the add-ons and Gibbs nodded at his son. “You’re wearing those and yes, so will I. Tompkins, how many extras of these add-ons do you have on hand?”

“We have 20 marshals stationed here and 30 sets of combat gear, including packs of those add-ons.”

“May we borrow 7 of them, for the two of us and our team coming in?”

“Of course. Chief Inspector said to make sure you saw them.”

Keeping the vests on, they made sure the extra pieces were secure. They tried on sturdy boots from the extras and each found a pair that fit well enough. For Gibbs, slipping his holstered weapon onto his belt felt good, almost like he was complete again. They declined the helmets, each preferring to wait and wear his own. Knowing his father’s penchant for replacing his helmet with his NCIS swoop cap, Tim extracted a promise from him to wear the helmet for this mission.

From the armory, they went to the garage, climbed into a Chevy Suburban with Mary and Marsh and departed for the airfield, another SUV following them.

The FBI jet was just landing as they arrived and Fornell deplaned with his phone planted on his ear. Disconnecting he walked to the Gibbseys and then wrapped his arms as far as he could around them. After returning the hug, they pulled back, introducing him to Shepherd, Miller and Davis who’d driven the other SUV. He nodded to them and then launched into an update. The Bureau had satellite imagery of a car believed to be driven by Svetlana leaving Lubbock, heading west. “It’s 319 miles from Lubbock to Albuquerque; the image is about an hour old so we have roughly four hours to get ready.”

“How do they know it’s her?”
“Because, son of my ex-wife’s ex-husband, the FBI is finally able to work on this with NCIS; I’m up to date and your boss asked me to update you and your friends. Rick and Dorneget are working with Intel Analysts scouring security footage of the roadways between here and Tampa. Dorneget found a rusty older vehicle at a gas station in Lubbock. Plates were out of state. He kept his eyes on the car and in minutes an older dark-haired woman emerged from the restroom; he headed to MTAC and got a satellite image clear enough to see her small eyes. Small mean eyes. They got the plate number and it is registered to an alias of none other than your boy in lockup, Krose. And oh yeah, the image of Svetlana matched the others that DHS has been sitting on for 9 months. By the way, anything you’re thinking about them is true. The spooks at Langley look like Boy Scouts next to those idiots.”

They stopped talking and moved away from the FBI jet as it rolled down the runway to a hanger. At their questioning looks, Tobias shrugged, “Yeah, I get to keep it until we’re done here.”

“Wow.” Miller could have bitten his tongue off, it had been a spontaneous remark; he’d had no idea the Hulls/Gibbses had friends in such high places or maybe they’d been in those high places themselves.

Whatever else Fornell might have said was lost to the noise generated by another sleek jet making a landing. The Gibbsees grinned at each other, “The cavalry’s all here now!”

Once the gangway lowered, the hatch opened and Tony DiNozzo nearly jumped down the steps. “Boss, Tim!” It was an incongruous sight: the three men in their fierce looking combat gear, hugging like a family who’d been separated for too long. There were a few tears surreptitiously wiped away but nobody said a word. Then Tim looked toward the jet and Mary cursed quietly at the look on his face. A man in a trance, he moved toward the agent hurrying down the gangway.

“Ellie!”

She touched his face and said his name as he pulled her into his arms. Mary made a noise as her former witness passionately kissed the other agent. Beside her, Miller murmured something sympathetic; his partner had the worst luck!
DiNozzo looked at an amused and impatient Gibbs. With a glance, they coordinated, bellowing “McGee! Bishop!” together while Fornell grinned.

The couple pulled apart, looking surprised and then sheepish. Ellie joined Bob Chalmers and Evan Fuller, the newcomers were introduced to the marshals and said hello to Fornell. Taking their gear and weapons, they climbed into the two SUVs for the drive back to town.

At the office, they found McQueen, a Bernalillo county sheriff’s deputy, an Albuquerque police officer, and a state trooper examining a map pinned to the wall. Fornell gave them the same update he’d given the others while Tony was on the phone, speaker on, with Vance. The director was still in his office while Dorneget and Rick Carter were in MTAC, monitoring the vehicle driven by their suspect.

“I hope she has a good auto club because that thing’s not going to make it to Albuquerque.”

“So meet her in Texas. Marshals, NCIS, and FBI have jurisdiction there.”

The state trooper replied to Vance’s remark. “You really don’t want to do that. Those Texans can be as ornery as a snake bitten by its prey. Let her drive across the border to New Mexico and then we’ll stop her.”

Tim had a fierce look on his face, “I want her here. I want us to bust her on our terms, our territory.”

The feed from MTAC dropped and they all groaned.

The sheriff’s deputy turned to look at Tim, “You looking for a firefight?”

“No, she’s not worth our blood or ammunition. But she murdered my father and brother, helped kidnap me, paid Krose twice to kill me so yeah, she needs to be put away for good.”

Fornell looked at him, “You put all that together?”

Gibbs nodded, “Took us a while but yeah. When Tim saw a picture of Krose today he recognized him as the chaplain he met when he was 9 in the hospital in California and the ‘crazed' man who stabbed him in Baltimore three years later.”

“And we know from the clinic where I was born that she worked there at the time.”

Bishop nodded, “She witnessed and signed the baby’s faked death certificate.” She refused to say it was Tim’s fake death certificate.

“She’s a real piece of work. You’re right, seems like she’s been trying to kill you since you were born.”

“At least the kidnapper, my grandmother, let the McGees adopt me.”

There was silence. Fornell, knowing what wasn’t being said, and that there was more the Gibbeses didn’t know, changed the subject. “All right, so where’s our best bet to apprehend her?”
The state trooper while still processing everything he’d just heard, jumped right in, “We stop her after she crosses into New Mexico. I’m sure we can find something about the car. She stops, you guys with the warrants move in.”

“What if she doesn’t stop?”

“Then we’ll need another plan because I’m not starting any kind of chase without a valid reason. Don’t want the case to get thrown out of court.” The Feds looked at each other, there wouldn’t be any ‘court’ for the suspect but that wasn’t something to be shared with the local LEOs just yet.

“Is there a BOLO out for the car?”

Bob turned away from a computer, “There will be as soon as she crosses the border.”

Tim made a face; he really needed an MTAC. He looked at Tony, “Did your team bring a laptop?”

“Bishop did.”

“Ellie, will you please log in and access MTAC?”

“I’ve tried that remotely, Tim. Either I’m not doing something right or I don’t have permission.”

“Mm, mind if I take a shot at it?”

“Not at all. Are you going to use your login?”

“Can’t hurt to try.”

He logged on and grinned when he saw a big “Welcome Back” banner on the screen. At the bottom, he saw a little note that said the banner was created by two CCU members. He looked at the team who were all smiling. Tony explained, “Vance saw Ellie pick up her laptop as we were leaving and said, “I need to have their logons restored.”

“Ok, great, now let’s see if I remember how to do this. Fornell, time?”

“Two and a half hours out from Lubbock.”

“Time to reach the state line…anyone?”

The trooper and the deputy sheriff replied and Tim calculated in his head while he worked at accessing MTAC.

“And last question, how long to get to the border from here?”

The state trooper blanched, did a little wave and took off. The deputy sheriff told Tim the drive time. “Ok, we might be stopping her after she’s a few miles inside the state of New Mexico. There, I’m in!”

Suddenly various windows popped up and a face appeared, his friend Sandy. “This is an unauthorized breach…Tim! Welcome back…wait, here’s the director.”

Vance huffed at them as he walked down the stairs, “I miscalculated, off by 15 seconds. Out of practice. Gibbises, it’s wonderful to see you both; is it the lighting or does Tim have a tan? Tobias, haven’t seen you in a while. McGee, oops sorry… do we have time for introductions?”

“Not sure, Sir. If we can look first and then do the honors?”
“Absolutely.”

Tim got most of it and Sandy talked him through the rest. In less than two minutes, they linked to a satellite and using the coordinates from the previous image and Tim’s calculations, he found the vehicle. Tony was smiling as proudly as Gibbs was but it was the younger of the two who patted Tim’s shoulder, “That’s my Probie!”

Calculating the speed she was driving and learning about the terrain of the interstate she would come across; Tim estimated she’d cross into New Mexico in roughly one hour. Their state trooper should be in her vicinity about fifteen minutes after that. The good news was that he was only about 10 minutes ahead of them.

Tim looked at McQueen, “We need to get moving!”

He looked at the laptop, “Sandy, you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hear our timeframes?”

“Yes, Tim. The director is nodding yes; we’ll watch and update you via phone. You still have your agency phone?”

“Got it back a couple of hours ago.”

As one, Fornell and Tony turned and glared at McQueen who shrugged, “We were told to follow strict protocols.”

“How?”

Tim interrupted, “You can argue about it later, we need to go - NOW!”

His father beamed with pride as they headed for the garage. They took three vehicles, all with lights and sirens so they could shave a few minutes off their drive time. With some effort, they established communications with their state trooper. Because he’d had to stop someone, write up a violation and run the tags, he was only five minutes ahead of them.

Bob was riding with Tim and two of the marshals, the BOLO up on his phone, ready to hit the button as soon as they got the word that their quarry was in New Mexico.

Luckily, Svetlana was driving much slower than the law enforcement folks. Tim hoped she was enjoying the scenery because she’d be staring at prison walls very soon and for the rest of her life.

Another forty minutes and they stopped behind their trooper, parked at the state line. He pointed them to a hidden access road; they drove in and then turned around so that the vehicle with Tony, Bishop, Fuller, Miller, and Shepherd would be the lead car out. The marshals were there for cover, they knew NCIS had the lead here; however, they also felt they had some skin in the game as the Gibbse/Hulls had been their responsibility for nearly a year.

Finally, Sandy reported Svetlana was three minutes from the border. Then she said something unintelligible and Tim said, “Sandy, repeat?”

“She’s stopped. She’s out of the car, oh, she’s uh, visiting Mother Nature and…” silence. “Ok, she’s back, opening the trunk and…what is that? Tim, she’s changing the license plate! Hang on; I’ll get you the new characters and tags.”
Bob sat, fingers poised over his phone, ready to add the information. As Sandy relayed the new information, he changed the BOLO and held onto it.

“Ok, she’s back in the car. Huh, she just reached for something - gun! She’s armed!”

They let their trooper know and he advised his superiors. Bob updated the BOLO with an “Armed and dangerous” comment.

Sandy was still on, “It looks like…geez that thing’s a cannon!”

Vance spoke, naming the type of gun. Bob relayed that to the trooper, DiNozzo, and the marshals in the car behind him who checked their weapons.

The woman finally drove across the line and Bob sent the BOLO. The trooper, who had also hidden his vehicle, let her get several miles into the state before he turned on lights and sirens. While they were waiting, Fuller joined him, hiding in the back seat of the state vehicle.

Svetlana stopped, damn this car, she knew this had been a bad idea! Rik had persuaded her, saying driving her car into town and casing the neighborhoods would draw out their quarry, make him more vulnerable. Now she wasn’t so sure. She hadn’t been able to reach Rik all day; she’d had a text from him saying he was in town and laying low, everything had gone well, but he didn’t answer his damn phone.

At least she’d changed the plate, so any legal thing they thought they had to stop her would be useless. Nevertheless, she pulled the gun over and tucked it under her seat. She watched in the side mirror as the cop approached her. She was so focused she never noticed Fuller getting out of the trooper’s car and doing a stealth run, nearly bent in half, to the passenger side rear door of the vehicle.

The trooper felt better with the NCIS agent backing him. He’d cleared it with his CO so there wouldn’t be any problems, for either him or the case. With a slight hand gesture, he told the agent to get into position. Then he moved closer to the rusty old car.

“Ma’am, step out of the car, please. Nice and slow.”

“Why officer? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Have to check out the car, ma’am, need you out of it. Open the door.”

He ducked as she took a wild shot at him; Fuller reached through the open window to pull the front passenger door open, his weapon trained on her. The trooper came back up with his weapon pointed at her. DiNozzo pulled up as Svetlana realized there were two men pointing weapons at her. Knowing she was trapped, she moved her hand to shoot again but the gun was shot right out of her hand. Screaming, she leaned forward, screaming at them in Russian.

Gibbs climbed out of his ride and approached her, telling her in Russian to stop her yelling as she only had a scratch. As he did that, DiNozzo reached in and cuffed her. “Svetlana Stacevyko, I am Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. I am placing you under arrest for several crimes. Those include but are not limited to the 1986 murders of Commander Daniel McGee, Patrick McGee, the attempted murder of Timothy McGee, child endangerment, conspiracy to kill a minor and murder for hire. Also on the very long list are falsifying the death records of Timothy Jackson Gibbs and accessory to the kidnapping of Timothy Jackson Gibbs, also known as Timothy Farragut McGee. Today we’ll add illegally changing the plate of this vehicle along with falsifying a marriage certificate, falsifying your application for US
citizenship by using the false and illegal marriage certificate and defrauding the U.S. Navy and ABC insurance company for death benefits paid to you. For an extra bonus, inflicting grievous bodily harm on two minors: Timothy McGee, aka Timothy Gibbs, and Patrick McGee in 1984, the selling of US classified information to combative countries, distributing illegal drugs for the Reynosa cartel and for other crimes not yet discovered.”

He paused to take a breath, “Because of the information you stole and sold to countries and groups hostile to the United States, you have no rights. Pending the outcome of our investigation and interrogation, you may either be deported or sent to Guantanamo Bay where you will spend the rest of your life. And by the way, deportation will be to wherever you were spawned, I mean born.”

She scrunched her face up to spit at him but Fuller nudged her right arm and she dribbled her spit on herself.

DiNozzo spoke again, “There’s someone who wants to see you, to know you’re off the streets and that you’re through. Mr. Gibbs?”

Tim walked up, looked at her, raised an eyebrow as if she wasn’t worth his interest and turned away. “She’s all yours, Special Agent DiNozzo. Not worth much, is she? Whole life’s been a failure while I’m having a great one, no thanks to you. Enjoy burning in hell!”

He returned to the vehicle he’d been in and stood to watch the monster. “My whole life, Ellie and now I’m free.”

She touched his hand and then looked at his father, still near the prisoner’s vehicle in case he was needed for translation and smiled. He nodded back, happy his son was handling this all right. There might be nightmares and problems later but they’d handle those as they came along.

Fuller leaned out of the car, “Agent Gibbs?” Natalie’s head swung around to stare at Gibbs, “Agent Gibbs? You are Jethro Gibbs? A marine?” He just looked at her and she started to laugh. “Oh, so I win after all. You may have your puny little boy but that was not my call, not mine at all. I have still hurt you – and him, oh, I have hurt you both and you’ll never know how, never! How wonderful to know that!”

He rolled his eyes at her, walking away. Chalmers, Bishop, and DiNozzo hauled her out of Krose’s car and into the backseat of theirs, placed between Bishop and Shepherd, with Chalmers riding shotgun in the front seat. When the prisoner scrunched her face again, Bishop whipped out a role of duct tape and a balled up piece of cloth.

“Pretend you’re a civilized person. Forget that; try pretending you’re a human being. One more play at your piggy game and you get this gag with this tape over it. It’s your choice.”

Shepherd was impressed; she’d obviously gotten Bishop all wrong. It made sense, she couldn’t see Brian Hull, er, Timothy Gibbs, going for a marshmallow woman and after all, she was an armed federal agent. With a sigh, she banished her dream of a blended family with the two of them, his two kids and her little girl. When Agent Bishop gave her a concerned look, she grinned, “If you’d like, I’ll hold her still while you apply the tape.”

Svetlana grunted but didn’t say or do anything while the female agent applied first aid to her injured hand. She was content for now although she did wonder how they knew about the plate change and some of the other things. Still, she’d dealt a mortal blow to the Gibbs’ family years ago and that pain would never go away.

The vehicle with the prisoner pulled out to return to the Marshals’ office in Albuquerque. Gibbs
climbed into the second vehicle with his son, Agent Fuller, Fornell, and Marshal Miller. The third car followed them. They waved goodbye to their state trooper; Tim had already written a commendation for Tony to submit.
Chapter 16

By the time they returned to the Marshals' building, it was getting dark. Once divested of their borrowed armor and weapons, Fornell asked the two Gibses and DiNozzo to join him in McQueen's office.

When they'd gathered, Fornell remained standing, clearing his throat before speaking. "Over the past 9 months, we've established a timeline of Svetlana Stacevyko's activities, criminal and otherwise, here in the U.S. We've pulled part together from naval and public records and more came from her own journals. We made copies of the journals while she was away from her house in Florida. Other information comes from bits of correspondence with her fellow spies. They cooperated in exchange for a few trivial prison perquisites. The Russians were the biggest help once they understood we were only interested in her and not the entire Soviet operation.

"In May 1977, she entered the US for the first time. Although she'd been trained as a practical nurse, she worked cleaning houses. Our theory is that she had trouble finding a job in her field due to her lack of contacts, language skills, inexperience, and the reputation of the school where she trained in one of the Soviet bloc nations.

"Nevertheless, in September 1977 she was hired by Bellingham Maternity Clinic in Pennsylvania. Most of the clinic's clientele came from the Sacred Lamb convent school, a home for unwed mothers next door. We know in November of '77 she assisted in the kidnapping of the infant Timothy Gibbs and was the medical person for the transport to Bethesda. She was paid by Joann Fielding and we know from her journals that the two kept in touch.

"In early 1978, she quit the maternity clinic for a better paying job. She lasted about 3 months before she was fired. From what we've found, that's when she contacted an old acquaintance and began doing occasional covert work for the Soviet Union. The old acquaintance is now a retired spy and was willing to share information, for a price of course.

"In between her minor jobs for the Soviets, she worked at making other contacts. Eventually, she picked up work for the Reynosa cartel who was beginning to establish their footprint in the U.S., the West Coast at the time.

"By 1979 she'd proved herself to her Soviet bosses and was a key player for information about the U.S. Navy. However, a year later whatever covert or stealth methods she was using to obtain information backfired on her and she was almost caught. We've found records of a mystery female who got away after a break-in on a Navy base. From her old friend the spy we heard that she feared she'd been seen; she left the country days after that report and next pops up in Okinawa. She lived there for a year, insinuating herself into the social life outside the base.

"Then she heard that Commander McGee had been transferred there and recognized the name from Tim's kidnapping nearly 4 years before. The information she hears is that he is now a widower, has two kids, including the boy she helped kidnap and will need someone to take care of the children. We know from correspondence we unearthed with another 'old friend' that Svetlana's Soviet bosses are putting pressure on her, she's no longer their #1 spy and she's becoming a bit desperate. Within a few weeks of the McGee family's arrival in Okinawa, she's managed to meet the Commander and apparently talked a good game about a fictitious career as a nanny. In her journals, she lists her fake jobs. She also says one of the things she remembers about the kidnapping is that the McGees were told there was no need for adoption. She doesn't know all the legal details but she is smart.
enough to know that in the U.S. it's illegal to sell babies or anyone else. That means she has leverage to use on Commander McGee if she needs it.

"Her journal goes on to say that Commander McGee doesn't remember her and falls for what she calls her story, hiring her as nanny/housekeeper. She wrote that she hadn't planned to become a housekeeper but agreed, saying she couldn't pass up the opportunity and hoped to please her bosses again. The pull of a better life is also strong.

"A later journal entry states the two boys don't like her but their father wants her to get along with them. As he's gone most of the time, she only has to fake affection when the Commander is home. While he's gone she writes her friend that she discovered a 'gold mine' in his files and her spymasters are happy again. Almost everything else I'm going to tell you comes from her journals. I've never heard of a spy keeping records like this but who knows, maybe she was planning to write a book.

"It gets more difficult as time goes on; she passes what information she hears from the Commander and his fellow officers but he's gone a good deal of the time. Afraid of losing her favored status again, she branches out, finding other information to pass to the Soviets.

"Several months later, the Commander asks her if she'd be willing to have his child. Her journal quotes him as saying she'd be the gestational host, the fetus will be a product of his deceased wife's frozen eggs and his sperm. Once an egg is fertilized, it will be implanted in her womb. She says she pretended to think about it, finally telling him she did not want to be seen as an unwed mother or his illicit lover. So they marry, although the officiant was one of her cronies; she and McGee are not legally married, she can't take the risk of the Navy vetting her. She wrote she was relieved the Commander didn't notice the Navy didn't background her. How could they when they'd never received notice of the fictitious marriage? Whatever form the Commander filled out never reached his Commanding Officer. It's important to note that the Navy may not have received official notification of his marriage but the Commander did add her to his next of kin information, listing her as his wife. He also added her as a beneficiary on his life insurance.

"In 1984 the family attends the opening of the Los Angeles Olympic Games where she makes another strategic error. Faking a headache, she leaves the family behind so she can get her work done. It isn't until she returns to the hotel that evening that she realizes her 'husband' knows she wasn't there earlier. She makes up a story about a friend who needed help, that she didn't believe her husband would approve. There's a lot of angry talk although eventually, things die down. She worries more after that. She's stealing information and moving drugs for two different employers and is afraid the Commander is beginning to wonder about her.

"Nearly two years later he's home on leave and tells Natalie he wants a divorce. He gives her money and tells her to move out, off base. The boys are at school and 3-year-old Sarah on a playdate; he says he is taking the children camping for the weekend and expects her to be gone
when they return. She's been thinking about making her exit since the fiasco at the Olympics but now she's furious. She's also terrified he'll discover they're not legally married and she'll be deported or worse, that her entire web of lies will be unraveled. She says she has two choices: to disappear or to dispose of the threat. She disposes of the threat. Following McGee in her car, she sees him fill the propane canister he uses for the camp stove and her plan starts to come together. He's packed for the kids; he'll pick the boys up at school and then swing by the friends' house for Sarah. She knows his habits, knows he likes to take a shortcut through a nearly deserted industrial area. She intends to carry out her plan before the kids are with him but there's another car and she can't afford a witness. Instead, she finds a spot where she can see his car returning with the boys.

"As he comes into view, she revs the motor and jams her foot on the gas, heading straight for the station wagon. As she draws closer, she aims the right side of her car at the fuel tank, knowing the full propane canister would be close to it. Using every trick her drug boss taught her, she hits the station wagon right at the fuel tank, then spins away and back again, this time to hit the driver's door, using her vehicle as a weapon. Her work done, she drives down another deserted street, looking back as she hears the tanks explode. There are no witnesses, no one around to help them. Full of morbid curiosity, she circles the area for a couple of minutes, stopping when she sees a small body in the street. Aggravated, she jumps out and runs to the body, hoping the boy is dead. When she finds a pulse, she curses but finds a pay phone and calls 9-1-1. She pretends to be a passerby who found the boy and as soon as paramedics and the fire department arrive, she quickly disappears before anyone asks more questions. Picking up Sarah at her playdate, she rushes home to be there when the police come to tell her of the deaths of the others. She also hides her car and sells it several days later in a town far enough away from Alameda that the buyer hasn't heard about the hit and run. This is 1986, remember the internet exists but is not widely known; people rely on word of mouth, newspapers and TV for news.

"While she waits for the news that her 'stepson' has died she and Sarah move to a nondescript rental house in a nearby town and besides her car, sells anything of the McGees that's worth anything. She also contacts family members, sorry Tim, she doesn't name them, and tells them all three children and the Commander have died and that following Russian custom, the funeral has already been held. Just as she's received a preliminary payout from the Navy, she's contacted by her man Krose at the hospital. He's failed in his attempt to kill Tim. He's afraid one of the nurses is on to him, refuses to make a second attempt, mentioning the NIS agent who is snooping around. Changing her game plan, she has her man step into another role, which buys her the time she needs. Weeks later, she's forced to retrieve the boy from the hospital and wait until his legs heal enough for walking casts. When the great day finally arrives, she tells him a story about sending him to her nonexistent cousins and then puts him and his brat of a sister on a bus to nowhere. Finally, she is done with the McGees!

"Except she isn't. A few months later, she hears through her contacts that the boy wrote the Navy asking for help. She bribes the shlub who handles dependent correspondence, telling him her stepson is 'troubled' and obsessed with the Navy. The shlub doesn't care as he's only in the job for the steady paycheck. He's a wannabe musician in his spare time, only plans to remain a federal employee until he 'hits it big'. Not only is he willing to take her money and dispose of the letter, he volunteers to dispose of any future letters from her stepson.

"Nearly three years later, her man Rik, now relocated to the mid-Atlantic to do some of his own work, reports seeing the boy and his sister at a homeless shelter. Enraged, she orders him to kill them both. When he reports success to her, she relaxes; this time she really is done with the brats.

"In the meantime, the Soviet Union breaks up and it is very difficult to find other sponsors. She's kept up her work with the cartel and Pedro Hernandez, the boss, often tells her she can work full time for him. She really doesn't want to, she prefers a boss who is thousands of miles distant, but
neither does she want to spend all the Navy and life insurance money she's received as Commander McGee's widow. Money wins and she works full time with the cartel.

"By February 1991 she's working in Southern California, now a trusted aide to Hernandez. She's watching his back one day while he negotiates business with a Marine who's been dealing for him. She's close enough to notice Pedro's flaring temper and see the knife he uses to kill the young man. She also sees another witness, a red haired woman a few years younger than Svetlana. She tells Pedro and they decide to wait to see if she does anything. When the young redhead is seen entering the NIS office on base, her fate is sealed. After dark that night, she helps Pedro set up the sniper's nest he'll use to shoot the van driver, Agent Mitchell and cause the subsequent deaths of Shannon and Kelly Gibbs.

"When Pedro is found dead near his home in Mexico, Natalie gets spooked and lays low. She leaves the West Coast, heading east. Reverting to her pre-McGee modus operandi, she takes lovers and has them support her, determined to make her Navy and life insurance money last as long as possible. However, after she flies into another of her violent rages and kills a lover in Texas, she flees to Maryland where she knows her man Krose lives as well as another old acquaintance in nearby Virginia, Joann Fielding. Both Fielding and Krose give her shelter while Stacevyko starts looking for another foreign sponsor. After some lean times and very sporadic work she finally finds a Middle Eastern radical group willing to pay for information. After killing another lover when she believes he's betrayed her she again changes her name, appearance and moves to Florida."

Tim closed his eyes when Tobias reached the year Natalie tricked his adoptive father into hiring her. Listening in silence, he let his mind drift away from the criminal history of Natalie McGee/Svetlana Stacevyko. There were things he hadn’t heard before but she was in custody and nothing could be undone. Then his heart twisted when Fornell reported her involvement in the murder of his mother and sister and he reached for his father's hand.
Chapter 17

Watching his father from the other room, Ty laid down for a few minutes; he wanted to go home. Then one of the marshals came in to talk with Marshal Maggie. Ty jumped up a few minutes later, looking for his father and grandfather. Seeing them in McQueen's office, he knocked on the window.

Tim looked up immediately, seeing the anxious look on his son's face. Reeling with the information Fornell gave them, he and Dad needed some time to deal with it. However, the kids came first. Brynie was sound asleep and Ty was okay once he'd had hugs and kisses from his father and grandfather. While they were still in the playroom with him, he went back to the picture he'd been drawing. The kids squared away for the moment, the Gibbs men took the elevator to the only place they'd have privacy: the apartment. There the two clung together for a few minutes, letting their tears go while they absorbed the newest horror, the last link in the chain of horrors.

Finally, Dad kissed his son, whispering "This isn't something that's going away, Timothy, we'll need time to deal with it."

Tim sniffed as he nodded, handing his dad a tissue and wiping his own face. "The kids will be scared if we're gone too long. And Ellie and Tony are here – and the others."

"All right, we good to go?"

Tim shook his head, "We need to wash our faces."

In their lives, the two of them had learned to mentally compartmentalize things and that's what they did now. While they cleaned up, they shoved the newest pain, anger and horror into a mental vault and slammed it shut. Their friends and family were here, they would deal with their emotions later. Each taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, arms wrapped around each other, they went back upstairs.

When the Gibbses disappeared into the elevator, DiNozzo wondered how his family, two of the people he loved most in the world, would handle this new pain. He'd follow their lead; if they needed to talk, he'd be there for them. He also knew they'd first need time to process and mourn. He'd already decided to let Svetlana stew overnight in the Marshals' holding cell, letting her have a taste of the future.

When Tim and Boss returned, DiNozzo and his team joined Fornell, the Gibbses, and their former marshals in the kids' playroom. Tim gathered his children, thankful that Stacevyko would never get her hands on them. "Ty, Brynie, look who's here!"

Wrapped in his father's arms, Ty looked up. "Ellie! Brynie, Ellie's here, and Uncle Tony and Uncle Tobias?" He looked at the other two, "Mr. Bob?"

"Wow, what a great memory!"

"And this is Agent Fuller." Always the gentleman his mothers taught him to be, Ty slid down from his father's arms, stood up straight and held out his hand for a shake, "Hello, I'm Tyler Dean Gibbs; is that right Daddy or am I Thomas Mason Hull again?"

"No more name game, sweetie, you're Tyler from now on."
"Yay!"

Brynie didn't answer her brother; she was already in Ellie's arms and pulling at Tony's sleeve. "Unca Tony, we ride horsies and swim and ride our Big Wheels and…"

Ty headed over to Ellie, who smiled, "Hi Tyler, it's so good to see you again!"

Putting Brynie down, she picked him up and kissed him. "I can't believe how much you've grown, sweet boy! And you're almost 4!"

"Almost! Are you going to stay with us now, Ellie? With Daddy, Poppy, Brynie, and me?"

"I think for tonight and then we'll see about later, all right?"

"Yes!" That taken care of, Tyler turned to Tony for a hug and kiss, "Unca Tony, we have lots to show you." He looked at his father, "Daddy, Ellie's gonna stay right? And can Unca Tony, Uncle Toby, Mr. Bob, and Agent Fuller please stay at our house?"

Tim counted beds. "We're a little short of beds, Ty."

"You and Poppy could share."

"You're right, we can do that. And we have a sofa bed, so someone can sleep on that."

Poppy finally spoke, "We have the foam we bought for camping mattresses and sleeping bags if people don't mind."

"I can share with Brynie and someone can sleep in my bed."

Tony started to laugh but then stopped; he had no idea what size bed Tyler slept in now.

"Ok, how many people are there, Ty, including us?"

He counted carefully, "Four of us, Ellie 5, Unca Tony 6, Uncle Toby 7, Mr. Bob 8 and Agent Fuller 9. Nine, Daddy!"

Miller spoke up, "Don't forget those rollaway beds you bought for camping, Mark uh, Jethro."

"Right. Ellie, you take my room and two of you can share Tim's king. That's three. Bryn and Ty in their rooms, 5, and the four left can have the rollaway beds and the sofa bed."

Tony looked at Fornell, got a nod and spoke for them both, "Tobias and I will take the rollaway beds; Bob and Evan can take the king."

Tim nodded, "Great, then we get to show you the house!"

His father snorted, "Right, the house that Morrow's guilt built."

Tim added, "Yes; now let's climb in the cars that Morrow's guilt bought."

Miller and Mary came down to the suite with them and with all the help, their luggage was easily transported to the parking garage. Fornell and DiNozzo rode with Gibbs and the luggage. Ellie rode with Tim and the kids and the others rode with Miller and Mary who had been invited to join them for dinner. When Mary's eyes lit up as she asked if Jethro was going to grill, DiNozzo, Fornell, Bishop, and Chalmers laughed themselves silly. The jobs, location, even their names might have changed, but not the grill master's skills!
As exhausted as the adults were, they had a wonderful dinner, the NCIS team and Fornell swapping stories with the Marshals. They duly admired the house; Ellie loved the adobe although she thought it a little small. Tony grinned when he saw the extensive workshop.

"Nice and yes, I see your tools, Boss. We noticed the empty spaces in the basement at home."

Back inside Tony peered at the electrician's license, hanging in Tim's bedroom, "I thought you were kidding!"

"No. Guess I never mentioned it, but I have a license in Virginia too, under my real name. Regulations are slightly different here, had to study before I took the exam."

Miller shook his head, "You two, the contractors around here are going to cry when you leave! And I bet the houses you worked on will be known as "Hull houses", hot on the market." He turned to the others, "You should see Jethro's woodwork. Not just walls, cabinets, or countertops, his specialty items. His arched, decorated doors, hey wait, he has one here."

Tim nodded and led the others to the laundry room, pointing to the door to the outside. "That was originally a basic rectangular exterior door. Dad did that to it."

It was curved into an arch as the other doors were, but on the panels, he'd carved and painted Native American scenes. He shrugged, "That was one of my practice pieces."

Tony grinned, "That's what you're going to do at home, Boss, decorative doors?"

He got an eyebrow from Tim and a look from Gibbs who chose to explain rather than scold. "Yes, Tony, I am going to do more woodwork, learn new things. Tim and I are thinking of starting a side business, side for him anyway, flipping houses. Going to renovate mine first, back to the original Craftsman details and modernize it at the same time. And one of us needs to get a plumber's license."

Tim shook his head emphatically, "No we don't! We've got Freddie and Jose, they'll love helping us and if we do what we're thinking, their company name will be all over the place."

Tony was chagrined, "Boss, I had no idea."

Ellie decided to help her floundering Team Leader, "Are you coming back to the agency, Gibbs?"

"Hope so, hope Leon can find something useful for me to do. Not out in the field, though, done with that. It's your team, DiNozzo, should have kept it 10 years ago. You're doing a great job, just like I knew you would!"

"And Tim?"

"I hope so too, although I don't know in what position. Don't want to go back to the field, not with the kids. I'd love another shot at a CCU, maybe the FBI. Tobias, you willing to put a good word in for me?"

"Timothy, I've been trying to lure you and DiNozzo to the FBI for years, what makes you think I'd change my tune? But why aren't you taking your job back?"

Tim looked surprised, "I haven't had a chance to speak with Vance about it. I figured he'd put someone else in as Manager."

It was Tony's turn to give him an eyebrow. "You 'figured', sure sounds a lot like assuming."
"Come on, he can't have held that open for 9 months; that would have been insane, not to mention chaotic."

Fuller laughed, "I admit there have been moments. But you underestimate Vance's trust in you and your return."

"How?"

Chalmers smiled, "He brought in team leads from the other NCIS cyber units. Each one did four to six weeks in your chair. Bingham, that's the lead from the London unit, has only been in for two weeks. She's been excited about being in the U.S., planning to see as much as possible. She's a U.S. citizen who hasn't lived here since she was about Brynie's age."

Tim's jaw dropped and he sat like that until his father reached over and gently closed his mouth, saying, "Good, we'll have one steady income in the family."

Over his shock, Tim grinned at him. "If you hadn't spent all our cash…"

"You spent everything? Didn't you wipe out your accounts the day they came for you?"

Mary and Marsh grimaced, hating the way that sounded but knew at least with the Gibbses, that's exactly what had happened.

"We did and no I haven't spent it all. He just likes to tease me because I like to treat my son and grandchildren."

Tim chuckled and looking at his children nodding off in his lap, whispered, "He bought out Albuquerque and most of Amazon at Christmas."

His father snorted, pointing to the wall art in the living room and dining area, the blankets, the recliner and the throw rugs.

Tim shrugged, "I've never been here before, I like nice things."

Mary laughed, "You should stay for a couple of weeks and see the rest of New Mexico."

The adult Gibbses rolled their eyes at her, "You mean all the parts that are more than 30 miles outside the city limits? Yeah, that's not a bad idea. Think we can get Morrow to pay for that too?"

Fornell huffed, "Bet I can get that for you."

"A vacation from our DHS enforced exile, hmm."

"Are you guys serious?"

Father and son looked at each other. "Maybe, we'll have to talk about it. We want to see Santa Fe and Taos. And who knows when we'll be back this way."

"Like to say goodbye to the Ortiz family."

"Me too. Maybe we should have a cookout, invite everyone."

"Won't be room, the Ortiz family is what, 40-50 with all the cousins? Church is another 10-12 or more. Daycare and Ty's school, another 10-15."

"You guys know that many people here?"
They nodded and Tim replied. "Yeah, it's easy with kids. Steve Ortiz was the general contractor on this house; we met him when we moved in. Then Dad started working for him and once I got my license, I did too, around my class schedule. We spent New Year's Eve at his family's ranch and somehow became part of the family. Kids and I take horseback riding lessons there, they learned to swim; we had an open invitation to swim this summer and we certainly have taken advantage of it!"

"That's how you got tan and what class schedule?"

"The tan, yes, somehow some rays get through the gallons of sunscreen we slather on. And those are classes I teach, DiNozzo, I'm an online school teacher along with my other gig."

"Wow, what grade?"

"High school math, it's a catch-up/catchall class for juniors and seniors who've had problems with math, need to up their grade point average and have pre-requisites nailed before they enter college. It's been fun and I'm going to miss teaching. I thought I'd bomb but turns out that it's very satisfying helping teens grasp mathematical concepts in ways that make sense to them. Last class, there was only one C out of 25 students and yes the rest of the grades were higher!"

His father nodded, "I hung around when he was doing his planning and although the Corps taught me all the math I needed to know, his lessons finally made sense of what my high school teachers taught."

"Cool!"

Fornell had a funny look on his face, "Would you think about staying here?"

The two men looked at each other, questioning. Then Tim shook his head. "Mary, Marsh, don't get us wrong. The kids have thrived here, we like the house and the yard, gardening's been fun and we all love the climate; from that standpoint, I dread going back to the East Coast. I love the culture here and the low-key political atmosphere has been a nice break. It gave Dad and me time to get to know each other as father and son, which I don't think we would have had in DC or it would have taken longer. We're fond of the friends we've made but it's always been a temporary posting. Sort of a long term TAD, although a lot longer than we hoped it would be. We missed you all something fierce. Tony, somewhere on my other laptop is a recording of things we said we needed to tell you, funny things, maddening things, some that are just points of interest and we couldn't talk with you. When I called my sister today, we both cried. And Bro, thank you so much for helping them, you pulled them through what could have been a personal hell for the two of them."

He paused, "I missed decades with my grandfather and treasured those hours I did spend with him. And Ellie and I were becoming serious, both willing to take that big leap of faith after the stuff we've been through with broken relationships. Being forbidden to have contact with you, the rest of the family and our friends has been very difficult, the most difficult thing to deal with. For both of us because we've lost our families before and this felt like an enforced version of that. Yeah, you weren't dead as far as we knew but we couldn't see you or talk with you, couldn't let you know that we were alive and doing all right. I don't ever want to go through that again. Ever!"

He took a breath before continuing, "I believe we're different from the usual people brought into WITSEC. We hadn't seen or done anything, not that we knew of, had no idea what had happened or why we were being taken until we figured things out from a 'false alarm' we had the other day, geesh that was last night! Anyway, it took us that long to put things together and even that took someone inadvertently giving us a clue; then we called Vance, no way were we going any further without you guys. Before we were removed that night, Vance came by and gave us false IDs and passports and sometimes I've wished we'd used those. We sure would have found out things faster
than playing by DHS' rules."

Brynie stirred in his arms, calling for him and he forgot his anger at the puppet masters. Gathering his daughter in his arms, he excused himself, tapping his son on the shoulder. "Come on Snuggly Boy, you've had a long enough day. Bath and story time, then bed."

"Ok, can I say goodnight?"

"You may."

Tyler turned to everyone and gave a sleepy wave, "Goodnight, see you at breakfast! Daddy makes awesome pancakes! And there's lots of coffee."

Poppy excused himself and the four of them made their way to the family bathroom. Poppy came back out with their dirty clothes, taking them to the laundry room, unpacking clean towels, some of their bath toys and jammies. Both kids fell asleep while they were being dried off and were woken to get into their pajamas. Their friends smiled when they saw the two men, each carrying a sleeping child, come back down the hallway to the kids' rooms. Tim poked his head out, "I forgot Brynie still has her crib and a toddler bed. Ty can sleep in that if one of you wants to sleep in his twin, in his room. Clean sheets, promise!"

Tobias thought about it but he didn't want to put the kids out; in the end, no one took Tim up on his offer. It was just as well. Ty had a bad dream around 0300 and woke up crying for his father who heard him on the baby monitor they'd resurrected for the night, worried about repercussions from the tumultuous day. Little Tyler was so upset that Tim stayed with him the rest of the night, cuddling his son in his arms as they slept.

Poppy was relieved Bryn slept through Ty's trauma. The two were best friends; so close they might have been twins, reminding Tim of his early childhood with his 10-months-younger brother Patrick. They'd also been best friends and Tim still mourned Pat.
Gibbs was just waking up when he felt a small body crawl into the sofa bed with him. "Poppy, you awake?" A little finger poked his arm and he gave his best Poppy bear growl, although in a soft voice. "Grrr, who poked the bear?"

Brynie giggled and kissed him, "I'm hungry!"

"All right, little bear; have you used the potty yet?" They'd learned to be specific with Bryn, asking if she'd been to the potty didn't necessarily mean she'd used it.

She nodded and showed her hands, which were still a little damp. "An' I washed my hands."

"Good girl. Ok, let's get breakfast started."

"Juice! Then pancakes."

"Yes, your royal highness!"

"Please."

"That's better; come on."

Tobias and Tony woke up to little girl giggles but there wasn't any coffee yet so they stayed put. While the coffee was brewing, Poppy realized the two men might not want an audience. He covered the pancake batter and said loudly, "Come on little bear; let's get you dressed before we make the pancakes."

The two men waited until a door snicked shut before taking turns in the bathroom, getting dressed. Ellie was up; she'd already had a shower and was dressed but didn't emerge until she heard another set of footsteps leave the living room. She'd heard Tim go into Tyler's room early this morning and thought he might still be in there. She was in the kitchen pouring herself a mug of coffee when Fornell joined her. "Good morning!"

He nodded as he accepted the coffee pot from her and poured his own mug. "Morning. You're cheerful before coffee."

"No way! I carry coffee, a small electric kettle and a mug in my go bag. I had my first cup an hour ago."

"That's a good idea and thank you for restoring my faith in you."

She laughed and pointed at the covered batter. "Looks like someone was starting pancakes."

"Yeah, Gibbs, then he took Bryn to get dressed. Shall we get them started?"

"Sure, just tell me what to do; I'm not much of a cook."

"No problem, DiNozzo and I both cook. Need a skillet, a little butter, and a pancake turner."

She found the butter and skillet right away; the pancake turner was in the dishwasher. She washed it just in case while Tobias finished with the batter and heated the pan. While the first batch of
'cakes cooked, the others gradually showed up, following their noses to the coffee. They decided to eat buffet style, as they didn't know where the rest of the dining chairs or the leaves to the table were. Cutlery was found and rolled in a napkin, enough for each person and set on the table. Plates were stacked, sippy cups filled with juice, coffee mugs set face down. The only thing missing was the rest of the group.

Tony had taken a quick shower and soon joined them along with Gibbs and Brynie who was wearing her hair in pigtails. "Oh great, thanks, guys! Sorry, I'm not as fast at untangling little girls' hair as I used to be."

"Want us to wake Tim and Ty?"

"No, let them sleep a little longer, Ty had a rough night."

After they'd quietly feasted, they cleaned up the kitchen and headed out to the back of the property to see it in daylight. Tony's eyes widened at the sight of the tiny trampoline. "Tim lets the kids use that?"

"Yep, he bought it for them; there's one at the daycare that he researched before he'd sign the permission slip for our kids. They're great for improving balance and coordination. We don't keep them outside but we have several foam pads that we shaped so they fit around this thing. Stack several apiece so nobody's getting hurt if they fall."

Bob spotted the Big Wheels, "Hey those are fun! Let's see, Ty's must be the Thomas the Tank Engine, right? And Brynie is this yours?"

She nodded, "Frozen, I love it!" She showed them how she could sit on it, but her little legs weren't quite long enough to pedal so she scooted around. There was a noise at the door and Ty crawled through his grandfather's legs. "I love Thomas!" He was in his jammies and slippers but that didn't stop him, he climbed right on Thomas and starting chasing after Brynie.

Tim appeared in the doorway, excusing himself to push past the others. "Tyler, come here please."

"I'm playing, Daddy."

"What did I say?"

"But Daddy!"

"I'm counting. One…"

With a frustrated sound, Ty pedaled over to his father and got off. Tim took his hand. "Breakfast first, and then you can play."

Ty said something whiny and Tim spoke very softly, something Tony remembered as his 'on the verge of annoyance' voice. He thought of saying something clever about it but let it go.

In the house, Tim sat Tyler down. "Son, you're tired, upset, and probably hungry. I know I am. Time for breakfast."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I just wanted to play."

"Apology accepted Tyler. Was it because a lot of our friends are here and we haven't seen them in a long time?"
Ty's lower lip trembled, "How come they came but not our mommies?"

"Honey, did you think Ellie, Unca Tony, and the others were in heaven with your Mama and Mum?"

"We went away; we didn't see them anymore so I thought maybe they went to heaven too."

"Oh, my snuggly boy." Tim pulled him into his arms. "We had to leave because Uncle Tobias and other people were afraid some bad people were going to hurt us. We came here to be safe. We talked about that."

"I know. But I was afraid the bad guys hurt Ellie and Unca Tony."

Tim rocked him, "Is that what your dream was about last night?"

Ty shook his head, "No, that was about the bad lady with the mean eyes. She was hurting you and Poppy."

Tim pulled back to look at his face, "Tyler, who is the bad lady with the mean eyes?"

"The one you 'rested yesterday."

"How did you hear about it?"

"I was lying down in the playroom when the funny guy came in; I think his name is Booker."

"Did he say something to you?"

"No Daddy, he was talking to Marshal Maggie and I heard him. He said the bad lady with the big car hurt you, a lot. I was scared but then you came back and you weren't hurt."

"Oh baby, he shouldn't have said anything in front of you. Part of the marshals' job and Booker is a marshal, is to help kids. And he wasn't helping you."

"Was he bad, Daddy?"

"Yes, son, he was bad but I don't think he meant to be. Now, let me tell you about the mean lady. She is very bad but she can't hurt us anymore. She is going to jail for the rest of her life."

"How long is that Daddy?"

"Probably 30 years."

"I'm almost 4, so I'll be…um." Ty thought for a moment, "I'll be 30 plus 4?"

"That's right! In 30 years you'll be 34 years old."

"Wow, that's really old, Daddy. Is Poppy that old?"

"Yes, he's older than that."

"But you're not."

"I'm three years older than that, Ty. How old do you think that makes me?"

"Thirty-four are a three and a four standing next to each other. Plus another three added to the four. Three and four are 7. Are you thirty plus seven, thirty-seven?"
"Yes, thirty-seven, very good, son! Now, our bacon's done, we just have to wait a minute for the pancakes."

"Ok, I'll get our plates." As Ty walked very carefully to the table with two plates, Tim thought about what he'd like to say to Booker for talking like that in front of a child! What an idiot! On the other hand, if he hadn't dropped those two clues yesterday morning, they'd still be in the dark about the case and DHS. He needed to talk with both kids about letting their adults know when they were afraid of losing people or afraid of anything.

Ellie came in and sat with them while they ate, having another cup of coffee. Tim looked at it. "You know, I woke up about 0530 and I could have sworn I heard water running and smelled coffee."

She smiled, "Really? Wonder who that could have been?"

He laughed, "Hmm. I remember a beautiful woman I used to work and do other things with who always had coffee and an electric kettle with her."

She chuckled, "Well I couldn't very well wake everyone up in here, could I?"

Tyler laughed too, "One time we stayed at the Marshals in those rooms from yesterday. And we had Guards! One outside in the hall and one sleeping on the couch. Poppy woke up really early but didn't want to wake the guard up. So he took the coffeepot, coffee, and a cup to the bathroom and made coffee there. I woke up because Daddy was laughing at him!"

Tim grinned as he reached over and ruffled Ty's hair. "I sure was! Dad and I were sharing a room with a half bath and I could smell that coffee through the door."

The slider opened and the group came trooping in. Poppy leaned down and kissed Tyler and Tim as he walked by. "Morning Tyler, morning Timothy!"

"Morning Dad."

"Hi, Poppy."

Ty looked at his dad, "Are we going to school today?"

"No, I think we'll have a family day today."

Ty and Bryn cheered and then looked at the others. "Daddy, can we take them to the ranch to see our horses and the alpacas?"

"They have to work today, son, I don't know for how long."

Uncle Tony squatted down in between his niece and nephew. "We do have to work today. I have to talk with the bad person from yesterday. We borrowed a plane to get here and we have to take it back. And then Ellie, Mr. Bob, Agent Fuller, and I have more work to do."

"Paperwork?"

"Yep. How about you, Tobias?"

He smiled, "I'm taking the day off with my friends, Anthony. The company jet's not going anywhere without me." He turned to the Gibbses. "How far away is the ranch?"

He was surprised when they chuckled, "29.5 miles. Another half mile and we wouldn't have been
allowed."

"You had to measure it?"

"Gets better than that, DiNozzo. The entrance to the ranch is 27.01 miles from the city limits. However, the main house is another 2.4 miles. Lucky no one ever asked if we were staying in the guesthouses which just might have pushed it over the 30-mile limit."

"Big place."

"Close to a thousand acres; used to be several thousand. The family sold off a lot of land over the years."

"So they have horses, alpacas and…?"

Tyler chipped in with the rest, "Llamas, sheep, goats and ponies and a big swimming pool."

"Oh, that sounds like fun!"

All four of the Gibbses nodded and Tony pursed his lips, thinking. "Hm, well, let's see. If I go now - guys, what do you think of doing paperwork on the way home?"

His three agents smiled, "We could do that and if you're going now and don't need us, we could get started."

"Ok, then Tyler, if I go talk to the bad person now, then we can go to the ranch when I'm done and come back mid afternoon."

"YAY!" Both kids jumped up and down. Tim waited until they'd calmed down and said, "Tony, I'll drive you downtown. Kids, get ready to go so we can leave as soon as we get back. Brush your teeth, wash your faces and comb your hair. Bryn, Poppy will help you, nice job on her pigtails, Dad. Get your Aqua vests and your floaty suits and flip-flops; put them in your beach bag. Wear your jeans, boots, and long-sleeve shirts in case we ride, and bring your hats."

He looked at the kids who were obviously waiting for something. "All right, one pool toy each. That does not mean the entire herd of seahorses. One only."

The kids took off and Tim chuckled, "Yay, we going to the ranch! Guess I'd better call Tamara."

He looked at their guests. "We'll have lunch out there; we can either bring stuff from here or have an authentic New Mexican meal."

There was quiet and then suddenly a whisper, "Choose the meal!" They all laughed at Gibbs' less than subtle hint. After calling Tamara and getting the okay for the outing and the meal, the agents scattered to start their paperwork. They'd trade off using Ellie and Tim's laptops.

Tim looked at Tony, "Come on, let's get going. I have an extra bathing suit if you want to borrow it."
Chapter 19

Storms are pretty bad here, another one moving in a few hours, the wind is picking up already. As our internet access lives in a very tall fir tree (not kidding, rural area), we may lose access to the internet and there are already power outages. Anyway, thought I'd post two chapters tonight. It's a good thing the drought is over for NorCal; I just don't think anyone anticipated that five years of a scary drought would be vanquished by a few weeks of endlessly driving rain!

Chapter 19

As they left, they heard Gibbs saying, "If you have swim stuff with you, bring it. Tobias, I have an extra pair of trunks if you want to borrow them. The Ortizes always have extras, all sizes and shapes. Shorts are fine too. Just remember to bring dry clothes, skin out. If you want to ride, sneakers and jeans and a hat if you have one. We have sun hats you can borrow."

"What about towels?"

"We'll bring enough for all of us. And we have sunscreen."

The kids were adorable when they returned in their riding clothes and Tobias found himself wondering how many years he'd have to wait to be a grandfather. Then he wanted to bleach his brain because grandfather meant daughter married and having sex. URGH! In the meantime, Ellie and Bob were snapping photos of everyone.

Tim laughed as Tony started firing questions at him the minute they left the house. "I knew you were too quiet!"

"Didn't want to ask in front of the others. So tell me how they told you to go with them, did they blindfold you or anything? Why did you say Morrow built this house and bought the cars? What are the marshals like? Do you have to report to them every day? My God Tim, have you been online at all since you've been here? I never thought I'd ever see Timothy Jackson Gibbs in cowboy boots! You really wear those?"

Tim answered the questions as best he could, laughing at the blindfold question, "Where'd you get that? That's not even on TV!"

"Just wondering. Did they give you a choice?"

"They didn't ask if we accepted their protection but they were surprised we were expecting them. We knew we could have refused but we didn't know what the problem was and I was not going to take a chance with the kids. And yes, I love my cowboy boots! Dad and the kids have them too and hats to go with them; we wear them all the time. I'm sure the kids will wear the whole ensemble for you today; they have chaps and vests. We big folk passed on those. Although it was tempting to get a vest and pin a fake badge on it."

After that, Tony stopped asking and the two of them had a great conversation, catching up with
each other. Tim smiled to himself when his friend referred to his newest agent, Maggie Barnes, once too often to be 'just casual'. Something was up and that was a good thing!

While Tony interrogated Stacevyko, Tim had coffee with Mary, Marshall, and Marshal Maggie. DiNozzo returned looking grim, went into McQueen's office, spoke with him and then made some phone calls.

Stan joined them at Mary's desk while Tony was on the phone. "There have been other murders and she's implicated Krose in a few. She gave up the locations where the others are buried so he's arranging for search and recovery. He spoke with Director Vance and it looks like your ME team is going to autopsy the bodies."

"How many?"

"Three. And she divulged her current sponsor and admitted to working for the Reynosa cartel."

"She gave it all up? What'd he offer her?"

"A possible semi-private room in Gitmo and she's almost gleeful about something."

Tim nodded, "She said yesterday that she'd hurt us both, Dad and me, and we'd never know how but the pain would last forever. I thought that was what Tobias told us though, her part in killing my mother and sister."

Tony appeared, done with his calls. "Yeah, I tried to get that confirmed but she said she was done talking. By the way, Vance talked with Mac this morning, he's fine, can't wait to talk to you."

"And the J-witch?"

"Vance took everything we put together and after your call gave it to the DA. She spent yesterday at Arlington PD being grilled. And they brought in three others from the medical staff."

"So she's finally going to do some jail time."

"Yeah, and your names were not on the files anywhere; she has no idea you and Boss were involved."

Tim gave him a look, "Oh I'm sure she knows. What aren't you telling me?"

"Tell you later."

Tim looked at him hard before nodding; he knew his friend wanted privacy for whatever it was and maybe wanted his dad there too.

"What happens to Krose?"

"FBI will handle him and Stacevyko. He's killed people in three states, no telling if he transported across state lines, but that's enough for the Bureau. They'll transfer her at Anacostia-Bolling from their jet to the transport to Mayport in FL and then Gitmo."

"Wow."

Saying goodbye to the marshals, they headed back to the house. Tim was quiet the whole way, processing everything. Back at the house Tony quickly changed into Tim's spare bathing suit while Tim found his bag already packed with his swim stuff. He was already in his riding clothes so as soon as Tony was ready the 9 of them headed off to the Ortiz ranch for some fun.
They took the truck and the SUV, removing the kids' seats from the truck. Chalmers, Fornell, and Fuller rode with Gibbs while Ellie and Tony squeezed in with Tim and the kids.

It was a wonderfully relaxing few hours. Bob and Ellie went riding with Tim and the kids while the others swam laps, figuring it would be harder to do later when the kids were in the pool.

When Bob offered to stay with the kids and their pony riders, the couple took him up on the opportunity to spend time alone. Before they separated from the others, they made sure the children understood they would only be apart for a few minutes. Wearing happy smiles, the kids agreed to take care of Mr. Bob for them.

As they directed their mounts toward the woods, Tim leaned over and kissed his love softly. "Hello love, I'm so glad you're here!"

She smiled, "Me too and now you're free!"

Riding to a secluded glade, they dismounted and faced each other. Wrapping their arms around each other, the two kissed. By mutual agreement, they kept things light but as Tim said, it was as if the past 9 months hadn't happened. They were still 'them', in love and still committed to each other. When Tim confessed to his love that he'd written several letters to her, she smiled happily.

"That's good because I did the same thing. Do you want to wait until you get home to see them?"

He pretended to think about it before shaking his head, "I don't want to wait; feels like tempting fate to pull something else on us. How about a mutual exchange? I'll send you yours and you send me mine?"

Laughing she agreed and they resumed reconnecting. Eventually they parted; remounting their horses, they rode out, catching and passing Bob and the kids.

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Tony challenged Fornell and Gibbs to race against each other, and then he and Fuller watched from either end of the pool. Gibbs won and he grinned, "Guess all the construction work and outdoor living is paying off."

"How often do you swim out here?"

Gibbs' grin never left his face, "Let's see, since they opened the pool in May, nearly every weekday afternoon after I get off work. One of us picks up the kids and meets the other one out here with our swim gear. Tim and the kids usually have a riding lesson so I get extra time in the pool."

"You cheated!"

"How did I cheat?"

"By practicing! DiNozzo, he's a ringer, I protest!"

Shaking his head, Gibbs jumped back into the pool, making sure he splashed Fornell. By now, Tony was out of the pool and taking pictures. Gibbs' splash got him too and not wanting the camera to get wet, he walked outside the pool gate, only to see the horses coming back in. He took more photos as Tim and Ellie raced in while Bob's horse sauntered along with the kids with their escorts on the ponies.

It was strange watching Tim ride a horse; Tony never knew he'd wanted to. Now when he looked
at his friend he saw the difference the last 9 months had made. He was not only tan, his body had a lot more definition and he moved differently, more confidently and at the same time more relaxed. He and Boss removed their colored contact lenses yesterday and Tony thought both men would be happy when their hair grew out to natural colors. Tim's was almost there, he'd told Tony he'd canceled his last two coloring appointments and his hair was an interesting mixture of the remnants of dark brown, nearly black, with his natural medium brown nearly hidden by sun-kissed blond and even platinum blond streaks.

DiNozzo was happy for Tim and Ellie and glad he'd had time to talk with Tim this morning. There were things he'd needed to say, things he'd needed to tell him. Nine months was far too long to be out of contact with your best friend!

He was poolside again when the horseback riders entered through the gate, ready to swim. Bob jumped right in, splashing Fornell, which made Gibbs start laughing all over again. The kids came in and Tony looked at their suits. Bryn pointed to hers, "It's a floaty suit so I won't go under the water." Ty pointed to the sort of half shirt, half vest he wore. "Me too. But we know how to swim anyway."

"That's good Ty. Did you just learn this year?"

"Yes."

Tim and Ellie came in right after them, hand in hand and beaming. Tim's body was more ripped than Tony's had been since his collegiate athletic career. Ellie had planned to wear the shorts and tee shirt she had with her but Tamara handed her a one-piece suit that fit her very well and Tim was calculating pi to distract his mind from sending signals to the rest of him.

Then his kids were there, they each pulled a hand and away they went into the pool, laughing hysterically. Ellie jumped in next to them and poor Fornell grumbled as he'd been splashed both times. Tony managed to get photos of Tim and Ellie walking in, the kids pulling Tim in; he quickly sent them to Sarah.

Thirty minutes later, they heard a strange noise and Gibbs smiled. "That's the five-minute warning for lunch. We're eating outside so we don't need to change but it would be better if we're not dripping all over the place."

Fornell was frowning. "You know, that noise reminds me of something from my childhood…TV maybe."

"Yes, Westerns. It's an old-fashioned metal triangle like they used to have on "Wagon Train" and "Rawhide"."

"Cool!"

They enjoyed their lunch and then the agents mostly lazed around the pool while the kids swam and played. Uncle Tony showed them how to walk on their hands underwater but Bryn was too short and only the tips of her toes poked out of the water.

Tim shook his head, "We need to practice, but that's enough for today. Unca Tony, Ellie, Mr. Bob, and Agent Fuller have to get back to work."

"Phooey!"

"Remember that's the agreement we made with Unca Tony."
The kids nodded and Tim bit back a smile, Tony's team looked as disappointed as Ty and Brynie did.

All too soon, it was time for their friends to leave. Back at the house, all the visitors but Fornell gathered their belongings. Bob and Evan said their goodbyes first and then waited out in front for the marshals' transport to the airfield, a gesture of appreciation from Chief Inspector McQueen.

Tony was glad he'd had private time with Boss and Tim. He hated leaving them but knew they'd be home soon, that he was still part of their family and they could talk and see each other on video chats now whenever they wanted.

Ellie managed a quick goodbye with Gibbs, a little lengthier with the children and tried very hard not to fall apart with Tim. When Tim asked if she could get away for the long Labor Day weekend at the first of September, she agreed and he suggested he and the kids meet her parents at their place outside Tahlequah, Oklahoma. They'd discussed her family meeting Tim, Ty, and Bryn, they'd already met Dad, and she loved the idea. If they were already back in DC, then they'd fly out together. The plan made it easier to say goodbye to each other – that and knowing where they were, being able to visualize what they were doing and best of all, being in communication.

As Tony and Ellie walked out the front door together, Dad took his son by one shoulder and gestured to the kids and Tobias. "Backyard, I hear those Big Wheels calling!"

The kids were all for that and Tim allowed his dad to steer him out the door to the yard. Ty and Bryn were madly racing around the yard when they heard car doors slam and a vehicle moving away. The airfield was on the other side of the city and the house wasn't normally in a flight path but forty minutes later a jet circled over their neighborhood; they watched the sky and waved, despite knowing their friends couldn't see them.
Chapter 20

Tobias later watched the kids so Jethro and Tim could figure out what they wanted to do. It didn't take long for the two men to agree that they wanted to explore New Mexico and they'd do so in a series of road trips. They mapped those out, picking Santa Fe and Taos for their first trek, followed by the trip to Oklahoma, then Ruidoso and finally a place called Four Corners, the only place in the U.S. where four states, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona, meet. They looked at Carlsbad Caverns but decided that while Ty was old enough, tackling the caves with two little ones would be too much. The caves could wait until the kids were at least a couple of years older.

That led to a discussion about the house. Dad threw out the idea of buying it and keeping it for vacations. The idea caught Tim by surprise and he said he needed time to think about it. While he liked the place, he wasn't sure how often they'd return. However, they could rent it out, either long term or as a vacation rental. He countered with the idea of buying a bigger place where their family and friends could join them. Deciding to let the ideas percolate, they'd see how they felt when they were closer to leaving.

Fornell left that evening, first agreeing to meet the family in Ruidoso in September after the Gibbses returned from Oklahoma. They hadn't reserved anything yet but wanted to try cabin camping for a week to ten days at some sort of lodge or resort that had a swimming pool, lake, walking and hiking trails, community campfires, store, and small boats such as kayaks, canoes, and sailboats. Available stables for horseback riding and any nearby Native American interests would be bonuses. They hoped their cabin would have its own fire pit or a grill, which seemed more likely.

After Fornell left and the children were asleep that night, the two men finally dealt with the news they'd tucked away, the fact that Tim's stepmother was an accomplice in the murders of Shannon, Kelly and Agent Mitchell. They spoke a little but there wasn't much to say. Instead, they sat leaning on each other, dealing with their grief and anger, each comforting the other.

By the next evening, the Gibbses spoke separately with Vance about the wish to take some time to explore New Mexico. Dad quietly told his boss that his son was overwhelmed with the case and needed some time before going back to the agency. Vance was fine with that. During his conversation with Tim, he laughingly said he'd dreaded telling Agent Bingham that she wasn't going to have her 6-week stay in the U.S. It would also give the director plenty of time to pull together options for Jethro's next position.

In the meantime, Ellie spoke with her parents, finding them also relieved that Tim, Jethro, and the kids were safe, in communication and wanted to meet them. After Tim told her they weren't returning to DC for a few weeks, she booked her flight to Oklahoma and the Gibbses mapped out their route.

When they looked at the drive time to Tahlequah, they realized that at nearly 10.5 hours, it was too long a drive for the kids to sit through in one day. Tim started looking for a motel for 2 nights, one going and one returning. After a little discussion and reading reviews, they booked a suite at a national chain about 5 hours from Albuquerque for the two nights.

Crossing that off the 'to do' list, they started looking into places to stay in Taos. As they both had some work to finish, they wouldn't leave Albuquerque for their Santa Fe/Taos trip until the end of the week. They'd leave Friday morning and spend the day exploring Santa Fe. Both men had things
he wanted to do and see there and figured they'd have plenty of time.

They'd leave for Taos before dark, check into their lodging and get an early start in town Saturday morning. They'd stay again that night and then finish up in Taos, stop in Santa Fe on the way home for anything they missed and be home Sunday night. If they found a reason to stay until Monday, that wouldn't be a problem.

Happy when they found lodging only a few miles outside of Taos, they made the reservations. This would be their first family stay in a cabin; Tim felt it would be quieter and easier for the kids, give them more room to run around and play, they could eat in or out and not have people in rooms on either side of them.

Thursday was a little anticlimactic but both men were happy enough to put their work clothes on, drop the kids at daycare and preschool and get to work. Routine felt good.

Gibbs was glad they were working at the same house that day, he was a little worried at Tim's continued lack of reaction to Tony's last bit of news: no adoption papers had ever been filed by the McGees. NCIS had painstakingly examined three years of records, the year before Tim's birth, the year of his birth and the year after, in Maryland, Pennsylvania, California and even Puerto Rico, Virginia and Japan. There was nothing under any of Tim's three possible surnames, Fielding, Gibbs or Gibbs, nor was there any record of Dan and Lily McGee filing any papers anywhere.

As they'd found a separate bank account for Joann Lindal (her maiden name) with a deposit of $50,000 made November 16, 1977, they believed she'd sold her grandson to the McGees and either told them she'd file the adoption papers or that they weren't necessary, the baby was theirs.

Because Tim's birth certificate listed his birthdate as Nov. 15 and the location as Bethesda Medical Center, the investigating agents believed the McGees were told not to bother with adoption papers. In the meantime, they'd found his original birth certificate buried in the archives of the maternity clinic.

Taking some time to first process the news, Tim decided it didn't matter at this point and eventually told his father. He knew his McGee father had loved him, he'd never felt any lack of love toward him. He did wonder why they'd purchased a baby, and how they could possibly think that was legal, and then had one of their own so quickly afterward. Maybe they'd been told they couldn't conceive. He'd never know at this point and didn't think it mattered. He already knew his grandmother was an evil bitch; he couldn't possibly think any less of her. If Sarah ever had her DNA tested and found relatives of the McGees or Hubbards, she could ask them. He was ready to move on from the whole matter and live his life with his children, father, grandfather, and he hoped Ellie.

Although it had a population of over half a million people, Albuquerque retained the atmosphere of a smaller town. This was evident in Thursday morning's newspaper, which covered the arrest of not one but two serial killers, one also rumored to be a spy, with plans to kill one of their own citizens. No names were stated and the journalist gave only a vague description of the family but did talk about the two jets landing at a private airfield with battle ready federal agents.

Steve Ortiz thought about the article and the crowd of men and one woman who had turned up at his family's ranch yesterday. His cousin Roger, who'd worked in Army CID, said he knew cops when he saw them and that, except for the kids, all of their visitors yesterday had been cops, including the Hulls. There had been rumors off and on for years about Albuquerque and now Steve wondered.

When he arrived at the flip house that morning, he went straight to his friends the Hulls.
'Hey you two, you ok?'

'Sure. Any reason we shouldn't be?'

He gave them a look and pointed to the photo of the FBI jet on the private runway. 'Know anything about that?'

'Isn't that the airfield northwest of town? Drove by it once.'

Steve smiled, 'So with these two creeps busted, you guys going to be here much longer?'

They looked at him, at each other and then gestured to the backyard. The landscapers hadn't touched it yet, it was a mess, no one would be likely to bother them and they'd be out of earshot. Father and son had discussed the possibility of someone questioning them, came up with a plausible story and let McQueen know the marshals were off the hook.

Jethro took the lead, 'Although we've mostly enjoyed life here, you're right; we've accomplished our goal, busting those two. It's been a long and difficult undercover operation; we're very happy all our work netted us both dirtbags. And yeah, after taking a well-earned vacation, we'll be returning to duty in another part of the country.'

'Oh my God! Am I right? Oh, no I'm not, I thought you were in, what do you call it? Witness Protection. Undercover is different, right? Were we part of it?'

Tim took that one, 'Yes, we were undercover and no you were not part of it. You were never a part of it, never in danger. When we met you at the house, we liked you and then you asked Dad to work for you and we met your family. It's been a nice break for us, having friends here; that usually doesn't happen.'

'You call him Dad; you're really father and son?'

Both men nodded, beaming at him and he relaxed, glad that hadn't been a ruse.

'Do you work for the same agency?'

Mark, if that was his name, smiled, 'We need to get back to work; we're leaving to do some sightseeing tomorrow. We'll be back Tuesday.'

He nodded, 'Gonna miss you two, the best woodworker and electrician I've ever seen. I know you're cops but you must do woodworking and electrical work on your own.'

Tim looked at his father who nodded. He said to Steve, 'This stays between us.'

Steve nodded and the younger man continued, 'I'm Tim, he's Jethro; our last name is Gibbs. We're federal agents working for NCIS, criminal investigators, he works in the field investigating crimes and I'm the manager of our Cyber Crimes unit, I work inside. Before the kids came to live with me a year ago, I worked for him, he was Boss, and I was McGee, my adoptive father's name, although I never knew I was adopted. I was a field agent on his team for more than 12 years and the folks who were with us yesterday are part of that team. We didn't know we were related until I was named the guardian of my kids and had their DNA run. Big surprise, not that I'm the kids' biological father but that Boss is mine. The kids' mothers had been killed in a hate crime and I needed to be there for them, so I left the field, took a promotion to the CCU. Then this case came up and here we are.'

'Wow! And I'm guessing there's a lot more to the story.'
Tim nodded, "Yeah, this is the part we'll talk about. While we're here, please continue to call us Brian and Mark. We're used to it!"

"I can do that. Uh, what about the rest of my family?"

"Please wait to tell them until after we leave. Be easier than fending off more questions we won't answer."

"So, sightseeing and then back to work? Which is where?"

"DC. We work in the Washington Navy Yard. You ever get back east, come visit."

"Wow, that's tempting!"

They smiled, "We live a few houses apart so it's easy to see both of us."

"Huh, going to be something for you two to live apart after nearly a year."

Gibbs nodded and poked at his son, "He's got an extra bedroom if I get too lonely."

"Oh yeah, Tamara said one of your friends was your age. He a cop too?"

Gibbs gave him a wicked smile, "FBI and he's the second ex-husband of my first ex-wife."

Then he and Tim went back to work, leaving their boss with his mouth hanging open. Tim finished in time to pick the kids up and he met his dad out at the ranch for a swim. Tamara gave Dad a look.

"How many ex-wives?"

Gibbs sighed, "Shoulda known that would come back to bite me. Three."

"You've been married and divorced three times?"

Tim frowned, shaking his head, "No, he's been married four times. His first wife was my mother; she and my little sister were murdered. The serial divorces came after that."

Dad pulled him into a hug and Tamara didn't ask any more questions.

When they got home, Dad grilled chicken, including extra for tomorrow night's meal while Tim packed his bag, the kids' stuff, and a few kitchen items. They'd take the SUV for this trip. When they went to Four Corners and Ruidoso, they'd probably take the truck.

They didn't tell the kids when they were leaving, theorizing they'd sleep better that way. They were right and the kids were happily surprised when they found out they were going on a fun road trip. "Do we get to swim?"

"Yes, and there will be animals there too. Don't know about horseback riding, but we're taking our boots and hats anyway."

"YAY!"

Loading the car was a chore but the Gibbs men were good organizers and soon enough they were on their way. Santa Fe was only an hour's drive from Albuquerque. The two men selected two of the museums they wanted to see today, the New Mexico History Museum and the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, figuring that would be enough for the kids, and then they'd do some shopping and looking around. If they had time on their way home and the kids weren't too tired, Tim also wanted to see the Museum of International Folk Art.
They made the selected museums their first stops. They had a great time at the History Museum, all four fascinated by the archeological finds they could see through 'windows' in the floor. The Museum of Indian Arts and Culture was also a big hit and they had fun browsing in the gift shop afterward.

It was just past 1100 and they started looking for somewhere to eat lunch. They found a small restaurant with courtyard seating out back. Selecting a table in the shade, they relaxed over lunch. The food was good, the service fine, the restrooms clean and they beat the lunch crowd, much to their relief.

They spent the afternoon wandering the town. They stopped in at the "Oldest House", older than any other house on the continent, took photos and bought a couple of things at the gift shop. When Tim spotted an art gallery he wanted to visit, Poppy took the kids to a nearby ice cream store. Tim knew what he wanted; he'd been lusting after the painting since he'd first seen it online. He paid for it and arranged to have it shipped to the house in Alexandria. Boy did that feel good! His family wasn't outside waiting yet so he also purchased a couple of small framed prints, adding them to the package for mailing.

Finished, he headed to the ice cream store where he found his family just ordering their treats after waiting in a long line. As his dad gave the order, Tim slipped in behind him and in a little kids' voice, asked if he could have some. Without looking, Dad smiled and said, "Already ordered yours, sonny boy. Nice try, though."

The kids thought that hysterical and Tim grinned at them. After enjoying their treats, they walked around town. When they discovered a Native American toy store, Tim looked at his dad. "Ship everything home."

Dad looked puzzled and then beamed at his son. "Oh yeah, all the way home!" They took turns distracting the kids while the other one shopped, paid and shipped. They did buy a few little things for the kids to enjoy now and a couple of presents for Victoria Palmer and her baby brother. The place next door had blankets, throws and wall hangings and they had fun in there too.
Chapter 21

By late afternoon, they were tired of walking and ready for their drive to Taos. It was only an hour and 20 minutes drive to the town of Taos and another 6 miles to Taos Creek Camp and Cabins, where they'd stay the weekend.

The grounds were nice and Tim could see the fenced pool. It was still warm and light out, a swim might be a good idea; they could all burn off some energy. Checking in at the small office, they were given directions to their two-bedroom cabin. It was fairly close to the office, although far enough away to be quiet and Tim was glad to see other families there.

The kids were asleep in the car and they stayed in their seats while Daddy and Poppy unloaded everything. Then Poppy got dinner going, heating the chicken he'd grilled last night along with pre-baked potatoes he popped in with the chicken. Tim would make a spinach salad once the kids were settled.

Once awakened, Ty and Bryn were curious about the cabin and inspected every room. "Bathtub, Daddy!"

"That's good Ty."

"TV in this room."

His son appeared in a doorway, "Do we have movies?"

"Yes, son."

"Is the room with the TV mine and Brynie's room?"

"Afraid not."

"Ok."

"Let's get washed up for dinner." Tim didn't say anything about swimming, he'd see how tired they were at dinner; they hadn't had naps today, except for the snoozes in the car.

The two barely made it through dinner, Bryn nodded off while holding a fork with a bite of baked potato. Both kids were good eaters, never fussing about vegetables, Tim mentally thanked Sue and Deeny for that; they'd had bites of chicken, fresh spinach and potato as well as milk.

Smiling at each other, Tim and his father carefully unfastened the kids from their booster seats and laid them on their beds, getting them undressed and putting their pajamas on. They'd brought a portable monitor along in case either of the kids woke up, didn't know where they were or had a bad dream. After getting that hooked up, they tucked the kids in, kissed them goodnight and turned the light off, leaving the door partially open.

The men weren't far behind them; after an unusual week, they were relaxed and both were asleep before it was fully dark. Tim was aware of a small body kissing his face at some point during the night; when he pried his eyes open, Ty whispered, "Just checking, Daddy. I remembered we were in a cabin and you were right here."
"Proud of you, snuggly boy!"

With a grin, Ty turned around and went back to his room.

Tim followed; when he came back, Dad said, "What was that?"

He told him and his father nodded, "Smart kids. Take after their father."

"And their mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers."

"Yep, us too."

They were all up early the next morning, ready for another day of fun. The kids danced in happiness when Daddy made pancakes and bacon, they all had baths or showers and they were ready to go. It was only 0700 so the four of them took a walk, found Taos Creek and the toddlers watched fascinated as a mama deer and her two fawns drank from the creek. Tim took pictures of the deer and the kids watching them, sending the photos to Ellie and Geo. He remembered seeing an ad for a silk-screening shop in town and wondered if he could have the photo of the kids and the deer transferred onto shirts or even just fabric, or maybe have the photo painted, yeah, that would be cool!

After their nature walk, they headed to Taos Pueblo, the oldest continually habited community in the United States; the main part of the current structures said by archeologists to have been built between 1000 and 1450 AD. The community is designated both a UNESCO World Heritage site and a National Historic Landmark. They left their cell phones locked in the car but brought a camera, paying a fee to take it inside the community. The adults read the rules and quietly explained to the children what they were going to see: ancient adobe houses mostly constructed over a thousand years ago. People lived in them so they weren't to go into any of the buildings without Daddy or Poppy. There were also shops where pottery, jewelry and things like moccasins were sold. After nearly a year in New Mexico, the kids knew that moccasins were shoes and slippers and that pottery meant dishes; that was enough explanation for them.

They had a wonderful time; as Tim observed, curious and well-behaved young children are a trigger to friendliness for many people or the opposite, he supposed, for those not so well behaved. Tim felt most of the credit should go to their mothers who'd provided the foundation.

Not only were the residents friendly, several of them invited the family inside the dwellings. When one elderly couple offered to participate in a photo with the children, Tim agreed immediately. When the woman told Dad he looked like a cowboy he smiled and thanked her, following that with, "one who respects the land." She patted his cheek and then said to Tim, "Have you no mother for them?" Tim swallowed, quietly saying their mother was dead. He did that when speaking with strangers who did not need to know more than that.

Because they all liked nice things, they purchased moccasins for the four of them and Daddy bought himself a pair of boots. They weren't cowboy boots but a style he could wear with jeans or dress slacks. They also bought moccasins for Ellie, Grandpa Mac, Granducky and the aunts and uncles, with the exception of Tony and Abby, buying them other types of slippers closer to their style. The kids giggled when their father picked up a pair Aunt Abby would like, they looked like boots while Unca Tony's looked more like the Italian shoes he favored.

Tim also bought bracelets for Ellie, Abby, and Sarah. The kids helped pick one for Lara too. He would look for something else specifically for Ellie in town; he'd looked in Santa Fe but nothing had yet caught attention.
His father wondered how long it would be before his son started looking for a ring for Ellie and then stopped to think about some of the boxes he'd brought home from Stillwater. He was certain there was family jewelry in one or two of them; he'd look when they got home. He grinned at that, they were getting used to the idea of being able to go home. And freedom, they were really enjoying being mobile, seeing the sights.

After they left the Pueblo, they drove to Taos where they parked near an unusual toyshop. It was full of educational, fun and interesting toys, and activities for the kids. In the fenced play area outside the back of the store, Ty and Bryn played with the interactive exhibits and unique play installations, all with artistic touches, while their father and grandfather sat in the shade, watching. When the kids wanted to go inside, they went upstairs to a playroom that had interactive play, crafting, and imagination stations. After watching to see what his children were interested in, Tim disappeared to the gift shop where he had a wonderful time selecting all kinds of fun presents for the kids. He had everything shipped to Alexandria, this time to his dad's house as the items would be birthday or Christmas gifts.

Lunch was next. Once again, they were early and happy to find hot dogs and hamburgers. Poppy volunteered to take the kids to the cabin for naps if Daddy wanted to shop; they arranged to meet in front of the toy store at a certain time.

Tim went straight to Taos Plaza where he had a great deal of fun shopping although it was strange to be by himself. He found a beautiful pendant and chain for Ellie and bought it. He wanted to bring something for the Bishops when they went but had no idea what. It had to be nice, but not too much or too expensive or not visibly so. He'd quizzed his father who told him what he remembered about the Bishops' home.

One of the things he mentioned were the colors used to decorate and now Tim was keeping his eye out for a piece of pottery or something in a deep blue. While he was looking, he saw a small painting with vivid blues in it. He loved it and deciding to buy it, sent a photo to Ellie, asking if her parents would like it. He was still browsing in the shop when he got a "YES!"

That took care of the Bishops although he did ask the clerk if the store had other works by the same artist. That shop didn't, but they directed him to a gallery featuring the artist's work. He hurried over and stood in awe amongst several beautiful paintings. Finally, he spotted another small one that he liked right away, with the same vivid blues. He purchased it and of course had it shipped. He was walking back to the toy store when a quilt in a store window caught his eye. It was southwestern; he loved the colors and knew it would look perfect on his bed at home. He smiled at that, home! He sent a photo to Ellie to see if she liked it. Her reply was a 'yes and where are you?' He replied Taos with a smiley face. Then he saw them. Next to the quilt was a counter with fine jewelry, including a pair of earrings that would look great with the pendant he'd purchased for Ellie. The few times he'd seen her wear jewelry, he noticed she didn't wear 'matchy-matchy' items. He bought them; tucking them in the bag with the Bishops' painting, these were not being shipped! He also bought things for his grandfather, sister, and brothers, Tony, Abby who would love this place, the Vances, the Palmers, and a book about the mysticism of Taos for Ducky.

As he ducked out of the shop, he spotted his father parking and walked around to his open window. "If you want to walk around or shop, I'll take the kids back and we can..." he leaned forward and whispered, "swim."

"Yeah, I'd like that. Pick me up in two hours?"

"Will do!"

They traded places and Poppy waved goodbye to them. The kids knew something was up. "Daddy,
"What's Poppy doing?"

"He's looking at stores like I did."

"Oh. What are we going to do?"

"Let's see, there's a big old swimming pool by our cabin, would you like to test it out?"

"YAY!"

Tim laughed; he was looking forward to it too. They had a great time in the pool and when it was time to pick up Poppy, they drove into town with the kids still wet from the pool. His dad laughed when he saw them. "I bet I know what you two have been up to! Did you take your daddy swimming?"

"Yes!"

Tim sniffed; he smelled food and looked at the large shopping bag his father had apparently purchased. "I like the bag."

"Yeah, I like the pattern on it. Thinking of duplicating it on something."

"And what's inside it?"

"Well, we do have a grill outside and I brought a bag of charcoal."

"YUM, Poppy's grilling!"

Tim grinned, "That's good because I have a surprise for dessert."

They had a great dinner, eaten outside at one of the picnic tables and then fed the ducks in the pond at the back of the property. Eaten inside, dessert was individual servings of baked treats. Chocolate cake for the kids, apple crisp for Poppy and a caramel chocolate torte for Daddy.

They decided two days was enough for their first outing and Poppy said he was afraid his son had already cleaned out the inventory of the various art galleries and stores between Taos and Albuquerque. Tim just grinned at him; now that he'd started, he planned to investigate other cultures online; he could see his home reflecting many different cultures.

They stopped for potty breaks along the way, lunch in Santa Fe and were home by mid-afternoon. Tired, Tim wished they had a pool big enough for floating. Although neither man felt like driving the 30 minutes out to the ranch for a swim, Tim, his eyes twinkling, borrowed the truck. Driving to the nearest box store, he found above ground pools that could be set up in minutes. He bought one that was oblong and included a ladder, cover and ground cover. Realizing they would need more floaty things, he bought noodles, kickboards, tubes and two loungers for the adults. Then he sent a text to his father who called him, laughing. "I thought that's what you were up to! You gonna put it on the lawn?"

"Yes, it's the levelest part of the yard; least amount of rocks."

"What shape is it?"

"Oblong and yes it's coming home with us!"

"Ok, I'll go rake the grass, get rid of any twigs or rocks."
"Thanks, Dad, I'm just getting to the checkout now."

They disconnected as Tim paid for everything, gratefully accepting help to load the truck.

The kids watched their grandfather as he got a rake, hoe out, and started using the rake on the lawn. Tyler asked, "Why are you doing that, Poppy?"

"Need to get all the rocks off the lawn."

"Can I help?"

His grandfather grinned, "Sure, both of you can. Ty, why don't you take the rake and go across the lawn, then I'll use the hoe and go up and down. Brynie, if you could pick up rocks and twigs that would be great."

Grinning, they got to work; the kids loved to help with yard work. When their father got home with the truck, Poppy asked them to stay in the backyard, that Daddy had a surprise for them. In a couple of minutes, Daddy and Poppy came through the gate carrying a big box. When the kids saw the picture on the box, they jumped up and down, cheering with excitement. "A pool? Our own pool? YES!"

They danced their happy dance before quickly moving out of the way. They watched as the box was opened and a bunch of things came out. A huge rolled up something, two smaller rolled up somethings, a ladder, some plastic things and a little bag of fasteners. Finally, a little booklet that Daddy said was the instructions.

One of the smaller rolled up things was opened and spread out on the grass; it was a lot bigger than it looked rolled up. Poppy called it a tarp or ground cover. Then the big huge thing was put at one end of the tarp and the two adults rolled it out. Brynie's eyes widened when she saw how big it was. "We can swim, Ty!"

"Yes!"

There was some fussing with the thing and then Daddy brought the hose over and put it in. The kids were fascinated, as the level of the water rose, so did the sides of their new pool! Poppy put the ladder together with the fasteners while Daddy watched the hose to make sure it didn't fall out; he also spread the cover out. "Every night, the cover has to be put on the pool. Neither of you is to be out here without Poppy or me. That's a new rule."

Both kids solemnly promised; they knew that look on Daddy's face.

He and Dad had already agreed the ladder would be stored somewhere unreachable by little kids when the pool was not in use. That might give an adult a few extra seconds to stop a child trying to climb over the edge into the pool. Tim had to keep reminding himself that his kids were good swimmers and were comfortable holding their breaths underwater. Still, he and his father would exercise extreme caution!

Finally, Poppy took the kids inside to unpack and throw their swim stuff in the dryer while Tim watched the pool fill. It was a slow process, taking a couple of hours to get enough for them to use that day. They'd put more in tomorrow.

They only used the noodles to float that day; the grownups were too tired to deal with anything else and were very glad they hadn't scheduled themselves to work on Monday! They had sandwiches for dinner, eaten outside so they could play some more after. As the sun started to set, Tim and the kids went inside while Poppy removed the ladder, stashing it on an upper shelf in the garage and
pulled the cover over the pool.
The pool was even more fun the next day. Poppy was up early and put more water in; after they'd eaten breakfast and cleaned up the pool was ready. While the adults traded off staying with the kids, doing laundry and getting the house ready for the week, they all relaxed after the past week's stresses and their fun but busy weekend.

As the two men were floating Poppy suddenly said, "Have I ever told you about the cabin?"

"What cabin? Where?" Tim chuckled, "I guess that's a no."

Dad smiled, "Guess so. It's at home. I came into some money a few years ago; bought twenty acres of land in the mountains, used it to camp and fish, never planned to do more. Then it rained one year and I was stuck in my tent or the truck. After that, I decided to put up a cabin, just a one-room thing. No electricity out there and I didn't want anyone to know so I couldn't ask you about solar panels and there wasn't any running water or plumbing. I built an outhouse first and then a little shed that I could stay in until the cabin was done.

"Then I started building but when I was dating a woman none of you ever met, she wanted to see it so we went up and she talked me into adding another room, a bedroom. I hadn't yet bought the woodstove I was going to use for a one-room cabin, so I bought a larger one. I added the bedroom, even made a wardrobe for it, not quite a closet but more than drawers. Put a little hallway in too, in case I decided to add another room. Got the woodstove in and piped, got the roof done before winter, that was three years ago. That was the first time I stayed in it."

He paused as Tim called to Brynie, "Back to this end, you too Ty!" While the kids were good swimmers, he wanted them where he could get to them in seconds if necessary. There wasn't a shallow or deep end of the pool, just closer or farther from Daddy and the ladder.

He waited until the kids obeyed their father before continuing, "Found a restored wood burning oven with a cooktop and installed that. Got tired of driving down the mountain to buy ice for the cooler so I added a modernized icebox, keeps ice solid for several days. The summer before the kids came to us, I put in a tank that collects rainwater; ran a line to the cabin, put in a solar hot water heater - that was easy enough to figure out. Then I had to build another room for the shower I wanted. Put that next to the bedroom, made it big enough for a full bathroom and there's a collection tank underneath for the shower water. It works like a camp shower, solar heated water, pull the cord and the water comes out. Runoff works kind of like an RV tank; I drain it before I leave. Got tired of using the privy so I bought a composting toilet. Which isn't much fun but it's indoors, beats the privy and doesn't require plumbing. Even so, I was looking into septic systems before the kids came to us."

"Wow! That sounds incredible! And I bet the place is beautiful."

"It is, in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina, south of Asheville. It's a long drive but worth it. Figure we can add a couple more bedrooms, one for you and one for the kids. Make that one big enough for more kids in case their friends come with someday. Put bunk beds in there."

"Maybe a pull-out couch or rollaway beds if other people join us."

"Yeah, those beds would be perfect. Got 2 chairs in the main room already, one from a garage sale,
one from my folks' house. Wanted a flat space to eat, read or play cards so I built a little table. Before I did that, I built a little workbench for the shed. The shed has a good lock so the rollaway beds can be stored in there; as long as they're covered, they'll be fine. I keep mint around to keep the rodents away."

"Did the woman we never met enjoy it?"

"She saw it once and approved. Quit fishing."

Tim laughed, "All right, I guess I'd know if I had another stepmother or ex-stepmother lurking around somewhere. You the only one who uses the cabin?"

"I've found money and a can of beans there a couple of times when people got stuck and took shelter. I usually leave a couple of cans of food, jug of water and wood chopped for the wood stove just in case and I don't lock it."

Tim nodded, thinking before finally asking, "Is that where you were during the Parsons thing?"

"Yeah, part of the time. Wanted to put the arrest off as long as possible and couldn't stand hanging around the house just waiting. No orders to stay in town. Was worried about you three, didn't want you to take the fall, keep me out of jail. Hoped if I was out of sight for a while, he'd get bored and find someone else to persecute."

"Boss, I mean Dad; we participated in nearly everything Parsons accused you of and we didn't have to. Any of us could have said no, I won't be a part of that. Even though there was nothing we did that wasn't serving justice."

"Not necessarily the strictest interpretation of the law."

Tim tilted his head, not willing to argue that.

"Anyway, yes I was there. And I can't wait to take you up there, to our family cabin."

"Me neither! If you'd like I can install solar panels. Have power during late spring, summer and early fall."

"Be nice not to have to use lanterns and flashlights all the time. Although it's better now with the composted toilet inside."

"Know what's involved installing a septic?"

"Tank, septic lines from the house and a leach field. Tank and leach field can't be close. The tank should be big enough for anticipated use and it'll need to be emptied out every few years. Have to be careful what does down the lines, organic matter only."

"Be nice to have flush toilets but we should see what leach fields do to wildland like that. Probably cost a lot of money."

"We could check it out and I can afford it. Never told anyone but Jenny left her estate to me. I didn't know, found out while the team was broken up for Vance's mole hunt; her lawyer said she didn't have any family left. I was so mad at her. I was mad anyway, what she did to Tony and Ziva, not telling me she was sick and then she goes and leaves everything to me. Including the insurance money for the townhouse, which felt very wrong, so I gave that money to charity, mostly things for veterans. I sold the lot for an obscene amount and she had all kinds of investments and stuff. Close to four and a half million after I gave away the insurance money for the burned out townhouse."
Tim was nearly speechless; none of them had had any idea. "Wow, Dad, that's something."

"Yeah, it was a lot and I didn't know what to do with it but I sure didn't want to just leave it sitting, paying a lot of taxes without some benefits! I started listening to some of those financial shows on the radio and then started following their advice, investing a little here and there and when it worked and I made money, I invested more. Turns out, I'm reasonably good at it. More money came in from Jack's estate so I put that to work too. I haven't made any changes in my life, planned on leaving it all to you kids; wrote up a will but haven't changed it to add the kids yet. Now I think I'll put it in a trust."

Tim was just staring at him, "Dad, that's - I had no idea. That's incredible!"

"Yeah, so now you know. Once I get it set up, I'll tell the others."

Tim nodded and they floated quietly for a few minutes before Dad said, "The pool's going home with us?"

"Yeah, there are portable fences you can rent, figured I'd rent one for the season while the pool's in place."

"Backyard's fenced."

"I know but I'll sleep better if there's an additional fence with a locked gate. If we were staying longer in New Mexico, I'd have one here too."

"Good idea. Sure will be nice to have! Your mother and I talked about putting in a pool. In-ground was too expensive and that was before these types of pools were available and neither of us liked the look of those other things and they were all round. I like this, it doesn't have to be in place all the time and it's oblong, we can actually swim laps."

"And it's portable if we have to move."

"You think you're going to move?"

Tim shrugged, "If the landlords move back or decide to sell."

"You wouldn't buy it?"

"Depends on the price. I'll look online and see how much it's worth. And then if you'd help me figure out what needs fixing."

"Nothing when we left, already fixed everything."

"Might be too small."

"Square footage?"

"Yeah. With three bedrooms upstairs that kind of limits things. I don't want to be on a different floor than the kids. Maybe when they're older but not now."

"Is there an attic? We could build a nice master suite up there for you if you're still there when the kids are older. That'd give you five bedrooms, we could divide up the current master, make it six."

"Those are good ideas. I'm just glad we got the basement done; guess we'll finally see how the kids do with it this winter."
"You mean how you do with housebound kids."

Tim chuckled, "You got me there! Ok, we said we'd talk about our move date once when we got back from Taos. Any changes?"

His father looked at him and they both laughed as Dad said, "Yeah, we were dreaming. No way are we staying another month."

Tim added, "And no more museum-shopping trips until they're older. This worked out because of that toy store, the Pueblo and the cabins but we need vacations with more activities for them."

"Agreed. Which trip do you want to cut? Or do we lose both of them?"

"Depends on what we find for lodgings at Ruidoso. I'm really hoping for a family resort with cabins, a lake big enough for canoes, kayaks, and sailboats but no motors. It'd be fun if there was a communal campfire where there's storytelling every night, roast marshmallows, things like that."

"Sounds like summer camp to me. Went a few times when my mom was sick. Had a blast doing all those things. Went hiking and backpacking too."

"Yeah, maybe I'm trying to have another childhood but that's really what I want for the kids. Then it would be cool if we could find a place like that at home, in the mountains. Although with the cabin, we're halfway there. Is there a lake nearby?"

"Yeah, a decent sized lake. Good for fishing, small boats and swimming. Not big enough to be of interest to most people and half of it is on my property. But Tim 'another childhood'? You barely had a first childhood! As far as camps, there used to be places like what you're describing in the Adirondacks. You ever see "Dirty Dancing"?"

Tim laughed, "Yes, Tony made me watch it. That camp was a little too set for me. Structured activities are fine but I don't want to eat with everyone else or dress for dinner."

"We'll look, see what we can find. Camp was a really good experience for me, especially as an only child."

After the kids were in bed, Tim started searching for their ideal 'camp'. The location, whether Ruidoso or Four Corners, would be dictated by what they found.

"Dad, isn't Tobias joining us at Ruidoso?"

"Yeah, but if we change places, he'll be fine."

"And I asked Sarah, Rob and Geo to join us for Four Corners."

"Think they'd mind if Fornell was there too?"

"Not at all, they've met him, at least Sarah and Rob have, don't know about Geordie."

"Ok, then let's combine guests and add the number of available cabins to the list."

"And then we need to let them all know; they'll need to take vacation days."

"Need to be back in time to drive to Oklahoma."

"Hmm."
Tim looked up the drive time from Ruidoso to Tahlequah and shook his head, "Same as from Albuquerque, oh because Ruidoso is southeast of us, must be another route from there."

"How about Four Corners?"

"Different direction but still 10 hours."

"If it's not any different…"

"Yeah, but if we go to Ruidoso then we can stop at the house and get clean clothes and whatever else we want to take. Don't need to haul the Big Wheels to Oklahoma!"

"Good point. You sound more interested in Ruidoso."

"Thinking Four Corners is something we can do as a family later when they're older. Right now Ruidoso, from what I'm seeing here, has more things for younger kids. Look, I found a place that's close to what we want!"

They looked at the website for a resort inside a National Forest; the only thing missing from Tim's list was a swimming pool. There was a lake with a beach and a marina with canoes, fishing boats, kayaks, paddleboats and sailboats, motors over 5 mph were not allowed. From the photos, they saw that the beach had sunny and shady spots; there were picnic tables and public restrooms.

There were various hiking trails around the lake, some noted as suitable for children ages 3 and up. As Ty would be four soon and Brynie would be three in December, Tim thought that was close enough. The lodge had both cabins and rooms; the property also had a restaurant and store. The deciding feature was a large fire circle where evening events such as stargazing, Park Ranger talks, outdoor movies and marshmallow roasting were held.

The cabin they viewed had three bedrooms, a full kitchen, and one bathroom with tub/shower combo, living space with a DVD player and TV but no live TV service. There was also a front porch complete with rocking chairs and a grill with a picnic table and benches in the front yard. A sidebar note explained that it was easier to have the grills in front than to have multiple false alarms from people reporting smoke from grills in the back of the cabins. Another note explained there were no individual fire pits and the grills used propane. There was a propane station on the way into the area and the smaller canisters could be purchased at the store.

When Tim looked for cabins, he found two close to each other available for the same timeframe. Looking at his watch, he called his night owl sister. "Hey, Tim! How was Taos?"

"Amazing, you need to see it sometime. Any chance we can do this on Skype? Have some questions for you."

"Sure, hang on."

They quickly connected and Sarah smiled at her brother and his father. There was movement behind her, the Gibbeses grinned as Rob and Geordie joined them.

"Hey, guys! Man, it's good to see you all! Here's the deal, we're thinking to cut back on our vacation plans and make just one more trip. Well, two because we're going to meet Ellie's family in Oklahoma but besides that. We're thinking Ruidoso instead of Four Corners. We found a place near a lake with all kinds of activities. It's a lodge with a restaurant and rooms but also has cabins. We're going to rent a cabin, Tobias Fornell will be there too, hope that's all right. Anyway, we're going to rent a cabin and there are others available. As I said, there are also motel rooms; I wasn't sure if you'd be up for cabin living."
"Wow, this sounds like fun! Cabins in the woods?"

"Yes, woods and mountains. There's a lake, swimming, boating, hiking, many things to see and do."

Tim grinned back at his siblings as he saw their agreement.

"Cool!"

"Oh yeah, we're in! Can you send me the link, oops, have it already, thanks. Hmm, guess we need to know the dates."

Tim told them and he and Sarah made both sets of reservations at the same time, including comments that they were a family group.

"Where shall we fly into?"

"Here; fly into Albuquerque and we'll pick you up. Depending on what time of day you get in, we'll leave that afternoon or the next morning. We'll take Dad's truck, it seats five and my Buick, which seats three besides the kids but it's more comfortable for two passengers. Then you can see the house before we leave."

"You're coming home after?"

"Yes, we don't have a date or even know how we're getting there, haven't told Director Vance yet. Some government entity will be moving us and our stuff."

"Least they can do!"

"Got that right!"

Geo moved closer to the camera, "I can't wait to see you and meet Gibbs and the kids. All the Gibses!"

Dad smiled, "Can't wait to meet you either, Geordie. This'll be a good chance for us to get to know one another."

"Absolutely."

"Bring hiking boots, hot weather clothes, swim stuff, long pants and a hoodie or light jacket for evenings. We have flashlights and stuff like that."

"Gibbs, does this mean I'll finally get to taste your famous steaks?"

"Oh yeah and your brother's great at grilling too."

Geo smiled, loving that Gibbs was so positive and loving toward his brother. He'd had concerns but it looked like things were working out well.

At a noise, Tim held up a finger to wait and disappeared while Sarah and Gibbs chatted. Tim returned carrying two adorable little kids. Geo had seen photos, even videos but this close and live, this was different. There was no way they could not be Tim's children. Tim was already 9 when he'd first met him but he could see that an older Ty was going to look very much like his father. And in Brynie, he saw the same close resemblance in feminine form.

"Ty, Brynie, this is your Uncle Geordie."
Both kids grinned and Tyler said, "Hi Uncle Geordie, I'm Tyler Dean Gibbs and this is Suzanna Bryn Gibbs. Hi Aunty Sarah, Unca Rob."

Geordie replied, "I'm very pleased to meet you, Tyler, Brynie. I can't wait to meet you in person!"

Sarah and Rob jumped in then, "Hi kids. Did we wake you up?"

Brynie giggled, "I woked Ty up. I was dreaming about being a mermaid."

Gibbs leaned in over the three of them, "We bought a pool today. One that inflates as you fill it."

"Cool! So we get to swim in a mountain lake and your pool!"

Ty turned to ask, "Daddy, are there horses there?"

"Yes son, there are horses we can ride."

"Yay!" He looked into the camera, "Do you ride horses?"

Geo grinned, "I do, Tyler."

Rob and Sarah shook their heads, "No but maybe we can take lessons while we're there."

"That's good, bring your boots."

"Ty, they don't have cowboy boots. Your sneakers will be fine."

"Tyler has cowboy boots?"

Ty nodded, "We all do only Brynie's are cow girl boots because she's a girl. We have hats, vests, and chaps too. Poppy says we're good junior cow people."

"Cowboy hats?"

Tim grinned, "Hey, we're in the Southwest! Of course we have boots and hats."

"I want one!"

"Daddy, can we take Aunty Sarah to the hat store?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"Yay, another cowgirl!" Brynie grinned at her aunty and uncles.
Yes, you were right, those of you who mentioned an additional bad guy...read on!

Chapter 23

After they disconnected, Poppy tucked the kids back in bed. When he walked back into the living room, Tim looked at him, "I know it's late but I can't stand it. I'm calling Grandpa, see if he wants to come too."

His father smiled, ruffling his hair, "Great idea."

Mac answered on the second ring, sounding wide-awake. "Hello?"

"Hi Grandpa, it's Tim and my dad. How are you?"

"Timothy, I'm so glad to hear your voice! And Jethro?"

Jethro said hello and Mac continued, "I'm sorry I missed your call with the kids, I walked in the door about a minute after they disconnected. Uh, we wanted to surprise you but I'll tell you now, I'm coming with them!"

"Yay, that's what we were calling to ask! It's so good to hear your voice; I've missed you so much. And I didn't realize you were staying at the house with Ellie and the sibs."

"I'm in and out; I've been at the beach for a couple of weeks, just getting back. I've missed you too son, you and Jethro and the little ones. I can't wait to see you!"

They talked for a few minutes before disconnecting. Tim turned to his father with a huge grin, "Family reunion!"

"Sounds good to me."

After talking a bit more about it, they decided to contact Vance about the change of plans. As it was now too late in the evening to call, Tim sent him an e-mail telling him they were re-thinking their plans, wanted to come home earlier but would need some time to settle in before returning to work. His phone rang about five minutes later.

"Saw your e-mail; I'm still up, waiting to hear about a case. That's fine, let me know when you want to travel and I'll let DHS know. They're paying for your move, both you and your stuff. I expect you'll be on a private jet, they can use theirs, be cheaper than paying first class for four of you. You have a lot of stuff to move?"

"Not a houseful but we do have some furniture, oversized toys and Dad's truck."

"All right, so at least a half of a moving van."

"Should we trust them, Leon?"
"Hey, Gibbs. Yes, Morrow was forced to resign and they're now reporting to the President's Chief of Staff until she can find someone nasty enough, uh, I mean qualified. Hang on, there's a text about your case. Wow, ok, new development happened this evening. I have e-mails from McQueen and my counterpart at the FBI. Ha, wow, listen to this! They tracked the leak of your location to the DHS team leader Stanson. McQueen says that was your theory and it panned out. FBI says motive was jealousy, Stanson and his brother were jealous of your successes, and that they have ties to Stacevyko through their father, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union. Unbelievable!

"The leak was a treasonous act; Stanson is in maximum security facing the death penalty and Brother is being looked at for accessory. Initial charges against Brother Stanson are grievous mischief with intent to harm against two federal agents and two minors. Boils down to criminal intent against the four of you. He's also in maximum security."

There was silence on the other end of the line for nearly 30 seconds before Jethro spoke. "We couldn't figure out why DHS was sitting on the case after being in such a hurry and why it was necessary to sequester us. Then we started putting other pieces together, McQueen said someone in Washington might have told Stanson where we were. Shouldn't have been any risk there, DHS was the one who ordered us picked up, so why would that pose a threat to us? He could have done whatever he was going to do right here. Except it wasn't for him, it was for Stacevyko."

Realizing the two needed time to absorb the latest horror and that he shouldn't say much more to them about the fallout from the whole mess, Vance asked if they had a leave date.

"Sept. 14th."

"All right, I've got it and I'll pass the word to DHS. They'll probably have someone from their HR call you, a relocation agent."

Someone, Vance thought it was Jethro again, made a noise and when the call he'd been waiting for buzzed in, the Gibbses disconnected.

In Albuquerque, Jethro wrapped an arm around his son. "They caught them and they'll pay."

"I don't understand, unless Stacevyko had something on their father."

"Sounds about right."

Tim shook his head, "At least we know it's over now, the last piece of the puzzle is in place."

"Yes and we're going home!"

"Yeah, we are. Do you mind having your birthday here? Oops, no it won't be; it'll be on the way to Tahlequah."

"I don't mind celebrating the weekend after, Ty's too."

"Can't believe he's going to be 4!"

Glad his son had quickly absorbed the latest news about Stacevyko and her machinations, Jethro listened as Tim outlined an idea for their last weekend in New Mexico.

Tuesday when Jethro saw his boss at work, he said, "Steve, plans have changed a bit. Family and I are leaving for home on September 14th. We have two more trips between now and then, thought it would be easier to let you know the days I'm available to work." He handed over a list of dates.
The man sighed, "I can understand that. Man, this really sucks, for us here I mean. We've enjoyed getting to know ya'll, feeling like you're part of the family. Think you'll be back this way?"

"We both love New Mexico so no telling. I'm sure Tim and Ellie will be planning a honeymoon sometime soon so it could be the two of them or a family vacation next summer. In another year Ty will be starting kindergarten, tougher to get away during the year. Tim's good at e-mail, good at staying in touch. I'm better than I used to be, I'll write, let you know what's going on." He paused, "Have a question for you, or maybe for Tamara and Roger. We'd like to host a party for all our friends that last weekend, but we don't have anywhere near the room. Would it be possible for us to rent space at the ranch, say have a barbecue on the terrace and a swim party?"

"That's a great idea, Mark, oops, is that ok?" His friend nodded and Steve continued, "Let me talk with Tamara about it, make sure the terrace is available. I know she's got weddings booked but no idea when."

"Great, appreciate it!"

While they prepared for their guests and the trip to Ruidoso, the Gibbs men once again started packing up their lives, although now it was a happy chore. Winter clothes went first along with the least loved of the children's toys. Those would be donated to the shelter they visited. After their Christmas fun there, they'd been back a few times and Tim believed his children would agree to give their toys to their friends at the shelter. Winter coats, hats, gloves, scarfs, jackets, rain boots, warm socks and flannel shirts were stuffed into boxes and carefully labeled although he put the kids' winter clothes with the toys for the shelter, knowing they'd outgrow them by next winter. They packed the DVDs, putting aside the ones that were duplicates. Tim and Ellie spent some time on Skype one night going through the DVDs in either house, at least that's what they said they were doing. The two Skyped every day, frequently very early in the New Mexican morning before Ellie had to leave for work. Gibbs was happy for them but even happier he wasn't in the room where all the billing and cooing was going on. Idly he wondered if there would be more grandbabies and that made him feel smug.

The McGee clan flew in that Friday, arriving at 11:00 AM. The kids were at daycare and preschool; Tim took their seats out of the Buick and then pulled up the third row of seats. They could always put them back down or use them for luggage but at least his brothers could spread out.

The two Gibbses stood in Baggage Claims, watching for the family to appear on the escalator. Tim spotted Sarah and nudged his father. "There's Sarah." He waved to her and she waved back. The next person Tim saw made his jaw drop and his father looked at him, "Tim, what…hey!"

As Gibbs looked, he'd also spotted Ducky and behind him Mac! As Rob and a man Jethro had only seen on Skype and in family photos appeared, Tim and Gibbs surged forward to greet them. Several of them cried. In fact, Tim thought they all cried at some point. They were such a big happy clump that someone took photos and posted them on an Albuquerque Community Facebook page as "Happy Family Reunion."

When they'd finally dried their eyes, Geordie, Tim, and Rob grabbed the luggage. Tim was amused to see Rob and Sarah had backpacks, Mac had a wheeled duffle, and Geordie had his sea bag. His dad still used his from his days of active service, said he didn't want a new one until that one was unusable. Ducky was the only one with a suitcase, a small one.

Geordie went with Tim to get the car and the two never stopped talking on the way and in the car driving back to the terminal. As Tim figured, Rob climbed into the far back where he could stretch
out his legs and the luggage still fit fine in the cargo space although Tim was happy the truck was also going with them.

When they reached the house, Tim stopped to let them out before pulling into the garage. "Unless you want your luggage, gonna leave it in here for now. Once we get the kids home, we'll pack the truck and the SUV."

They'd leave that afternoon and Fornell would join them Saturday morning, renting a car for the drive out. In the meantime, they all wanted to see the house. They'd seen the photos Tony and Ellie had taken and those Tim sent but viewing digital images and seeing things in person are two different things. Close, but still different.

They loved the adobe; Mac and Ducky were heartened to hear that Jethro had learned how to make the stuff and build with it. "On our way out of town we'll drive by the house we helped build."

"We?"

Tim grinned, "Yes, I was the electrician for that build. I mean my alter ego, Brian Hull was the electrician."

Rob laughed, "Cool Timpa, you have two sets of names."

"Three, Robbie, don't forget Timothy McGee!"

"Right."

Geo went with Gibbs to pick up the kids, which gave the two men time to talk, and for Geo to meet the children before they were scooped up by the others. He went inside the daycare with Gibbs to get Brynie and the little girl nearly flew across the room and into her grandfather's arms. "Poppy!"

After kissing him, she looked over and smiled, "Ooh, you're Unca Geordie!" She held her arms out and Geo took her into his. She kissed him. "Welcome to Abahkerkie!" Oh boy, he was sunk, hers forever.

"Thank you Brynie! You ready for some fun on our trip?"

"Yes, cabins and horsies and swimming!" She leaned in close, "And s'mores, Daddy said."

"That's right, sweet pea, s'mores!"

They tucked her into her seat and then went to the preschool for Tyler. He hugged Poppy and Geo's legs. "Welcome to Albakerkie!" He looked at Geo, "Poppy says you're a Marine. He is too, but he doesn't do that anymore."

"I know. Do you know your Poppy was so good at what he did that there's a sign up at our Headquarters with his name on it?"

"Wow, I didn't know that. Poppy, can we go see it?"

Amused, Poppy nodded to the kids and then looked at Geo, "They haven't taken that down yet?"

"No one's broken your record."

He chuckled, "It'll happen. By the way, a birdie named Tim told me you made Major; congratulations!"
"Thanks! That's when I figured it was time to exit Spec Ops."

"Sure put enough years in, enough for three Marines."

"Kind of slid by, you know how it is. One minute I was nearly at the end of my first year there, next thing I know it's five and then ten."

"Glad you made it, kiddo."

"Me too, Gunny, me too."

Back home, the kids greeted the others with kisses and hugs. They had a quick lunch, packed the large cooler, divvied up the luggage and made sure the kids' Big Wheels were secured to the bed of the truck. Then they put the kids' seats back in the Buick, put the ones from Gibbs' truck in the truck bed, decided who was riding with whom, loaded up and backed out of the garage right on time.

The ride to Ruidoso went quickly as everyone caught up with either Tim or Jethro. The kids started out in high spirits but were asleep before they'd driven halfway. Tim told his passengers not to whisper, the kids were used to noise.

Geo had been torn between wanting to spend more time with Tim and getting to know Gibbs. He knew the older man was interested in adopting the three siblings and he knew Sarah and Rob were fine with that, just waiting for his vote. They'd decided it was all three or none of them, to be fair.

He decided to ride with Gibbs, Mac, and Ducky; he'd only met the two older men a few times and wanted to know more and to see how the three older men related to each other. He should have known! They grilled him about his life in the Corps although they knew there was very little he could tell them. Finally, he started turning the tables, asking questions of them.

Gibbs chuckled to himself; he and Geo had a fair amount in common; too bad they couldn't talk about it! He said that aloud and the Major agreed.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

A weekend read, with plenty of sunshine to brighten us all up. And hey, Mark Harmon won Favorite TV Crime Drama Actor, YAY! WE did that, folks, fans of MH and NCIS who voted, so congrats to us, FINALLY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24

As they drove in, Pinecrest Resort looked just the way it did online. On the road in, they passed the propane station, the gate to the campgrounds and then came into the main area. Mountain rustic, surrounded by fir and pine trees, sparkling lake, people of all ages looking casual and comfortable, with a lot of activity. Beachgoers carrying folding chairs, coolers and small children, hikers with packs in shorts and sturdy boots, people from a tiny infant in a sling to an elderly woman enjoying an ice cream cone.

On their left as they drove in, they saw a shaded boardwalk. At one end was the grocery store, followed by a tiny post office, coffee shop, a souvenir/beach shop, art gallery and lastly, a restaurant. Across a narrow alley, was a line of ten motel rooms. Farther down past the motel rooms they could see a cabin or two; to their right they saw the lake, marina, and the beach stretching around this end of the lake.

A small building was situated about 50 yards off the road, in the general direction of the beach and the adults smiled at each other without pointing it out to the children, they thought that was probably the ubiquitous snack shack. Of course, the line of people stretching from the front of the building to the beach might have also provided a clue.

They couldn't be seen from the cars but the vacationers knew from the website that there were picnic tables and restrooms nestled in the trees lining the beach. And behind those, also hidden from view, was the fire circle with the National Park campgrounds tucked about half a mile deeper in the woods.

Everything they'd seen so far met their expectations. Jethro was surprised by the size of the lake; it was bigger than it looked online, they could do some sailing, canoeing and kayaking out there. Geo thought it was great to be in a beautiful place like this as a civilian and with people he loved. Sarah, Ducky, and Rob were glad there really was a lot of shade; the two doctors and Tim were also happy to see the manned lifeguard stations. Mac was happy to be there with his family and Tim had already spotted the young children's area marked on the beach and the paddleboats moored at the marina. They found parking; Tim and Sarah checked in and then led the way to their cabins, which were side by side.

As they were given their keys, Tim looked at his sister, "I didn't even think to ask, who are Mac and Ducky staying with? There's an extra bed in Fornell's room."

"We gave them choices but apparently you Gibbses are early risers and they're not particularly.
Both are bunking in with us."

"Huh, which means Geo will be over having coffee, juice and pancakes with us at 0700 while you late sleepers will roll out around 10?"

"Yes and we can make our own breakfast."

Tim hooked an eyebrow as he looked at his sister. She chuckled, "Ok, we checked and the cabins have blenders. We brought protein powder and we'll buy milk and fruit, make ourselves healthy smoothies for breakfast."

"I'm impressed."

She grinned at him and he pulled her into a hug. "Missed you so much and you know the weird thing is I wouldn't have seen you two until July anyway. Dad and I were planning on taking the kids to the UK to see you two."

"Wow that is weird. It was ok when it was voluntary and planned, not when you just disappeared and Tony sounded like he was ready to cry when we talked with him. Anyway, you would have seen us at Christmas; we were planning to surprise you. Gibbs knew."

"Huh, he never said. Guess there wasn't any reason to, really. Yeah, Tony knew, oh, he told you."

"Yes. We talked when they got back from here and he said he'd told you that he told us. Not all of it but enough."

"There was an article in the paper here about Svetlana's arrest and a vague description of us. My boss, Steve Ortiz, guessed, well, our arriving at his family's ranch with five cops might have been a clue too. He guessed and we told him it was an undercover operation. That the names weren't real but we were really father and son. He was pretty impressed." He thought about it and then said, "You know it kind of was an undercover operation. For us anyway. We just didn't know why until that morning." He'd told her the story earlier.

They picked bedrooms, settled in, running back and forth between cabins with the kids who were having a blast. As they'd be here for a week, they unpacked everything. Swim stuff stayed out, it was hot enough for a late afternoon swim. They changed, slathered on the sunscreen, gathered towels, beach chairs and flip-flops and headed over to the lake. The first part of beach, the area Tim spotted from the car, had a sign marking it for young children; they stopped there, setting up the chairs, towels. With their floaty suits and water shoes on, the kids were practically dancing to get in the water. Tim took a hand each and they ran over the mixture of hot sand and small rocks, pulling him. Laughing he ran with them and laughed harder when they exclaimed loudly as the water was colder than they were used to. "Ooh, Daddy it's cold."

"Move around Brynie, keep your feet moving, you'll warm up." Ty was doing just that, dancing in the water. When the rest of the family joined them, he laughed when they started dancing too. Mac made a face, "And I thought the water at Fenwick was cold! I'll never complain again!"

Eventually, Tim decided to be brave; leaving his flip-flops behind, he yelled loudly as he dunked himself and then swam to the rope bordering the children's swim area. He really wanted to duck under and swim to the dive platform but not in front of the kids. He was nervous enough about them swimming in a lake without pulling a stunt like that. He turned around and swam back to his kids who were also all the way in and playing with Rob and Geordie. "Ty, Bryn let's show Grandpa, Granducky, your aunt and uncles how well you can swim. You start from where you are and swim out to me. Wait until I get there!"
"Ok, Daddy!" In a move done many times in the past few months, Poppy positioned himself partway in between in case either of them had any problems too far from Tim.

"All right, this is not a race, just a swim. Brynie, did you hear me?"

She nodded, anxious to get going.

"Ok. On your mark, get set…go!"

The kids did a beautiful job of swimming to their dad. He hugged and kissed them, "I'm so proud of you. You both did very well."

One of the other parents noticed and asked Ducky where they'd learned to swim. "They have friends with a ranch and a pool. The children have learned to swim and horseback ride."

"That's remarkable! How old are they?"

"Our young man is two weeks shy of his 4th birthday and our young lady will be 3 in December."

"Wow, I wish my kids could do that. I wouldn't worry so much when we're around water."

"Yes, that's precisely why their father chose to do that. I imagine there are swimming classes for young ones. Perhaps the Red Cross? I believe my other granddaughter is learning through them."

"Thank you, that's a great idea, I'll check it out."

As she walked away she shook her head, saying "horseback riding" in a surprised voice. Ducky smiled to himself; that was fun, he loved talking about his kids, young and not so young. Noticing his feet were finally numb, he waded out a little farther, to join Sarah.

"Hi, Ducky!"

"Hello, Sarah. It's lovely up here, isn't it?"

"Yes, I really like everything I've seen so far. No wonder they want to explore before they come home."

"It won't be long now."

"Are you sure you don't mind me staying with you until I find a place?"

"On the contrary, I can't wait! It will be wonderful to have young people around."

"It's just me but thanks, I'm looking forward to it. I hope Tim and Ellie will be making an announcement shortly after he gets home."

"And are you happy about that?"

"Yes, absolutely. I never trusted Delilah but I wish she hadn't hurt him the way she did. Ellie is the right one they just mesh. As hard as all this has been, it's given the three of us a chance to get to know her well."

"Yes, that is a silver lining. And I agree with your assessment about Eleanor and your brother. I believe with the discovery of the children and then papa Gibbs, the wound inflicted by Ms. Fielding healed rather quickly."
"That's good. He deserves only the best!"

"My dear, it's wonderful that you are as fiercely protective of him as he is of you."

"We were all we had, Ducky. First just the two of us and then three with Geo and four with Rob. Been that way all my life until now. It's about time we bring new people into the family." She grinned, "Are you going to swim?"

"Not today, I'm a bit tired from our travels and I don't suppose the 6700 ft. altitude is helping much. With a good night's sleep, I'll be kicking up a storm tomorrow."

"Ok, I'm going to dip in now; I'll try not to splash you!"

Chuckling, he moved away as she dipped her body in the water, yelling at the cold and then swam toward her brothers. As he walked out of the water to the warm sunshine, he saw that Mac was too and they laughed at each other for being such wimps.

The rest of the family played in the water for about an hour before the temperature began to drop and Tim gathered his kids. "Come on; let's warm up in the sun before it goes away. We'll swim every day here."

"Ok."

Tyler shrieked in surprised glee as his father slid him down his back, holding him securely, his head pointing toward the water. Uncle Geo grabbed him by the waist and swung him around, the tops of his toes skimming the water while Brynie had her turn with her dad. Uncle Rob grabbed her for a toe swing through the water and she chortled in toddler happiness.

Jethro watched, feeling an almost overwhelming satisfaction with his life, deeply loving his son, grandbabies and the others he hoped would also be his kids. When he turned to look at Mac and Duck, he saw the same look and the three men smiled at each other.

They dried off in the dying sun and then ran for the cabins and dry clothes, Rob and Geo carrying the kids. Tim smiled watching them; he could only describe his feeling as 'home'. This was his family. There were people missing, Ellie, Tony, the Palmers, Abby, but he was content.

Geordie and Dad made dinner, which brought on several comments about not wanting to eat MREs on vacation. Dad stopped to think, "I don't know, the mac and cheese is delicious."

"Oh yeah, that's one of my favorites. That and the beef stew."

"Mm, forgot about that one!"

They busied themselves with dinner preparations until Geordie stood next to Gibbs quietly saying, "I'd like to keep my father's name, it's all I have left of him. Other than that..." he turned to Sarah and Rob, "We three would love to be your children."

Gibbs' grin was so wide he thought his face might break. He grabbed his new kids and wrapped his arms around them and then included Tim, the kids, Mac and Ducky when they piled in.

"Oh boy, I'm so happy! Welcome to the Gibbs' family!" He laughed, "Not that you haven't been members for a while and Mac and I have been members of the McGee family!"

Eventually, they calmed enough to have dinner. By the time they finished it was bedtime for the littles, but they were still pretty keyed up. They had their baths, got in their jammies and then sat
first on Poppy's lap for a story, then Mac and Granducky's for another story each. Geo took the next round and told them a story he remembered Tim telling Sarah and Rob when they were younger than Ty and Bryn. That one tipped them over the edge into sleep and both kids were carried to their bed. As they had in Taos, the kids had explored each room of this cabin and knew just where Daddy and Poppy would be. The kids' monitor was with them again and Ty now had his own flashlight. Tim put it on the nightstand next to the bed.

He partially closed the door and came out smiling. "They should sleep straight through now."

"Wow, did we do that?"

Tim and Geordie laughed, "Took us a long time to figure out the 'pass them around for more stories' routine. Remember that when we left the shelter and moved back to the camp you were older than Ty and Brynie are now. Sarah was 6 and Rob, you were 5. Freddie, Barry, and Jose used to help; I think Nate even told a story or two. And Big John read to you from the bible."

Ducky chuckled, "Jimmy told me one night nothing they did was successful with Victoria. As I recall, I even told her a story over the phone, to no avail. Finally, Jimmy remembered something a friend had told him years before about the cure for insomnia. He grabbed their automobile insurance policy and read it to our girl. She was out in just a few minutes, unfortunately so was he!"

They all laughed at that. Although it wasn't particularly late, the travelers admitted they were tired even though with the time difference it was two hours earlier in New Mexico than on the East Coast. Off they went, taking Grandpa and Ducky with them.

Tim looked at his father, "Lightweights!"

"That's okay; they won't be as tired tomorrow. Want to play some rummy?"

"You're on and congratulations on your new kids. Four kids in two years, not bad!" Tim paused, "You talked with Tony?"

"When they were here; he's fine with it, says he can't imagine how his father would feel if he did that to him."

Tim made a noise, "Even though his father neglected him most of his life."

"Yes. Bad parenting."

"Plenty of good around too. Look at Sue and Deeny with the kids. Tobias with Emily, you with Kelly and me."

"And you with all four of your kids! Hope I was and am a decent parent. My parents were and Mac."

"And Ellie's folks and Jackie, Leon and Lara, Jimmy and Breena. And the Sciutos, even if they never told Abby she was adopted."

"Reminds me, I had a chat with Duck about her. She's doing fine; he says her involvement with the training seminars and the college classes really helped her get through the first months without us. And she's continued her sessions with Dr. Cranston."

"That's great, Dad. Good news! I can't wait to see her."
"Good, proud of you son! Now tell me what else is going on."

Tim chuckled, "Never could put anything by you. Ok, I picked up Ellie's ring this morning; left it at home in the gun safe. I plan to propose to her while we're at her parents' house; I just have to figure out how to do it differently than Jake."

When his father looked smug, Tim's eyes widened, "You didn't ask?"

"Not me, our master manipulator, Donald Mallard. He got Jimmy to help him without knowing why but when she came down to autopsy to check on something, the two of them were in a discussion of marriage proposals. You remember how nervous Palmer was before he proposed to Breena?"

Tim huffed, "Yeah; we had a triple homicide. The whole time he and Ducky were at the crime scene he was babbling. I had to put my hands in my jacket pockets to keep from smacking him."

"You?"

"And DiNozzo and Ziva. Any talk of marriage and weddings gave Tony the hives back then and Ziva would start to melt around the edges and then get all ninja. So?"

"She said Jake went traditional, down on one knee with a very romantic proposal."

"Ok, crossing that off the list. No knee bending and no romantic twaddle."

His father laughed at that. "You used to write poetry that was clever, not gushy. Why don't you do that?"

"Maybe, don't want her parents to think I'm a smartass."

"Nah, they're going to love you. Especially when they see how happy their daughter is around you. And you're proposing to Ellie, not her parents!" He chuckled, "And hey, they like me, how can they not like you? Do you at least have a picture of the ring?"

Tim nodded and pulled it up on his phone. "Wow, that's beautiful and totally different from whatshisname's."

"Yeah. That was yellow gold and she doesn't even wear yellow gold. This is white gold with an Imperial Topaz reflecting all the colors of her eyes that are like windows to her soul, blue topaz for my pledge of fidelity and a sunburst of diamonds for the light she brings to my heart."

"Dang son, that's all the romance you need. There's your proposal, go with that. Just out of curiosity, what was Delilah's ring and how were you going to propose?"

"Kind of an industrial look with a big ass diamond. That's what she wanted, a show-off ring. Paid a fortune for it but got my money back. As for how, I had flowers, the ring and a bottle of champagne, I think I was going to quote something from a TV show we both liked, it's all kind of blurry now."

"Because you've moved on. So proud of you, Timothy!"

"You don't think it's too soon?"

"I don't know about too soon, I do think it's awfully fast but neither of you is a twenty-year-old who doesn't yet know his or her ass from a hole in the ground. You've been through fire and are
strong people who would rather work things out than walk away but you have limits and standards and both of you stuck to them. Remember when we talked about your liking strong women but going for the wrong type of strong?"

Tim nodded.

"Eleanor Bishop is the right kind of strong. You're going to do great together."

"And you're not just saying that because you want more grandbabies?"

"I'll love them if you do but I adore the two I have; I'm good with however it works out."

Tim beamed at him and then leaned in and kissed his dad's face. "Thank you, you are the best Dad!"

"Aw, Timiny!" He pulled him into a hug. "I sure hit gold with you, son."

They laughed at their mushiness, promising not to tell on each other and then played rummy for two hours before turning in.

Chapter End Notes

RIP to Miguel Ferrer the talented actor who played Assistant Director Owen Granger on NCIS: LA.
Chapter 25

Fornell was there before lunch the next day, threw his bag into his bedroom, changed into his swim trunks and then hurried down to the beach where he’d spotted the clan plus Mac and Ducky! He smiled at them all as he stuck his feet into the water, determined not to miss anything. Out they came along with a wild exclamation. "Holy Sheelzaba, that's cold!"

He gave them a fake glare when they laughed at him. Finally, the two older men took pity on him, "Hello Tobias, it's good to see you; it's been far too long."

He grinned at both of them and a third, much younger man, "And this is a great surprise! It's wonderful to see you both! All of you, ah, Major Perry, I assume?"

"Yes but please call me Geordie or Geo; otherwise I'll think my CO is following me around!"

"I know that feeling and I'm Tobias." They shook hands as a small wet, cold body hugged his leg. "Hi, Uncle Toby!"

"Hiya Ty, how it's going?"

"Pretty good. The water's cold but you get used to it."

"Ok, I'll try again as soon the ice falls off my feet."

Ty giggled and pointed out to the water. "Poppy is sailing Brynie around."

"So I see." Jethro was pulling his granddaughter around on a kid-sized floating pad. "That looks like fun!"

"It is; Aunt Sarah sailed me around."

"Pretty cool kiddo."

His feet were saved by a call to lunch which they ate at a picnic table in the trees right off the beach. "Mm, good sandwiches, who do I owe?"

Rob smiled, "We made these but if you'd like to pitch in, Dad's in charge of the food finances."

Tobias smiled, nodded and then stopped and looked at Tim, his siblings, and his old friend, all of whom were looking very happy. "Are you gonna be Gibbses? Wow, congratulations!"

He kissed Sarah's cheek and shook hands with both of the boys, hugged Tim and Jethro, Mac, and Ducky for good measure. "Jethro's crazy but your brother says he's a really good dad. And he's always been good with my Emily."

Someone had produced a bottle of sparkling water to celebrate the new family members; Ducky and Tobias toasted their friend, all his kids, then Mac, and all his kids. That set the tone for their vacation: family and celebration.

Over the next week they hiked, swam, ate, found the ice cream shack and ate some more, went horseback riding, the kids riding with their father, grandfather or Uncle Geordie, attended the campfire, watched movies at the fire circle, swam some more, rented mountain bikes, fished for
their dinner and generally relaxed while taking advantage of the area's activities. Tobias had so much fun he stayed the whole time instead of the long weekend he'd planned. One day Geordie, Tim, Rob, and Poppy took their packs and went for a good long hike into the mountains. They enjoyed the company and the hike into the beautiful backcountry.

One morning Geo and Tim took their packs and set out to hike around the lake, just the two of them. Once they were away from the beach, their conversation began. Tim looked at his older brother, "Thanks for letting me set the pace; I'm sure you could be halfway around the lake by now."

Geo chuckled, "If I had to be, yeah, but this is about us catching up, took us years to get here, there's no hurry now."

"Ok, I have to ask as it's been killing me! What made you decide to leave SpecOps?"

His brother gave him a grim smile, "Haven't told anyone else but I had a very close call about three months before you four disappeared; too close. Close enough that I spent three weeks in a hospital and two months in rehab before I was cleared for active duty. I was surprised when I woke up alive; I know that sounds ridiculous but I'd thought I'd hit the end of the line. I realized I had to stop playing the odds, they'd been against me for too long and this was definitely a sign it was time to get out. As soon as I could, I filed a request for transfer from SpecOps. When my CO showed up with the papers all signed, I knew he felt the same about it being time for my exit. However, he told me there wouldn't be any news until I was cleared for duty. So I kept everything to myself, didn't want to get anyone's hopes up; figured I could be posted to the farthest outpost of the USMC."

"Wow, Geordie, that's frightening. Thank God you recovered!" Reaching over, Tim embraced his brother, who returned the hug.

As they continued their hike, Geo turned with a question, "You were an agnostic last I heard but that sounded like you meant it."

"I did mean it and I was. Not so much anymore. Hard to explain." He huffed, "Okay, truth is I haven't thought about the whys. Things changed."

"That's fine; your business after all. What's it like being a grownup dad?"

"Far less panic, worry and desperation, less winging it. And a lot more resources, no worries about food or shelter or crazy people with knives running through the camp at night. When they need shoes, I can buy them. And I have a dad now, he doesn't do it often but occasionally he'll offer parenting advice. I can go places without them and them without me. I can take them to fun places and we laugh a lot more."

"You mean you laugh a lot more, Sarah and Rob were pretty happy kids, considering the circumstances."

Tim nodded, "Yeah, guess I do and the sibs have told me they have good memories. I guess because they didn't know any other life and we did." He huffed, "I haven't had to kill anyone, not off the job."

"That was self-defense, Timmo, he would have killed one of you, maybe all three of you. Thank God you had the shiv and knew how to throw it to hit your target. I have a clear memory of that detective telling you the same thing. It was one of the few things Ellen Brill did right, sticking by you that day."
"And Lu. I remember being relieved that she was there, more so than Ellen."

"Of course! Hey, we called Lu, Nate, and the guys after we heard from you. I’d told them you were on assignment somewhere but ten months, not sure they were buying that anymore, especially when the kids were gone too. Anyway, Lu sent her love and the guys all said to say ‘hey’ and to get your ass home!"

Tim laughed, "That sounds like Bill."

"It was but Barry, Freddie and Jose were there too."

Tim nodded, "So what’s it like being back in the world?"

"Surreal at first. I went from rehab in a Third World country straight to Rob and Sarah's flat in London. That was bizarre!"

"How so?"

"I flew in on a C-130, very normal. Then I was transported to the nearest train station. I was used to avoiding people and daylight, being in full camouflage, doing recons, not hopping on a train in broad daylight, full of possible bad guys, to ride into the city. Then I transferred from the train to the Tube and that was even worse. Now I was underground, trapped in a labyrinth, had no idea of the layout or my exit options. I spent 30 minutes studying the emergency schematics they have posted. I was in my fatigues; hope people just thought I was being careful and not the paranoid crazy guy I looked like. I jumped and jerked at every noise, every movement around me, as twitchy as a newbie on his first deploy!"

Tim laughed at that description. "Tell me it got better."

"Yeah, it did. Took a few weeks but I finally got used to being in public in the daylight and sleeping in a bed. Oh and wearing civilian clothes, doing laundry whenever I wanted. And real food. I stopped drawing my weapon every time someone pressed the buzzer at the front door or there was a loud noise on TV. Sarah thought it was funny while Rob spent a lot of time at school. A lot. And then we flew home on a civilian plane and that was strange and then I had to get used to sharing a whole house with people coming and going at all hours. Not really, but with Ellie and Rob's hours and Sarah's friends, it took another few weeks. Mac was there and that made things easier, as worried as he was, he was a calming influence."

"Yeah, he's great, love him so much!"

"He reminds me of my first CO in SpecOps. He had a great sense of humor, calm, but never afraid to kick butt, you know?"

Hearing a sound in his brother's voice, Tim turned to him. "Past tense?"

Geo nodded, took a deep breath and then told his brother about seeing the man he admired so much killed in action. By the time he finished, he had tears rolling down his face. Finding a shady tree, Tim pulled his brother under it with him and held onto him. When the storm passed, Geo washed his face with a baby wipe from Tim.

"Geordie, did you…were there a lot of troops killed during your time?"

"No, if there had been I would have left sooner. There were more than the Colonel but not many and his was the worst hit. For me, anyway."
"All these years, Geo and you've never mourned him?"

Geo shook his head and then looked at his brother, "Couldn't afford to. You ever stop to mourn Patrick or the Commander?"

Tim nodded, "Yeah, after Dad and the kids. Someday I'm going to San Francisco to the cemetery where they're buried. Maybe that will give me some closure. Whatever that means."

The brothers huffed, took a few more minutes to collect themselves and then continued on their hike.

Geordie fired off the next question, "I re-read what you wrote me after the Delilah fiasco and obviously I've gotten to know Ellie but I still don't understand how you went from broken heart to in love again within a week or two."

Tim chuckled, "Not sure I do either, Brother. I was shattered when I walked in on that mess. Pissed as hell but shattered. It was too big to handle by myself; I knew I needed help. It was my whole future, my whole life, blown to hell, again. This time I reached out, went to Gibbs. And you know, he didn't ask any questions once I blurted out what happened; he wrapped me in his arms and held on tight. Like a dad. My God that felt so good I couldn't believe it. Maybe it was me getting out of my comfort zone, asking for help and actually getting it, maybe it was the shock of Boss giving me the support I needed that helped heal me so fast. Don't know."

"Shock therapy."

Tim huffed, "Could be. And Tony was gone, we had a new TAD, you know Bob Chalmers?"

Geordie nodded and Tim continued, "Probably better than I do. Anyway I was acting Senior Field Agent, had to be at the top of my game. Having to focus on work helped. And those first days Ellie knew something was up but didn't pry, nobody did. And then Sue and Deeny were murdered and everything changed again, just like that. For them, for the kids, for Boss and me." He paused, "After that, even with the news of Boss being my father and the kids, there was something more. Wasn't as if I suddenly knew Ellie was the one or anything weird like that, no epiphany. She caught my interest." He sighed, "I'd always found her interesting but off-limits, you know? She was married and then Delilah came home from Dubai. Things heated up between Del and me while Ellie and Jake started to have problems."

"Anyway, the kids knew. Don't ask me how or why, when they met Ellie, they immediately took to her. Everyone else was either Agent this or that and Bob was Mr. Bob. Ellie was never agent or aunty; she's always been Ellie, their Ellie."

"That's pretty powerful."

"Oh yeah! Did she tell you we're meeting at her folks' ranch in Oklahoma after we get back from here? Ellie's flying in and we'll drive."

Geordie grinned, "She might have mentioned it. That's good, Timmo, that you'll meet the parents."

"Yes, a little scary. I met the Fieldings too and liked them, they liked me."

"You work with Ellie, you know her much better than you did Delilah, just by virtue of working with her. You know what she went through with her ex-husband."

"Yes. We had ringside seats to that mess. I hate cheating! Why do people do that? Is it a power trip, the ability to hurt? Or carelessness? Why do people commit when they don't mean it?"
Geordie gave him a hug and Tim calmed, the two men continuing their hike. Finally, Geo said, "I don't think there's one answer. Might be the cheater wants to prove to him or herself that they're still attractive to others. Might be whatever emotion led them to a commitment isn't there anymore or not as strong. Don't know about women but with guys a lot of it is just sex, letting their genitals dictate their actions."

"Penis trumps heart or at least commitment."

"Yeah. You know a lot of guys say they're committed but don't really mean it or don't understand what it means."

"Scares them."

"Yeah. Means they're in a grownup relationship. Adults, yikes!"

That made Tim laugh and the two of them spent the rest of their hike catching up. When they got back to the cabins, they found Sarah and Rob waiting for them, wanting to rent paddleboats. The kids were napping; their grandfathers and Tobias would stay with them.

Once on the lake in the two paddleboats, the four siblings laughed hysterically, as they turned in circles in the water. Finally figuring it out, they raced across the lake and then were so tired they stopped for an hour before slowly pedaling their way back to the marina.

Another day they rented canoes, this time taking the littles with them. That was a red-letter day for Tim, the lake was calm and he experienced no seasickness. They paddled to the far side of the lake, found a beach with shallow water and played in the water, taking numerous photos. On the return voyage, Ty and Brynie sat on laps and helped paddle.

Ducky, Tobias, Mac, and Gibbs fished on a few mornings, sometimes joined by Geordie, Tim, the littles and once by Rob. Sometimes they went out in a boat to fish; mostly they walked partway around the lake to a quickly established favorite fishing spot with boulders to sit or climb on for the littles.

The small store next to the tiny Post Office and café had visits from members of the family nearly every day; Gibbs was pleased that they didn't have to drive anywhere to buy the meats he wanted for grilling. The ice cream shack saw them every day. By their third day, the group figured the best time to get to the shack before the rest of the beachcombers and campers. Most people waited until after lunch, the Gibbs crew learned quickly that ice cream as an appetizer tasted just as delicious.

Ducky and Fornell felt privileged to be there with the family, watching the siblings deepen their bond with their new father and grandfather. The children were in seventh heaven with not only their father and grandfathers but also aunt and uncles to play with. When Aunty Sarah balked at getting on her horse during her first riding lesson, Tyler and Bryn encouraged her in their funny little kid ways. She finally decided that if her less than athletic older brother could do it, she could too. Uncle Rob was the surprise, he normally shied away from large animals but he had no such problems with the horses. Poppy just watched from his perch atop his steed, smiling. He hadn't stopped smiling since that first night.

With all the fun and all the activity, their week flew by and all too soon, they found themselves on their last full day. The group went for a morning walk, then had breakfast outside, cleaned up, did a little packing and then spent the rest of the day on the beach, in the water, sunbathing, eating ice cream and making sure they'd purchased every kitschy souvenir at the store. Tim finally bought the painting he'd been admiring since the first time he'd walked into the small art gallery. Geo bought a framed photograph of the lake with the marina and the cabins in the background. All of them had
taken copious photos and agreed to post them online in the family album so everyone could see.

The next morning they loaded up the truck and the SUV, even stuffing a few things in Fornell's rental car. Driving home, they were in no hurry; as in all the best vacations, they weren't quite ready to end it but it was time. Tim was getting excited and anxious about the visit to the Bishops' ranch. By now, everyone but the littles had seen the photo of the ring and heard his plans.

When they got back to the house, the truck, SUV and rental were quickly unpacked. It was still early; the flight back to Washington wasn't until the next day. They were relaxing on the back patio, enjoying a thrown together lunch when Fornell's phone buzzed with a text. He read it and laughed, "Mac, Ducky, and new Gibbses, is your airfare refundable? I'm being called back to Washington; my ride will be here tomorrow morning. Let me see if there are seats available."

He made a quick call and smiled, "Yep there are plenty of empty seats so if you want to fly FBI there's room. Sarah and Rob, if anyone asks you're with NCIS. Rob and Ducky, you can work that out, Sarah, no reason you can't be an Intel analyst. Mac, you're with Geo, which is the truth and Geo, as a member of the armed forces no one's going to say anything."

"I don't even have fatigues with me."

"Son, no one is going to take you for anything but a Marine - trust me!"

Their flight was canceled and the group looked forward to a flight on a private jet. Gibbs snorted, "It may be private, but it's an FBI office same as the Hoover building."

Fornell opened his mouth to disagree but shut it again and then said with a grin. "Yeah, I usually work, you're right. Even when I'm not working, I always have a file folder with some papers in it. Maybe a status report, something with lots of words. Then I have the folder open while I do whatever I want. I'm sure everyone else flying the Bureau does the same thing." He looked at Tim and Jethro, "Rumor has it that if SecNav or SecDef's jets aren't available, we'll be providing your ride home on the 14th."

Tim smiled, "Much rather it be you guys than DHS."

"Well, their jet isn't available to them right now anyway. Seems there were some improprieties in its use by a certain treasonous former agent. So it's more or less locked up as evidence."

The agents and Ducky laughed themselves silly at that, knowing all that would be needed were the records, not the actual jet. "So how long is the entire agency going to be punished?"

"Let's just say that the entire population of DHS central is being scrutinized very carefully by the IG."

"Ugh! Been there done that, no thank you!"

Fornell twisted his lips, "It's not Parsons but the rest of them are just as bad. In this case, it was clearly necessary and very public which is why I'm able to talk about it."

As it was still early in the afternoon, Tim and Poppy consulted, made a quick phone call and then made an announcement. "The pool and horses at the Ortiz Ranch are available until 6:00 this afternoon, if anyone's interested."

Tobias made a happy noise, "Yes, that's a great pool!" The little kids had slept in the truck on the way home, and were always ready to see the horsies, the pool, and their friends. Of the adults, everyone but the three drivers had napped for part of the trip so a trip to the ranch was a go!
Back in the car and truck, Fornell squeezed in with them, and out to the ranch they went. Mac, Rob, and Sarah had never seen anything like the ranch; if Geo had, he wasn't saying and they were all suitably impressed. There were four horses available so the littles rode with Dad and Poppy while Rob and Sarah put their lessons to good use. Geo, Mac, Ducky, and Fornell jumped into the nice, perfect temperature pool. The riders didn't stay out long, it was hot and they wanted to swim.

They stayed long enough to have a late afternoon snack with Tamara who was by now fascinated with the clan, as she dubbed them. When she asked if she'd met them all now, Tim shook his head. "No, you haven't met the Palmers, that's Jimmy, his wife Breena and their daughter Victoria who's my son's age; they have a baby boy too, we haven't met him yet. They're really part of the Mallard clan but we're fluid. And also our friend Abby Sciuto, who works with us."

Ducky showed Tamara pictures of his granddaughter Victoria, grandson Teddy, and their parents. Tamara decided that nobody but Brian, his kids, Grandpa Mac and Mark were related; 'Granducky' as Brian's kids called him must be an honorary grandfather, she bet it was the same with the other little kids. That was nice, she liked this family; they were obviously a chosen one and sometimes that meant more than sharing DNA.

Back at the house, the group had a light dinner, once again eating outdoors. Sarah, Rob, and Geordie took the kids for a walk afterward while Tim, Mac, Ducky, Fornell, and Jethro relaxed.

Tim chuckled, "It's strange to just be able to kick back with you here too, Dad. Usually, that only happens during naps or after bedtime."

"Very true. Get used to it; you'll be tripping over Aunts and Uncles wanting to take the kids somewhere."

"Two Aunts anyway, Sarah and Breena."

"What about Abby?"

Tim sighed, "All the sibs know about her is what they've heard from me, which is the problems I've had with her. As you now know, some of them have been serious. Life-threatening in one case."

Fornell wondered if he should go inside but opted to lay back on the lounger and close his eyes instead. He'd be stuck inside the office soon enough. Ducky frowned, he wasn't aware of any life-threatening problem between Timothy and Abigail.

Tim looked at his dad who sighed and nodded, he'd explain. Tim started gathering pool toys while his former boss told Mac, Ducky (and Fornell) about Abby's actions in Mexico.

Mac already knew some of it, courtesy of Tony, but was nonetheless aghast when he heard the whole story, while Ducky was horrified and Fornell sat up straight, his eyes blazing. "She did WHAT?"

Although the Reynosa situation had been a few years ago, Tim still felt vindicated with the others' reaction, especially Fornell's. He hated that he still needed validation and was afraid that meant his relationship with his father was not as strong as he thought or maybe it was his relationship with his former boss. In any event, Abby was obviously still a sore point between them. He silently moved away to the side yard, pulling some weeds, straightening tables and chairs. Lost in his thoughts he almost jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder. "Tim, please come back. We can't ever put this behind us if we don't deal with it together."
His dad. He swallowed and turned around. "I can't get past it. Every time Mexico comes up I get sick to my stomach."

Fornell looked at him, "So what happened to her?"

"To who?"

"Sciuto!"

Before he could stop himself Tim nearly spat out, "Nothing much; nothing ever happens to her. She's like Teflon, she can throw the shit but when it comes back at her it just slides off."

"Timothy!" That was Ducky, upset at Tim's vehemence.

"Duck, he's right and I've been the Teflon."

"You knew about this and did nothing?" That was from an incredulous Fornell and Mac watched intently, frowning.

"No. Tim didn't tell anyone at first. Because I was his supervisor and I would have blamed him so he didn't bother."

Tim nodded and Ducky was even more upset. "Why didn't you come to me?"

"Because you would have found an excuse for her, in essence blaming me and then you would have told Gibbs."

Fornell jumped in on that quickly, he could see Ducky was upset, "So who did you tell?"

"Vance, when he asked if I needed to amend my report. Then I knew he knew something and I wasn't going to take the fall or catch hell for omitting it from my report."

"And Sciuto?"

"On probation for months."

"She still had her job? Oh my God, Tim, why aren't you on my team? I can't believe the crap you put up with!"

Tim looked at his father who looked back at him sadly and then pulled him into his arms. "I'm so sorry Timothy McGee, so very sorry." He understood his boss was apologizing to the man who'd been on his team. He tried to say something but everything came out muffled. He moved his head, "I think it's time to declare an end to the past, to just keep moving forward. What's done is done. We've made a lot of progress and a big part of it has been working on that stuff. I'll talk with the others."

"As much as I'd love you to handle it for me, this is my responsibility, son. It was because of me, the way I protected her, treated her as my favorite. I need to work things through with your sister and brothers too."

When Fornell muttered something about a 12 step program and amending things with everyone he'd wronged, Tim was able to chuckle, "You gonna call that "Abby Anonymous", Tobias?"

The four of them were just tired enough to laugh at that and it broke the tension. When Ty and Brynie returned with their aunt and uncles, they found their father, grandfathers and Uncle Toby sound asleep outside, Poppy's arms around Daddy. Geo frowned and looked at the others; they
thought they knew what had happened, what topic might have caused this.

"When we're all home, guys. We need to work through this with them."

Sarah and Rob jumped when the Gunny spoke, "With me, Geo, I'm the one responsible."

"Not for all of it. Abigail is responsible for her own actions." That came from Ducky.

Fornell opened his eyes and gave them a sympathetic smile. Then Brynie yawned and Tim picked her up, gathered Ty who was nodding off and took them in for their baths. Poppy went in for story time and tucking in. They'd moved Ty's old toddler bed into Brynie's room, leaving his single bed for Ducky to sleep in. Rob would share Tim's king with him, Sarah had Gibbs' queen, Geo, Gibbs and Fornell would take the sofa bed and the two rollaways.

The group's departure was difficult but was mitigated by Tim and Gibbs' move date, only a few weeks off. They had had a week of fun together; that helped too. Tim and his dad finally took over packing luggage in the cargo space of Fornell's rental SUV and then watched, amused as Fornell, the three siblings, Mac and Ducky crammed into it. Tim chuckled, "Glad it's a short drive! Send us a text when you get home please."

That was something else that had changed in Gibbs' life, letting people know he was safe. It was a habit of the siblings from their lives on the street, to always pass the word along that they'd safely arrived wherever they were supposed to be. Gibbs sometimes felt silly about it but he had to admit it also made him feel loved.
With less than a week to go before their Oklahoma trip, the two Gibbeses went back to work for Steve. In their spare time, they cleaned the house stem to stern, made a list of the items they wanted to move, purchased a few items from the Marshals Service and finally got a call from the relocation agent. She confirmed they'd be transported home in Secretary Porter's jet and since they'd be the only passengers, they could bring all their suitcases, clothes, artwork and even light furniture if they wished.

When they informed her they also had a half ton pickup truck, a California king sized bed, two toddler beds, twin bed, two recliners and a mass of gardening implements and children's toys to move, she added a moving van without missing a beat. The moving company would work directly with Tim and Jethro, arranging times, pickups and delivery and she would let them know there were two locations for delivery. They decided the kids' Big Wheels, some of their favorite toys and books would go on the plane along with most of their clothes and artwork. Then they realized they'd be responsible for moving all that from the house to the jet and from the jet to their homes at the end of their journey. Tim grunted, "Oh no, we're not doing any work! We take the clothes and stuff we need for a week and the artwork, that much makes sense. The movers can bring the rest."

"There a twin bed there?"

"Yes, Ty's toddler bed is there for Brynie and there was a twin bed stored in the basement. I'll ask Geo or Rob to bring it up and put it in Ty's room...huh, the room that's painted primary colors. We'll tell the kids the Big Wheels are riding on the truck. They might even like that. Soft toys only on the plane."

"Thomas and Neigh."

"What we brought with us, yes."

The moving company representative came out to the house that day and Tim took time off from work to show him what they were taking and what was staying. The man tagged everything that was going, including the truck and many of the items stored in the garage. He looked at the pool and Tim chuckled, "Yes if we don't take that I'm afraid my kids will refuse to go!"

"Please have it empty and dry. We'll roll it up and keep everything together. Which house is it going to, A or B?"

Tim's place was A, Dad's was B. "A. Would it help if we packed all the tools in the back of the truck?"

"Yes, that would help immensely. The garden tools too and anything else that will fit in there. I'm assuming the Big Wheels are being moved?"

"Absolutely! We'll put those in the truck too."

"Something you'll want to do is catalog the hand and gardening tools and check them against the manifest when we arrive."

"Will you need keys to the pickup?"
"Yes, although I've never had a fire or an accident that required me to shift the load."

"Then we'll put the tools and other tempting items inside the cab and lock up. That ok?"

"Yes, it's a good idea. Now, you said you want to take the apple tree. That's tricky as it's a two day trip in a dark hot trailer."

Tim laughed, "Maybe we'll get that onto the plane then. Or I suppose I could hook up a grow light on a timer inside the truck, put a gallon of water in with a drip line."

The mover looked at him, "Must be a special apple tree."

"Symbol of hope. Maybe we'll leave it here, I'll let you know."

The man put a question mark by the tree and on they went down his list. "Are you taking your electronics with you on the plane?"

"Most of it. The TV is staying with the house." He'd already turned the laptop into the Marshals.

"And the other vehicle, the Buick?"

"Selling it before we go."

"Yeah? Beautiful car. How many miles on it?"

When Tim told him, he had more questions, "How long have you had it and how many miles did you put on it?"

He told him, adding, "We'll be putting on another thousand before we go."

"Still not bad. Got an asking price yet?"

"Are you interested?"

"Might be. Wife's car is aging, starting to cost money. I'm on the road a lot and she needs a reliable vehicle when I'm away. How'd this one do in the snow?"

"Great, never had any problems. It's comfortable for long rides. We just came back from Ruidoso, had five of us and no complaints. For its year, class and model, it's the #2 safest vehicle. The #1 was too expensive for me."

"Yeah, know how that goes. I have your number, let me talk with my wife and see if she'd like to take a look, test drive it. That work for you?"

"Yes. Have a deadline of next Thursday by 1700 to place an ad though; I'll need to know before then."

"We can do that. All right then we're done for now; I'll be in touch about the car and we'll be here at 8:00 the morning of the 14th."

"Great, thanks!"

Tim watched him drive away and then hopped in the Buick to pick up the kids. He patted the dashboard, "I know you haven't been my first love, not your fault. This guy seems pretty solid, hope he and his wife will give you a good home and you'll live with them for years to come."
He shook his head, laughing at himself. The kids were still talking about the trip to Ruidoso on the way home and Tim was counting on them to tell the Bishops all about it. Nothing like adorable kids talking about good memories of Dad and the family to make a good impression, right?

They left for Tahlequah just before dawn Friday morning, the kids still asleep as they were secured in their car seats. They wanted to beat other early weekend travelers and thought they'd spend the afternoon in the hotel swimming pool; everyone could relax and have some fun. Tim checked the ring so many times that his father put his hand out. "I'll hold onto it for you."

"Thanks, Dad, I'm so afraid it's going to fall out of my pocket and I won't notice."

"I remember that feeling with your mother's ring. It was the most expensive thing I'd ever bought, took me months to pay for it and I was terrified of dropping it somewhere! You know, you surprised me with this; I have a box of stuff from my parents and I was hoping maybe there'd be a ring in there that you liked. At least a stone or setting."

"Wow, that's a great idea. I never even thought about a heritage ring." Tim chuckled, "Not used to having a heritage!"

"There's plenty of jewelry in there, think my great-grandparents and grandparents' rings and things are also in there, that's Baxters, Stirlings, Cahills, and Gibbeses. You can always gift her with a ring for your anniversaries or special occasions."

"Excellent, thanks, Dad! Who're the Stirlings?"

"My mother's family. Her mother was from Scotland, met her English husband in London; when they married she was disowned from her family."

"For marrying an Englishman?"

"That's the way my grandmother told the story."

"Wow. That's interesting. Does Ducky know?"

Dad shook his head, "No, I've never particularly wanted to look into it and figured he'd pester me about it. How about I drive today and you drive tomorrow? Give you something to focus on."

"On one condition, that you stay awake and keep me out of my head."

"Agreed Timothy!"

Stopping in Amarillo Texas, they had something to eat and then looked around. Finding a park with a playground, the adults helped the kids climb the intricate jungle gym, sliding down the 'curly' slide as Bryn called it and swinging as high as they could. There was a wooden building at the top of the jungle gym that Ty immediately called a cabin. Gibbs thought in his day he would have called it a fort but he could see why his grandson said cabin.

When he asked his son whether he'd ever had a fort, Tim stopped to think. "Yes, in San Diego. We lived on base; there was an old wooden shed in the backyard and sometimes we called it our fort, sometimes our spaceship. Pat and I had a lot of fun in it; I think we even got to sleep out there a couple of times when Sarah was new and loud." He smiled, "That brings back good memories, thanks, Dad!"

After playing for a couple of hours, they went for a walk. When they'd had enough fresh air and exercise, they continued their journey, stopping in midafternoon at the hotel where they'd booked a
suite. They checked in and changing into their bathing suits, went outside to the pool. They'd brought their favorite pool noodles and the four of them swam, played, rested, and played some more for close to three hours. Daddy and Poppy helped the littles practice their handstands and by the time they quit for the day, Brynie's were better; she was able to straighten her legs and her feet, all the way up to her ankles could be seen. She was very proud of that and made sure her daddy took a picture that they sent to Unca Tony. Tim also shot a video of Ty attempting his first walk under water and sent that to Unca Tony as well. The text they got back said, "Where are you? There’s nothing beyond the pool, no hills or trees."

Tim sent a one-word reply: "Texas."

They had dinner in their suite, Poppy's grilled chicken and then watched a movie and went to bed. As early as they'd started, the adults fell asleep shortly after tucking the kids into bed. Checking out very early the next morning, they estimated they had four hours' drive time before reaching Tahlequah and then close to a 30-minute drive to the ranch. Deciding to call the Bishops when they were two hours out, they got underway.

They'd driven about an hour when Tim's stomach rumbled. The kids were watching a movie and didn't notice but Poppy laughed. "That was a pretty sparse breakfast. Why don't we stop?"

"All right, watch for signs and tell me which exits." Tim had looked ahead and thought there were a couple of chain restaurants in the area. It would be nice to find a local diner as they were usually more interesting. If anyone could find one of those, it'd be his dad. Sure enough, ten minutes later Dad said, "Diner at the next exit."

It was a clean little place with a menu reflecting years of experience. Tim decided he'd better hold off on onions, garlic, and peppers, nothing like knocking your future mother and father-in-law over with bad breath! He also passed on the potatoes in favor of eggs and a waffle. Dad also eschewed the onions, peppers, and garlic, opting for eggs and French toast. The kids each had an egg, toast, and milk. The family took its time eating and after they were done, had restroom breaks, washing hands and faces before climbing back into the Buick. Poppy made a big show of patting his pocket to reassure his son the ring was still there.

As planned, they called the Bishops when they were two hours out from the ranch, giving them their ETA, barring any unplanned stops. Gibbs made the call and spoke with Ellie's dad, Jerry. He hadn't been home when Gibbs was there to help Ellie with a case so he was an unknown entity. He sounded all right on the phone and Jethro said so to his son.

Tim nodded, "Sure, he would to you. You're not the one uh…interested in his daughter."

With a snort, Gibbs said softly, "You don't think I've talked to enough future fathers-in-law?"

"Oh well yeah, when you put it that way!" They both laughed. Minutes later, a young voice came from the back seat. "Daddy?"

"Yes, son?"

"Is Ellie going to be our mom now?"

"We don't know yet, Tyler. Would you like that?"

"Yes but what about Mama and Mum?"

"They'll always be your mothers, Ty, always. And we'll always honor and remember them for being your moms."
"So Ellie would be another mother for us?"

"Yes, son. She wouldn't replace your mothers; she'd be your mom too."

"Like Christian in my class? He has a mommy at home but his daddy has another mommy for him, I can't remember what it's called."

"Is the other lady called his stepmother, Ty?"

"Yes, but he doesn't even know her!"

"That's not what would happen with us, son. If we decide to get married, Ellie would be your stepmother but you already know her. And you like her don't you?"

"Yes, she's our Ellie!"

"Good. She would be your only mom on earth. Your first mothers will still be angels in heaven."

"Oh ok. When are we going to decide?"

Gibbs had to put his head down; he'd seen that one coming.

"Pretty soon, son. But it's very important that we keep it a surprise for Ellie."

"For how long?"

"Till we get home on Tuesday. How many days is that?"

Ty said the words of the week and then said to himself, "Today is Saturday so that's 1 and Tuesday is three days from Saturday, one plus three is four. Four days Daddy!"

"Great job Tyler Dean!"

Tim wondered if his son would realize he hadn't told him what Ellie's surprise was. It would be great if he didn't ask.

After their planned restroom stop, they pulled up in front of the ranch house within a minute of their ETA. They knew Ellie had flown in this morning. It was a little less than a two-hour drive from the ranch to Tulsa; with any luck, she was already here. Tim was just lifting Brynie out of her seat when Ellie opened the front door. "They're here!"
Happy (early) weekend - hope you enjoy! See you on Monday.

Chapter 27

Ty ran right into her arms and Brynie followed him. "Ellie!"

She hugged and kissed each of them and then Tim was there with his arms wrapped around her whispering her name. She laughed joyfully, so happy to see him! They kissed, keeping it chaste. Mostly.

He heard his father say something; he and Ellie pulled apart, grinning at each other. He turned to the kids and took their hands, "Come on sweeties, we're going to meet Ellie's mom and dad!"

He looked up to see a couple standing in the doorway smiling at him. Even her dad. He smiled back, "Hello! I'm Tim Gibbs and these are my children, Tyler and Bryn."

"Hi, Tim, welcome to our home. And hello kids, it's very nice to meet you."

Her parents shook hands with him and the kids. Then his dad was there with them. "Jethro, it's wonderful to see you again! And congratulations on being a father and grandfather!"

"Thank you; the best surprise of my life."

Mr. Bishop introduced himself to Dad as Jerry.

"That goes for you too, Tim. We're Jerry and Barbara. Now come on in, it's hot out here!"

Tim turned to get the bags only to find his father had carried them from the car, which was only a few feet but still, Tim felt bad. "Sorry Dad."

"That's ok son, you were otherwise occupied."

Shouldering the kids' bags, Tim reached for their hands but Ellie beat him to it. "Come on you two, I'll show you to your rooms!"

As they left, Tim heard both kids talking about swimming and standing on their hands. He chuckled, "Bet they don't stop until bedtime."

A bag was lifted from his shoulder, Jerry. "Thanks!"

"Kids come with lots of stuff."

"They sure do!" He turned to his dad, "Here let me take my bag."

His father started to give him a look but Tim gave him an eyebrow and Dad handed him the bag. "You cheat."
"Why, because I learned that from you?"

Ahead of them, Jerry was laughing. "How long have you known about your relationship?"

"About a year and a half. But I worked for him for 12 years."

"So you know where all the skeletons are buried."

There were two chuckles behind him and Jerry Bishop grinned. He already liked Tim better than he had Jake and he knew from what Barbara said that Gibbs, Jethro, was a good man.

Ellie told them he'd become a much happier person when he'd become a dad again. That required some explanation from his daughter and Jerry shuddered inwardly, thinking about losing his wife and any of his children; it was hard enough only seeing his son Robert in person every few years. At least he knew he was alive and they spoke often, made good use of Skype. Ellie had also told them about Tim's background, his years on the street and Jerry reflected that he seemed pretty well balanced for the trauma he'd been through then and just recently.

"Get settled and come on down. We've got plenty of cold drinks and we haven't had lunch yet, weren't sure if you'd stopped or not."

They shook their heads, "No, we stopped for breakfast somewhere but the kids weren't hungry for lunch so we decided to snack our way here. Didn't have many of those either." Dad paused, "I could eat now!"

Tim smiled, "Me too and I'm sure the kids are hungry."

The kids were; they were on their way back down the stairs with Ellie; Bryn went a little too fast and stumbled, starting to fall. Before anyone else could move, Tim somehow reached her in time and snatched her into his arms, trying not to hyperventilate. "Brynie, are you trying to fly?"

"I was falling!"

"You almost did, sweetie, almost. You need to hang on when you're walking down stairs, either to an adult's hand or to the railing. Please don't go so fast, ok?"

"Ok Daddy!" He kissed her, smiled at Ellie and turned around, still nearly white under his tan.

Ellie felt terrible, she'd thought little Bryn was holding on. "Let that be a lesson, Eleanor! You can't take anything for granted with little kids. Rule 8."

Tim smiled at her and she felt worse, especially when she saw his pallor. They continued moving toward the dining room and, shifting Brynie into his other arm, he took Ellie's hand. Poppy reached for Tyler who grinned at him.

Tim relaxed over lunch, Brynie was all right and Ty was all right although poor Ellie was still shaken. He'd talk with her later. It was difficult getting used to taking care of kids. He didn't know what he would have done without his father.

Barbara was asking if they could talk about their undercover case now that it had been resolved. Ellie's eyes widened but Dad smoothed it out. "Unfortunately, we can't, not yet. There are several trials coming up, after those we should be able to disclose more details."

"I'm just glad things turned out well." Jerry noticed Tim was paying a lot of attention to his little boy. Maybe not a good topic; it might be a little raw still. Although it was a case, wasn't it? Not
something personal. When Ellie nudged him under the table, he sat up straighter and changed the subject.

"I understand you were in Ruidoso last week. We spent a week there years ago, love the area!"

Tim jumped in, "It's beautiful! We found just what we were looking for: a lodge with cabins and plenty of activities on or around the lake there. My sister and brothers joined us and surprised us by bringing my grandfather Mac, Ducky, uh, that's our medical examiner, Dr. Mallard. A friend of Dad's also joined us and we had a great time!"

Ty was nearly vibrating with impatience as he waited for his father to finish so he could tell Ellie's Mom and Dad about all the cool stuff they'd done. "We went horseback riding and swam every day and I caught a fish! Oh and we went hiking, I got kind of tired but Daddy and Uncle Geo carried me partway and Uncle Rob carried Brynie. It was fun though and we got to climb HUGE rocks and we saw a..." He looked at his dad for help. Tim gave him a hint, "A lot of water and what was it doing?"

Ty's face lit up and he motioned with his hands, "I remember; it was falling over a rock, a waterfall! That was so cool; it just kept falling and falling and falling. We saw deer and elk and something with big horns."

Poppy helped, "Pronghorn antelope."

"Yes!"

After lunch, they had a tour of the ranch in the back of an old pickup truck. It reminded Tim of Jack's old truck and he saw his father was having the same thought. "Great truck, Jerry. Did you buy or inherit it?"

"My grandfather bought it new. We keep it going, can't bear to give it up."

"My grandfather bought it new. We keep it going, can't bear to give it up."

Tim nodded. "My grandfather, Jackson Gibbs, had one similar to this. Dad?"

Dad looked at him quizzically before smiling, "Yes it was my grandfather's and Dad kept it. I had it towed from Pennsylvania after he died. I don't have room for it so it's at a buddy's farm." He looked at Tim, "Roger Cooke."

"I'm glad you didn't sell it."

"Don't know what we can do with it." He grinned, "We don't have a ranch."

They'd talked about buying a ranch, rather than the house, for vacations. With the large family, it would be much easier and more fun. Although Albuquerque was nearly 1900 miles from D.C., the flight in would be faster than the daylong drive to the cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. And with small children, that mattered!

Tim grinned back but didn't say anything. Lifting the kids into the back of the truck, he gave Ellie a hand up. "Hello, beautiful!" He stole a kiss and heard his kids giggling. She whispered something in his ear and the tips of both ears turned bright red.

His father shook his head, "You must get that from Mac's side of the family or maybe my mom's. Certainly not from me!"

"Wasn't my great-grandma Gibbs Irish?"
"Yes, her maiden name was Cahill."

Jerry laughed, "That's it then, Tim. Skipped a few generations. Do you also have a 'touch of the blarney'?"

Ellie laughed which made Tim happy and he smiled. "I guess so, I'm a writer."

His father smiled proudly, "That's not blarney, son, that's talent."

While the others were talking, Tim quietly asked Ellie if they could meet somewhere that evening, after the kids were asleep. She nodded and leaned in, "We'll just go for a walk; we're not under lock and key Tim!"

"Or we can go for a walk, great idea."

After the tour, none of which really registered with Tim who hoped he'd see the ranch many times in the future, they drove past the house and cheered when they saw the pool. Just what they needed! Gibbs reflected that he'd never swum so much in his life as he had these past few months. It felt good though and best of all it didn't make his knee hurt although everything else in the universe did. Ducky talked to him about it at Ruidoso, advising him to have surgery before he went back to work or retired. "Have it replaced while you're on full medical, Jethro. It will be far easier. I know you've put it off because you didn't want to leave the field, but now you've done that. Think of it this way, you'll be able to chase after our grandchildren without worrying about your knee giving out."

He'd talk about it with Tim on the way home from here, guessing he should find a doctor around Alexandria and make an appointment. Maybe the person who did his yearly physical, since Duck wouldn't do it anymore. He looked at Tim and Ellie who were laughing softly together and remembered doing that with Shannon. It was as if the rest of the world didn't exist, except he knew Tim was keeping an eye on the kids.

The kids went down for a nap after their swim and their grandfather fell asleep in a comfortable chair on the Bishops' back porch. Tim was so full of energy he couldn't sit still; grabbing Ellie's hand, the two of them set out on a walk. As they stepped off the front porch, Ellie's parents watched and Jerry smiled, "He's a good man, I already like him."

Barbara smiled back at him, "He's good for her; they have a lot of shared interests and goals. And I think she's good for him too."

"She lights up when talking about him and his face looked like he'd seen the sun for the first time when he saw her this morning. Do you think it's too fast?"

His wife chuckled, "I don't know; did you think we moved too fast?"

He grinned at her, "No ma'am!" He paused, "They won't want to wait, will they?"

"Not after being apart for 9 months, no. They're adults in their 30s, no reason to wait. I expect they'll have a small wedding, family, and friends."

"Here?"

"No, my dear husband, they won't want any reminder of Ellie's first wedding or marriage. I think you'd better find someone to manage the ranch for a few days while we go to Washington D.C. for the wedding. Which will probably be fairly casual."
He nodded with a smile, "Suits me! As long as we're going, let's do some sightseeing."

Her eyes lit up, "You're on!"

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Tim and Ellie walked until they came to a pond, her favorite place on the ranch. There was a large tree shading part of it and she smiled, "I used to sit in the tree, watch the pond and daydream. And my brothers and I used to stand on that branch there," she pointed, "and jump into the water. It was so much fun!"

He grinned as he swung up onto her daydreaming branch, reaching down and pulling her up. "Come sit with me, sweetie. I have something I want to talk to you about."

She smiled at him, leaning in for a kiss and then her expression changed to surprise when he took a small box out of his pocket. "Ellie, I've missed you so much over the past 9 months, I felt like half of me was cut off. Not a very romantic way to say it, so maybe this will do."

He opened the ring box and explained his choices to his love, "White gold for your fire, Imperial topaz reflecting all the colors in your eyes, windows to your soul; blue topaz for my pledge of love and fidelity and a sunburst of diamonds for the light and joy you bring to my heart. Eleanor Bishop, will you marry me, be my wife, partner, lover, mother to my children, and best friend for the rest of our lives?"

She was smiling and crying, finally managing to say yes. He lifted the ring out of the box, slipped it on her finger and kissing her, murmured "I love you." She kissed him back and it was several minutes before they broke apart, needing air. "I love you too."

The next time they stopped to breathe, she asked if the kids knew.

He grinned, "They know I have a surprise for you and Ty asked if you were going to be their stepmother and if you would be replacing their mothers."

"I could never do that! If they'd like and you approve, I want to adopt them."

"That's wonderful! I'm sure they'll like that; they already love you. I told them no one could replace their mothers, you would also be their mother, living with us here on earth. Is that all right?"

"Yes! Oh, Tim, I'm so happy!"

"Me too, sweetheart."

They stayed there in the tree for another hour, talking and kissing. When Ellie showed Tim the spot where she and her brothers had carved their initials, he looked at her, hooking an eyebrow. "Doesn't that hurt the tree?"

"It didn't this one. We didn't cut deep enough."

Tim pulled his pants leg up to reveal a small holster with a knife. "Want to put our initials up then?"

Laughing, she agreed and they put TJG with a heart and then Ellie's initials, ERB. "I'm ashamed to say I don't remember your middle name."

She grinned, "It's Rose, for my great-grandmother, my mom's maternal grandmother. One of my
great-grandmothers on my dad's side was Eleanor."

"You're named for both of them! That's sweet."

She nodded, "My mom's paternal grandmother was Evelyn and Dad's was Gertrude."

He smiled, "And you would have done those names proud too. Gertrude Evelyn, you might have
been called Trudy or Evie for Evelyn."

"Major points for not laughing! My brothers are named after the grandfathers and our great uncle,
John, George, and Robert."

"Good solid names."

"Yes. If your mother had named you after your grandfathers, you'd be McKenzie Jackson."

"Wouldn't have minded that a bit and at least I picked Jackson. Dad says they'd already talked
about babies and he'd been emphatic that any child of his would not be Leroy or Jethro. When they
gave us our new names in WITSEC, one of the first things he said was that he liked the name
Mark."

"And yet he loves LJ and he's Leroy Jethro too."

"Yes, but he's an earlier generation."

He took her in his arms, kissing her deeply. They were getting steamy when they heard an air horn.

Breaking apart, both laughing, Ellie said, "That's the dinner bell. Mom says with my brothers there
was no use being subtle."

They paused long enough to straighten hair and clothing before walking back to the house. When
they walked in the front door, they were greeted by all three of their parents. Tim opened his mouth
but Ellie beat him to it, "Mom, Dad, Gibbs, we're engaged!"

Congratulatory kisses, back slaps and hugs kept them busy for a few minutes until a young voice
could be heard, "Daddy? Poppy? Ellie?"

Gibbs grinned, "They're already at the table, in their booster seats."

"Then excuse us, we'll go tell them."

When they walked in, they smiled at the kids and then Tim lifted them into his arms. "Got
something special to tell you. Ellie has agreed to marry us; she's going to be your mom. That means
you'll have three moms, two who are angels and one here with us."

"We're getting married?"

"Yes, we are, Tyler Dean."

Ty looked at Ellie, "You're our mom!"

"I will be. And if it's all right with you and Brynie, I'd like to adopt you, so I'll be your mother, not
your stepmother. Although many moms are great stepmothers."

Both kids nodded emphatically, "Yes please, Ellie!" They hugged and kissed her and their daddy.

Tim added, "That also means Ellie and I will be husband and wife." The kids nodded although Tim
knew they weren't sure what that meant. They'd talk about the changes later.

Behind them, they heard a tummy growling and Brynie giggled, "That's our Poppy!"

"It is Bryniebear, I'm hungry!"

"Mommy, Daddy, Poppy's hungry!"

They chuckled as the Bishops joined them. Tonight it was the four Gibboses and the 3 Bishops. Tomorrow two of Ellie's brothers, their wives and children would join them for Sunday dinner. The third brother, Robert owned a ranch in Argentina with his brother-in-law and came home every few years.

Tim made a mental note to also talk to the children about 'cousins'. As far as he knew that would be something new to them although Granducky sometimes referred to Victoria, Ty, and Bryn as cousins. While he understood the concept, he didn't remember ever having cousins and had no idea what to expect. He remembered that Tony's British cousin inherited their uncle's estate and had then been insistent on Tony paying an old debt but other than the definition, that was all he personally knew about cousins. Later he remembered Steve and Roger Ortiz were cousins, nearly as close as brothers.
Chapter 28

After dinner, Poppy took the kids upstairs for an early bath, story, and bedtime. Ellie went up to help and Tim insisted on cleaning up the kitchen. When Ellie's parents appeared to work beside him, he decided now was the time. "I had this planned a little differently. You've never met me before and I hoped we could talk a little before I proposed. But then we got here and Ellie…"

He stopped and beamed at them. "I do want to tell you a couple of things. I love her to pieces, I'll do anything for her and we understand each other. I've been cheated on and I'll never do that to Ellie or break any of my vows. I'm far from perfect but I will be the best husband and friend, the best partner I can possibly be for your daughter. We share many interests besides criminal investigations and we make each other laugh. My dad says that was one of the best things about his marriage to my mother.

"Laughter, friendship, constancy, loyalty, and romance. I'm not impulsive, except when it comes to gifts and I'm loyal to a fault. Ellie says she's told you about my background and yes it's been rough but it's also given me a stronger appreciation for family and decent values. My siblings and I had to fight to keep ourselves out of trouble, there were many temptations and even more desperation, but somehow it's made each of us stronger. Anyway, I wanted to tell you a little bit about my beliefs and feelings about Eleanor Rose." He paused, "I don't know how you feel about being grandparents to our kids, but they'd love it and so would I."

He smiled in relief as Jerry and Barbara pulled him into a hug. "Welcome to the family, Tim! Ellie's told us so much about you we feel like we know you and it's wonderful to meet you in person. And yes, we'll be thrilled to be grandparents to Ty and Bryn and any other children that come along."

He worked very hard not to grin at that. "We're hoping for more!"

"And her career?"

He was puzzled, "What about it?"

"I meant when she has a baby."

"That's up to her. I moved from a field agent position to management of our Cyber Crimes unit primarily because of my children. You know about their mothers?"

"Yes and Ellie has also told us how you came to be their father."

"It's a bizarre story, I know. Stranger still that the kids' mothers asked me to be their guardian. They didn't even know my name!"

"A topic for your next book?"

"I think that will need some time to figure out how to tell it and then only if Tyler and Bryn agree. Anyway, I moved out of the field because they'd already lost one set of parents, I couldn't put them at risk and now I have regular hours too. Then it also turned out I couldn't stay on my dad's team. But back to Ellie, it's her choice."

"Will she have to move off the team when your father returns?"
Tim shook his head, "He's not going back to the team. Tony DiNozzo was his second in command for nearly fifteen years and took over the team about 10 years ago when Gibbs took medical leave for three months. He took the team back when he returned but he won't do that to Tony again. It's DiNozzo's team and Ellie's doing a wonderful job."

"Good to know. Now tell us about your sister and brothers."

Tim nodded, smiling as Jerry poured coffee for the five adults; they moved into the living room as Ellie and Dad walked down the stairs. Tim smiled at his father as he said, "Ellie's not the only one who'll be adopting."

Dad grinned as he told the Bishops about adopting Tim's siblings. "Thing is, Tim raised Sarah and Rob, so does that make them my grandchildren or my kids?"

They laughed at that and then Jerry asked if Ellie and Tim had a date in mind for the wedding.

Ellie nodded. "As soon as possible. We haven't asked yet of course, but Ducky has a large, beautiful backyard. If we have the wedding in the next month, we can probably have it outside, otherwise we'll have to wait for spring and we don't want to wait."

She looked at their parents, "It'll just be family and friends. That includes the Bishops, the Gibbeses and Mac, Tim's grandfather, our team family and some extended members of that family, some friends of Tim's and some friends of mine."

Tim cleared his throat, "I don't know whether they'll come, but there are a few folks from the camp and shelter that I'd like to invite. Ms. Lou who is the shelter manager and helped us a lot when we stayed there and even after we moved back to the camp. Our friends Freddie, Jose, Barry, and Bill, who were my brother Geordie's tent mates. Barry is a police officer; Freddie and Jose have their own plumbing business and Bill is a carpenter. And a few friends from college and work."

Ellie smiled, "Barry and the guys will come. Sarah called them after we heard you and your dad were done with the case."

She looked at Gibbs who was giving her an eyebrow. "Ellie, I'm not your boss anymore and I'm going to be your father-in-law. How about you call me Jethro?"

She opened and closed her mouth, "I'll try - Jethro."

"Wasn't so hard, was it?"

She rolled her eyes at him and they chuckled. Tim continued the wedding planning, "We know this is short notice and that you'll need to get someone for the ranch but we hope you'll stay for several days. We'd like to have a party before the wedding so our families will get acquainted."

Barbara smiled, "We'll make arrangements for the ranch. Jerry has a cousin who won't travel but he will stay here and take care of the livestock. Jerry's already promised me extra days to sightsee so we'll be there a few days before!"

Gibbs hooked an eyebrow question at his son and almost daughter-in-law; they both smiled and nodded. He looked at Barbara and Jerry, "I've got three extra bedrooms at my house that people can stay in. It's in Alexandria, not far from Ducky's, five houses away from Tim's place, that is Tim and Ellie's place, and fairly central for sightseeing. Tim's granddad will stay in his downstairs bedroom and everyone else is local."

"That's very generous, Jethro, thank you! Does that leave you a room?"
He grinned, "Yes. Too old to be sharing a bed with my 81-year-old father-in-law. Although we have recliners we're taking home with us and they're comfortable enough to sleep in."

Tim thought about furniture. "Ellie, how do you feel about the couch and love seat in the living room?"

"Uh, well I know you took them from Sue and Deeny's estate because you needed furniture and they're not horrible but I'm not crazy about them."

"Do you like the furniture we have in Albuquerque?"

"Yes, I love that couch and the big overstuffed chair and the recliners. They're not huge or overly masculine. And the dining table and chairs."

Tim smiled, "What would you think of us moving the Albuquerque furniture home and getting rid of Sue and Deeny's furniture?"

"Everything in the living room?"

"Yes, then we'll have furniture we like, including a comfortable sofabed. And we can select whatever else we need together."

"Will, uh, can you do that?"

Jethro grinned, "I'm sure it can be arranged."

Jerry looked puzzled. "Wasn't that set up for your undercover operation, paid for by your agency?"

Tim made a noise in the back of his throat, "Yes although it was paid for by another agency, the one that messed up and kept us there for 9 months instead of the one or two weeks, maybe a month it should have taken. They know they screwed up, we'll tell them it's compensation for having to be away from our loved ones."

"But isn't that part of your jobs? Wasn't it your choice?"

Ellie's parents watched as the three agents exchanged long glances, seemingly having a conversation. Finally, they apparently agreed and Jethro spoke. "This is something that cannot be shared with anyone. No, it was not our choice. They came for Tim but we'd figured out ahead of time that something was up so we were as ready as we could be and they took the four of us."

"Took? As in kidnapping?"

"They told us there was significant danger for Tim, that they were offering protection, so we went. Our boss knew they were offering protection, he didn't know why but he was ordered to cooperate by his boss who also didn't know the whole truth."

"So was there a case?"

"Yes, although we solved it in two days last month, after 9 months of waiting for another agency to do their jobs. Up until then we'd been told by what we believed were reputable sources that the danger was too great and neither of us would risk the children. Then we heard a couple of clues, Tim put the puzzle together, got mad, called our boss, called out our team, got some additional help and the case, actually cases were wrapped up within 48 hours."

Barbara was thinking, "Does this have anything to do with the massive upheaval going on at
Homeland Security? It's been all over the news for a couple of weeks. One of the agents is accused of treason, a senior office suddenly resigned and the President's Chief of Staff is running the agency."

She got three enigmatic smiles and nodded at the answer. Tim finally remembered his gift for them and excusing himself, ran up to his room. He dug the small package out and, glad that he'd had it put in a decorative bag, brought it back downstairs.

"I brought you something from Taos. Hope you like it!"

Barbara took the carefully wrapped item out of the gift bag and opened it, Jerry watching closely. They both exclaimed when they saw the painting, "Oh Tim, it's beautiful! Thank you!" He smiled, happy and relieved they liked it and then blushed when Barbara kissed him on the cheek. She patted his face, "Better get used to it!"

He smiled, "Happy to! I'm used to my dad kissing me; he says we're making up for lost time."

Jerry patted his back, "That's good! Now, Barb what do you think about putting our new masterpiece right here?" He held it up against the wall and she nodded. "Yes, we can do that tomorrow."

In the morning when the kids woke, Tim and Ellie told them they would have more grandparents, even a grandmother, along with aunts, uncles and cousins. The kids were excited about everything although a little confused about cousins.

When Ellie's brothers George, John, their wives Eileen and Jazzy and children arrived, the Gibbs' kids were in heaven, kids to play with! Tim had been nervous, forgetting he had three advantages: Ellie knew how to handle her brothers, his dad was there and he was a federal agent. That impressed many people and luckily, that included his future brothers-in-law and their wives.

He also had a hidden advantage, Ellie's parents. They'd let their sons know they approved of Ellie's fiancé and when their eldest asked about the mother of the fiancé's children, they explained the circumstances. Their arrival at the ranch found them curious but willing to like him. Even though they'd also liked whatshisname and were furious and heartbroken on behalf of their sister when the jerk cheated on her.

John's son Matt was Ty's age while his sister Chesnie was two years older. Both of them were thrilled to have kids close in age to them and that helped dispel any shyness there might have been. There were three older Bishop grandchildren, John and Jazzy's oldest child Ethan, and George and Eileen's children Nick and Kenna. Robert and his wife also had two boys who only knew their American family through Skype.

Jerry brought out an old wagon that had benches attached to the sides. The horses were harnessed; the children and adults loaded in and off they went to the pond for a swim. Tim brought their pool noodles with them and the kids traded off so everyone had a chance to use them.

They had an early dinner, seated outside at an elongated table that Jerry's father made when Ellie, her brothers and their cousins were young. Jerry quietly reflected that he was glad to have more people joining the family and he loved that his daughter would be an instant mother, bringing him more grandkids to spoil. Dinner was barbecued beef brisket, corn on the cob, roasted potatoes, and a crunchy vegetable salad; Tim and Ellie laughed when Jerry asked Dad if he'd like to help with the grill.

Dinner was convivial; Ty and Brynie were chatty about their wagon and pond adventures and Tim
was proud of them. He kept an eye on them but other than helping Brynie with the corn on the cob, they were fine. When he wiped his hands and face, he noticed his children did too. Smiling at his little ones, he received grins in return.

As they finished their fresh strawberries, both kids were visibly drooping and he pulled them onto his lap; Brynie with her head buried in her daddy's chest and Tyler half sprawled on Ellie. Ellie's young niece and nephew were also nearly asleep in their parents' arms. It was so peaceful, sitting in the gathering dusk having one last glass of iced tea, listening to the katydids and the soft-spoken conversation. Tim smiled as he leaned over and kissed his fiancée, he could really get used to this!

He was sorry the evening was ending but eventually John, George and their families gathered their belongings, kissed their parents and Ellie goodbye, shaking Tim and Dad's hands and disappeared down the driveway. Tim smiled, "That was a perfect evening."

Jerry beamed at him; he really liked his new son-in-law. For not having had a family or at least parents, he sure knew how to appreciate family life and maybe that was why.

"Tomorrow, we'll take you into Tahlequah; show you the History Trail and some of the sites around the area. There are two museums, think we'll probably hit one of them, I imagine that will be enough for the children."

Tim nodded, "Yes, one site, one museum and a t-r-e-a-t, they'll be done." He chuckled, "We hauled them all over Santa Fe but did things differently in Taos. Dad and I took turns in town and they got to swim more at the cabin."

They talked for a few more minutes before Tim took Ty and with a smile from her former boss and future father-in-law, Ellie took Brynie into the house, did a quick cleanup and got them into bed. Tim noticed that Ellie was worried about something and after they had the kids settled, he asked her. She made a face, "I'm just thinking about your dad. He's so used to being a daily part of Ty and Bryn's lives."

"He'll always be a big part of their lives, of our lives. He didn't live with us in Alexandria; that's just been out here. And I don't know what I would have done without him, he kept us all going."

He took her arm, "We're probably a lot closer than most fathers with grown sons due to our circumstances. It'll work out."

She smiled at him and he leaned in for a kiss, only parting when they heard his father climbing the stairs. He smiled serenely at them. "Might have to give up Albuquerque for Tahlequah son, love it here!"

"Me too, Dad. Maybe we should buy that ranch here, huh?"

Chuckling, he leaned in and kissed them goodnight. They stole a few more minutes together before Ellie yawned mid-kiss and they both giggled.

Tim grinned, "We'll be home in less than two weeks."

"Let's call Ducky tomorrow and see about having the wedding there."

"And set the date!"

With that, they headed to their separate rooms, Tim sharing with his father.
After breakfast the next morning, they headed into town, walking the History Trail and visiting one of the museums of the Cherokee Nation. They were home in time for a light lunch and got the kids down for naps. When Dad and Jerry said they’d listen for the kids, Ellie took Tim horseback riding. He’d brought his boots and hat with him and she grinned. “You look so good in those!”

“I’m glad you think so. We look like many people in Albuquerque, but I wasn’t sure about here.”

“Perfect, lots of ranches and cowboys. I hope you’ll wear them when we go riding in Virginia!”

He looked at her, “You have boots?”

“I sure do! I was going to bring them this trip but they wouldn’t fit in my carry-on and I didn’t want to pay to check a suitcase just for them.”

“Don’t blame you. Did I tell you SecNav’s flying us home? Vance says she insisted but DHS is still footing the bill.”

“That’s only right! I still can’t believe those turkeys sat on their hands for 9 months!”

“And then sold us out. Well, the team lead did anyway. And his brother.”

“Reminds me; before I left the office I heard he’s being charged as an accessory.”

“To his brother’s treasonous act?”

She nodded and he shook his head. “Man, committing treason, endangering everyone in WITSEC because of an old world connection and not even directly theirs. Sounds stupid to me. Or was Stanson a mole at DHS?”

Ellie didn’t know and they talked about their wedding. She wanted casual and he agreed, except he had a question, “How casual? You’re going to wear a wedding dress, aren’t you? And I’ll dress up too.”

“All right, we’ll dress up and maybe the kids but no one else.”

“No jeans or shorts though. This is our wedding!”

She nodded, realizing this would be his first wedding, their wedding. She’d been trying to avoid the expense and extravagance of the fairytale wedding she’d had with Jake but this wasn’t about her past and that wouldn’t be fair to Tim. This was about the present and future with Tim, a celebration of their marriage, their union and their families. As opposed to The Wedding that was almost her entire focus before.

“You’re right. I’ll wear a wedding dress and will you wear a tux or a suit?”

His eyes twinkled, “I have a navy suit Tony convinced me to have made. I won’t know if it still fits until we get home though.”

“That’s perfect! Who will you ask to be your best man?”
Tim smiled, “My dad. Got two brothers and Tony, don’t want to choose and besides, I want him to stand up with me. How about you?”

“Maid of honor? Jenna.” Jenna Wilkes was her best female friend; they’d met at NSA and eventually both left the agency but remained close. She liked Tim; she’d never warmed up to Jake. Another point in her favor was that she had not previously been Ellie’s maid of honor.

“Going to have more attendants?”

She smiled, “I’d like to ask Sarah, but I didn’t know if that would create problems for you, you know, choosing between your brothers.” Then she smiled, “I could ask Breena too.”

Tim laughed, “Then I’ll ask Rob and Geordie to be groomsmen and we’ll have three each! It’d be great if the kids could be involved too.”

“Absolutely, Ty and Brynie will be our ring bearer and flower girl.”

“Then we might want to start after naptime.”

“Good idea. That will help Breena with Victoria and little Teddy too.”

Although Jimmy and Breena’s second child was nine months old, Tim and Jethro hadn’t yet met him. He was born the previous December, weeks after the Gibbes were taken into witness protection. Named Edward James, for Breena’s father and Jimmy, from the start he’d been called Teddy.

“Next question, do you want a minister or shall we look for a Justice of the Peace?”

“Maybe an internet minister or something?”

“Good idea! I’ll start looking online.”

She nodded, thinking about finding a wedding dress in less than a month. And bridesmaids’ dresses. She shook her head, “Jenna, Sarah, and Breena can wear their favorite dresses. They all have good taste.”

“Dad has a suit he had made, Rob had one made in London and Geordie will wear his dress blues. We can get Ty and Brynie’s outfits in Albuquerque.”

She looked at him, “Tim, you’re moving home in 8 days!”

He chuckled, “Yes, but we only have to pack what we want to take on the plane. The movers will pack up and bring the rest. And we don’t want to haul a lot of stuff home from the airfield, so there will be mostly clothes, artwork and selected toys.”

She looked at him, “When will your stuff arrive?”

“The 16th.”

“Oh good! I had visions of the movers arriving on our wedding day!”

“Nah. Do you want to set it for September 24th or the 1st of October?”

She thought about it for a minute. “The 1st would give us more time.”

“I’ll work on it too, Ellie. I don’t want to be one of those bridegrooms who just shows up.”
When Ellie grinned and kissed him, he briefly wondered if Jake had been one of those guys.

“Ok, how about you figure out the food and we’ll figure out the cake together.”

“Flowers, music, invitations. That’s too much for you to handle!”

“I bet my mom would do the flowers, she’ll love being involved. Music, uh, any ideas?”

“Yes, Jimmy sings. He sang at his cousin’s wedding a few years ago. I heard the recording and it was wonderful. And he did it acapella.”

“Perfect, now we just have to figure out what.”

“He’ll have some ideas; I’ll get in touch with him.”

“Invitations then and food.”

“How many people are we inviting?”

She started laughing, “I have no idea!”

“Ok, let’s see: one bride, one groom, 2 kids, that’s 4. The rest of Gibbs’ side is 7 including plus ones but not for Dad, huh, no assumptions, 10, including Mac and a plus one for him. Palmers are 4, DiNozzo is 2, Chalmers is 2, Sciuto is 2, Jenna is 2, Fornell is 2, Ducky is 2, Vances are 4, your turn.”

“Ok, that’s 34 counting us. Bishops are 6 adults, 5 kids, my aunt and uncle will come, that’s 47 and probably two of my cousins but they’re single and won’t bring anyone from home, so 49. Don’t you want to ask anyone else from work? What about Rick, Jim O’Brien, Evan and Ned?”

“Oops, wasn’t thinking, yeah so that’s 10 more with Evan’s kids, 59. Oh and Ms. Lu, Barry, Freddie, Jose and Bill, that’s 64.”

“No plus ones for them?”

“Barry is gay and won’t want to out himself with all the law enforcement people there and Bill, Freddie, and Jose won’t ask anyone because they won’t want Barry to feel weird. Ms. Lu might though, so 65.”

“What about Nate?”

Tim smiled, “We’ll send him and Juanita invitations, but they won’t come. They don’t like leaving the camp. That’s still 65 although 67 invitations.”

“No one from your team?”

“I’d have to invite all of them or none of them and that’s 30 more people, not to mention plus ones, so the answer is none of them. You should invite more, you’ve got Jenna and the rest is your family!”

She made a face. “When you divorce someone, you divorce your friends too and I guess it takes time for people to decide who they want to stay in touch with.”

He looked at her, frowning. “People dumped you? People who were your friends?”

“They were couple friends, not specifically my friends.”
“That’s no excuse, that’s just rotten!” He thought, “What about the people at the stables where you exercise the horses?”

“Oh, I hadn’t even thought of them! Yes, that would be nice, that’s four but two are paired, so it’s 6 more. That’s 71 plus 2 courtesy invites. That’s enough!”

“If you say so. I guess we can get preprinted invitations and send them out. I can scan names and addresses in and print the envelopes. Or we can look online for something we like. Do we need something for R.S.V.P.’s?”

“Yes, an RSVP card and a second set of envelopes usually come with the pack of invitations.”

“Ok, good. I’ll ask Sarah and my brothers to help with those.”

“Would you trust Abby with that?”

“No; I mean yes I’d trust her but she hates being involved with weddings. Since she doesn’t believe in commitment, I guess it’s hard for her to believe in weddings.”

“I hadn’t realized that.”

Tim chuckled, “I found out the hard way. She dumped me because she said I was getting too serious. I’d asked her to go to something with me that wasn’t going to happen for three weeks.”

Ellie looked at him, her eyes wide, “You are joking!”

“Afraid not.”

“Unbelievable! Speaking of dating, I forgot to ask if Tony said anything to you about who he’s dating?”

“Yes and no. He didn’t come right out and say it but he mentioned the new agent so many times there has to be something there.”

“Yes there is and he probably didn’t want to say because Bob, Evan, and I were there. Vance transferred in another agent as SFA, she’s a Marine finishing her 20 in the reserves; name is Maggie Barnes.”

Tim grinned, “A Marine, I love it!”

Ellie grinned back at him, “When we got back from New Mexico, he found she’d transferred off the team, she and Evan swapped. It was her request because she didn’t want to date her boss.”

“Wow, integrity, Rule 12 all on her own, that’s great! Wonder if Dad knows?”

“Probably not, Tony was upset she didn’t mention it to him. But the way we went flying out of there, I could see why that didn’t happen. And they appear to have worked things out.”

“I’ll be cagey, tell Dad he might want to call Tony, see what’s new.”

She laughed and spurred her mount into a gallop. Grinning, Tim followed.

Ellie’s flight left at 2130; after an early dinner she and Tim disappeared upstairs with the children, having their baths, story time and plenty of cuddles. Both kids were upset that she was leaving again but cheered up when they were told they’d be driving back to Albuquerque tomorrow and then would return to their home with the playroom. Ellie told them, “Today is the 5th and you’re
flying home on the 14th, how many days is that?”

Both kids counted and Ty shouted the number. “That’s right, but today’s almost done, so we can cross it off. That means only 8 days!”

Bryn nodded, “We can cross them off too.”

Ty added, “Every night when we go to bed, cross off a day!”

Tim smiled, “We’ll cross them off on the calendar so you can see it.”

“Yay!”

Thus cheered, the children had more kisses and hugs before being tucked into their beds. On the way downstairs, Tim and Ellie also had more kisses, although the grownup kind. She and her father left soon after as they had about an hour and forty-five minute drive from the ranch to the Tulsa airport. Tim had briefly considered going along for the drive but knew it would just make things more difficult.

While the kids slept, their father and grandfather enjoyed one last starlit evening at the ranch, having a coffee outside with Barbara. She laughed when the two Gibbses admitted they’d looked online for land prices near Tahlequah.

“It is peaceful out here. Until it storms and the cattle get stuck or sick or you know- life happens.”

Tim chuckled, “Right, we’ve seen life at its best this weekend. And I forgot you’re subject to tornados.”

“Yes we are, get 3 or 4 a year.”

“Hmm. But it’d be great to have a place near you so when we come for a visit we can just relax.”

Barbara smiled, patting him on the back. “That’s a great idea, Tim!”

As the Gibbses hadn’t yet packed, they didn’t stay outside long. They left after breakfast the next morning, the kids kissing their new grandparents goodbye, Tim hugging them both and returning Barbara’s kiss. “We’ll be talking to you in a few days and see you in less than a month!”

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The return trip to Albuquerque was uneventful although it seemed quicker and both men silently wished they could drive through and not stop overnight. However, that really was too much sitting for the kids, no matter how many toys, movies, and books they had with them. They arrived home Wednesday morning, taking the luggage from the car straight to the laundry room.

While Tim did the laundry, Dad cleaned out the car. When he finished that, he and Tim gathered boxes and bags to pack for the plane, placing them on the dining table to get started.

Tim hadn’t yet heard from the mover about his wife wanting the car and sat down to write an ad. Then he stopped to call the mover first, leaving a message that a) they had more furniture to be moved and b) he needed to sell the Buick; if he was still interested please let him know as he was about to run into an ad deadline. If these people were interested then he’d hold off on the ads. The deadline to place anything to appear in the weekend newspapers was Thursday. If he didn’t hear back he’d be placing the ad.
His burn phone finally buzzed with a text reply from the mover. “Sorry took so long. Yes interested, can see Thurs.?”

Tim and his dad would be working on Thursday so Tim texted back saying he and the Buick would be available after 3:00. Dad would pick the kids up, the couple could have their test drive and Tim would have a sliver of time before the 1700 newspaper deadline to get the ad in for the weekend papers if the couple decided against it or didn’t show up.

In the meantime, he and the kids washed the SUV, top to bottom, scrubbing mud and dust off the wheels, lights and bumpers. Then Dad helped him buff it out so that it shined prettily. Tim vacuumed the inside and wiped down the seats, the interior of the doors and dashboard; washed the windows inside and out until the whole thing looked as new as the day it rolled off the assembly line.

They’d done such a good job that Tim didn’t want to drive it to the construction site on Thursday so he and Dad carpooled in the truck. After work and a surprise farewell lunch from the construction crew, Dad dropped Tim back at the house and went on to pick up the kids.
Chapter 30

The potential buyers, the Wares arrived on time and Mrs. Ware loved the look of the vehicle right away. “It’s beautiful, what a lovely color.” She looked inside before smiling shyly at Tim, “I was concerned what the interior would look like with young children but you’ve done a wonderful job with cleaning or with the children, maybe both!”

He beamed at that. He was very proud of his kids and they’d all worked hard on the car. Mrs. Ware insisted on taking the car out for her own test drive. She was gone for twenty-five minutes, returning with a smile, “It’s easy to drive and very comfortable.”

Mr. Ware took it out and came back in ten minutes. “It’s great, brakes well. What’s strange is that there aren’t any electronics in it!”

Tim’s eyes widened, “I’d forgotten those were removed. Is that going to be a problem?”

Mrs. Ware shook her head, “All I care about is GPS and I’ll use my phone.”

Tim twisted his lips, “If you’ll hold on for a couple of minutes, let me make a quick phone call. The tech mechanic who took them out lives in the area; let’s see what we can arrange.”

Stepping away, he called Marshal Miller who called the tech, linking Tim into the call. The tech was pleased to hear from him, “I heard you’re going home, congratulations! Yes, I can put everything back in and I’ll bill it to your favorite agency. I can do it tomorrow; it’ll be ready by 4:30. Would that work?”

“Yes, thanks! What about a warranty?”

“Of course, you’ll have a 12-month transferable warranty.”

Tim went back to his potential buyers. “All right, I’ve arranged to have the electronics re-installed, no cost to you, tomorrow morning, it’ll be ready by 4:30 tomorrow afternoon. And there will be a 12-month warranty on the work done.”

“That’s great but won’t that cost you money?” Mr. Ware continued, looking puzzled, “I don’t understand why you would have the electronics removed. You have a smart phone and I know from your move list that you have electronics.”

Tim inwardly shrugged and said, “I’m not only an electrician, I’m also in law enforcement, both my dad and I. We’ve been here undercover, working on a case and I took the precaution of having the electronics removed for safety measures. Anything that connects to the internet can be traced back and that was too dangerous. And no, the agency we’ve been working with on the case will pay for the replacement.”
“So the tech guy that’s putting these back in, is he also in law enforcement?”

Tim shrugged, “I don’t know. He was recommended to me and has good reviews on Google, Yelp, and Angie’s list; I didn’t look any further than that.”

The Wares chuckled, “That’s pretty thorough!”

Tim smiled, “Yeah, I’m big on researching before I jump into anything.”

After writing a check for a hefty deposit and arranging to pick up the car at the house late Friday afternoon, the couple left, passing the truck with Dad and the kids as they drove down the street. Freed from their car seats, the kids ran in the house while Tim grabbed the keys from his dad for a trip to the bank.

After Stacevyko’s arrest, Chief Inspector McQueen acknowledged their exit from the WITSEC program. Among many other things, that meant the Gibbses could have bank accounts under their own names. They were told they could not change the names and use the same accounts as the Hulls and McQueen asked they not use the same bank. Not wanting to jeopardize WITSEC, they complied.

They withdrew almost everything from their Hull accounts, Tim leaving a couple of hundred dollars while his father closed his account. They’d return to clean out their safety deposit box later. Taking their cash, they walked around the corner to another bank, one that also operated in Virginia, and opened new accounts in their real names, depositing most of the cash into either their new checking or savings accounts.

Jethro hadn’t seen the need to open new accounts in Albuquerque as they’d be moving home soon but Tim pointed out that if they decided to buy property here it would be easier if each of them had an established bank account. Jethro thought that was a bit flimsy but deciding his son was probably following his instincts, he agreed.

Now, back at the ‘old’ bank, Tim cashed the Wares’ check, made out to Brian Hull, for the deposit on the car, made sure all charges against his checking account had cleared and then cleared out their safety deposit box. With the marshals listed as their next of kin and having power of attorney for both men, the Gibbses had written letters to their family and friends in case the worst happened. Tim had directed them to his living trust with the list of guardians for the children. They’d also left letters for the kids and Tim had written an almost daily journal in the form of letters to his son and daughter. He thought he’d keep those, he might use them in a book at some point. Now that they could use their real names, the legal documents were no longer necessary. Whatever they didn’t burn or shred could be stored in their gun safe until they left. He’d already given Ellie the love letters he wrote to her but his letters to his siblings were still in there and he looked forward to giving them to their intended recipients.

Friday was their last day of work and the Buick needed to be dropped off; the kids and Poppy took the truck while Tim drove his car into town to the Marshals’ building where the tech was waiting for him. Walking back out to the street, Tim grinned as Dad’s truck rolled up. First taking the children to daycare and preschool, they headed over to the house being renovated. Both men were done before 3:00 and were happy to be invited to the Ortiz ranch on Sunday for a day of swimming, riding, and dinner. As they’d never gotten around to putting together the party they’d discussed, the day with the Ortizes would be an extra treat.

Back home, the two men relaxed until it was time to pick up the kids and the car. They drove downtown to the Marshal’s building where Tim was dropped off. He picked up the car, thanking the tech and then drove home to meet the Wares. In the meantime, his father picked up Ty and
Brynie in the truck.

The Wares were on time and at Tim’s insistence drove the car again to make sure everything worked properly. He had already tested it of course, but he wanted the car’s condition on record. He smiled when the couple handed him an envelope full of cash.

Mrs. Ware returned his smile, “We sold my old car and figured it would be easier on you to have cash. Seeing the car seats made me remember the days of running errands with small children, taking them in and out of the seats. And now you’re down to one vehicle until you move, so I imagine you’re doing even more ins and outs!”

He laughed, telling them about the truck and multiple pickups and drops off. “I’ve just become engaged and our wedding will be almost as soon as we get home. My dad lives down the street from us; he has two vehicles to my one and now with Ellie’s truck, we’ll have two. So it’s a little easier from that perspective but we really need to find babysitters!”

Mrs. Ware nodded, “Yes but not just for errands. A newlywed couple needs time alone together and I’m sure your father does too!”

She sat in the Buick and played with the seat and mirror settings. Mr. Ware pulled Tim away from the vehicle. “I got curious and looked at the paperwork. The relocation people handling your move are listed as working for Homeland Security. You’re not involved in the mess that’s going on?”

Tim shook his head, “Not involved. The case we handled was originally theirs; we were pulled in and then sat on our hands for months while they did nothing. We work for NCIS; we finally picked up leads on our own and called our own agency for help. My boss reports to the Secretary of the Navy so you’d better believe when she heard what was going on she went up the food chain. Putting aside the personal issues, that’s nearly a year of taxpayer money going for our expenses here and keeping us in the dark. DHS is in a heap of trouble, all of their own making.”

“Wow! Did you at least get paid?”

“Don’t know; when you’re this deep undercover you’re cut off from your other life, no banking, phone calls, letters, e-mail, no contact. We got jobs and had cash so we’ve been okay. The rest we’ll find out when we get home.”

As the Wares drove off, Tim thought he’d talked so much about the fictitious ‘undercover operation’ that he was starting to believe it himself. Laughing, he patted his pocket with the nice fat envelope full of cash and walked inside to the gun safe, currently empty of any guns. They both had backup firearms at home and not wanting the trouble of selling what they had here, they’d donated them to the Marshals Service.

While they were released from WITSEC, Chief Inspector McQueen asked them to come in the day before they left to sign non-disclosure papers. For all their trouble, Tim thought if he were ever in need of marshal service, he’d ask for McQueen, Miller, Shepard, Tompkins or Davis. Just not bigmouth Booker, although Tim would always be grateful for the man’s indiscretion after the ‘false alarm’. He’d spoken to him personally, thanking him for that and then taking him to task for speaking of a case and a scary criminal in front of his young son. He couldn’t bust him to McQueen, not when the man had helped them crack the case but he did need to watch his tongue. Booker was visibly shaken and Tim hoped he’d learned his lesson.

They spent the day Saturday continuing to pack or at least sort what would go with them on the plane, on the moving van or stay in the house. After thinking about what he’d said to the Wares about taxpayers’ funds being used to house them, Tim and Jethro talked about the furniture they
wanted and decided to pay the Marshals Service for it. Whether or not they passed it along to DHS was up to them. They still had the list prices the salesperson had unwittingly given them and figured out the depreciation after 9 months of use. Tim wanted his bed and bedframe, Ellie hadn’t slept in it but she liked the bedframe and that was enough for him. The mattress itself would go in the downstairs bedroom. The dining room table and chairs, one recliner, they’d already paid for the second one, overstuffed chair and Dad wanted his queen bed, saying it was time to replace the one at home. They owned the grill and patio furniture; it would go on the moving van.

They sent a proposal to pay for an itemized list to Chief Inspector McQueen who wrote back saying, “Sure but it’s not required or requested.” Tim headed to the bank before it closed Saturday, purchasing a cashier’s check for the amount.

By Saturday night they’d tired of sorting and packing and were looking forward to the party at the Ortiz ranch on Sunday. As they’d already said their farewells to their church friends, Sunday morning was lazy. Both Tim and Ellie were still in their jammies when they talked.

There was much progress in their wedding plans. Ducky was enthusiastic about the use of his backyard and then showed Ellie his ministerial license, issued through one of the online churches; he could legally perform the marriage ceremony. All the wedding attendants agreed to be involved; Ellie’s mom was in touch with a florist Bob Chalmers knew. Tim found invitations he liked and sent a link to Ellie, who agreed. Shipping them directly to Sarah, he e-mailed her their guest list, which expanded a bit as they added Tony’s father and the Ortiz family. They didn’t expect the Ortizes to come but wanted to invite them. Sarah, Geordie, and Rob were already working on the invitations. Breena, Sarah, Ellie’s friend Jenna, and Abby were on the lookout for a specific dress for Ellie but she wouldn’t share details with Tim. Mac agreed to do a poetry reading; Tony would drive to Delaware and bring him back several days before the wedding.

Tim asked Tamara Ortiz for help with a suit for Ty and a flower girl dress for Brynie plus shoes and she’d found outfits for both; they’d look at them on Monday. Tim figured he’d buy them if he liked them and then bring them on the plane; they could have them altered in DC. When Tony heard that, he volunteered to help with the alteration process. He asked his tailor who agreed to work on the little kids’ wedding clothes. Tony was also working with a caterer for the food for the reception. Abby had a friend who worked at a bakery that made wedding cakes, so Ellie and Abby were going to look Tuesday at lunch and then she and Tim would go in for a tasting on Saturday.

Less than a week away! However, this was still Sunday morning; Poppy made pancakes and Daddy finally got through talking with Ellie. They all talked about what they’d do their first day at home. Ty remembered their house, Bryn didn’t think she did; they both said they wanted to run around and see every room and play in their backyard. They were a little unhappy when told their pool, trampoline and Big Wheels wouldn’t arrive until later in the week but perked up when Poppy reminded them they had a wading pool at home and more lawn than here. When Tim said they were taking some of this furniture home, the kids made a game of it, running around and guessing what was coming with them. When he told them that meant some of the things at home would be given away, Ty had to think about that. Finally he nodded, “That’s ok; Mama and Mum would like to share with other people, not just us.”

They were also happy to be reminded they had a playroom at home, where they could play, skate, and ride their Big Wheels indoors if the weather outside was bad.
Fully decked out in their western wear, the four Gibses were ready for their afternoon at the ranch. The kids rode with Dad and Poppy, taking a little tour of the ranch, saying goodbye to their favorite spots. When they'd had enough, they visited all the animals, finally ending up in the pool for a refreshing swim on a hot day. By late afternoon, all the Ortizes they'd ever met had arrived.

To the Gibses' surprise and delight, several of the family, including Steve and his wife Pam, Tamara, her husband Roger and daughter Chase and a few other Ortizes had already received their wedding invitations and were making arrangements to attend.

Tim grinned happily, "That's wonderful! This is Steve's fault you know, he hired Dad and then me, invited us out here for New Years and you all made us part of the family!"

One of the saltier tongued members of the family drawled, "Shook that East Coast attitude right off you, boy, made you into a good rider and a decent enough cowboy. You're just gettin' good, why you goin' back there?"

Tim grinned, "The woman I love, my sister and brothers, grandfather and oh yeah, my job. Ellie's a rider; we're already planning on riding together and keeping the kids going too."

"You do that! Just don't forget to come back."

Tamara outdid herself with dinner, serving it on the large terrace. Homemade traditional New Mexican foods with a twist of this or that to make the dishes even more interesting. Dessert was flan, her specialty. Monday was a workday for most folks, so no one stayed too late but they did sit outside enjoying the soft air and sunset.

Monday morning, Tamara picked up Tim and the kids to look at their wedding clothes. The outfits were sweet. Ty's was a little navy suit that looked like his dad's. Brynie's dress reminded Tim of the fairies on her birthday cake last year, all purples, blues, greens, and pinks with ruffles around the hem. Her dress and Ty's jacket needed to be taken in at the shoulders. While the kids tried on the outfits, Tim snapped photos and sent them to Ellie whose reply was "Perfect!"

Their task complete, Tamara drove them home, kissing each of them goodbye and then they got busy packing. Tim put aside the clothes they'd need for the next two days and packed everything else. Then he stopped, looking at the piles of clothes that still needed packing. Chuckling, he called for his dad who ambled in. "What's up?"

"Do we have any more suitcases?"

Dad pointed, "Those are the ones we brought with us." He also laughed when he saw the piles. "Want to buy another suitcase or use boxes?"

"Boxes! I don't want to spend any more money on suitcases, I hate the things anyway."

"Ok, let me knock some together and label them for the plane. I'll handle the rest of this stuff, why don't you get some coffee, take a break?"

Tim opened his mouth to protest but changed his mind, gripping his dad's shoulder as he walked to the kitchen. The kids were playing on their Big Wheels outside and he took his coffee out to the
patio. Then he ran back in, "Dad, the room in the garage! We have stuff stashed in there for Christmas."

"Geesh you're right son! Let me finish this and then we'll tackle that during naptime."

Tim took boxes outside and put them together while he finished his coffee. By lunchtime, they felt like they'd made good progress. By dinnertime, they were not feeling so proud of themselves. There was a lot of stuff stashed in the room in the garage: boxes of Christmas ornaments, things they'd stashed in there for birthdays, Christmas and assorted toys and books. None of it needed to come on the plane with them but they did need to ensure it was on the truck! They already had a big pile of items that would be packed in the pickup truck Tuesday evening and some of the garage room treasures were added to that.

Somehow, they made it through Tuesday, packing like mad fiends and remembering their appointment with Chief Inspector McQueen. He accepted the cashier's check for the furniture with a smile, saying, "If I'd ever had any doubts about you two, this sure would have dissolved them. Thank you!"

They were surprised to see most of the marshals they knew gathered in the 'playroom' along with coffee and cake. McQueen explained, "We don't often get to say this kind of goodbye; many of our witnesses end up with us for years, have to be relocated numerous times and some of them wind up in prison. So yes, we celebrate those who successfully leave WITSEC to resume their previous lives. Mark, Brian, good luck to you as you return to your lives as Jethro and Timothy Gibbs. And for the kids too."

Cake, coffee, saying thanks to everyone, hearing little surprises from Mary and Marshall and then they were out of there. Back home, they finished packing the garage room stash, did a final sort of clothes and toiletries needed tonight and tomorrow, made sure they left room in their carry-on bags for those and then emptied out the refrigerator. Steve's crew planned to take everything but Steve texted that no one could get over there to pick it up. Knowing most of the crew had coolers the Gibbes put everything in their big cooler and drove out to the construction site to hand over the food. On the way back, they detoured to pick up the kids from daycare and headed home for the last few hours of their lives in New Mexico.

After a late lunch, the kids had a nap while the last of their toys and books were scooped into boxes, which were labeled Toys, Plane, taped up and put with the stack of suitcases and boxes in the living room. They packed all the non-perishable foods, putting some in a box for the plane and leaving the rest on the counter for the movers. They didn't need all their spices and baking goods right away.

The men would strip the beds in the morning and the movers would pack the bed linens, pillows and towels. The Big Wheels and many other odd shaped or oversized items went in the bed of the pickup, including all of the garden tools. Dad's tools were itemized, boxed (when possible) and placed in the backseat of the truck. Last out of the yard was their apple tree. Roger Ortiz gave them directions to prepare it for transport. The roots would have the moisture they needed and the tree would have air but no light. He warned them the tree would most likely go into winter hibernation, lose all its leaves, but they should plant it as soon as possible. Because of the climate differences between Albuquerque and Alexandria, Roger made some recommendations for the winter and Tim wrote it all down.

To avoid jostling and possible crushing, they covered the inside of the truck cab with tarps, cardboard, and newspaper and then gently placed the tree inside so the root ball was in the foot well on the passenger side with the tree leaning against the seat, the windows cracked open. Then
they locked the cab; that was as much as they could do.

To entertain themselves while they worked, they took photos as they packed, showing the growing pile of suitcases and boxes. Knowing the kids would eventually forget their lives in New Mexico, they wanted the photos to complete the chronicle of their odyssey, the term they'd probably use in the future rather than exile.

Ten months ago when they'd found themselves in WITSEC, transported to New Mexico and not knowing how long they'd be away from home, they'd also wanted to create a visual chronicle of their lives here for family and friends. Once they were given a cell phone, Tim and Dad photographed just about everything that happened. That included the house as it was completed, moving in, the changes they'd made, the kids as they grew, the backyard, time at the ranch, the kids' daycare and preschool, even the homes the Hulls-Gibbses worked on.

Now they were adding their preparations for returning home. As Tim remarked that afternoon, it would be great to finally be able to download the photos into an album. He labeled the latest batch of photos as "Tuesday as the clock ticks away. No panic here!"

As neither man wanted to drive the truck around with everything in the back and the tree in the passenger seat, they ordered Chinese food to be delivered. They'd saved frozen food for breakfast, along with juice, milk, and of course coffee, but never thought about dinner. Their dinner was delicious and cleanup was a one armed sweep across the table into the garbage.

They played tag outside until it was bedtime for the kids and then Daddy and Poppy got busy again. Rounding up a few more items, they made sure nothing was hiding under the beds and resumed their own packing. At the last minute Tim remembered to put the garbage out for pick-up in the morning, they'd canceled the service so the bins would be picked up too. Lights out before 10 for Jethro and Tim as they'd have an early morning.

Up at 0400, the adults showered, dressed, dried the towels and packed them along with their jammies and clothes from yesterday, drinking their first coffees before waking the children. Cleaned up and dressed, towels and clothes also tucked away in the Dirty Clothes box, Poppy heated their breakfasts in the microwave while they drank their milk. Juice boxes and snacks would come with them.

Sitting down together for one last meal in their Albuquerque home, they ate quickly and then took care of the rest of their morning routines. At 0600, they were ready and chuckled when a large SUV and panel van from the Marshals Service pulled up outside. It took about 20 minutes for them to load everything that was going on the plane; Mr. Ware their mover arrived before they were done. He and Poppy did a quick walk through of the house, backyard, and garage.

He left and the Gibbeses were just helping Ty and Bryn into their seats in the SUV when Steve's truck pulled up. He jumped out with an insulated bag that had two containers: one with homemade cookies and the second full of frozen, homemade enchiladas. "You can have those on your flight or have them for your first meal home tonight. We're going to miss you all, safe travels! See you soon!"

Tim felt much better having seen him before they left. Sure, they knew the marshals, Miller and Davis or rather Mann and Davis, now that they knew Marshall's real surname, who were transporting them, but having their friend and former boss show up made them happy.

The SecNav's jet was on the tarmac, ready to go when they arrived. Their carry-ons, the insulated bag and a few miscellaneous items went with them; everything else was loaded into the cargo hold. Tim was texting Ellie when the pilot appeared, "Welcome! We'll be departing in about five
minutes. Weather's good between here and DC, so we should have a nice smooth ride this morning."

Tim sent his text while the sleek jet started its run. Once in the air the kids watched cartoons and Poppy read the newspaper while Tim did some writing. He was sketching an outline chronicling their exile, including the politics of DC, the politics of crime and their discoveries along the way. If he published this as nonfiction, it would likely be years before the DOD approved publication. If he changed it to fiction and disguised it enough to pass muster, he could have it out in a year or two. He might also publish the nonfiction version when he was allowed to. He wouldn't use Gemcity; he'd find another name he'd only use once and make as anonymous as possible. He'd have to use a different style of writing as well as a different publisher.

He gave a start when the pilot told them they were free to move about the cabin and his father laughed at him. "Where were you?"

"Driving the kids home from daycare, Metro PD just arrived to escort us."

"Wow, scary memories."

"Yeah, I'd like to get the outline done, the major points, before the seriousness and anger starts fading and morphing into our fun year in New Mexico. How frightening that drive home was when Vance pulled everyone off, how we figured out what was likely to happen. Waiting for you to get home from the bank run.

"What probably scared me the most during those moments was that they might make us leave before you got there. I would have refused to go without you. Having to leave Ellie. Packing, not knowing where we'd be going or if we'd ever be allowed to come home again. Trying to leave clues. Vance's visit. Making that recording; trying to find a place to hide the thumb drive after hearing the van in the driveway. And you know, not even considering turning them down because we couldn't risk the kids' safety."

His dad reached over and tugged him close. "We made it; we're here, the four of us, on our way home to Ellie and the rest of our family. We've seen most of them in person, talked with everyone. They're all right; they've known we were together from the start. And we not only made it through, we solved the case for DHS and busted two murderous creeps. And you finally have freedom now, after literally spending your entire life in danger from her."

"Yeah and that's a good thing, even if I never put it all together. Dad, what about the rest of that team? Yeah, the team lead was a traitor or a mole but what about the others? Tobias told me his boss officially assigned him other duties, but he was to quote him, "eyebrow rubbed" told that. He said he couldn't get anywhere, that everything led back to DHS and he hit brick wall after brick wall. He was so frustrated he started feeding information to Tony, I guess hoping DiNozzo would take the bait. But Tony played by the rules; he told Tobias our lives were too important and he wasn't going to put us at any more risk. And we didn't even know we were in danger!"

"Yes we did, on some level. If we hadn't believed it, if we really bought into Stan's line of DHS wanting us out of the way, we would have flown back home that first day."

Tim shook his head, "Man, talk about one fubar mess!"

"Oh yeah, this is going to make a helluva book, Tim. Might even seem like a comedy in the middle of it, once we were put in the fish bowl, I mean Albuquerque. Only two ways out: quit or die."

Tim grinned, "But we cheated, swam around in the bowl until Booker dropped the clues. A little
ladder for the fish to climb out of the bowl."

"And then we turned into sharks and bit the big bad."

"Hmm, I think the analogy needs some work but I like the whole fish bowl theme."
Chapter 32

Yes, home! Enjoy the weekend! For Superbowl fans, hope the team you're cheering for wins!

Chapter 32

As they flew east, Dad asked another question about Tim's future book, "You gonna be kind to the marshals?"

"Not gonna say much about them at all. Can't or I'll have to come up with some wild ideas because we know too much now. If we weren't Feds, don't know how things would have gone down. But if we weren't Feds, they probably wouldn't have allowed us to see and learn so much about their operations. So yeah, I'll be kind; they had their orders and did their best to make us comfortable. However, if they did that, back to my question, if the marshals believed us and worked with us, then what the hell was the rest of the DHS team doing? Morrow was so guilt stricken he spent money on us, and he took the fall for all of it."

"Maybe he wasn't forced to resign, maybe he chose to resign because of the crap he put us through, and allowed his team to do or not do."

"Guilt."

"Yep. Don't know that though, son; I have as many questions as you do."

"Wonder if the White House is going to pursue it? Or do they feel with the traitor busted and us safe and on our way home, that's enough?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Filing a complaint and having an IA investigation opened."

Dad chuckled, "Yeah, I've had that thought too. Vance should too; he's been kept in the dark about two of his employees for the better part of a year. If I were Leon, I'd be nearly as frustrated and angry as we are. Let's find some time to talk with him about it."

"You're thinking all three of us should file?"

"No, that he and I should. He's not interested in going any higher in the food chain; he wants to retire from NCIS. I'm retiring from the field and not interested in anything that involves politics. You, however, have a bright career ahead of you. Let's see what he thinks of the political risk of you filing with us. He certainly knows more of the current political scene than we do. Well, you do, I try to pay as little attention to it as possible."

"Uh huh."

"Why do you say that?"
"Because you always know what's going on. You're not involved but you are informed. Big picture anyway. Just maybe not oh PsyOps level."

His father groaned and turned his head. "Please don't remind me."

"Just so you know, if she ever surfaces again, you'll have at least three bodyguards 24/7 and that might even bring Ziva back."

"That bad?"

"Oh yeah. The kind of bad that causes adult children to go to court to establish that their parent has reduced mental capacity." Tim chuckled, "So I can put that one at your door too."

"What?"

"Poor judgment about women."

"Not always, I got your mother right and you're right about Ellie."

"Ok, then poor judgment about mind gamers."

"Guess so."

They talked for a little while longer until first one then the other yawned. Tim shut his laptop off and putting it aside, wiggled around until he was comfortable and settled in for a nap. His father closed his eyes thinking how much Tim was like his sister. Like Tim, Kelly had always wiggled around until she'd found her sweet spot for sleep. He smiled and reaching over, grabbed his son's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

They woke when the attendant brought snacks and beverages around. It was too early to serve lunch but they had Steve's enchiladas tucked away in the freezer in the galley, they'd have those for dinner at home. Ellie planned to take the afternoon off; she, Rob, Sarah, and Geordie were meeting them at the airfield with the Acura, Dad's truck #2 of 3, and Ellie's truck. They'd get everything sorted and head straight home. Leon wanted them to come into the office Thursday or Friday and both said Friday. They wanted time to unpack and re-familiarize themselves with life in the real world first.

Bryn's ears hurt when the jet began its descent into DC Metro airspace but Tim was prepared this time. He gave both kids a piece of gum, took one himself and smiled when his father took one too.

The jet made the softest landing Tim thought he'd ever experienced. Over the intercom, one of the cockpit crew said, "Lady and Gentlemen, welcome home. The gangway will be in place shortly and then we'll be unloading your treasures, looks like you have some help on the ground. Deplane at your leisure; we're done flying for the day."

The four Gibbses cheered and Daddy and Poppy kissed and hugged the kids and each other. Making sure they had everything, the adults shouldered a carry-on each and then stopped when the flight attendant brought the frozen enchiladas to them. "Not that I wouldn't love to have them but I'm guessing these are a special treat for you."

Thanking her, Poppy tucked the food back into the insulated bag. Ty took one of his hands, Brynie took Daddy's hand and they walked to the gangway, smiling at the pilot who smiled and nodded at them. And then they blinked when they saw the crowd. A big cheer went up and once again, the four Gibbses grinned. They picked the kids up so they could see better and laughed as Ty and Brynie pointed out their friends. "Look, there's Grandpa, Uncle Jimmy, and Aunt Breena!"
"An' I see Uncle Leon and Lara!"

"Unca Tony!"

"Where's Ellie?" Tim found her first and waved to her while the kids yelled, "Ellie, Ellie!"

Their grandfather had his eyes locked on the front of the crowd with his father-in-law, Ducky, Sarah, Rob, Tobias, Geordie, Tony, Abby, Ellie, Leon, and Secretary Porter and - he blinked and then nudged Tim who looked at him, followed his line of sight and straightened his posture. Dang if he didn't want to salute, it was the President! Whispering to the kids, whose eyes got very big, they walked down the gangway, the flight crew following them.

The President stepped forward, "Special Agents Jethro and Timothy Gibbs, Tyler and Bryn Gibbs, welcome home! You've been gone too long and we are doing something about that, but we won't get into that just now. Today, your family, friends, and your bosses want you to settle in so all of your lives can return to normal. Whatever that means to you!" That got a chuckle.

"Thank you for solving your own case, bringing down a hostile covert operative and for stepping away from your agreement for protection to contact Director Vance and your team. I know he and Secretary Porter are very proud of both of you and I have to say I'm glad to finally meet you. They've been very persistent in their insistence that something was wrong and although we've dealt with some of the problems, we're not done yet. For now, relax, enjoy your family and friends and again, welcome home!"

She walked forward, shaking hands with each of them, adding a kiss for the kids, cell cameras clicking. Tim was relieved at the lack of media. The last thing any federal agent wanted was to have his or her likeness splashed all over the national news or worse, social media.

Secretary Porter joined her and hugged the four of them. "I'm so glad to see you! Timothy, it looks like your skin agrees with the New Mexican sunlight! Hmm, and the children's too."

Ty grinned, "We learned how to ride horses and went swimming a lot."

"Oh my, that sounds like fun!"

Brynie nodded, "It was. Now Ellie's gonna take us riding with Daddy."

Secretary Porter smiled and then looked at Gibbs senior. "Heavens, Jethro, I never thought I'd see the day! You're wearing cowboy boots!"

He chuckled, "We all are, ma'am! The kids insisted and Tim and I decided we'd wear ours too."

"No Stetsons?"

Brynie giggled, "Daddy packed them; he said we'll wear them when we go see the horsies."

"Oh I see; well, Daddy, I guess they didn't need hats on the plane."

The two women moved away as Leon moved forward, shaking their hands and then gesturing to the others. As the mob moved forward, Leon hugged the kids, "I'm so glad to see you two and it looks like you took good care of your daddy and your Poppy."

"Yes we did, Uncle Leon!" Lara was next and after that, it was a blur as friends and family welcomed them home. Finally, things quieted down and everyone looked at them. Tim and his dad looked at each other and laughed. Giving his father a look, Tim turned to their family and friends.
"This is really something! We expected to see Ellie, Sarah, Rob, Geordie, and Grandpa, but wow, a whole crowd welcoming us home! Sarah, do we have RSVPs from everyone?"

She called out, "Yes, we checked as they came in."

"Great! We're excited, thrilled, and relieved to be home. While we haven't been prisoners exactly, it has been life in a fishbowl. We could swim around the bowl, up, down and around, but we couldn't leave the bowl. Now we're out and very happy about it. For those of you who joined us on the case, and Madam Secretary, Director Vance, that includes you two, we can never thank you enough. Bringing to justice someone who has been intent on harming me", he looked sideways at the kids, "literally since the day I was born is immeasurably satisfying. Moreover, having lived in a fishbowl, let me say if you have to do so, New Mexico makes a beautiful one. After we were released, we saw as much as we could and it is truly beautiful. Then we traveled to Tahlequah Oklahoma and saw more beauty. We made friends in our fish bowl and Dad and I did some satisfying work. Not catching bad guys but building houses. He left his mark with his beautiful woodwork while I made sure families would live safely in their homes. Satisfying as I said, but oh boy have we missed busting bad guys!"

There was general laughter at that and the kids waved as the President's limo pulled away. Gibbs broke into a smile, "Huh, if my former mother-in-law could see me now! She always said I'd never amount to anything but here I am with my son and grandchildren, being welcomed home by all our loved ones, the Secretary of the Navy and the President of the United States. Wow!"

With a wave Secretary Porter was the next to peel off from the group, followed by Leon and his agents, although Rick Carter and Jim O'Brien stopped long enough to shake hands and hug the kids. Grandpa Mac stayed while Breena and the NCIS family went back to work. Finally, the crowd was down to the five the Gibbeses had been expecting. They piled in for more hugs and once again, there was a big happy clump of people.

Ty and Brynie were hungry enough to be bordering on whiny when Ellie took them by the hand. "Come on, I have sandwiches for you in the car. We'll have a picnic while these guys move all the stuff."

"YAY!"

She kissed Tim as she and the kids took an insulated bag and a blanket from her truck, finding some shade to sit in. The kids had just finished eating when Daddy appeared. "Hey kiddos, we're done! Let's get moving so we can see our house!"

"Ok Daddy."

He stopped as Ellie handed him a sandwich. "There's one here for your dad too. Plus lemonade and water."

"Thanks sweetie, that was thoughtful. Mind if I ride with you?" He twisted the cap off a bottle of water and poured it over his head. "Dang, I have not missed the humidity!"

She laughed at him, "You don't want to drive your own car?"

He looked at her quizzically and then shook his head. "And I thought I was perfectly fine. Geesh! Who drove it here?"

"Geo."

"Then he can drive it home. Not sure I should be driving!"
"You must be exhausted!"

"Didn't think so but I guess I am."

Poppy and the kids rode with Geo and that felt very strange, the four of them separating. Tim kissed all of them goodbye and shook his head. "This is so weird. It's as if, I don't know it's just very strange. Things should be familiar but they're not. I feel like we've landed in a different country. One where all my loved ones live but still foreign."

"Mm, you do need to rest! You didn't plan on doing anything this afternoon, did you?"

"Depends, do you have to go back to work?"

"Yes. Bob's out with a bug so I told Tony I'd come back after we got you all squared away."

"Oh, then no, nothing planned but unpacking. And that can wait."

"Have you thought what you're going to do with the furniture you're replacing?"

"Call one of the thrift stores to pick it up, I guess, or have you got something in mind?"

"I was thinking the love seat could move to the basement; it opens up to a twin bed. The rest of it can go."

Tim nodded, "That's a good idea, Els. Any idea what time you'll be home tonight?"

She looked at him, "You know we haven't talked about that."

"What?"

"Me staying. Jenna's housemate moved out, I can stay with her."

"Are you leaving me?"

"No, honey but we're not married yet and the kids…"

He grinned at her, "In three weeks we're going to legally be doing what we'll be doing now. Do you think they're going to care? They've already asked if you're Mommy now. I told them we'd talk about it when we got here."

"They called me Mommy at my folks but now for real?"

"Yes and I'm sure eventually Mom."

"Oh, Tim!" she blinked, trying not to cry.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm surprised and happy. I didn't want to push the name thing, didn't want to bring up sad memories."

Tim smiled, "Ellie, there's nothing we can do about that. Sue and Deeny will always be their first mothers, their Mum and Mama. Ty and Brynie seem to understand that and that you're now also their mom."

"Wow. I mean, I know what we said before but I thought it would take longer to be called their
mommy regularly."

"Are you okay with it?"

"Yes, absolutely!"

"In the everlasting words of our son and daughter, 'YAY!'"

Her smile lit up her face and he took advantage of a red light to lean over and kiss the driver. A horn honked nearby and Tim turned to glare, laughing instead when he saw Rob, Sarah, and Mac.

Ellie smiled, "I filed for adoption when I got home from my folks. There was some mumbo jumbo about residency but I put your address in. Legally, you and the kids still live there and I changed my address to yours nearly 8 months ago."

"Do you know how long it will take?"

"A few weeks because there's no change in custody. I'm expecting to hear any moment now. Fingers crossed it'll all be finalized before the wedding."

"There's something else we haven't talked about, our honeymoon."

She stole a look at him, her eyes wide. "I can't believe it, I never even thought of a honeymoon!"

"Time to turn your mind to where you want to go for some fun! If it's all right with you, I'd rather not return to New Mexico or Oklahoma quite so soon."

"Agreed and when do you see us going?"

"I don't think I should take any leave for a few months, not after Leon's been so generous holding my position open for me. What would you think about a winter escape?"

"Yes! Someplace tropical please!"

Tim giggled, "Boy, I'm really off balance, the first place I thought of was an aquarium!"

"Oookay, no driving and no alcohol for you! But you were talking about fishbowls."

"Thanks for the save. Maybe I'm just giddy with joy to be home! Look, I'll get serious here. He chuckled again, "That wasn't it. Do you have any preferences? Aruba, Jamaica, Bermuda, Bahamas, Key Largo, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Fiji, Tahiti?"

"Wow, how much money are we spending?"

"Well, the President of the United States just handed me the cashier's check we gave the Marshals to pay back for our vehicles and furniture, so we have that."

"She gave it back?"

"Yep, the Chief Inspector must have overnighted it to her or maybe Leon or SecNav or maybe it flew home with us. I didn't look inside the envelope until she left but there was a note that said DHS, not the Gibbs family, owed the taxpayers and their budget will be dealt with accordingly."

"Wow!"

"I know, huh? And we're not spending a huge amount on the wedding so why not have a blowout
Honeymoon?" He paused, "They're not tropical but we could go to Paris or Greece in the spring."

"Greece?"

"Maybe one of the islands? Heard they're spectacular."

"Have you ever been?"

"Nope. Been to Puerto Rico as a baby, Okinawa, San Diego, San Francisco, DC, Baltimore, Somalia, Afghanistan, and now New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma. That's it."

"Puerto Rico might be fun. It's tropical and still in the U.S. Or Hawaii…"she got a dreamy look on her face and Tim smiled to himself, Hawaii it was. Now to figure out which island.

"Puerto Rico is close enough we can go for a long weekend getaway, so is Aruba for that matter. And if we're going to Europe, we need more time."

She nodded, "And it's our honeymoon, I don't mind a little sightseeing but I really just want us to be together."

"Me too! And we'll need it after the wedding, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Bryn's birthday and Christmas." Tim stopped to think, "I forgot to give you your birthday present last week."

"My birthday's in April. And you left yours out, I know it's November 13th!"

"I know; anyway I got you something. I'll give it to you tonight when you get home from work."

She laughed, "That's how this all started. Yes, I will continue living in the house and as much as I love your sister and brothers, I hope to have a lot more fun with you." With a wink she added, "And our children." She paused, "Also, I've got a new truck on order; it's got a super cab so there will be room for five of us."

"Dad?"

"Yes. Or Mac when he's here."

"He looks good."

"He was worried sick after you and Jethro finding him and then losing you two and the children within months. It helped when Tony told him what he told the sibs, that you were in protective custody but then he worried about the danger. The week with all of you in Ruidoso worked wonders, he came back all smiles." She stole a glance at her fiancé, "It also hasn't helped to find out he'd been married to a criminal whack job for more than 20 years. He feels horribly guilty about what she did. Ducky's talked with him; he's even had a few sessions with Dr. Cranston. We're hoping now that you four are home, he'll relax. He stayed at the house with us most of the summer. When you showed us the big pool you bought, I laughed because we bought one too. We have three pools, yay! I guess your dad can take one."

"Yeah, if he can swim laps in it, that'll help his knee. I tried to talk him into having knee surgery but he wouldn't do it. He was concerned about medical insurance. There were many blurred lines and we weren't sure what benefits we had or if we had any. Turns out SecNav greenlighted NCIS continuing to pay our salaries and our medical insurance was in place. We just never knew." He paused, "I feel bad about Grandpa. He shouldn't feel guilty; she's very good at hiding her evil. I'll talk with him and the kids will make him happy!"
"That's good. So yes, sounds like there was a big gap in communications, really messed up! And what about your dad's knee?"

"Yeah, a real snafu. I hope Dad will have the surgery after the wedding, before he goes back to work. He'll have to be in the hospital for a few days, then possibly a rehab before he comes home."

"Will he be okay living by himself? Tim, he should stay with us, he can have the downstairs bedroom."

"Good idea. Let's not say anything for a few days; he's as tired as I am."

"Maybe we could get Ducky to work on him. Who's his regular doctor?"

Tim chuckled, "He goes to someone for his yearly physical and that's it. Except for work visits to the ER." He smiled as they turned onto E. Laurel. "Ah, now this looks familiar!" Geordie was idling at the curb in front of their house, waiting for them to pull into the driveway so he could park alongside them.

They got the kids out of their seats and then went into their house. It seemed familiar but not quite. Ty pointed out that it looked funny without any adobe. They peeked into the backyard and Tim smiled, "Are those the vegetables we left behind last year?"

Geo chuckled, "No way Bro, we planted all that this past spring and summer. Lots of zucchini, 3 kinds of tomatoes, beans, peas, those patty cake squashes you like, and you can see the pumpkins are plumping up nicely."

Brynie squealed, "My purple flowers and the orange ones!" Tim chuckled as he told Ellie, "She doesn't remember the house but she does remember her flowers!"

When Ty found his red and yellow posies, both kids wanted to say hello to their flowers. Ellie went outside with them, and then Rob, Mac, and Sarah arrived. The group formed a chain to move boxes. Poppy marked his with "Poppy" and most of those had gone from the cargo hold of the jet to his pickup so the unloading gang moved down the street to his house. However, most of the boxes belonged to Tim and the kids.

In an hour, everything was inside one house or the other. Tim looked around, "How much did we take with us when we left? I remember one suitcase apiece."

His father snorted "Better question, what's still coming on the van?"

Geo started laughing, "Tim, when did you turn into a packrat?"

His father huffed, "I can answer that, Geo. It was the first time he went shopping for the kids. We'd brought them home to my place the night before and Breena and a couple other people loaned us a crib, bottles and a high chair. We had the kids' clothes so that wasn't an issue. We needed a baby monitor, a toddler bed and booster seat for Ty. So new daddy here takes my truck and comes home three hours later with it packed full. That was the start of it."

Tim grinned, unrepentant. "It's fun shopping for them and they love everything! I'm enjoying it because in another year or so Ty's going to want specific things that he picks out and Brynie won't be far behind him." He paused, "I don't spoil them."

That brought gales of laughter from everyone and he winced. "Ok, maybe I do but they're good kids and I discipline them when they're naughty."
"And the cowboy hats and boots?" That was from Rob. Tim and Jethro looked at each other, each pointing at the other one.

Jethro shrugged, "I've never had grandchildren before and we didn't have much money when Kelly was little. So many things are more fun now. First, it was their boots, that gave Tim and I excuses to buy our own. Then they needed the outfits to go with them: hats, chaps and vests. Brynie wanted a little fringed skirt. Tim and I stuck with the boots and Stetsons."

Sarah frowned at the boots on Gibbs' feet. "Those aren't the same ones we saw when we were there. Did you get another pair?"

Ellie started laughing and left the room, although they could still hear her. Tim looked at his father who just shrugged, "They were on sale."

Geo roared with laughter, "You two went Western with a vengeance!"

Tim smiled patiently. "I suppose we did but everyone said we rocked the look."

"Yeah? Got photos?"

Ellie came back still giggling, handing Geo Tim's iPad. "Here you go!"

The siblings grinned as they scrolled through the photos but agreed that Poppy might have been born a cowboy and Tim looked great too. Sarah laughed, "I would never think you could do that look. Steampunk, yeah or Western city slicker but you're all cowboy in those shots."

Gibbs grinned at his son, "It's all in the attitude."
Happy Saturday. It's dreary here so I'm posting another chapter to read if it's dreary - or too hot - where you are too.

Chapter 33

After moving boxes and suitcases to the right rooms and then sitting outside for a snack, the move crew took off. Ellie, Rob, and Geo went to work, Sarah went home and Mac, Ty and Brynie took naps while Poppy rested his eyes in the old recliner. Tim went upstairs to his room, now his and Ellie's room and found an additional dresser in place. It had a big mirror attached to it and there was a hairbrush and ponytail holder on top along with a framed photo of him and the children. He smiled; she was always going to stay!

His dresser was empty except for the bottom drawer; that was full of clothes he hadn't taken with him last year. He got everything in, although he'd need to put his jeans in the closet. As he opened the closet door, he remembered he'd only used a fraction of the large walk-in; he laughed when he saw he now had just about half allotted to him. That was fine; he could put his jeans on the shelves. Feeling frisky, he looked through Ellie's clothes and smiled, he couldn't wait to see her in them, couldn't wait to help her out of them.

He sat down on the bed to take a break and the next thing he knew, Ty was cuddling with him. "You awake, Daddy?"

"I am now, snuggly boy! Did you have a good sleep?"

"Yes. I just woke up, Brynie's still asleep."

Tim looked at the clock; he'd slept for over two hours! "Let's go see if Poppy and Grandpa are awake."

Hand in hand, they went downstairs, Tim thinking how strange it was to have stairs again, and found it empty. Hearing voices, they looked out into the backyard and found both men relaxing in the patio chairs, having a beverage.

"Hey son, grandson! Get some rest?"

"We did and Brynie's still asleep!"

A little voice spoke behind them, "No I'm not, surprise!" She looked at Tim, "Daddy, we have lots of toys here!"

"I know, Sweet Pea, we couldn't fit more in our suitcases when we left. Ellie took care of them for us."

"She's our mommy now?"

"Do you feel like she's your mommy?"
Both kids shouted "Yes!" and the others chuckled. Tim said, "When she comes home from work, make sure you tell her that."

"Ok!"

"Grandpa, are you gonna live with us now?"

"Your Poppy and I were just talking about that. He's going to be all alone in his house so I think I'm going to stay with him. And then after Christmas I'll take the train back to Florida."

Tim heard him but stopped listening at the thought of Dad being alone in his house. That would take a lot of adjustment, not living together in the same house. He must have been wearing his thoughts because a calloused hand rubbed his shoulder. "We didn't live in the same house before New Mexico, Timothy."

"I know Dad, but we have and it's going to take some getting used to. I know it's been a chunk out of our lives but I'm sure glad we had the time together."

"Me too, son, me too."

Around them, Mac and the children continued their discussion as Ty asked, "Where's Florida?"

"South of here, takes 12 hours to drive to my place."

Ty's eyes got big, "That takes all the time from getting up in the morning to going to sleep at night!"

"It sure does. That's why I take the train, it's much more fun."

Brynie frowned, "Do you have to sit all the time like a plane?"

"No darling girl, on a train you can move around as much as you want. You can have a seat or you can get a little room, called a cabin, where you can sit or lay down or sit on the floor if you want! And the train is long so you can walk up and down as much as you want."

As one, both kids turned to look pleadingly at their father who said, "We'll talk about it."

"Grandpa, do you have an ocean in Florida?"

"Yes, there are two oceans there. I live close to the Atlantic."

"As close as you do at your other house, the one we went to before?"

"No, it's not as close. In Florida I live two blocks from the beach."

Tim explained, "That's like from our house to the park." Then he huffed as he realized the kids might not remember the park, much less how far it was from their house.

Ty thought for a moment, "Is that where the slide is?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I remember Brynie riding in the stroller and me pushing her. We were little!"

"Yes you were."
"Daddy, are we having Uncle Steve's enchiladas for dinner?"

"Planning on it, Brynie."

"Yum!" The kids danced around the yard.

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The team landed a case after their airport party and Ellie was neck deep in electronic work when she heard Tony say he was going to Autopsy. There was a chance this was a suicide and she really hoped that was the COD. It was selfish of her but she wanted to be home to have dinner with her family their first night at home.

She cheered silently a few minutes later when she received a text from Tony, "Stop worrying, D&J ruled it a suicide." She didn't say anything to Evan, their SFA, but he knew from Tony's face when he returned. "Suicide?"

"Yep. Get your preliminary reports written and go home, finish up tomorrow."

Ellie nodded as she switched gears and started her report. An hour later, she smiled as she hit her electronic signature and sent the report to Evan. "It's all yours. Let me know if you need anything else."

He grinned at her, "First night home! Who's cooking dinner?"

Tony laughed, "You're gonna love this! Before they left Albuquerque this morning, their friend and former boss Steve shows up with a pan full of frozen homemade enchiladas."

Ellie smiled, "Yep, so no need to cook tonight! I'm sure Tim will add rice and sour cream and guacamole, maybe some beans and flour tortillas."

Evan groaned, "Now I'm gonna have to stop for Mexican food. So much for the diet. Thanks, Bishop!"

"No problem, although you really should thank Tony!"

Tony grinned, "Yeah, Fuller, see you at Agua 301."

"Mmm, I'm thinking more Los Hermanos; have to get enough for the family."

"That does sound good."

They turned to say something to Ellie but she was gone, the elevator doors closing. She sent a text to Tim on the way to her truck. "D&J, COD suicide; on my way home, need anything? Sour cream, guac, tortillas, beer?"

Tim laughed when he saw her text and replied, "No thanks have it all. Beer & salsa cold, chips crispy, enchiladas heating."

Her next text said, "Home ASAP!"

When the men first started talking about dinner, it had still been warm out. Now when Tim stuck his head outside, it felt a little too cool for dinner on the patio. The kids helped Poppy set the dining table before heading into the basement to play. Tim noticed his dad looking at the table. "You want it?"
"A lot nicer than mine, lot more room. I'm thinking I might take the couch too, if that's all right with you."

Tim looked at him, "The Bishops already know and like you, Dad. Barbara and Jerry are not going to change their minds because of your furniture."

"Maybe not, but things have changed and I'd like to be able to offer comfort to my guests. Bishops might not be the only ones."

Tim grinned, "Far be it from me to talk you out of new furniture! You said you're going to renovate, this is a good start." He chuckled, "Will you be able to sleep on that couch?"

Dad gave him a gentle swat. "Brat!" Followed by, "Guess I'd better test it."

He stretched out on the couch, wiggled around a little bit and then closed his eyes. Tim stood and watched him, knowing he wasn't asleep.

"How can I test sleeping on this thing if you stand there staring?"

"You sleepy enough for a nap?"

"Nah, not really. It's comfortable enough."

"Don't forget, we'll also have the rollaway beds."

Dad chuckled, "Never thought much of garage sales, buying someone else's junk. But those were a real find, and we still haven't used them for camping!"

Tim chuckled at that and then his face lit up as they heard the garage door opening. "That's Ellie. Be back in a minute, watch the food?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Ellie was just getting out of her truck and smiled as Tim swept her into his arms. "Mmm, welcome home!"

They were still exchanging passionate kisses when someone pounded on the door from inside the kitchen, saying quite distinctly. "You can do that later. Now is for Ortiz homemade enchiladas! Thirty seconds before we start eating!"

Giggling, they parted, using a hand wipe to clean up before entering the house. Brynie was in her booster seat but Ty was sitting on a cushion on the chair, grinning madly. "Look, Daddy, Mommy - no booster seat! I'm big enough to reach!"

"Wow, that's wonderful, Tyler!"

Ellie was beaming at the "Mommy" from Ty while Tim was beaming at that and his son growing out of the need for a booster chair. After Poppy and Mac greeted Ellie, they dug into their delicious dinner.

The next two days flew by. Leon sent Tim a text asking to postpone their meeting until Monday, which was fine with his agents. Once they unpacked everything, they kept busy moving Dad's old sofa, table, chairs and a few other items out of the Craftsman. The sofa was a lost cause; there wasn't a thrift shop in the area that would accept it. Tim called his friend Lu to see if they could use it at the shelter but when she saw the photo, she politely declined. Finally, they loaded it in the
back of the old pickup and took it to the dump. Their next task was hauling Sue and Deeny's furniture from Tim & Ellie's down the sidewalk to Dad's house. They thought about loading it into the pickup but that was just as much work as carrying it down the street. Thursday evening they were moving the biggest piece down the sidewalk when one of their neighbors came out to help. "So what are you guys doing? Thought you were law enforcement - you start a used furniture business on the side?"

Tim shrugged as well as he could. "I've got furniture arriving tomorrow and Dad wanted this. I inherited this stuff but my fiancée and I like the stuff that's coming better, I picked it out."

Dad added, "Got rid of my old couch, table and chairs, so I'm taking Tim's inherited stuff."

Hank the neighbor laughed, "I'm right, you are dealing in used furniture."

Neither of the Gibbses responded as they'd reached the steps at Dad's house and the three of them concentrated as they lifted the heavy sofabed onto the porch and into the living room. Task completed, Dad offered cold beer and the three sat on the front porch to enjoy the brews.

Hank asked if Tim's fiancée was one of the women staying at his house the last few months and Tim nodded. "Ellie is the blond; my sister is the one with brown hair. My brothers were staying there too."

"Think I saw them a few times. The tall skinny one was home at odd hours."

"He's a new doctor, gets to work all the odd hours."

"Ouch! And your friend Tony was staying here, huh Gibbs?"

"Yeah. Tim and I got dragged into undercover work out of state for another agency; we were able to take the kids but we didn't know how long we'd be gone, so Bishop, that's Ellie, and DiNozzo offered to take care of things here."

"Nice of them! So you'd bust the bad guys?"

Tim nodded, "Yep, did the other agencies' work for them and busted the case wide open."

Gibbs added, "One of the baddies went straight to Gitmo, the others are awaiting trial although it's just a formality. Got enough evidence on each of them to convict them three or four times."

"Any more details?"

Tim chuckled, "Yeah, sure, we'll be happy to share them with you in about 20 years."

"Classified, guess that makes sense if one of them went to Gitmo."

The Gibbses just nodded and drank their beers. Thanking Hank for the help and kissing his father goodnight, Tim walked down the sidewalk, time for the kids' nightly routine.

The moving van arrived around noon on Friday; about 10 minutes after Tim, Dad, and Mac finished pushing the remaining furniture out of the way. Tim greeted Mr. Ware and showed him the house while Dad waited for his pickup to be backed off the van. He left it at the curb while he, Mac, and Tim sorted through hand tools, garden tools, toys and everything else that had traveled in the pickup.

While the crew was moving the furniture, Tim carried the tired looking apple tree to the backyard
and the big bucket of water and nutrients waiting for it. Once his son's tools and the kids' toys were stuffed in the garage, Gibbs and Mac took his new pickup down the street to his driveway. After moving his woodworking tools down to the basement, they locked up and went back to help Tim.

The movers were just finishing and Mr. Ware was chatting with Tim. "This is a nice place you're got here; it's got more square footage than the one in Albuquerque, doesn't it?"

"Yes and there's a finished basement that the kids use as a playroom. Our backyard is bigger here too. Only thing missing is an office for me."

"You work from home?"

"Sometimes. Guess I can just walk down the street to my dad's."

"Nice he's not too far away."

Shaking hands with both Gibses and Mac, Mr. Ware and the move crew took off. The men went inside to assess what needed to be unpacked and laughed at Tim when he groaned. "What did I bring from the kitchen? Didn't Sue and Deeny leave us everything we could possibly need?"

As they unpacked, he perked up, finding places for everything.

"You better make sure you let people know you don't need any kitchenware for wedding presents!"

Tim's eyes widened. "Oh geez, do we need to make a list?"

The two older men looked at each other, grinning while Tim sent Ellie a text. Eventually she replied that selecting what they might want as gifts and registering was one of the things they'd be doing that evening.
Chapter 34

By mid-afternoon, Tim had the kitchen in shape while the furniture remained pushed back against the walls, waiting for Ellie's input.

The kids were having an overnight with Dad and Mac so Tim and Ellie could have some time to themselves. They'd have dinner out and then run some 'wedding errands', although Tim made reservations for a late dinner; they could run their errands first. Saturday morning they were going to taste test wedding cakes and both of them were looking forward to that. Tony asked them to taste a few of the items he'd chosen for the reception food and they'd do that after the cake. Tim got a kick out of that, dessert first!

Ellie kept her fingers crossed all day and decided it was worth the sore fingers when the MCRT landed no new cases. Wishing the others a good weekend, she picked the kids up at the Yard daycare, enjoying hearing about their day. Ty would resume preschool on Monday; he'd spent a couple of hours there today. When he said he remembered a couple of the kids from his months in daycare here last year, Ellie was impressed and wondered if he had as strong a memory as his father did.

She kissed them goodnight as she dropped them off at their grandfather's and they waved goodbye with big smiles. She kissed Tim hello and laughed at the two of them. "You'd think we'd been away from each other or something!"

While she took a quick shower and changed her clothes, he whipped up a snack for her. She ate it, brushed teeth and hair and they were ready to go. First, they were shopping for gifts for their attendants. They looked at bracelets, but Tim confessed he'd just bought several of them as gifts for the same women, not Jenna, but the others. Necklaces had too many variables. They finally settled on earrings for the women and Ellie knew each well enough to select just the right style and metal. Gold for Jenna with silver for Sarah and Breena.

The best man and groomsmen were a little easier. With Ellie's agreement, Tim brought watchbands similar to his and Dad's back from New Mexico for his brothers, the groomsmen. They finally decided to get Dad a ring with their birthstones and they'd add the children's for Father's Day.

They were in a mall with Ellie's favorite jewelry store. They found just what they wanted, a simple band with a slightly angled opening that would eventually hold all the Gibbs' kids birthstones. The ring would be ready in time for the wedding. Before they left the store, Ellie nudged her fiancé, "We need wedding rings!"

Tim grinned at her. "We can buy them new or how would you feel about heritage rings?"

"From your family?"

"Yes, Gibbeses, Baxters, Cahills and Stirlings, some of my great-grandparents. Dad has a box he brought back from Stillwater when my grandfather died. Mac said he might have some too, from his mother but they're in Florida."

"Ooh, I can't wait to see them!"

Along with other gifts, Tim had already ordered some fun things online for Ducky, Jimmy and Tony. For Ducky a natural cork bow tie, for their soloist Jimmy cedar thumb pianos, for Tony a
bio-luminescent mini aquarium. From another site, he purchased "Best Man" and "Groomsmen" socks to be worn at the wedding.

Ellie's mom and Bob Chalmers, the flower handlers, would receive gift cards to the Smithsonian. The air and space museum was on Bob's list of things to visit and Barbara Bishop wanted to see it all. Geo would also be given a card for the Smithsonian, as he was a self-described history geek. Sarah, Rob, and Abby would be given gift cards to favorite area restaurants.

With that, they were done with the gifts. Their next order of business was appeasing Mama Bishop by picking items for their gift registry. Tim nixed anything for the kitchen; he told Ellie he should be dispensing kitchen gifts to their guests. Instead, they went for linens and some fun items. Figuring it was mostly for out of town guests who could go to their local branch of the store and pick from the list, they tried to be practical.

Finally, they were finished with the wedding task list and drove to the restaurant. It was where they'd had one of their first dates over a year ago and Tim asked for the same table. They relaxed over cocktails, appetizers and a delicious dinner. Tim smiled, "Mid-Atlantic cuisine, hadn't realized I missed it!"

It was a wonderful evening spent alone together and they agreed to have date nights as frequently as possible. Having set Hawaii as their honeymoon destination, they still had to decide which island. Tim suggested an interisland cruise but when they looked into it, decided it was not exactly what they wanted for their honeymoon.

Focusing on visiting one island, they made a list of what they wanted to do and decided they wanted quiet and time together most of all. Some sightseeing but not scurrying here and there, rushing to get it all done.

In the end, they settled on Kauai toward the end of March. Because part of their trip would take place in April, the prices would be lower than in full winter and they'd miss whatever nastiness Mother Nature chose to dump on the East Coast.

With only 2 weeks to go before their wedding, they made a pact not to worry about the details. As Ellie said, all they needed was Ducky and two people as witnesses.

Tim asked Ellie if she had any misgiving or nerves about getting married again and was glad she stopped to think about it before replying.

"It's worlds different from the first time. I was naïve and so involved with wedding planning that I didn't stop to think much about the marriage. I feel more mature this time, this is a partnership for life and I know more about what that means; we're not going to fall apart because one of us changes jobs. I'm stronger; I didn't fall apart, not too much anyway, when you went into WITSEC. I know what I want now, a strong relationship complete with the physical relationship we already have and family. It's not the wedding gifts, it's not what we wear, although that's fun; it is who will be there with us, witnessing our pledge, our commitment. I not only love you with everything I am, I trust you. That wasn't something I really thought about before either. I mean, you love someone; they're a good person, what's not to trust? Now I know, we both know and although no one is perfect, we'll argue and fight but neither of us will break our vows, we just won't do that to one another. We already have children so that makes things more wonderful and more challenging. We'll have more children so we'll get to experience pregnancy hormones and sleepless nights." She grinned, "I can't wait; I'm so excited!"

He grinned back at her, glad they were as much in accord as he'd believed. When she asked him, he said much the same thing.
"Even though Delilah and I weren't married, I believed she was the woman I'd marry. This is going to sound weird but I'm glad I caught her because I know now we never would have made it. Now I know how right a relationship can be, should feel. Being with you makes me so happy. I've never felt like this before. That everything is right. I don't have to watch what I say or do and neither do you. Everything is right. And I know I make you happy, that for you everything is right too and I love making you happy. Maybe we both had to go through fire to get where we are, I don't know; I'm just glad we got here together! And sweet Eleanor, I can't wait either!"

Knowing they'd have the house to themselves until they left for cake testing, the couple didn't dawdle long over their coffee and dessert. Later as they cuddled together after making love, Ellie smoothed her hand down Tim's chest. "I'm so glad you're not all hairy!"

He snorted, "Thank you, I wish you'd been around to tell me that when I was 15 and afraid no girl would ever want me."

"Because you weren't hairy?"

"Yes."

"Oh honey!" She demonstrated how happy she was with his smooth torso and he quickly forgot the whole subject.

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Cake testing the next morning was as much fun as it sounded. After tasting more than a dozen flavors, they agreed on their favorite, approved of the suggested icing and the creamy middle layer. Instead of the traditional bride and groom topper, the baker showed them one they liked right away: the bride being dipped and kissed by the groom with two young children "sitting" in front of them on the edge of the cake. "Oh that's perfect!"

"Abby mentioned that Tim has two children you're adopting; I thought you might like this. I'll adjust the hair colors for the two of you. And the children?"

Tim grinned, "We have a son and a daughter, ages 4 and almost 3. They have the same hair color as me although all three of us are summer blonds right now. This is such a great idea, thank you! We wanted to involve them while still keeping it our wedding and this is perfect."

After selecting a few fall colored decorative bits for the cake tiers, they were done. The bakery would deliver the cake to Ducky's about 90 minutes before the ceremony; the baker explained that the cake would be delivered in pieces and put together at the venue. "Otherwise we run into too many chances of breakage on the way and fixing things at the last minute is not a good idea."

From the bakery, they went to the caterer's where Tony met them. While they liked everything, they asked that the garlic be toned down considerably for one item. Tim quipped, "I love garlic, but with all the kissing and hugging, I'd prefer not to have quite so much of it coming my way."

Other than that, the menu was good to go. Tim dropped Ellie off at the alterations place, waving at Jenna who was waiting there for her. They'd meet Sarah, Abby, and Breena for drinks later; Sarah would bring Ellie home and probably stay for dinner.

As Sunday was warm, they filled the pool from Albuquerque and spent most of the afternoon lazing around, swimming and floating. The kids practiced their handstands and Ty again walked underwater on his hands. Mac was quite impressed with their watery prowess. He told Ellie, "When we were up at Ruidoso, I worried because they're still so young but then they got in the water and
swam like little fish!"

She nodded, "I was worried the first time I saw them swim but Tim had them demonstrate swimming, holding their breath under water and treading water. I was fine after that, although Brynie's still a little too short for underwater walking; she's got handstands mastered but needs another couple of inches before she can walk underwater."

While other adults were there to watch the kids, Tim and Ellie went inside to go through the box of heritage jewelry that Dad brought over. They took everything out and then tried to match sets and guess who'd worn them.

Deciding to pick for each other as they would if purchasing the bands, Ellie went first and after looking through several of the men's rings, picked up a simple gold ring with a tiny diamond in the center. "This, it's perfect. And I bet this was Jack's."

Tim smiled as she slid it onto his finger to see if it needed sizing. It fit perfectly and they sat admiring it. "Why do you think it was Grandpa Jack's?"

"Might be kind of whimsical thinking but he worked in the coal mines when he and your Grandma Anne were married, right?"

"Yes, oh! Diamonds and coal – carbon." He grinned, "Dad says his mom had a great sense of humor. Diamond in the rough!"

"Exactly!"

"Ok, my turn." Ellie turned away while Tim sorted through the women's rings. When he made a noise, she turned around and her eyes went wide. He was holding a white gold band with a blue topaz set in it. "Tim, that's like my engagement ring!"

"Do you mind another topaz?"

"Not at all!" She tried it on and turned it back and forth so the two stones, one blue topaz, the other with brown and amber tones, the Imperial topaz, glinted in the light. "Look, the two rings complement each other."

"All right, my love. And it fits, that's great!"

"I hope your dad knows where this one came from."

"Let's go ask him."

Still wearing both rings, they carefully returned the other rings to the box before joining the others outside.

Mac smiled, "That was fast!"

"It was easy."

They held out their hands and Dad took Tim's hand. "That's Jack's ring."

Ellie nodded, "Yes, it's perfect for Tim and we thought Grandma Anne adding the diamond chip was amusing. Coal, carbon, diamond."

"Coal miner, ha, that is funny, I never thought of that."
Mac touched it, "I like that, feels like Jack's still here with us."

Tim leaned over, kissing his grandfather. "He is, Grandpa."

Then he grabbed Ellie's hand, "Dad, any idea whose ring this might have been?"

Jethro looked at it for a few minutes before smiling, "I believe that was your great-grandmother Baxter's, my mother's mother. Charlotte Stirling Baxter. I have a photo of her at home, two actually. One of her as a young girl and another where she's holding me, I'm about two or three. We'll look, see if she's wearing it. She died when I was five; I have vague memories of her telling me stories in an accent like Ducky's."

"What did you call her, do you remember?"

"Wow, that's a tough one." He thought for a couple of minutes before he said, "We can check with Ducky but I remember something like shenar."

"And your Baxter grandfather?"

Dad shook his head, "I think he died before I was born. He was English; remember I told you the story about my grandmother being disowned by her family for marrying an Englishman?"

"That's right, I do remember. So no Scots grandfather name for him."

Mac joined them after a dip in the pool, "I had a Scots grandfather; I'm named for him you know, as the eldest grandchild."

"McKenzie. Wow, I'm Scots on both sides! Was McKenzie his first name or surname?"

"Surname. His first name was Fergus. My siblings, cousins, and I called him Shenar. Jethro, I think you're missing a letter or two for your grandmother. My Scots grandmother died when I was young but I believe we called her Shenavar. I don't know how to spell that one but I can spell Shenar, it's S-e-a-n-a-i-r."

"Interesting!" Tim was working his phone, looking up the Scots word for Grandmother. "Ok, Shenavar is spelled Seanmhair." He looked a little further and then tapped his father on the shoulder, "I thought Gibbs was English but this says it's Scots and English. It's short for son of Gilbert; 'Gib' is apparently a diminutive of Gilbert."

Dad smirked, "But Timothy, Gilbert only has one 'b'!"

They all laughed at that. Then Tim exclaimed, "Hey Ellie, Bishop is of ancient Greek origin, a pre-Christian word 'episkopos', means 'overseer'."

Poking her chin out, she said in a mock stern voice, "And don't you forget it!"

That got another laugh; she grinned and then made a face when her tummy growled. "All right, who's cooking us dinner tonight?"

Mac raised his hand. "I am, well I bought it; Jethro's grilling it for us."

She looked at her soon-to-be father-in-law, "Jethro, there are hungry children here!"

He grinned at her, "A bit old to be a hungry child, Eleanor."

"The kids are hungry too; they just don't know it yet."
"All right, all right, I'll get the grill going."

While he did that, Ellie got the kids out of the pool, feeling very parental. "Ty, Brynie, come on out and dry off; Poppy's grilling something yummy for us!"

She wrapped them in beach towels as they emerged from the water. "Wow, you guys are pruney!"

"That was fun!"

Tim nodded, "We all had fun today. How about you two come inside with me, dry off and warm up a bit. Hon, I'll make a veggie salad."

"Ok, sweetie, then I'll set the table."

After their delicious grilled steak, mashed potatoes, and salad, Ellie and Mac did the dishes with the kids pitching in. Tim and Jethro sat in the living room talking about their meeting with Vance in the morning. Mac heard and said, "I bet I know what it's about. Tell you later." He tilted his head toward the kids, obviously not something he thought the children needed to hear.
Ellie bathed the kids and then she and Tim read a story each and tucked the kids in. Tim grinned as Ty and Brynie each said, "Night Mommy, night Daddy."

Back downstairs, they curled up together on the couch while Mac and Jethro relaxed in the recliners. Mac looked at the three of them, "I haven't said anything because it's all just happened and I'm still getting used to the idea of my former wife being a criminal."

Tim bit his tongue to keep from commenting and Ellie squeezed his hand. Mac continued, "Timothy, I didn't realize that she committed a crime when she kidnapped you from Shannon. At first, I thought it was because as Jethro said, that she needed my signature as well as hers. Now I'm told the age of maturity in Pennsylvania in 1977 was 17. It didn't change to 18 until later. So yes, she kidnapped you and let you go for adoption when she had no custodial rights over you or Shannon.

"My divorce attorney has been keeping me updated and I'm not sure how that happened, how he got involved. I did have an interview with a police detective shortly after you two left; I told her the same thing I told you, I was told my infant grandson had died. I was a little overwrought that day because you two were gone and Ellie, Tony, even your director didn't know when you'd be back. Anyway, the DA decided to prosecute Joann and she pleaded guilty in some sort of plea bargain. By pleading guilty, they agreed not to charge her in some other crime; Hastings, my attorney, didn't know what."

Ellie was listening but she'd noticed the tension in Tim and Jethro as soon as Mac said the DA was prosecuting his former wife, Tim's kidnapper, and grandmother. While Mac continued to talk, father and son had an intense nonverbal conversation, which ended a few minutes later when Jethro excused himself. Mac looked at Tim. "Something I should know about?"

"No, Grandpa. Just be very glad you're no longer married to her."

"I am, son, believe me. The only thing holding us together all those years was Shannon and then Kelly and your dad. Well, for me anyway."

Tim was still tense and Ellie scooted behind him, massaging his shoulders. Jethro came back in the room and nodded to them. "Vance wants to talk about us returning to work but he also told me the details of the plea bargain."

Signaling his former agents, Gibbs was glad to see them stand down. "Mac, you know the woman we busted was a Soviet Union era spy and murdered several people."

Mac nodded and Jethro continued. "She told Tony everything I'm about to tell you. She first arrived in this country as a nurse and was one of the medical staff taking care of Shannon and baby Tim the day he was born. She helped Joann forge the medical papers and buried his original birth certificate in a file drawer to keep it from being sent to the county. She also signed his death certificate as a witness and helped create his second birth certificate. She was the medical person who accompanied Joann on the trip to Bethesda where she witnessed Joann selling her grandson.

"There was no adoption and selling babies or any other human being is a federal crime. Svetlana told DiNozzo she witnessed Joann selling you and lying about the adoption papers; they verified
there are no adoption papers filed anywhere. The investigators were able to find the financial transactions, withdrawals for the McGees, a separate bank account for Joann. Later when Svetlana's income got a little too thin, she went to Joann for help; evidently, she was given money from that account - her blood money."

Tim closed his eyes and Ellie pulled him into her arms, Jethro joining them. Tim finally croaked out, "She's not going down for the crime she committed years ago."

His dad, understanding he was referring to her premeditated murder of Captain Joseph Norton, nodded and reaching out, tilted Tim's chin up.

"What'd she get?"

"Life, no parole at a maximum security prison, no country club for her and a well-earned trip to Hell. It also appears at some point she found out about Svetlana's covert work and never bothered reporting it, thus becoming a traitor. Only reason she isn't going to Gitmo as an accessory is her age."

Tim snarled; there was no other word for it, "Evil has no age."

Mac joined them and the four of them sat huddled together. Finally, Tim sighed, "This won't change anything and she'd probably love that we're upset by her actions. I'm sorry; I'm mired down in her crap every time it comes up. I need to find a way to deal with it other than anger and depression."

His father leaned in to kiss him. "That's fine son and we're here to help, we hurt too. Just remember to cut yourself some slack. It's never easy being the victim of crime, especially when you were an infant."

Realizing that his son and almost daughter-in-law needed to work through this together, Jethro gestured to Mac and kissing Ellie and Tim goodnight, the two walked down the street together, supporting each other through their own pain.

After they left, Tim pulled Ellie to him. "Magic bubble, we need a magic bubble to shelter us from the Joanns and the Svetlanas."

"Can you tell me what else she did?"

He shook his head, "Ask me in a month or so."

"So I won't be able to testify against you?"

He sighed, "So you won't change your mind about marrying into the family."

She looked at him, exasperated, "If hearing what your biological grandmother is like didn't scare me off, I can't think of anything else that would."

"It's about her and Dad. He thought he was doing the right thing, now he knows how wrong he was." He sighed, "She murdered a naval officer, deliberately insinuated herself into his life to kill him. Her rationale was that in his position with the Navy, he'd been involved with the Reynosa cartel and therefore he was as guilty as the Reynosa family for the murders of my mother and sister. She killed him and told us there was a shooter who'd gotten away. Boss had to do some convincing to have Vance allow him to work the case, finally told him it was what Shannon would have wanted him to do."
"Then we figured out from the angle of the shot and from Abby's forensics, including spatter patterns, there was no way a third person shot him. Poor Boss finds out she's a murderer and in the meantime, a retired cop, a private detective she'd hired to find out about the Captain's dealing with the cartel was tortured and murdered by the cartel in Arizona. Tony and Ziva found him.

"The Captain was not a good person, he was involved with the cartel, but there was no evidence, not even hearsay that he had anything to do with Shannon and Kelly's murders. That was one man and she couldn't get to him, so she settled for killing the Captain, the closest she could get."

"Is it a cold case?"

"No and to me this is the worst part. When Boss confronted her, she gave him the name of a lieutenant who'd also been dealing for the cartel; there was bad blood between him and the captain. The lieutenant's gun shot the captain. I believe Fielding killed the captain, framing the lieutenant and he went down."

"Oh my god, Tim, that's awful."

"Yeah, Tony, Ziva and I were told by Boss and Vance that the lieutenant was going to do time. Abby found evidence; I forget what it was. His gun though and that did it. None of the three of us could look either of them in the eyes for weeks after that. We took turns taking time off just to get away from the stink. And now he finds out what a monster she is; always has been."

"Wow. I know you and Tony have called him a cowboy but I never thought of that kind of 'frontier justice' happening at the agency. And not condoned by Vance."

"I'm not excusing them but they're complex men and things change a person. And sad to say, you know as well as I do that the law does not always serve justice."

She nodded in agreement and then sat in thought for a couple of minutes before asking, "Have things changed you?"

"You mean my childhood?"

She nodded.

"Yeah, sure. I probably would have gone into the tech world if not for my father and brother's murders. And definitely the years on the street changed me, or I guess formed me since I was a kid."

"But you're a sweetheart, Timothy."

"Thank you, Eleanor. I think I would have been a nice person, I hope a good person, but maybe not really motivated by anything outside of work. I'd be a success at tech but I don't know that I'd be very creative. Maybe just 'in the box' creative. With the life I've had, I have a lot of varied experience that feeds my creativity and my drive, my motivation to make things better, to be better."

When he smiled at her, she kissed him and they went upstairs arms wrapped around each other, feeling far more upbeat.

If Tim thought being home was like landing somewhere foreign but familiar, walking into NCIS headquarters Monday morning was even stranger. Bingham, his current substitute was still here; he wouldn't actually return to work until after the wedding. Today he and his father were meeting with Vance, ostensibly for a debriefing and for Jethro to discuss career options.
Tim thought their boss might also have a project or two for him to work on until his official resumption of his managerial position. At least he hoped he would because with everyone else at work, the kids at daycare and preschool, he gave himself three hours before he was bored. Oh sure, he could write but that required his muse to work with him and it wasn't happening. That left working in the garden. He could do that for an hour or so but not all day every day or he could amuse himself gaming but that didn't appeal to him either.

He supposed he could get started on the renovation of his father's house but he hadn't seen any plans yet and he didn't imagine Dad would be pleased to find his kitchen an empty room. The cabinets, appliances, sink - everything needed to go and he might take out a wall too. No, better not to invoke Rule 18 this time, Rule 15 would be better: work as a team.

As neither man expected to stay aboard the Yard after the Vance meeting, they carpooled in Dad's Challenger. Other than commenting that it felt strange to be headed for the Navy Yard, neither thought too much of it. They talked about the renovation and Gibbs huffed when Tim told him his thoughts. "Yeah, you're right, it needs to be gutted. Don't know about blowing out the wall though. If it is load bearing, costs a lot to get a support beam installed. Need to find out. So that'd be kitchen and dining area combined, yeah, if we can do it without the support beam, it'd be great. I think the layout needs some change; kind of a straight line right now. Your mother used to complain about that. You know she drew out some ideas, what she'd like to do in there. I'll look for them."

They were still talking about the house when they stopped at the main gate. The Marine on duty looked in, "Agents Gibbs, welcome back! Director Vance told us to expect you."

They thanked the guard as they passed their ids over. On their way again, Dad shrugged, "Didn't expect that but it has been almost a year."

Tim nodded. They parked; he walked Tyler to his preschool while Dad took Brynie to daycare, the men meeting at the main door of NCIS.

Then they saw them: balloons in the lobby, tied to anything that they could be tied to, floating on the ceiling and hanging off the scanner. Henry, their favorite security guard, grinned when he saw them.

"Agents Gibbs, senior and junior! Welcome back, so glad to see you two!" He looked closely at them, "You both look healthy, rested, and that's a good sign. Now I know everyone here is excited to see you so I won't keep you. And Agent Tim, congratulations on your engagement!"

"Thanks Henry, I'm a very lucky man! We're glad to be back too, feels like we've been gone a lot longer than 10 months."

After handshakes and slaps on the back, they headed for the elevator. With just the two of them, they could let it out and started laughing. "Balloons?"

Tim shook his head, "Has to be Abby!"

"Bet you're right. Who else would do that and get away with it?"

Dad pressed the button for the third floor out of old habit; they'd walk up the stairs to the mezzanine and the director's office. As the elevator came to a halt, Tim suddenly said, "Dad, brace yourself!"

"Wha…?"
The doors slid open as he spoke and he let out an 'oof' when the air was suddenly squeezed out of his lungs as Abby rushed to him, wrapping her arms of steel around him. Alarmed and not wanting to suffer the same fate, Tim started pulling her off his father, realizing he had help as Tony and Bob pulled with him. Abby, pulled back by the men, exclaimed loudly, "Oh no, I did it again. I'm so sorry Gibbs, I just wanted…"

Ducky cut her off. "Abigail, come with me."

Gibbs tapped Jimmy, who was taking his pulse, on the shoulder, "Jimmy, I'm fine."

"I know, but Dr. Mallard wants to make a point with her. She's been backsliding. Anyway, I'm glad you're fine and welcome home!"

He shook Gibbs' hand and gave Tim a hug. The others shook hands with them, although Tony got a one armed hug and Ellie a cheek kiss from both Gibbses. They waded through the crowd, which consisted of the combined teams of DiNozzo, O'Brien, and Carter as well as several others. Greeting everyone, the two men worked their way up the staircase and then found some of the MTAC techs, including Sandy, poking their heads out of the door to say hello and welcome back.
Chapter 36

They finally made it into the outer office of the Director’s Suite. Closing the door behind them, they looked at each other, laughing, only then realizing Pam Cook was sitting there. “Hello gentlemen, welcome home!”

“Thanks, Ms. Cook! We’re happy to be home and glad we made it through the welcoming committee.”

She grinned at them. “We’ve missed you around here, it’s been so quiet and peaceful - I mean boring!”

Dad started laughing and her eyes widened, she’d seen him chuckle but never a full out laugh. Vance came out and watched with a grin on his face. “Come on in, Gibbseys; let’s see what we can do to liven this place up again!” He winked at Pamela who decided not to be embarrassed.

As they’d thought might happen, Vance needed reports from both of them, covering the activities the day Tim spotted the tail car through the capture and arrest of Svetlana Stacevyko. Anything involving the marshals and of course the NCIS-FBI team. Tim shook his head as his father protested, “Leon, they were involved in nearly everything we did the first few weeks. From taking us shopping and waiting outside to covering us from a tail car when we had our own vehicles. Babysitting the kids, vetting Steve Ortiz, measuring the distance to his family’s ranch, picking out furniture. Hell, Shepherd, uh that’s Marshal Shepherd, helped design the house we lived in and selected some of the furniture.”

Vance nodded, “I know it’s nitpicking but Secretary Porter feels it needs to be done, to protect them and us.”

“From?”

“There are those in Congress who are skeptical of the events that transpired.”

Tim couldn’t help himself, he snorted. “Let’s invite them along next time.”

Vance would love to send the professional politicians into the oblivion of WITSEC but knew that being obnoxious was not a valid reason nor would it be fair to the good marshals. He kept his thoughts to himself and tried again.

“They’re coming under fire for not pushing back at DHS.”

Gibbs frowned, “They’re part of Homeland and DHS is pretty much their puppet master, how hard should they have pushed back? They were ordered to give us the BS line about DHS wanting us out of their hair but the Chief Inspector might as well have been rubbing his eyebrow when he said it. The only thing we believed in that little speech was that we weren’t going to be sequestered or exiled or quarantined, take your pick, for long. They picked up Tim, not me. Leon, all they would have had to say to either of us was that the children would be in danger if we didn’t stop poking around and that would have been it. And McQueen was given money by DHS to house and transport us.”
Tim nodded, “He showed us copies of the checks, they were signed by Morrow. They were doing their jobs as mandated by their bosses.”

“That’s good, all of it and I believe you, I’ve spoken with McQueen several times and he was not happy keeping you two in the dark for so long.”

Tim opened his mouth to ask a question but stopped when his father touched his arm and pointed at the ceiling with a whirling motion.

There was silence as Vance engaged the SCIF. “Love that little whirling motion, Gibbs although it’s not exactly the Cone of Silence.”

Gibbs smirked, “Close enough. Tim?”

“Director, did you speak with McQueen before we busted the case?”

“Yes. He called me the first time in early March. You two mentioned me by name when they first brought you in and he was worried. No one in his chain of command had heard anything from the DHS team since shortly after your arrival. He’d made inquiries but he was asking his superiors to check with their superiors. He was told to do his job and mind his own business, a very tricky situation. I updated Secretary Porter, I didn’t want to cause you any problems but I also had no idea what was going on. Nevertheless, it was good to verify that the Marshals had you although I wasn’t told where.

“He called me again in late May to tell me what he’d heard; he said that was the first he’d heard of Svetlana, her murder of the McGees, the various attempts on Tim and her other crimes. He was pressured to move you but he fought back saying he had a strong team, that you two were cooperative and observant, he felt he could defend you better in Albuquerque than moving you to a new location, having to start over with another team. That was also the first I’d ever heard of Svetlana as Svetlana and not Natalie McGee. I shared what I knew of her life as Navy Wife McGee and then I again updated Secretary Porter. At that point, she went to her chain of command and laid the story out. Unfortunately, Stacevyko hadn’t yet made a move so there wasn’t much anyone could do, although everyone in DHS who was involved, including Morrow was put under covert surveillance.

“When you called to tell me what was going on, I was so relieved I wanted to cry and cheer at the same time. I notified Porter and the news went up the line. I remember calling McQueen and thanking him for allowing you to have firearms. Yeah, I know, you would have purchased them without his permission. Did you know his bosses didn’t know that? He really put his neck on the line there.”

Tim shook his head, “The whole thing is almost unbelievable. First the list of crimes that woman committed in this country, starting with my supposed death, all three of them although she was an accessory to the first one as opposed to being the actual murderer as she was with my brother and Commander McGee. Then hiring Krose for the third attempt and ending with her last murder victim. Throw in DHS and the Stansons, Morrow’s guilt money, treason and the conniving Joann Fielding, it’s mind boggling.”

He took a breath, “So you want a point by point list of things the Marshals did for us?”

“Yes.”

Tim smiled, “Luckily I kept a journal so I have most of the information and I’m sure my father will help me put it together for you.”
“Good, thank you.”

Gibbs stirred, “You’ll have it by October 15th.”

“Gibbs?”

“Can’t do it any sooner, Leon. My boy here is getting married; he has other things to do. You know, since his love life was put on hold for 9 months due to the machinations of the Department of Homeland Security.”

Tim didn’t say anything but he did rub his eyebrow. If this was going to help McQueen and the Service at all, they needed it sooner than that. All along, they’d understood that the marshals were following orders and the services’ own protocols, odd as they seemed.

Disappointed that Vance didn’t have any projects for him, he excused himself from the inner office and set up at the extra desk tucked in the back of the outer office. He had his journal on a thumb drive and plugging the drive into the desktop, opened his document, copied it, changed the format to a report and then went through, taking out personal comments and events. He was still working on it when he heard his father asking Pam where he was. She pointed over her shoulder and Dad wandered over. “You’re working on that already?”

“Just as soon have it done, not hanging over my head to do.”

“Our heads, it’s a task for both of us. Vance wants to talk to you. Why don’t you leave that up and I’ll look it over, make paper notes of anything that needs adding.”

Grinning, Tim saved his version and made a new copy, titling it “Jethro”. “There you go; you can add it right in there. It’ll do an automatic save every three minutes and then I’ll copy it over into the main document.”

“Thanks kiddo.”

“If you get stuck, just stop, ok?”

A voice drifted back, “I’ll help him, Tim.”

He thanked Pam as he walked back into Vance’s office.

“Oh good, you weren’t too far away. I’m sure you really are busy with the wedding and settling in, but if you do have some time I have a couple of things.”

Tim grinned, “Yay!”

Vance chuckled, “All right, so…”

He walked him out of the inner office 20 minutes later and found Gibbs hunting and pecking on the keyboard. Pam smiled, “He’s doing fine. I’ve learned some new words in Russian and Spanish, pretty sure they’re curse words but hey, now I can say I speak Russian!”

Chuckling to himself, Tim got the documents squared away and closed down. “C’mon, let’s go see what Mac and the boys are up to.”

Dad laughed, “Other than floating in the pool and drinking my beer?”

“Maybe Mac; Rob and Geo have duty shifts tonight.”
Leon smiled, “Sounds like fun to me!”

Tim snorted, “Yeah, if we added a paddock and riding trail, nobody would ever go home.”

Pam looked curious, “I heard about your cowboy boots. I didn’t look to see...”

Grinning, the Gibbses showed her their boots. “Oh, those are beautiful! I thought they’d be all scuffed up.”

“Nah, those are our riding boots, these are our going-out-to-do-business boots.”

Eyebrows rose, “You have more than one pair?”

Tim smiled, “I have three pair and my father has four. He’s found his niche!”

“Damn straight pardner!”

They left after that, finding Abby in the lobby waiting for them. “Hi, uh, I just wanted to apologize, I got carried away again. I know I just saw you at the airfield the other day and anyway I shouldn’t have hugged that hard. Dr. Cranston says nobody should be hugged that hard.”

They nodded, Gibbs accepted her apology and gave her a kiss, Tim gave her a kiss and a light hug and they left.

In the car they looked at each other, laughing, “We survived!”

Tim shook his head, “I don’t like visiting like that. Going back to work would have been fine but that was just weird.”

“Yep.”

“So what did you get?”

“Options to think about. He gave me a list. You?”

“Couple projects to work on, I’m saved, yay!”

“From boredom?”

“Yes, I can’t just float around in the pool. Well, I could but I shouldn’t. This gives me enough work to feel useful but I can still spend time with the kids, Mac, and the sibs and do whatever still needs doing for the wedding.”

“Good! We also talked about my knee. He agrees with Ducky, I should have the surgery before I go back to work.”

“And?”

“Wasn’t gonna say anything until after I saw Leon, hoping he’d say no. Duck gave me the name and number of a good orthopedic surgeon and I have an appointment to see him on Wednesday.”

“This Wednesday? Day after tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Would you mind going with me?”

“Mind? I insist!”
Gibbs sighed in relief. “Thanks. I’d ask Duck but he gets all caught up in the medical jargon and then I get frustrated and, you know.” He looked at his son, “I figure with your bio-medical background and your experience with Gibbs-speak, you can translate for me.”

Tim laughed, “Do you know all of our silly Gibbs’ terms?”

“Probably not. Some of them are creative. I like Gibbs-speak.”

“Not functional mute though.”

“Pretty descriptive for work but you know me better now.”

“I do and you’re almost a Chatty Carl.”

“Chatty Carl?”

“I know the term is Chatty Cathy but you’re not a girl so I changed it to Carl.”

“Chatty Cathy was a doll back in the 60’s, one of my buddies’ little sister had one. You pulled a string in the middle of her back and she’d say something. A phrase or a question.” He started laughing and Tim waited patiently.

“Reminds me of that teddy bear we got, that you programmed with your voice. I think it was that case with the secret Cuban lover.”

“Oh geez, I did that and I had it compliment me. Of course you had to be standing right behind me when the stupid bear said that.”

“I thought it was pretty clever. That was also one of the first personal things I’d ever heard you say or ask for.”

Tim grinned, “I got a hair ruffling instead of a Gibbs’ slap; that was good.”

“I don’t like that one.”

“Gibbs’ slap?”

“Yeah. My own fault though, should never have picked that up from Franks.”

“Ah, so it was really a Franks’ slap.”

Gibbs grunted, which told Tim the subject was closed. He laughed to himself, his former boss was a great dad but when he was done with something, he was done. Period, end of discussion. And he was stubborn as a mule. Although Tim admitted he had his own mulish moments.

They spent most of the afternoon finishing their Exile report, e-mailing it to Vance that evening. Tuesday Tim started one of Vance’s projects, spent some time in the pool and managed to squeeze in grocery shopping.

Dad’s appointment was at 0930 on Wednesday; the Gibses were there at 0920 and were happy to be called into the surgeon’s office promptly at 0930. The doctor had the last scan of Dad’s knee displayed on a light board. After the introductions, she pointed to it, “That’s dated last year. Have you had a scan since then?”

“No, I’ve been away on a case for several months, just got back last week. My son here has been talking to me about getting this done but I haven’t been to a doctor since my last physical.”
“I see. Any changes, additional injuries to it?”

“No, in fact from May through the summer, I swam almost every day and that really helps. I’ve also done a lot of horseback riding and it doesn’t seem to bother it, not as much as running after suspects does.”

“A healthier lifestyle is always good news. It’s probably helped slow the degeneration but it won’t reverse it. If your knee looks anything like that scan, you really do need the surgery.”

“And that’s a full replacement?”

“Yes. Let me show you.” She pulled out a life sized plastic leg with a knee attached to it. Removing the knee, she showed him the artificial parts that would make his new knee. “The surgery is 98% successful and takes a lot of stress off the rest of the body which has been working overtime to support the wounded structure. I’m not going to lie, it’s painful; it takes time and a strong commitment to physical therapy to get you back on your feet. But once you’re there, you won’t believe the difference. I’m not just saying that, I’ve had one knee done and I’ll be scheduling the other one sometime next year.”

“Will I be able to run?”

“For exercise or work?”

“Work; my personal physician doesn’t want me running for exercise. He says a brisk walk is better for me.”

“It’s certainly better for your knees! Yes, you’ll be able to run again but it will take several months before I’ll clear you for that and I’d rather you didn’t.”

“All right; so how’s it happen?”

She explained the surgery, the need for him to be up and around before he could be discharged. “You’ll be using a walker and then a cane. You’ll begin working with your physical therapist as soon as you wake from surgery. Before you leave the hospital, you’ll be walking the hallways with an assistive device, generally a walker, sometimes crutches or a cane and you’ll use it to walk up and down stairs. Do you have stairs in your home and is there anyone living with you?”

“There are five steps up to my front porch, three up to the deck in the back, and my bedroom is on the second floor, but there’s also a bedroom and bathroom on the first floor I can use. My 81-year-old father-in-law is staying with me, although he’s staying in the downstairs room. Tim lives five houses away.”

“I’m happy to hear about the downstairs bedroom but I prefer once you’re discharged you have someone with you. It sounds like there’s a conflict with the downstairs bedroom.”

Tim nodded. “We don’t have any steps into our house and there’s also a downstairs bedroom and bathroom. I do have young children but they’re old enough to watch themselves around him.”

“How old?”

“Four and three.”

“Are they home during the day?”

“No, they’re in preschool and daycare.”
“All right, that might be an option. What about the bathroom? Is it a tub/shower combination or a step in shower?”

“A step in shower.”

“Good! He may need to have someone in the room with him for his first couple of showers.”

Tim nodded, “That’s not a problem.”

His father gave him a look; Tim gave him one right back and Dad sighed.

The doctor laughed, “Think of it as payback. I’m sure you changed his diapers when he was a baby, now he’ll help you with a shower.”

There was dead silence and the older man took the younger one’s hand. Finally, the son smiled at the doctor, “We didn’t know each other when I was a baby. Found out we share DNA less than two years ago.”

“Oh my goodness! Then you’re doubly lucky to have your son to help you out, Agent Gibbs.”

He nodded with a smile. She wanted an updated scan and physical before she’d do the surgery; he made an appointment for both. She handed each of the men a copy of ‘What to Expect’ from a total knee replacement and a copy of ‘Handy Tips for the Home’. She advised them to read both, ask her any questions and make sure both homes were prepared prior to the surgery.

Chapter End Notes

FYI: For this series, I tweaked the Marshals Service puppetmaster from the Dept of Justice (DOJ) to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
Chapter 37

Tim drove home with a silent Dad. As they pulled into the driveway, he took a deep breath, "I know it'll be worth it in the long run, I just hate losing more time."

"But we're home and you've retired from the field. And this is a choice, taking care of yourself so you'll feel better. It's a good thing you waited so long; the procedure is more advanced now than we thought. Only hours in the hospital and a faster, easier recovery and maybe best of all, less pain. So you can still be chasing your grandbabies twenty years from now."

Dad snorted, "They'd better be great-grandbabies in twenty years, Timothy! Although those grandbabies could be your brothers', might be a bit late for Sarah. How many more children are you two planning?"

"Two more, Dad."

"Great! Of course you could also adopt."

"Yes we could and we might. We'll see. No baby for a few months."

His father gave him a look and Tim chuckled, "Practice, lots of practice, makes perfect, right?"

Father joined son for a swim; they were still lazing in the pool when Ellie and the kids arrived home. "All right, I need to get going. Hi daughter, hello kiddos!"

"Why are you leaving?"

"Because I'm here all the time and you need time to be a family on your own."

"Jethro, you are a part of our family! Enjoy the pool. Just be ready for the kid-sized dolphins!"

Laughing, he agreed, pushing his lounger over to one side and hanging on while the 'dolphins' jumped in, doing their version of a dolphin's 'squee'. Ellie joined them and they raced around the pool until Tim told them it was time for dinner. He brought big thick warm towels for each of them and they wrapped up in them after their showers. Tim was just wondering where his grandfather was when Mac came in the front door. "Hello! Sorry I'm so late!"

"That's okay; I was beginning to wonder. I thought Rob and Geo had to work."  

"They do but Geo's shift doesn't start till 8, I mean 2000."  

"He could have come for dinner."

"I told him that but he said he had things to do before work. Seems the Major has been procrastinating a bit."
"Procrastinating, huh. What's her name, do you know?"

"Now Timothy, why would you - all right, it's Lindsay."

"And?"

"They met at a bank at Quantico; they went out for coffee and they're going to dinner and a movie Friday night."

"Hair and eye color?"

"No idea, son, why?"

"Huh, I guess nobody's told you the rules."

"What rules?"

Ellie answered that, "The sibling rules; there are five of them. Three of them are cautions about Sarah and the other two basically say that any sibling who discovers another sibling is dating someone must dig for any details."

"But I'm not a sibling!"

Tim pursed his lips, "Changing that rule to any family member."

"But I didn't know the rules!"

Tim chuckled, "Grandpa, don't worry! They're more guidelines than rules. Except the ones about Sarah."

"And those are?"

"There's one about her temper and two about the kinds of guys she dates. There is always trouble. Always!"

"And the rules say?"

Ellie smiled, "I've got this one. Find the guy's full name and birthdate. The information is given to Tim and now that is amended to 'or Ellie' as soon as possible. We'll do a background check. The second one is do not ever approach Sarah directly with the results of the check. Best method is e-mail or text."

"Oh my!"

Tim nodded, "Yep, that's my baby sister. I did my best, but she's attracted to these men that - they're just bad. I did like one guy, a sailor but he dumped her for her roommate and ended up getting killed."

Mac's eyes were big as saucers. "You children certainly lead unusual lives!"

Tim thought about reminding his grandfather how unusually his life had started out but decided against it. Not every conversation needed to circle back to that.

After the kids were in bed, Dad updated Ellie and Mac about meeting the orthopedic surgeon and the plan for his surgery and recuperation.
Mac looked at him, "If I can be of any help at all, I'll stay up here this year."

"Thanks Mac, but no, not past Christmas anyway! We like knowing someone is warm and enjoying the winter months."

Ellie asked, "Will you have to go to a rehab facility or will you come home?"

He smiled, that sounded so good. "Apparently no one wants to pay for those anymore. I'm home the same day as the surgery and then physical therapy starts."

Ellie looked at Tim, "And home means here."

He smiled at her. "If that's all right with you."

"It's more than all right, I insist." She smirked, "Don't forget Bishop means overseer!"

They laughed at that and Tim explained what the doctor asked about the house. Mac frowned, "Will you be all right home by yourself, Jethro?"

"I'm sure I will be. And one of the neighbors may be available during the day; Vickie Walsh, you know, Reg's wife, is a stay at home mom, although Reg says she's crazy busy."

"I can work from home for the first few days."

"And I can take a couple of days off."

"No Eleanor, please don't! You save those days for your honeymoon."

"All right; if we're off rotation or have paperwork days, then I'll work from here."

That settled for now, Mac and Jethro set off down the sidewalk. As they walked, Jethro thought about Tony. When he moved into Gibbs' house last year, he'd leased his apartment short-term, with a condition that the lessee would be given 30 days' notice to vacate. That had worked out well with the Gibbeses' post-WITSEC stay; the tenant moved out the weekend the Gibbeses were in Tahlequah and Tony moved home the weekend before the Gibbeses' return from New Mexico.

Now Jethro wished DiNozzo could have stayed for a few more weeks; then he would have been there after the knee surgery. Except he would be at work and who knows how many nights he wouldn't make it home because of a case. And the new girlfriend might not be too crazy about the arrangement either. He was looking forward to meeting Agent Barnes; he had a good feeling about her. For one thing, Tony had never voluntarily told him about any of his relationships, not since the first go-around with Wendy all those years ago. For another, Maggie Barnes was a Marine, in Gibbs' book that was always a positive!

**NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS**

The rest of the week flew by. With the wedding and the arrival of the Bishop family quickly approaching, the family got busy cleaning. Barbara, Jerry, and Ellie's brother George, his wife Eileen and kids would stay with Gibbs. Brother John, wife Jazzy, and their kids had been invited to stay with college friends. The friends lived in Arlington, which was close. Other relatives of Ellie's would stay at a nearby hotel. When Tim heard the Ortizes were looking at the same hotel, he negotiated a family wedding discount for their guests.

Jerry and Barbara arrived Sunday morning; Ellie and Tim picked them up at the airport while Poppy and Grandpa watched the kids. As traffic on the way home was light, Tim drove along a
route where they could see some of the National Mall and other sights. Ellie pointed out buildings and famous sites, telling them what they were. At the Bishops' request, they drove into the Navy Yard to see NCIS. The Marines at the gate greeted them, "Agent Gibbs, Agent Bishop, good morning. And who are your visitors?"

They were cleared and parked outside to walk in the front of the building. The security guard looked surprised to see them. He was new and didn't know Tim but did know Agent Bishop. He was embarrassed when he saw Tim's id. "Sorry Agent Gibbs, I didn't recognize you."

"That's all right, Officer Ferris, I've been off the Yard for several months, we haven't met before."

Neither agent had their firearms with them although their knives were scanned. Ellie's parents were surprised that they both had lethal looking knives on them.

Ellie told them, "DiNozzo kept most of Gibbs' rules and Rule 9 is always carry a knife."

"Why?"

"Because knives don't run out of ammunition."

"Oh. But off duty?"

Tim answered that one, "Law enforcement, even off duty, may respond to a crime in progress or a suspicious situation. At an airport, not a great idea unless they're expecting us. But knives are mostly invisible."

"But you'd have to be up close."

Ellie responded, "Not necessarily; we're trained to throw."

"Oh my heavens Eleanor, I had no idea!"

She smiled, "That was on purpose Mom."

"Have you ever had to use your knife, I mean in a real situation?"

Ellie shook her head but Tim remained silent.

"Tim?"

"Yes, I have. Twice when we were on the street and a couple of times with NCIS. One time when we were outnumbered, before Ellie joined us. We disabled several of the bad guys with our knives and that meant we evened the odds and won the firefight."

Jerry wanted to ask what he meant by 'disabling' the bad guys but one look at Tim told him the answer. Wow, he hadn't thought about his seemingly laidback son-in-law having these kinds of experiences. Although all things considered, it shouldn't be much of a surprise. That his daughter was trained in such weaponry was unbelievable. He decided not to think about it, his wife was probably freaked enough for both of them!

They enjoyed their tour of NCIS, seeing the bullpen and the Most Wanted wall as well as the Wall of Fame. They peeked in the door at Abby's lab and politely declined a look into the Autopsy suite. Then they headed out to see Tim's office.

Back in the car, they drove to Gibbs' home, finding Poppy and Mac in the backyard playing with the kids. Ty and Brynie ran to their new grandparents as soon as they saw them and after hugs and
kisses, Brynie tugged Grandpa Mac over. "This is our Grandpa Mac. He's Daddy's grandpa and ours too." They were still confused by the concept of Great-Grandparents.

Jethro showed Jerry and Barbara to their room, the master bedroom. "Help yourselves to anything."

"Where are you sleeping?"

"There's a den downstairs that I use as a bedroom, with a full bathroom; it's closer to the coffeemaker."

They chuckled at that and he showed them the rooms where George, Eileen, and their kids would stay, although they wouldn't arrive until midweek. "This is the kids' room. It was originally my daughter Kelly's room, Tim's sister; we fixed it up for Ty and Brynie when he brought them home."

"Oh, they stayed here with you?"

"Yes, Tim was between apartments and staying with me for a few days when we got the case with the kids' mothers. He'd been here a little over a week; he found the house down the street shortly after we brought them here."

"And that was before the discovery that you are father and son?"

Jethro smiled, "Yeah. I run - ran a tight ship but always left the front door unlocked for my team. Any time they had problems, troubles, I hoped they'd come to me for help. DiNozzo, you'll meet him later today, spent many nights on my couch. He lives in an older building, loves the location but that place always has something going on with it. Boiler going out, problems with the power, termites, you name it. So he's stayed here, Ziva did a few times; Abby has a couple of times although she tends to seek help from her nun friends. Let's see, Palmer's been here but he's never stayed over. And finally Tim."

"Ziva was Ellie's predecessor, the one from Israel?"

"Yes, she was our Mossad liaison for several years, then resigned from that agency, became an American citizen and an NCIS agent. She went back to Israel after her father was killed a couple of years ago. Never came back." He smiled, "Her loss, our gain. That's how we found Ellie."

"Can't wait to meet the others, we've heard so much about them."

"They're good people; we've become family over the years."

After they settled in, the group walked down to Ellie and Tim's house where Ty and Brynie proudly showed them their rooms, pointing to the master bedroom, "That's Mommy and Daddy's room."

Next came the basement playroom and finally the beloved backyard with their Big Wheels and pool. Barbara approved of the portable fence surrounding the pool and the pool cover. Both Bishops liked the raised garden beds with the pumpkins and autumn squashes holding court. Ellie showed them the apple tree that had moved with them from Albuquerque. Jerry looked at the two men quizzically, "And you brought it home with you. Any reason why?"

Tim smiled a little sheepishly. "The first few days there we had to stay in a company owned suite and the only outdoors we were permitted was a rooftop garden. When we moved into the house, the backyard was bare. Dad loves apple crisp so one of the first things we bought was this apple tree. We had apples from it right before we left. To me it was a symbol of our time there. It was
fine, we were together and we grew but we were very happy to pick up our roots and move home. We just hope the tree will make the adjustment, we won't know until spring."

Jerry asked how they'd transported it and the before and after care. When Tim told him, he smiled saying it should be fine.

With Ellie's brothers arriving mid-week, the party where both families would meet was morphing into dinner Wednesday night, depending on the team's caseload. Tonight would be a scaled down version of that.

Because it was Sunday with work on Monday, the DC family started arriving around 3 PM. Sarah, Rob, and Geo arrived at 1:30, wanting to help and spend extra time with Mom and Dad Bishop before the rest of the gang arrived. The Palmers arrived post naptime; the day was again warm enough for a swim and although Victoria couldn't yet do handstands, she knew the basics of swimming, a how to float and to hold her breath under water. Baby Teddy liked the water well enough but he stayed safely in Mom or Dad's arms.

Tony and his date Maggie Barnes arrived shortly after the Palmers. He hoped to spend extra time with his surrogate dad and especially wanted Jethro and Maggie to get to know each other. After that, people drifted in, Ellie's maid of honor Jenna, Ducky, Abby, Tobias, Emily, Bob Chalmers, the Vances, Evan and Mindy Fuller.

The Bishops were amused at the range of personalities amongst the clan, from shy brother Rob to boisterous Abby with the others ranging somewhere in between. They knew who Ducky was but had only heard Tobias' name mentioned a few times and were surprised to find him a full-fledged member of the family. His daughter called Jethro 'Uncle Gibbs' (they'd also heard little Victoria call him Uncle Jethro) and once she spotted the Vance teens, made a beeline for them.

They knew that Lara Morgan had been a huge help taking care of Ty and Brynie when they first came home with Tim but hadn't realized she was part of the Vance family. A surprise was Ty introducing her to them as "Aunt Lara". She loved that and her grin spread to Leon, Kayla, and Jared. That was about the time several of them spotted a wedding ring on Lara's finger and a new one on Leon's. The couple grinned, "Yes, we finally made it legal."

Everyone had a beverage of some sort and glasses were raised in their honor with an impromptu toast from Ducky.

Because the pool and fence covered the entire lawn and the rest of the backyard was either garden or concrete, they'd set up a ping-pong table and a croquet field for play. The croquet hoops and the center posts had little weighted stands meant to hold them in place if there wasn't lawn or dirt available. Several people took advantage of the pool, enjoying a dip and playing with the children. With no storms forecast in the next 10 days, the relative humidity was low, much to everyone's relief.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Happy (almost) weekend!

Chapter 38

Dad started the grill at half past four; within an hour, the group was seated around the patio tables. They feasted on chicken marinated and then grilled New Mexican style, corn cornbread (with whole corn and sour cream), steamed vegetables, a mixed green salad, grilled potatoes and 'cowboy caviar', also known as salsa, enlivened with black beans and more corn. Dessert was a choice of pecan pie made by Abby or apple crisp made by Tim.

The Bishops turned in that night feeling good about Ellie's new family and friends. They were already fond of the Gibbses and meeting the others showed them these were good people. Jethro was definitely the head of the family, notwithstanding Ducky and Mac's more advanced years. They were also happy to see Tim's three siblings comfortable with everyone and as openly affectionate with Jethro as he was with them and their brother. Their adoptions were recently approved and finalized by the state of Virginia. Any name changes would come later.

As they lay in bed, Jerry listed their occupations, "Our new in-laws include two published authors, a doctor, a Marine officer, two Federal Agents, a retired Marine and Mac's a retired accountant. Guess we also count Tony as a Gibbs' kid, which makes three federal agents. Not too shabby! Do you remember anything about whathisname's family?"

"Weren't they all lawyers? I remember they thought an awful lot of themselves and I was glad they didn't live anywhere near us or Ellie so we wouldn't have to share holidays or see them - ever."

"You remember that guy on "M.A.S.H.", the snooty doctor from Boston? I liked the character eventually but that family, that's who they reminded me of and I couldn't see any redeeming qualities."

"He's gone they're gone; we need never speak of them again!"

"You're right; I'm just saying our girl's found the right guy with a good family this time. And I got a kick out of Tony bringing his new girlfriend to Dad Jethro for approval."

"I caught that too, Hon. And I agree with your assessment of Ellie's choice, I'm very happy for her!"

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Monday, Tim worked at home for a few hours in the morning; after the commute traffic was out of the way, he took the Bishops sightseeing. "I thought I'd show you around and then once you've seen the layout you can decide where you want to return for more. Ellie's taking one of Dad's trucks starting tomorrow so she'll have a kid friendly truck and you can use her truck to get around. You're better off taking the Metro whenever possible, even if it means the Metro and a bus. But getting to and from the Metro from home is easier with a vehicle."
He grinned, "And I know that because I didn't have a car when we moved here from Norfolk. I
didn't even have my driver's license; we lived in Silver Spring Maryland and I took the bus and
Metro to work. Problem was the bus stops at midnight, so I'd either take a cab which was
expensive or Jimmy would drive me home."

"Why just Jimmy? I'd think the others would have been happy to."

"Couple of reasons. One, I was the new guy and that meant hazing and behaving badly toward me
and there was no way I wanted to owe favors to any of them. Two, I didn't want them to know I
was a former homeless person. I kept that hidden for many years. Boss found out after Somalia, uh,
that was in late 2009, a covert operation we undertook to identify and suppress a terrorist cell we
were told had killed Ziva. Turned out she was alive and had been their prisoner for four months. I
was badly injured and Boss stepped up to help Sarah, Rob, and me. Up until then, Boss and I didn't
know each other very well. I was his junior field agent/tech support and he was the father I wished
I had but didn't dare approach. Anyway, Tony and Ziva didn't find out about our lives on the street
until 2013 when they finally met Rob. And we three wrote a book about our experiences."

"Three years ago?"

Tim nodded. "Tony and I haven't always been friends; the first year on the team was tough; almost
adversarial. Eventually, we got past that and became friendly co-workers. Telling him and Ziva
about my background was the turning point. Then Ziva left us; by that time Tony and I were
genuine friends and since then we've become close, brothers."

"What name did you use for the book?"

"The book's not published yet, we needed Geordie's input and he hadn't been stateside in a few
years. He's working on it now, adding his take on things. We've also added stories from his tent
mates; you'll meet them at the wedding, Barry, Freddie, Jose and Bill. There are also a few stories
that Nate told me. He and Juanita have been there the longest. The book is close to being finished
but it isn't quite there yet."

"Do you go back there?"

"To the camp?" At Jerry's nod, Tim continued, "Yes, just about everyone who lived there as a kid
goes back to help or contributes in some way. Some don't and that's their business. We've formed a
non-profit organization for fund raising, dealing with government entities who want to control or
close the camp and better coordinate what aid we can give. And through that organization, we help
at a few places. We do a run to the Baltimore camp several times a year. Used to be every month
but things are better there and our lives keep getting busier and busier. We used to go together too,
but with our schedules it's better that we go separately, we accomplish more. There are no longer
any orphans there; the foster care system has improved a great deal. Now kids without guardians
can safely go into the system.

"We help when and where we can. Our goal is to help people get back on their feet but while
they're at the camp or shelter, we help with their physical needs too. We ensure everyone has
winter coats, boots, socks, hats, gloves, scarves. If tents need replacing, we do that, everyone gets
two new blankets every year and new sleeping bags and suitcases as needed. We also do a shoe
check several times a year. Homeless people are on their feet all the time and they can't afford new
or even used shoes. Cardboard cutouts work for a couple of weeks but not long term. Shoes and
socks go a long way toward keeping them healthier. For those who are willing, medical help. For
those who have substance problems or poor mental health, we work to get them help. Not
everyone will accept it. Some drunks like being drunks and people with mental health conditions
don't always know they're sick. Those are the tough ones."
"Can we see it, go there?"

"You want to see the camp?"

"Yes, it was a part of your life; we absolutely want to see it."

Surprised and pleased, Tim smiled, "I'll take you tomorrow morning. I'll load up at Costco this afternoon and we can get started after the commute in the morning."

"Has Ellie been?"

"Yes, several times. We went together a few times but while Dad and I were away she went with Sarah, Rob, Jimmy, Tony, and Geordie."

"That's our girl!"

Tim's smile lit up his face, "She is wonderful!"

Nate had an inexpensive cell phone now; paid for by the non-profit. While the Bishops were at a Metro station buying tickets for their adventures, Tim called Nate to tell him he was bringing Ellie's parents tomorrow. He'd heard that some folks needed shoes and asked if Nate knew any specifics. Nate had a few ideas but instead of guessing, he walked around the camp and asked. Tim put his phone on speaker, jotting down names and sizes. While he moved around the camp, Nate told Tim what else was needed and Tim wrote that down too.

A few years ago, the city council had approved a plan for locked cabinets to be built into each restroom. Camp residents could then stock non-perishable food. Juanita and Big John had the keys; whoever wanted to store something put a label on with their name and the date. That way, ol' Gary B. couldn't claim he'd left the can of beans when the label clearly said Sally T. Since residents rarely had enough food to save for the future, the 'alumni' were generally the ones to stock the shelves and Juanita, Big John and Nate handed it out. It made life a little easier for them.

Tim disconnected after getting the information and unlocked the doors for Barbara and Jerry who were approaching the car. "Perfect timing, I called and got shoe sizes and whatever else is needed. It's just 1:00, do you want to have lunch at the Smithsonian, take your first look around? I can never get enough so it's a treat for me too; we can always plan to meet at a certain time."

Barbara's face and Jerry's smile gave the answer. "All right. There are cafes in each of the Smithsonian museums. Do you know which one you want to see first?"

"American History!"

"Great! There we have a choice of two cafés; one is on the lower floor and has barbecue, salads, burgers, soups and sandwiches. The other one is on the first floor and offers a light lunch. It does have a good view of the Museum fountain and of Constitution Avenue."

Jerry's stomach answered with a rumble and Barbara laughed, "I think we'd better go for the full serve café."

"All right, Stars and Stripes Café it is! Let's see how close I can park to the right door."

He found a space only a few steps away. As they approached the ticket office, Tim smiled, "I have an annual pass we'll use today."

"Oh Tim that's wonderful, thank you!"
Jerry patted his shoulder, "Lunch is on us."

Although they enjoyed lunch and the company, all three were eager to get to the exhibits. After setting a time and place to meet, Tim went one way while the Bishops went the other.

After thoroughly enjoying his unexpected visit to one of his favorite museums, Tim met his in-laws and they started for home. They were stopped at a red light when Jerry saw a Costco in the next block. "Hey, why don't we stop now and pick up what you need? We're still early and then you won't have to go out again."

"You don't mind?"

Barbara grinned, "I never mind Costco, especially if I'm not there on a weekend."

"Ok, yes we can do that."

He was already in the right lane and turned into the parking area, Jerry chuckling to himself when the Acura slid into a spot close to the door. Once inside, Tim grabbed a large cart and headed for the shoes, the others came with him. "What food do you buy for them?"

"Cans of fruit, vegetables, beans - protein, things they can eat cold if they have to. Cans of tuna, spam, chicken, ham, corned beef or roast beef hash. Some of that stuff comes in soft packages now. When we're pulling cans, we try to get the ones marked 'BPA free' and with pull tops. We try to buy stuff with a decent expiration date and we don't buy big cans of anything. Homeless folks have no access to refrigeration. Usually a case or two of peanut butter, creamy not crunchy, that's a staple for the homeless. Juice boxes, milk in the same kind of box that doesn't require refrigeration. A case of plastic cutlery.

"I'll get fresh fruit since we're going tomorrow. Things that can be eaten without plates. A bag of avocados is a real treat for them; they're full of good nutrition. I never buy anything spicy because they can't always get to a restroom when they're away from the camp. Which reminds me, boxes of Pepto, the pink stuff - tablets, not liquid. Toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, hairbrushes. Towels, wash and dry packets, cases of those. Socks, heavy, light.

"Dry shampoo, anything they can use to clean themselves without water. Deodorant. Cases of bottled water, individual bottles not the gallon size jugs. A case of multi-vitamins, gummies for adults and kids, no liquid needed to take them. Shaving cream, disposable razors, uh, pads and stuff for the females. Sarah always makes sure she includes a pain reliever too; I believe that's called Midol. We usually buy three or four bottles and Juanita doles it out.

"And," he sighed, "condoms. We'd all rather they not spread STDs or make more homeless babies. Bundles of wood for the oil drums, they burn those during the winter. But it's a little early yet and Geo told me last winter they found someone to donate a cord of wood, all chopped up."

"How much of everything?"

Tim looked a little puzzled but answered anyway, "The population is pretty low right now, about 27 and only five under 18. It'll increase as the weather gets cooler; Nate's camp is known for taking care of people. So figure in another 6 weeks they'll have close to 50 people there. We'll be making another run about then, get them winterized."

"All right, we'll take a cart and start rounding up food and the toiletries you mentioned while you get the shoes and whatever else you have on your list."

"Great, thanks, that helps!"
They went off while Tim grabbed the sturdiest shoes he could find in the various sizes, adding extra shoelaces. Remembering Geordie mentioning Nate needed new winter boots, he grabbed two pair when he spotted the right size. Nate was a big man, someone once described him as a mountain on two legs, and shopping for him was challenging. The non-profit had a small storage unit for things they’d gathered and the extra pair of boots would be stored there until they were needed. The sibs and their friends had learned over the years that if they saw something in Nate's size to buy it no matter what season it was or whether their friend even needed it at the time.

From there he headed to the outdoor equipment and pulled three sleeping bags off the shelves. From experience, he already knew these were rated for subzero weather and would last for a few years. Noticing a deal on blankets, he grabbed several. They were ugly, probably why the price was so low but who cared about ugly if it kept you warm?

Socks were next and he bought four pair for every box of shoes he had on the pallet. Men's underwear: boxers, briefs, tees. Seeing the thermal underwear displayed, he grabbed a bunch of those in different sizes, then went over to the women's clothing and grabbed more. He made a note to check shoe and jacket sizes for the camp kids; they'd need rain boots soon. His own two would also need new rain and snow boots, hats and jackets, they'd grown out of everything they'd worn last winter and it had all been donated to the shelter in Albuquerque.

Done with his part, he discovered Jerry and Barbara had decided to divide and conquer, each taking a cart. Jerry was handling the toiletries while Barbara was loading cans and cases of food. Tim looked through everything; it all looked good and he was happy to see the variety. There were many milk boxes, a very good thing. Barbara had also included a case of cereal in variety packs, that could be eaten dry or the milk poured into the box. Leaving his wheeled pallet with her, he went to the paper aisle and brought back a case of disposable bowls and plates, cups and several boxes of plastic cutlery.

They wheeled their conveyances toward the front of the store where Jerry joined them, his cart full of packets of toothbrushes, dental floss, toothpaste, vitamins, pads, condoms, the wash and dry packets and everything else Tim mentioned, plus some. Tim shook his head at the small bottles of mouthwash. "Can't give those out, there's alcohol in it. We're a non-profit organization; our charter prohibits us supplying anything with alcohol. Sorry, I forgot to mention that! Those little breathe mints, the ones in the little plastic shake out containers; those are helpful."

"That's all right. I'll swap this case for a case of the mints."

Tim and Barbara got in line while Jerry did the swap. All three of the carts were together by the time Tim reached the cashier who smiled as he recognized him. "Mr. McGee, haven't seen you in here in ages!"

"Yes, I've been out of town for work. These three carts are together."

"All right, got your card, thanks." The clerk quickly rang everything up, applying what Jerry described as a very healthy discount. While he was doing that, other staff brought boxes and flats for the loose items. When they reached the car, Tim looked at his watch and grinned, "Thanks; that saved at least an hour!"

Jerry chuckled, "Most fun I've ever had at Costco and it didn't cost me a penny!"

Then came the reality of packing everything into the car but Tim had it well in hand; Jerry was impressed when only two boxes of shoes ended up in the back seat.

"Years of experience?"
Tim nodded, "Started out a Navy brat. And then later had to pack everything, including our sleeping bags, into roller bags every day, so yeah, packing's one of my skills." He chuckled, "Even Dad was impressed the first time he saw me pack a trunk. He was Boss then and we had a case that would keep us away a couple of days. That meant we had our gear bags, everything to process the crime scene, plus mounds of evidence bags, jars and boxes and our go, or overnight, bags. Tony was stuffing it all in; I nudged him aside and fixed it. That was my job from then on."
They'd just arrived home when Ellie and the kids rolled in, Dad and Mac joining them soon after. Ty was excited about his day at preschool but Tim asked him to wait because Grandma Barbara and Grandpa Jerry were guests and should get first chance to talk about their day. Tyler, good sport that he was, sat back and tried hard not to fidget or sulk.

When it was his turn, his parents told him how proud they were of him. Then he told them about Monday preschool. They had a new teacher today, Mrs. Linderman and Ty really liked her; he told his family she reminded him of Marshal Maggie. He also thought it was cool that some of his friends from daycare still remembered him. He finally got all his news out and sat back with a "Phew!"

Brynie had her say about her day in daycare and then it was Mommy's turn. She grinned, "We had a case today, someone was missing but we found him pretty quickly and turned him over to the MPs."

Poppy laughed, "Let me guess, 48 in the brig?"

"Something like that; it'll probably take him at least that long to feel better."

"And then he's gonna feel worse again!"

Ty scrunched his face, "Why Poppy?"

"Because he was bad and he'll be punished for it."

"Oh. Really bad like the mean eyed lady?"

"No, son, not that bad. More like 'didn't make his bed when he was told to and talked back to his father' bad."

That incident had happened in Albuquerque and since Ty had been the culprit, Poppy was sure he'd understand. It wasn't quite taking your clothes off and running down the sidewalk naked bad as Brynie had but it was disobeying your father and that was never good.

"Oh ok."

After dinner Tim, Poppy, and Grandpa Jerry played with the kids in the backyard before it was time for their baths. Tim gave Tyler a piggyback ride up the stairs while Grandpa Jerry followed with Bryn on his shoulders. Poppy had been told not to carry the kids upstairs until the doctors cleared him after his surgery. He followed the others, feeling useless until Ty and Brynie insisted he read them their story that night. Ellie came up to tuck them in.

Tim silently wondered how families with two full sets of grandparents managed without tripping over each other. Still, Jerry and Barbara were only here for the week, going forward it wouldn't be a problem. He knew his dad was feeling left out because he had to be careful of his knee. They were all adults; it was ludicrous to think any of them might be jealous of time spent with the
children. Besides, Tim wanted his kids to be comfortable with everyone in the family, how else was that going to happen without them spending time together?

Tuesday morning he kissed Ellie and the children goodbye as he and the Bishops drove off to the camp. They’d decided to get an early start so the couple could resume their sightseeing in the afternoon. Tim would drop them at the National Mall and they’d take the Metro back, calling for a ride from the station.

Nate was waiting for them and grinned in thanks at the hot breakfasts he was handed, one for him, one for Juanita. "Thanks Timmo! Let me get this to her or she'll be on my case." He nodded at the Bishops as he turned toward Juanita's tent. He was back in a minute, enjoying his coffee. "That's better than the shelter's. You make this?"

"I did."

"You're a good boy. Where's Ms. Ellie?"

"At work. These are her parents, Barbara and Jerry Bishop."

Nate shook hands with them, "Your daughter's a pistol; I always enjoy her visits with Sari and the boys. Timmo, they told me you were away with your dad and the littles."

"We were but we're back to stay now, Nate."

"Good, we missed you!"

"Thanks, I missed you too. And we have a carload of things for you."

"Bless you, kiddo, you're too good to us as usual."

"And I'll tell you as I always do, that you and Juanita kept us alive, Nate. None of us are ever going to forget that!"

Nate reached down and ruffled his hair. "Saw your daddy do that to you when you were here last."

"Aw, come on we have a lot of stuff to unload."

"Let me get," Nate paused and then bellowed, "John! Get over here!"

Another big guy came lumbering over, grinning at Tim and nodding to the Bishops. Nate told him, "Timmo's brought shoes and stuff, we need to unload."

It took them all of 5 minutes to unload the SUV. Nate bellowed "Shoes!" and several people emerged from the tents. Tim handed Big John his new shoes right at the car and then put a hand on his arm. "Got socks for you too, man, wait until we get those out before trying the shoes on."

"All right Timmo."

Nate grinned when Tim handed him the new boots. "I forgot to tell you!"

"Geo mentioned you needed new boots. I saw your size and bought them just in case."

They distributed the shoes by size and then Tim passed out the socks. Not wanting to sit in the dirt, everyone returned to the tents to try them on. They all fit or at least no one wanted to say they didn't. Nate and Juanita would handle the distribution of the rest of the clothes after their visitors were gone. The family that needed new sleeping bags and the woman whose tent was beyond
repair smiled when they received the new items. "Thank you!"

Tim nodded, "This one is bigger than the one you have. I thought you could use both, it'll give you a little extra protection this winter."

Turning to the group, he repeated what he always said.

"Don't thank me; my sister, brothers and I lived here for 9 years. We remember, we'll always remember. You need anything or you have problems, you let Nate, Juanita or Big John know. We can help you help yourselves. You want to stop drinking or change whatever landed you here, let us know. We can't do it for you but we can help. If someone's harassing you, let us know. I'm a cop, my dad's a cop, my wife's a cop, my brother's a Marine, believe me we can help!"

One of the women called out, "Aren't you Doc McGee's brother?"

"Yes ma'am and proud of it!"

"He was here couple weeks ago, helped my little girl; she had a bad cut. He carried her over to the clinic, cleaned it and stitched it up."

"That's my Bro! Know where he got the idea to become a doctor?"

The others shook their heads. "He got a play doctor kit from Toys for Tots one year for Christmas when we lived here. Over at the shelter, he opened it up, so excited. Now he's a doctor for real, he studied hard, worked hard, earned scholarships to pay for it and now he's a doctor. Please don't give up hope, ever! I remember how easy it is to do that, but it's a trap. When you give up hope, life gets worse. Keep your kids in school, make sure they do their homework; help them avoid all the crap that goes on around here and they'll make it out." He grinned, "Sorry, I didn't mean to preach!"

One of the women raised her hand. "I lost my house and everything, landed here. I have skills and experience but I can't get a job because I don't have a permanent address. Ms. Lu over at the shelter said to try using their address but too many employers know that now."

Tim wrote something on the back of a business card. "Here you go. That should be all you need. It's a UPS store where I get some of my mail. I'll add your name to my box so it'll be legal to use. I trust you not to hand that out to anyone else. I'm picky about sharing."

"I promise I won't, but I can't pay you."

Tim smiled, "Yes you can. When you have a job and your own home, don't forget this place. Help when and how you can. Bake cookies, donate your old clothes; just don't forget."

She nodded, "I can do that."

Tim handed her another card, "Please print the name you'll be using for your job applications; that's the one I'll add to mine for the mail. When you get anything, I'll let Nate know and get it to you." He paused, "If you need clothes, a haircut or transportation for interviews, let Nate or Juanita know or call me. We can help with that too." He looked at her, "You ever stay at the shelter?"

She nodded. "Last winter but it was too crowded and noisy. When it got warmer, I moved over here to the camp; I like my independence."

"When you're ready to start your job hunt, consider going back. Hot showers, clean hair and a full stomach are a priority for a potential employee. You'll want to look and feel your best and you
don't want your stomach growling during an interview!"

"Thanks, I'll do that." She smiled for the first time and the Bishops saw the woman had relaxed her worried stance.

Most of the crowd stuck around and now eyes lit up when they passed out the treats they'd brought. When Barbara took out the oranges, apples and avocados, eyes were on the hands passing the fresh fruits to Nate. Bags of potatoes with rolls of foil came next and there was a murmur, they were going to have a feast today!

Tim passed an old round grill on a stand and a bag of charcoal over to Nate. "This is from my dad. And so," he handed over a large package of chicken, "is this. Guess you can cook it for lunch with the potatoes, huh?"

"Timmo, this is great and there's plenty for all of us. How do we do the potatoes?"

"Wash them first and then tear off a piece of foil big enough to go around each one. Let's do one so you can see."

The job-hunting woman took a potato to the ladies' room to wash it. When she returned, Tim found the olive oil they'd brought, measured the foil, tore it off, smeared olive oil on the inside of most of the foil and then using one of the plastic knives pierced the potato three times. Then he wrapped the oily foil around the potato. "Fold it up so nothing will leak out. Make sure the two long ends of the foil are on the top when you put them on the coals, otherwise the olive oil will leak out and cause all kinds of flames. Nate, better have one of the bottles of water nearby just in case."

One of the men stepped forward, "I know how to do that, I'm an unemployed cook. I can grill the meat for us too. Is the grill clean and is there a turner or tongs I can use?"

Tim nodded and handed the man a metal spatula and tongs. "Here you go. Yes, the grill is clean and I think I've included some scrub pads to wash it off again. Don't burn yourself - be careful. Oops, I almost forgot!" He dug around and brought out disposable plates. "These are the kind we use for barbecues, they're plenty sturdy. There are vegetables in that bag," he pointed to a large bag. "You can wash them and roast them in foil too. And lastly..." he pulled out a large package of paper towels, "napkins!" He looked around, "There are salt, pepper and a few other spices in with the food we brought. Enjoy your meal, don't eat too much at once - stay healthy and safe, please!"

With a wave to everyone, the trio returned to the car and left. As they drove off Barbara remarked, "This sounds terrible, but they're a lot cleaner and smell better than the homeless folks at home."

Tim chuckled, "That's because of the restrooms, the liquid soap, dry shampoo, toothpaste and deodorant. The camp is officially a city park, thus the restrooms. They have cold water only and the non-profit pays most of the water bill but the city has never shut it down and they pay the electric bill. When we were here, we'd sit in there at night to do our homework, even slept in there a couple of times when Nate was worried about someone at the camp. All of us kids slept in the ladies' room with the door locked from the inside. Two of our friends, Freddie and Jose are plumbers now and they keep it going. We provide soap, towels and in the winter, Nate has a big pot he puts on the oil drum to heat water for everyone. A few years ago, we came up with the idea of providing each tent with a metal bucket and they get some of the hot water. Nate collects the metal buckets when the weather warms up and we store them in our storage unit. The first year we handed out the buckets, they'd all disappeared by the next winter. Now they're just on loan until spring and there's a penalty for not returning a bucket. I don't know what that is, I'm afraid to ask!"

"Wow. If I were homeless, I'd want to be in that camp."
Tim shrugged, "We can't get everyone out. Not everyone wants to leave; we can't even get everyone to accept what we bring. However, none of us, Sarah, Rob, Geo, Barry, Freddie, Jose, Bill, or the other kids who grew up with us there, none of us was there because we wanted to be there. Sarah and I were dumped in a strange city; Rob's mother abandoned him on a busy street. Geordie's father was an alcoholic who died while they were staying at the shelter, leaving his 10-year-old son alone. Barry's uncle deserted him at the shelter; Bill, Freddie, and Jose ran away from abusive guardians or foster parents and ended up there. Nate and Juanita do their best to help. They provide shelter, some adult knowledge and some measure of safety if not food. I won't say either of them is parental but we knew they cared about us and that's more than anyone else had."

"How long have they been there?"

"About 35 years. We showed up almost thirty years ago and they'd been here for a few years. They're siblings. Juanita is schizophrenic and their family didn't or couldn't get any help or treatment for her. She was an outcast, dropped out of school and couldn't keep a job. Nate did as much as he could to help but he had a drinking problem. They came here, set up their tents and they've been here ever since. Nate had a narrow escape with a fire one night when he was drunk and it scared him sober. He worked after that, made enough money to keep them fed and clothed but not enough to afford a place to live. Juanita learned how to sew at some point and for several years made beautiful quilts and blankets, I think Sarah has the quilt she made for us. She has arthritis, bad now. Rob, Jimmy, and Ducky make sure she has pain medication but she sometimes won't take it. Nate sneaks it into her food but she figures it out when the pain stops.

"When they go, the city will shut the camp down for good. They've only left it alone because Nate and Big John are strict with the residents, there's no violence, bullying or stealing from each other allowed, and we've lobbied to keep it open during Nate and Juanita's lifetimes. The police department's annual response to crime statistics is lower for the camp than for some commercial businesses in the city."

"What happens if they can't take care of themselves anymore?"

Tim gave them a sad smile, "We have a trust set up for them. Right now, we have funds enough for 3 years of assisted living. When we publish our book, all the proceeds will go to the trust. Getting them to leave will be a major challenge."

"You're all wonderful people to have done all this!"

Tim shrugged a shoulder, "They took care of us when nobody else did; way we see it, it's our turn now. Just as we would parents. That is, some of us have parents now but we didn't when we set up the trust and certainly never expected to have any."

"What about Big John?"

"He has family in Texas who know where he is; they visit him a couple of times a year, they are members of the non-profit and contribute what they can. We have a Facebook page for our organization; they belong and watch for any changes. Whoever visits the camp usually posts an update about him. I'll do that tonight, post that we visited, John was in good health, and that the residents were treated to a grilled chicken dinner. When the time comes, John's family will take him home."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He was in an accident in his late teens and sustained some brain damage. He's a good soul and a huge help to Nate and Lu but he can't live on his own and needs assistance with everyday things."
"And the others, what will happen to them when the camp closes?"

"Most of them can go to the shelter. They'll lose the 'independence' that woman spoke of but they won't be allowed to stay in the park. We do have it in writing that the city will give two weeks' notice before closing the park. Closing the restrooms will chase folks out of there."

"It'll be a sad day when they have to leave."

Tim just nodded. Nate was still healthy but Rob and Jimmy said he was slowing down every year. Jimmy thought he'd need to move in the next five years while Rob believed it would be sooner than that. He'd told his brothers and sister he didn't think Juanita would live long enough to leave the camp. She had several conditions besides the schizophrenia and arthritis and they were all getting worse. As she refused to go to the hospital for treatment, the doctors kept her as comfortable as she'd allow.

He was quiet on the way home, thinking of all the people he loved. In spite of his rough start, he considered himself a lucky man. Three siblings, chosen family and then the team, again chosen. Now Ellie, the love of his life, his wonderful children, his father, grandfather, Ducky, and the Bishops. He had far more than almost anyone he knew.

When Barbara said, "A penny for your thoughts?" he smiled and told her. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're an exceptional human being, Timothy Jackson Gibbs, and I'm so proud and happy that you're part of my family, that you're marrying my only daughter."

He blushed saying, "I'm not perfect, believe me! What are you going to say when Ellie calls you saying what a schlub she married?"

Barbara smiled, "I'll ask her how far along she is."

Tim blinked in surprise but said nothing while Jerry doubled over in laughter.

When Jerry could finally speak, he said, "Smart man, there is no good response to that."

Dropping the Bishops off at a Metro station, he made sure they knew where to exit for their sightseeing and how to get home. Then he drove to the UPS store and added two names to his account, Ellie's and the job-seeking woman. From there he went home and buried himself in work all afternoon. He finished the first project and after making a copy, sent the original to the director. His father was home so he walked down to say hello to him. Mac was out with a friend who'd driven over from Delaware to see him. Tim smirked, "A friend? What's her name?"

"Her name is Kathleen, and she is very nice."

"Doesn't have red hair, does she?"

His father snorted, "What does Tony call them? Cougars. She's Mac's age and I really prefer someone closer to my age, at least the same decade. Her hair is pretty though, a light red."

He grinned when his son gave him a look, "Hey, I can admire a woman's hair, even if it isn't her natural color!"

They sat out on the deck with cold beverages. "Looks like the weather is going to hold for the wedding. I know you have a contingency plan."

"Yep, inside Ducky's house."
"How many people are coming?"

"Somehow it went from 60 something to 80 something."

"80 wow! I'm not sure I know that many people I like."

Tim laughed, "Several of the Ortizes will be here and you like them. We haven't met Ellie's aunt, uncle and cousins, but she likes them so we'll like them. Our gang will be there and you like all of them. Don't worry about it, stick with your kids, Tobias and Mac all day and leave the in-laws to me. After all, they're my in-laws, not yours."

"Kiddo, you know it doesn't work that way in our family. Your in-laws are part of your family and so part of our family."

They spent a convivial couple of hours together and when Tim got a call from Jerry for a pickup at the Metro station, Dad went along for the ride.
Chapter 40

Wednesday the brothers arrived and were welcomed with another dinner party, despite a few conspicuous absences.

Ellie scheduled a half-day of vacation and was preparing to leave the office, off until the following Wednesday, when Tony's phone rang, an internal call. As he reached for the phone, he gave her a pointed look and a head tilt toward the elevator. She grabbed her stuff and hurriedly left, wishing that call had come 5 minutes later or better yet, not at all.

And so the second dinner party was also missing a few of the guests: Tony, Ducky, Abby and the Palmers. The Vances and Fornells weren't expected, having already declined.

It took longer for Ellie to relax that evening, alternately worrying about her team without her and possibly not being free to come to the wedding. Tim was sure that Ducky and Jimmy would at least be free by Saturday. His father agreed with him and fought the urge to call his former SIC for a sitrep. Other than personal concern for the welfare of Tony and his team, it was no longer his business. Eventually Ellie shoved aside her worry.

Thursday and Friday flew by. The visitors took the SUV for sightseeing while the bride and groom had Dad's #2 of 3 truck. They picked up their marriage license at City Hall Thursday morning, locking it in the safe at home. The bridal party met for a late lunch that same day, finalizing last minute details.

Breena was Tony's backup for the caterer; she called them to go over the menu and confirm everything one last time. Ellie called the baker to confirm cake details and was touched that Abby had already taken the time to call, probably while Major Mass Spec was running. The bakery would deliver the cake to Ducky's around 2:00 Saturday afternoon, with the guests arriving around 3:30 and the ceremony to begin at 4:00.

Poppy and Grandpa Jerry took the children to Tony's tailor for their final fitting; everything was perfect and the flower girl dress and ring bearer suit went home with them, carefully hung in the back seat, with dire warnings to the child sitting closest not to touch. Barbara had already spoken with the florist and Tim was surprised to hear that Ellie's brother John and his wife Jazzy sang in community and church choirs and would pinch hit for Jimmy if necessary.

The only backup they were missing was the most essential, a stand-in officiant for Ducky. By late Thursday afternoon, they knew Ducky and Jimmy would be there on Saturday. While the case was proving to be a nasty one, the two MEs had completed their work.

With a huge sigh of relief, Tim set aside the call list he'd pulled together of every non-denominational church and justice of the peace in the District, Maryland, Virginia and states as far north and west as New York and Kentucky. He'd been prepared to beg and offer top dollar to officiate at the wedding; he'd pay roundtrip airfare if necessary. He didn't tell Ellie until after the wedding but he'd already left messages for over a dozen potential officiants. He'd searched online for internet ministries. He'd also planned to post a plea on Facebook, Twitter and every other social network he could find. He was marrying Eleanor Rose Bishop on Saturday, whatever it took!

It was only later he realized they already had their marriage license, they could have easily taken it with them, along with witnesses, to City Hall on Friday, been married by a City Clerk, and
repeated their vows at the wedding on Saturday. Sometimes simple is the best method. And yeah, he thought he'd was calm and handling things well. Maybe not so much.

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Friday morning just before dawn, Sarah and Rob collected Barbara Bishop from their father's house, driving to Silver Spring to a wholesale flower warehouse. The bride's bouquet, those of her attendants, the groom and his party's boutonnieres, additional corsages and boutonnieres were waiting to be picked up from the florist. Barbara decided it would be more economical and fun to make the table arrangements themselves and thus the trip to the warehouse. When DiNozzo's team landed the case earlier in the week, leaving Bob Chalmers out of the floral preparations, Sarah and Rob offered their help.

As Rob was hungry, they stopped at "Diner the Great", their favorite diner in Maryland, for a quick breakfast. The McGee siblings had shared many meals here when Tim was transferred up from Norfolk and the owner, Nancy, was a good friend. Rob called in their orders from the car so when they walked in, they grabbed a booth, waved hello to Nancy who they'd also see at the wedding and quickly dug into their meals.

Although still a bit groggy from the very early morning and the time difference, Barbara was having a wonderful time with Tim's younger siblings. Rob was shy on Sunday when they met, a little less so on Wednesday and today he'd lost all hints of shyness. The two of them told Ellie's mom a few Tim stories, things they knew their brother would never mention; she laughed at some of the tales and held back tears during others.

The flower market was a lot of fun. The color theme of the wedding was 'rainbow', although not limited to the visible colors of the rainbow. With the diversity in mind, the trio selected flowers in an eye-pleasing variety of colors, first giving them a scent test, always aware of Tim's allergies. No roses, scented lilies or other strongly scented flowers were allowed.

Barbara had photos of Ellie's bouquet and Tim's boutonnière and they began by selecting flowers in those colors. The bride's bouquet would have blues, purples, greens, burgundy, dark pink, yellow and orange, which gave them many choices. Tim's boutonnière would be a rich light blue with a bold green leaf.

The rented tables were round and seated up to 8 with one rectangular table for the wedding party. After much discussion, they'd decided to have one basket of flowers per guest table and several for the bridal party table. That was after Sarah and Barbara discovered their mutual dislike of tall arrangements that blocked views of ones' tablemates, making conversation awkward.

Once they had all the stems gathered and paid for, they headed back to Alexandria where their purchases would rest in the coolest part of Jethro's home, his basement, until Saturday morning. Then a group of volunteers, Barbara's daughters-in-law and older grandchildren, Sarah, Rob, Geordie, Tony's girlfriend Maggie, would assemble the flower baskets, transporting them to Ducky's home shortly before the wedding.

Later that morning, Rob joined Tim, Geordie and Ellie's brothers for a visit to Ducky's backyard. The lawn was freshly mowed, the rose arbor Dad built for his friend had a flowering vine, luckily not roses, twined around it; there were stacks of folding chairs that had been delivered along with the tables and separate tables for the cake and beverages. There was even an awning to put up over the cake table. The adjacent patio had been swept and cleaned and they confirmed it was big enough for dancing. They were renting a sound system and John and George Bishop would be their DJs. Tim's brothers were surprised as Tim had never been an enthusiastic dancer; he explained he'd learned enough that he felt confident. Since there was nothing that needed doing until the brief
rehearsal that evening, they left.

They met the rest of the males in the family, minus Tony and including the kids, for lunch out at Dave and Buster's, a more or less adult version of Chucky Cheese. After a delicious meal, they spent several hours playing the various games in the large arcade. Tim hadn't wanted any kind of typical bachelor party and he did want to include the children. While the Bishop kids had fun swimming and doing a little sightseeing, he knew they'd love Dave and Buster's. There were two in Oklahoma but John and George confirmed they'd never been.

Most of the games were a little old for Tyler and his new cousin Matt but they hung out with their elders and the older Bishop boys, Nick and Ethan, having a good time. And some of it was just fine for the two youngest boys; they had fun playing a video version of bumper cars.

While the boys were off eating and playing games, the girls also had lunch out and then went roller-skating. Sarah and Jenna had been surprised to find that all the girls, young and old, knew how to skate and so skate they did.

Nervous about scraped knees and elbows, Ellie kept a close eye on Brynie for the first few minutes. Until she saw her daughter outskating everyone there and remembered Tim's comment that Brynie was well-coordinated and loved skating, swimming, and swinging a bat, catching a ball. They'd talked about getting her a scooter for her birthday.

Ellie was good at those things too while Tim loved swimming, volleyball, and baseball but other than those sports wasn't much of an organized sports enthusiast. She smiled, her fiancé liked horses, was great at riding and that was a big plus in her book. She didn't care if he wasn't a big football or basketball fan.

She wondered if he'd ever skied, she'd ask. That might be a fun family vacation; a trip to one of the ski resorts within driving distance of DC, in Virginia or Pennsylvania and the kids could learn to ski. Ellie had learned on winter trips to her uncle's place in Colorado and continued to enjoy it. She thought they might try ice-skating too. They needed fun to get them through the cold winters.

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Late that afternoon, they heard from Steve and Pam Ortiz. They'd checked into their hotel and the bridal couple made plans to meet them for lunch on Saturday along with an 'out of towners' brunch on Sunday.

At the end of their afternoon of play, the men and women, boys and girls of both families reconvened at the house and then split into a smaller group: the wedding party. After the rehearsal, the larger group would gather at a favorite restaurant famous for its barbecued ribs, where they could eat as much and get as messy as they wanted.

Ducky was all set, waiting for them in his backyard. Jimmy pulled up just as they did and Tim smiled, finally believing the two would be there for the wedding. He knew Ducky had arranged with his counterpart at FBI headquarters to cover any autopsies needed over the weekend. As Director Vance and Director Sailes of the FBI knew and approved, Tim wasn't worried.

After reviewing the 'game plan', everyone got into position. Ducky led Tim, Dad, Geo and Rob in from the side. When Jimmy started singing, Breena and Sarah started walking slowly and then Jenna started.

Ty and Brynie listened carefully for the words that meant it was time to walk toward Granducky. Uncle Jimmy turned and sang the words to them and they both smiled as they walked forward.
Brynie wanted to march but Mommy and Daddy said no, walking to Granducky would be just fine.

Tomorrow she'd have flower petals to scatter and Grandma Barbara had showed her how to do that rather than throw them. Brynie liked that better anyway; she treasured flowers and didn't want to hurt them by throwing them at people. For tonight, she pretended the pieces of paper Mommy made for her were the flowers and she had fun scattering them. Her brother was right next to her and he had to carry a pillow with a play ring pinned on it. She'd rather scatter flowers!

Looking behind her, she saw Mommy walking close to them with their new grandparents. Ty whispered to look at Granducky and she nodded, turning to the front again. Now her daddy was there with Poppy, Uncle Rob, and Uncle Geo. She smiled at them but remembered not to wave.

She'd wanted to wear her pretty new dress tonight but Mommy said it would get dirty and she needed to wear it for the first time at their wedding. Then Daddy said they were going to a fun restaurant tonight where everyone could be messy if they wanted. Her fairy dress would wait but then she'd get to wear it for the whole party.

Ty was a little nervous until he saw Daddy and the others. He smiled at them but like his sister, remembered not to wave. He was glad he didn't have to wear his new suit tonight; he liked it and was excited that he'd be dressed just like his daddy but wanted to get messy at dinner. Then he remembered the surprise for tomorrow and smiled again, that would be fun!

They finally stood before Granducky and then turned around to sit on chairs with Grandpa. They watched as their Mommy and new grandparents moved toward the front. When they got to Granducky, Grandma Barbara and Grandpa Jerry kissed Mommy and then sat down across the aisle from Grandpa and them.

Granducky talked some and then Daddy and Mommy talked some, Poppy handed a ring to Daddy who put it on Mommy's finger and then Ms. Jenna handed another ring to Mommy who put it on Daddy's finger.

Tyler wondered why they traded rings. Didn't they like them? Then Granducky talked some more and Daddy and Mommy kissed. Yay, it was done! Grandpa held onto them, quietly reminding them they would walk out with their parents. Daddy and Mommy turned around, holding hands and then held out a hand each for Ty and Bryn. They liked that and practically danced all the way to the back.

Unbeknownst to the children, there had been a lot of discussion about what they should do when they got to Ducky. Someone, not a parent or grandparent, had suggested the kids stay up front with the wedding party but everyone who was a parent vetoed that. As well behaved and mature as they were for their ages, they were still young children; they'd be excited and nervous and needed to sit with someone they knew to watch the rest of it. Then if they were wiggly, it wouldn't matter.

Another suggestion had been to split them up, one sitting with the Bishops, one with Grandpa Mac but Ellie and Tim quickly vetoed that. Their kids were best friends, they'd want to be together and it would be very difficult for Brynie not to talk across the aisle to Ty. The kids needed to be comfortable and that meant together.

Grandpa Mac was thrilled to have the children coming to him. After the deaths of Shannon and Kelly, he'd never considered the possibility of grandchildren, much less great-grandchildren. To be at Tim's wedding and have some part in it was wonderful, beyond wonderful.

Standing with Tim, Jethro watched his father-in-law, thinking he had a good idea of what Mac was feeling. He was thinking the same thing. After losing Kelly, he couldn't stand the thought of failing
another child. And as his teammates edged into their 30s and 40s without finding partners, his hopes of being an honorary grandfather began to dim. And the one wedding they'd had in the group, Jimmy's, had been out of state in the middle of a terrible crisis. He'd figured his only chance was to be granduncle to Victoria Palmer and any children of Emily or Amira. And now here he was, standing next to the son he never knew he had and loved with all his heart.

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With the rehearsal over, Ducky and the Palmers joined the caravan to the restaurant. When Ty asked where Victoria and Teddy were, Uncle Jimmy said they were with their other grandparents but would be at the wedding tomorrow.

The ribs, coleslaw and 'taters were delicious and no one worried about getting messy. Ty thought it was even better than making mud pies, you could get dirty making those but you weren't supposed to eat them. He tasted one once and spit it out. This tasted really good. Daddy cut the meat off the bone for him but he still gnawed on the bones. Poppy called him his little caveman. Ty thought a caveman lived with dinosaurs so that was cool.

Brynie smeared her entire face in sauce and announced she was having a mud bath. Her female relatives realized she'd picked that up from a conversation at lunch that day and laughed. Ellie thought some parenting might be needed but she wasn't sure quite what. She looked at Tim who didn't seem upset, in fact he was laughing as hard as everyone else was. Even Breena, Ellie's source for all things Mommy when her own mother or the internet weren't available, was laughing. Relaxing, she gave in to her own laughter, enjoying her daughter's fun and imagination.

Back home the kids had real baths with Daddy getting the last little bits of sauce from Brynie's ears; she'd really done a good job. Stories read by Mommy, tuck in's and both young ones were out like a light. They'd have a chat with Brynie later.

Grandpa was there and offered to stay up and listen for the kids if the bride and groom wanted to go for a walk. Time alone sounded great and they grabbed sweaters, reminded Grandpa of their cell phones and walked down the driveway. When they passed the mailbox, Tim made a face, "I didn't get the mail today or yesterday, did you?"

Ellie shook her head, "We've been too busy! Let's get it on the way back."

They continued on their walk, ending up at the park, snuggling on a bench. Tim pulled her hair back, kissing her ears. "This time tomorrow we'll be married!"

Having trouble forming words, she managed to say, "Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Gibbs."

He stopped and she groaned in disappointment. Ignoring that for the moment he said, "I thought you were keeping Bishop?"

"I am. But people will still call me Mrs. Gibbs, now do you mind?" She tilted her head and with a chuckle, he obeyed.

Eventually they wandered back to the house, remembering the mail. Tim grabbed it out of the box, brought it in and tossed it onto the dining room table. Then the two of them ran upstairs, not noticing Grandpa half asleep in the recliner. He smiled to himself as they disappeared.

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The bridal couple was up early, too excited to sleep any longer. When both children slept ten minutes past their normal waking time, their parents woke them. Naptime was crucial today, no
sleeping late! They had their Sunday pancakes instead of their Saturday breakfast because on Sunday they were having brunch with all the out of town guests and their combined family. After the brunch, the newlyweds were leaving for a couple of days, booked into a resort on Chesapeake Bay.

The ceremony was at 4:00 and Tim had been afraid the day would drag but he hadn't accounted for the kid factor. Getting them up, dressed, fed and then sticking to ordinary activities such as pulling weeds, watering the garden, picking up their rooms and the playroom, putting toys away, going to the park to play. That took them to lunchtime and Ty and Brynie were surprised and happy to see the Ortizes. They had a wonderful lunch, then it was back to the house to do a few last minute household chores; finally, it was naptime.

Tim and Ellie sighed with relief when the kids went down without a fuss; the couple immediately started their personal preparations for the wedding and time away. Ellie and her attendants were meeting early at Ducky's for hair, makeup, and dressing. Tim had Poppy's house where the men of the family, fingers crossed including Tony, would join him and Ty. Ellie's brothers and nephews wouldn't stay long; they'd help with anything they could before joining their wives and daughters at Ducky's. Jethro and Jerry had asked the photographer to come by to get shots of all the men and boys together.
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The first thing the couple did was pack their bags for their getaway. They had the honeymoon suite at a local hotel tonight, followed by the brunch and the resort tomorrow. They stowed the bags in Ellie's truck as the Acura needed to be available Sunday and Monday for transportation and of course the children. Poppy also had his New Mexico truck, he'd finally sold the post-kids' truck (#2 of 3). The Challenger and his old pickup were also available; there should be no problems with transportation!

When they came back into the house, Tim noticed a big red note on top of something on the dining table. The mail they'd tossed there last night. The red note was from Grandpa Mac and read, "This what you've been waiting for?"

It was from the County Clerk's office and Ellie tore it open. "Tim, it's finalized; I'm the legal mother of Tyler Dean Gibbs and Suzanna Bryn Gibbs. Oh!"

She burst into happy tears and Tim shed a few himself, holding onto his love and thinking about the timing. Although neither could remember when they'd last checked the mailbox, the letter might have been sitting there for days. "Let's tell them when they join us at the end of the ceremony. We can ask Ducky to make the announcement."

"Oh honey, they'll love that!"

After hugs and kisses, they went upstairs but Ellie soon shooed Tim out of their room so she could shower, pack her makeup, hair products, footwear and whatever else she needed for the wedding. Then she took it out to the truck along with her wedding dress, hidden from view in an opaque garment bag. They'd removed Ty's car seat but left Brynie's in the truck, they'd give it to Poppy when they left the party this evening. Before the kids went for their naps, Ellie took everything Brynie would need for the wedding and stuck it their room. Now she carefully packed the little girl's dress, footwear and various other items, adding it to everything in the truck.

In the meantime, her fiancé took a shower in the downstairs bathroom. Tim and Ty's suits, dress shirts, and footwear were already at Poppy's, in the closet in the downstairs bedroom. Other than dressing, getting Tyler ready and making sure that Ellie's ring was still in his father's custody; Tim didn't have much to do. He'd had his hair cut three weeks ago so it was just at the length Ellie preferred, the length he'd become accustomed to in New Mexico. He still had layers of different colors in his hair but the darkest color was almost gone and the overall effect now looked more like hair kissed by the summer sun than by artificial color.

When the kids woke, they were washed and dressed, their excitement level climbing. Their wedding was almost here! Ellie and Brynie left after kisses for Tim and Tyler, they drove down the street to pick up Barbara. The boys made sure they had everything before locking up the house and strolling down the sidewalk to Poppy's where Grandpa Mac, Grandpa Jerry, and of course Poppy were already waiting.

They enjoyed the few minutes they had alone with the older men before the Uncles and Granducky arrived. And then as Ty told someone later, "It was really funny because Uncle Robbie was talking loud, Uncle Jimmy was humming and making goosey noises; Granducky was telling a story, Uncle Geordie was teasing Poppy and Daddy was walking up and down, talking to himself."

They were all glad when Tony walked in the door. Tim grabbed his shoulders, "DiNozzo, I was so afraid you weren't going to make it!"

Tony patted his back. "We had it all figured out; we'd trade off attending the wedding. I wanted to be at the ceremony, and then I'd stay for a little bit of the party while Bob and Evan would rotate. We'd bring our laptops to Ducky's and work from there if we had to; Vance even cleared that, as long as we were out of earshot. However, we broke the case about 0300 this morning, actually Tim your folks worked your kind of magic, cut through some tough encryptions and gave us the missing links we desperately needed. Anyway, the suspects cooled their heels in Interrogation for a few hours while Bob and I got some sleep, then Evan slept while we questioned the first two dirtbags. We broke them and Abby gave us enough physical evidence that we didn't need confessions but you know they're good to have. Then Evan tackled the third guy who'd already figured out he was marked for the fall guy; he handed his written confession to Fuller when he walked in the door. I'm here, Abby, Chalmers, and Fuller will be at the wedding along with a very happy Director. These guys were running a…" Tony stopped as he realized how many 'civilians' were in the room as well as his four year old nephew. "Not wedding talk. Tell you some other time."

He chuckled when Mac, Jerry, and Geordie looked disappointed while Rob was clearly relieved. "Sorry everyone! I can't have all our hard work tossed out because I opened my big mouth!"

Tim looked amused, proud and relieved as he asked, "Were my folks working all night? I need to approve their overtime and send them attaboys."

Tony nodded "Six of them trading off hours but yeah, they arrived in the bullpen with the links about 0230. You should have seen Dallas; he was so excited he could hardly breathe."

Tim nodded proudly, "Oh yeah, definitely some attaboys. This is just the kind of cooperative effort we need with the field teams."

Using both hands, Gibbs patted the backs of their heads. "And you can gush all over them on Wednesday, Timothy. Boys, no more work talk!"

The others bit back smiles when DiNozzo and former Agent McGee automatically replied, "Yes Boss."

John and George arrived with their sons and Tony finally had a chance to meet Ellie's brothers and nephews. The Bishops and Rob had been to Ducky's to deliver the flower baskets, set out the chairs and the big tables; they reported the cake had been delivered and the delivery person was in the kitchen assembling it; the caterer's crew was just arriving as they left.

The photographer arrived and got some candid shots of the chaos and at least a few of all the men and boys together. Then Tim, Ty, Grandpa Mac, and Poppy disappeared into the downstairs bedroom to get ready. They left Tyler for last, giving him fewer chances to get dirty or wrinkled. At the photographer's request Tim left his tie undone, a favorite selected by Ellie in blue and green hues. When he and Tyler were ready, they slipped out and had some photos taken. Then Poppy joined them, he did Tim's tie for him, at the direction of the photographer, then more photos and finally Grandpa pinned Tim's boutonnière onto his lapel as the photographer snapped away.

Jerry, John, and George and grandsons Matt, Ethan and Nick took the master bedroom to change while Rob and Geordie slipped into the kids' room with their wedding clothes, Rob's London suit and Major Perry's dress blues. When Rob was dressed, Geordie pinned a boutonnière to his jacket lapel for him. Patting his little brother's arms, Geordie smiled, "Here we are, Robbie, all grown up and one of us getting married!"
Rob returned the smile, "Glad Tim and Ellie found each other. Think we'll ever find 'the one', Geo?"

"I'm sure of it, little brother. Look at Tim's history with women, one disaster after another. But he persevered and here we are on his wedding day!"

Rob nodded, "I really like Ellie. It was awful when they were away but I'm glad we got to know her better."

"Me too. All right, we're set, let's go!"

When Geordie and Rob returned to the main level, Poppy automatically straightened his posture and snapped off a salute to his son. Geordie returned the salute saying, "As you were, Gunny! I don't believe its protocol for fathers to salute their sons." That brought big smiles and the photographer, who'd managed to catch both salutes, kept clicking away.

Once everyone was ready, the group reconvened on the back deck where the photographer mixed them up and took another thousand or so photos, or so it felt. Finally Tim spoke, "We've got to split up. George, John, and their boys need to join the rest of their families."

The photographer asked for one more shot, he'd noticed the footwear of several of the men and boys. He lined them up for shots of legs and feet, amidst a lot of laughter. There was one last candid shot as the bridegroom, fathers, grandfather, brothers, and the boys, big and little started splitting apart, still laughing and grinning at each other.

Poppy drove his son, grandson, and father-in-law while the others piled into their own vehicles or rentals. Gibbs led the parade to Georgetown where the passengers were dropped off while the drivers parked a block away, leaving room for the guests.

Tim and Tyler walked into the house hand in hand and smiled at each other when they heard Brynie and Aunty Sarah laughing upstairs. "Can we go see them, Daddy?"

"You can, son; I'm not allowed to see your mom until the wedding."

"Ok, then I won't either."

Tim looked at his son, brimming with love and pride in him. "I'm so proud of you, Tyler Dean. And I love you so much!" He leaned down to kiss his little boy who'd tilted his face up to smile at his father. "I love you too Daddy."

He was surprised but happy when he heard the click of a camera and realized their father and son moment had been captured.

Their guests were beginning to arrive, so Tim, Ty, and the others went outside to greet them. Tim was glad Jerry was with him as the Bishop great uncle, aunt and cousins arrived. They were quickly introduced as Aunt Cissy, Uncle John, Trish and Ali. He chuckled when he noticed their footwear, along with the Ortizes'. It seemed the Oklahomans and New Mexicans had all gotten the word and decided to participate.

Poppy appeared and motioned to Jerry who gave Tim a hug, kissed the top of Ty's head and disappeared inside the house. While Ducky would not ask who was 'giving away' Ellie, Jerry and Barbara would walk with her down the aisle.

Ty went with his father, Poppy, and Grandpa to stand in front until someone came to get him when the bride and her entourage were ready. He stood against his father with Poppy on one side and
Mac on the other while Rob and Geordie escorted people to their seats. Tim slipped an arm around his father and grandfather, giving each a gentle hug. He couldn't believe his life, how great it was and that the woman of his dreams was marrying him. As he'd said the other day, he had more than he'd ever dreamed possible and he planned to enjoy every minute. When the guests were nearly all seated, Barbara appeared and took Ty by the hand.

As Rob and Geo approached their brother, father, and grandfather, Tim kissed Mac and escorted him to his chair, next to Abby, her brother Kyle, Tony, his girlfriend Maggie, and the Bishops in the front row. They'd mixed up the guests so there wasn't a groom or bride's side.

Finally, there was silence and Jimmy started singing, the cue for the bridal party's entrance. Tim smiled when he heard two additional voices providing Jimmy with a descant and realized John and Jazzy had slipped away from their seats. It was lovely and he hoped someone was recording it because suddenly his attention was riveted to the center aisle. First came Breena and he smiled broadly as he saw she'd come up with her own fancy footwear, then Sarah wearing a simple dress with the footwear she'd purchased while visiting, then Jenna who wore traditional heels with her dress. The guests murmured as they realized that two thirds of the brides' attendants were wearing cowgirl boots. Very attractive ones that went perfectly with their dresses. Tim smiled when he saw his children, dressed in their wedding finery and wearing their boots. He wiggled his toes, clad in his own dressy cowboy boots and then caught sight of his bride. She wore an ivory colored dress with a detailed sweetheart neckline, short poofed sleeves that sat at the edge of her shoulders and a boned, corset style bodice that ended low on her hips, almost like a bustier with sleeves. The whole thing was done in a lined lace. The skirt of the dress fell in soft gathers in a high-low hemline. One wide ruffle completed the hem and created a train in the back, skimming just above the ground as she walked and in the front, skimming her cream and tan boots. With a little bling on them, definitely dress boots. Tim couldn't take his eyes off her.

After her parents kissed her, she joined him. He took her hand and they turned to each other. Ducky said something; Tim was too distracted to pay any attention. At some point, Grandpa got up and read an excerpt from something. Tim knew it was nice; he and Ellie had picked it out and they'd listened to Mac practice reading it. Then Ducky started talking again and Tim heard his name. He said his vows, Dad handed him the ring and he slipped it on Ellie's finger, still repeating whatever Ducky was saying. Then it was Ellie's turn for vows and Tim's ring. He loved the feel of it on his finger and hoped Grandpa Jack was watching today, hoped that somehow he knew his grandson wore his wedding ring. Then they were kissing, they were married!

Ducky said something else, Ellie and the kids. Their two little ones jumped out of their chairs and ran to them, cheering. Then Ducky told them to turn and face their family and friends and he called them the Timothy Gibbs' family. He was crying, he thought he'd started when Ellie put the ring on his finger, and looking up he saw Ellie was too. He smiled at his wife and babies, surprised to hear cheering, and applause. The newlyweds walked down the aisle, grinning happily, while Ty and Brynie danced their way down.

While their guests mingled, enjoying beverages and finger food, the photographers grabbed the wedding party, members of both families and took more photos. Some of the guests had been given disposable cameras and were asked to take random photos. Tim laughed when the photographer snapped a photo of the Bishop family, including the tablet where Ellie's brother Robert's face could just be seen on Skype.

After a few more photos, Tim and Ellie visited with their guests, making sure to spend time with each one while drinks and appetizers were brought around. That was fun and they were still chatting when John and George got busy with the music system. Soon enough, the newlyweds were slow dancing. The next tune was one of their favorites and Ty, Brynie, and their new cousins
joined in as well as the rest of the folks from New Mexico and Oklahoma. Many of the others, including several of the NCIS folks joined in an impromptu line dance, called the Cotton Eyed Joe and by the end of the song, several more had joined in. It was fun and nobody cared if you knew what you were doing.

The brothers alternated musical genres, playing rock, hip-hop and slow sultry love songs as well as country. More people joined in for the line dances than the other styles and the kids liked those too. By the time the music cut off in favor of dinner, the crowd had experienced not only "Cotton Eyed Joe" but also the "Cupid Shuffle", followed by a segue into disco with the "Electric Slide", and Tim's favorite, "Boot Scootin' Boogie".

As they ate, drank and listened to Jethro's brief toast, full of love and pride in his son and new daughter-in-law, the couple continued to spend time with their guests. Before they cut the cake, there was more fun with that perennial wedding favorite: "The Chicken Dance". As the music stopped, the guests were still laughing while Jenna and Geordie announced it was time for cake. Knowing they'd have more when they returned from their getaway, the bride and groom had a few bites each.

It was getting late by the time they decided to leave. The younger children needed to get to sleep, and Tim and Ellie were ready for time to themselves. After goodnight kisses for the children, the couple changed, hopped in the truck, mercifully free of any cans tied on the back or soap smeared windows, waving as they drove off.

END OF PART TWO
As Tim settled into work on Wednesday, he hoped their lives would start to reflect some normalcy after the events of the past 19 months. He huffed to himself; he no longer remembered what had been 'normal' before Ty and Brynie entered his life. Whatever it was, the life he lived now was far more fulfilling.

At home with Mac, Jethro glanced at his pre-operation list once again. The surgery was scheduled for 0800 Friday morning, the day after tomorrow. He was told he'd be home by 1700. He had some pre-op exercises to do every day, but they were simple and straightforward. He also had some restrictions that started the day after the wedding. No carrying anything over 10 pounds including his grandchildren, no sandals or flip-flops, he was to wear lace-up shoes only. His sodium intake was limited and alcohol was forbidden starting today.

He had to watch how many stairs he did each day; he had a choice of either sleeping on the couch and avoiding his bed upstairs or giving up the basement for the duration. To his own surprise, he gave up the basement. He wasn't supposed to stand more than 20 minutes at a time anyway and the bed he'd had moved from Albuquerque was comfortable. The most difficult thing on the list for him was no caffeine for 24 hours prior to surgery. That meant from 0800 Thursday through his surgery.

He understood the various restrictions were to avoid any inflammation, strain or damage not only to his bad knee, but also to the rest of his body. He'd known he wasn't going to like this whole knee surgery thing but he figured he'd feel a whole lot better when he was healed. It wouldn't be very long, his grandbabies would still be small enough for him to carry, beer and bourbon would still be available, as would bacon, pizza, and Chinese food, all high in sodium. He'd finished last year's Christmas toy projects when they returned from New Mexico; his new knee should be stable enough by Christmas to bring them up from the basement and deliver them himself. If not, he'd ask one of his kids.

One thing he wasn't crazy about was staying in Georgetown with Ducky once discharged from the hospital. He wanted to stay at Tim and Ellie's but the kids came down with bad colds after the wedding, so that was out. As much as he would love to stay in his own home, someone besides Mac would have to stay with him and that meant longer commutes and time off work for his kids. Ducky was close to the Navy Yard, if he was needed he could get there quickly but Jimmy was more than capable of handling things for a few days. One of his kids would take him from the hospital to Ducky's and stay over the weekend and days off so the older man wouldn't have 100% care. Jethro suspected Dr. Rob would stay and hoped all of his kids would come by.

By the end of his first post-surgical week, he should be fine on his own as long as he did what he was supposed to do. He hoped to return to his home the second week, subject to the doctor's and physical therapist's approval. Anyway, Mac would be there although he'd probably sleep at Tim's so Jethro could have the den/bedroom on the first floor. In that case, Tim, Sarah, Geo, and Rob planned to rotate sleeping upstairs or on the sofa bed in the living room.

While the week sped by for everyone else, it seemed to crawl for Jethro. Tuesday, he had his pre-surgery physical and scans; Thursday he drank his last large mug of coffee shortly before 0800 and had his pre-op conversation with a nurse. When the weather forecast called for 72 degrees that
afternoon, he and Mac decided to go fishing.

He drove, his last time behind the wheel for at least two weeks, to Fletcher's Cove along the Potomac, spending the afternoon there. They'd talked about renting a fishing boat but Jethro mentioned it to the doctor on Tuesday and the answer was a firm no. Bringing folding chairs and a rolling cooler full of sandwiches and beverages, they were perfectly happy fishing from the dock.

Jethro was thankful his father-in-law planned to stay through Christmas this year; he really enjoyed spending time with him. When their girls were alive, they hadn't spent much time together, either Jethro was deployed, Mac was working or Joann was demanding he do this or that. Truthfully Jethro had done all he could, without raising his wife's suspicions, to avoid his in-laws. He hadn't had anything against Mac, just Joann and she was always wherever Mac was.

Once they had enough fish for the 6 of them for dinner, they knocked off and spent another hour watching other anglers. They made plans to bring the kids here in the spring to teach them the ancient art of casting. Before they headed home, they cleaned and gutted the fish, ready for the grill.

Friday morning, Tim, Sarah, and Geo arrived to escort their father and Mac to the hospital, Tim wearing a face mask and gloves in case he was harboring cold germs. The others laughed when Sarah said he smelled like disinfectant. Tim would go on to work after Dad signed in and would see him after the surgery that afternoon. The others would stay. Tony and Ellie were working and would see him at the house when they could. As his father suspected, Rob would stay at Ducky's over the weekend while Ellie once again kept her fingers crossed that they wouldn't catch a case that day.

Ducky was also at work. As pragmatic as Tim, he realized there was nothing he could do and he'd be at even more loose ends in the waiting room than the others would. He was scheduled off Monday and Tuesday but after that, Sarah would be available to visit during the day and stay overnight.

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It was time for quarterly evaluations in the CCU and as this was only the second time Tim was available to do them in the 18 months he'd had the job, he felt they were doubly important. With notes from the substitute managers and notes from the teams his crew had assisted, he got to work.

He made it all the way through the first half of the first evaluation before he gave in and looked at the time: 0834. Dad would be in surgery and under the anesthetic. They'd been told the surgery would take 60 to 90 minutes and that Dad would be in the recovery room in just under two hours. 30 minutes down, possible 60 to go.

Determined, Tim pushed through the rest of the first evaluation and this time made it nearly to the end of the second one before he looked again: 09:05. 25 minutes to go. Forcing his attention back to his work, he'd started the third evaluation, with 27 more to go, when his phone chimed with a call.

"Hello?"

"Hey Bro, Dad's out of surgery and in recovery. They're going to let us see him in about an hour. The doctor said he did fine, no complications. They're planning to discharge him about 1600."

"Thank God! Ok, Geo, I'll take a late lunch and come over about 1400. I'm gonna be useless until I see him."
"Know what you mean. We're hungry and Sarah says we're close to Diner the Great so we're going for our second breakfast. See you about 1400."

"Hey, have some French toast for me, would you?"

"Married for a few days and already trying to lose weight?"

"That's just it, too much good food and drink. And the holidays are just around the corner."

"Ok, ok, I'll have French toast, anything to help."

By the time Tim left for the hospital at 1330, he'd gotten halfway through the evaluations. Knowing his father was through surgery and doing fine energized him.

Dad was a bit out of it from the pain medication although he gave them a little smile, "Geo, Sari, and Tim, good, such good kids. Tell Robbie to go home, sleep. Ellie and Tony, same thing. Tim, you and Ellie spend time with kids and each other. Gonna sleep anyway."

His words were becoming more slurred and now it looked like he'd dropped off to sleep. Smiling, Tim whispered, "Sleep well, Dad, you'll be up and around soon enough."

He was awake again in time to meet with his Physical Therapist and then to be discharged. He had plenty of work to do while he was healing, first using a walker, graduating to a cane when he was stable enough. Stairs would come gradually. Before he left the hospital, his Physical Therapist had him get up from the hospital bed, with assistance and walk to a chair with a walker. It wasn't far but he walked on two legs and his new knee did exactly what it was supposed to do.

It hurt but over the weekend and on Monday he faithfully did his PT exercises. Tuesday when he had his post-op doctor's appointment and meeting with his Physical Therapist, he was doing well and his body was healing properly. He wouldn't be visiting the basement or the master bedroom for a few weeks but he was doing well. Because the new knee wasn't used in driving his truck or car, he'd be able to drive sooner than he'd be climbing full sets of stairs.

Nine days post-surgery, Jethro's family gathered at Ducky's for Sunday dinner, the first they'd all been together since the wedding, thanks to the kids' colds. He'd already switched to a cane but at Rob and Ducky's request switched back to the walker while everyone was there.

His old friend couldn't believe how cooperative Jethro was. When told that, the man laughed, "The harder I work at this, the sooner I get to resume my life, Duck. I can sleep in my own bed, pick up our grandchildren, drive a car, get down into the basement to work on projects, have a beer or a bourbon - and go back to work!"

"How are you doing on pain management?" That came from Rob who'd joined them.

"Hey kiddo! I've been off the narcotics for a couple of days, taking over the counter meds now."

"Wow, that's good Dad. Be honest about your pain though; if it's still post-surgery level bad or anywhere near that, let your doctor know."

"I will; Ducky's drilled into me how pain can delay healing."

His friend beamed, "You mean you actually listened? Jethro!"

It was a very low-key gathering. Originally planned for a cookout, a blustery rain moved everyone inside. Tim and Ellie were just glad it hadn't happened on their wedding day! The kids were well
over their colds and their parents hadn't caught it, much to their relief. Privately they teased each other about the endorphin rushes from all their love making killing the cold virus.

Mac stayed at Ducky's until the kids were well and then moved back in with Tim and Ellie. He'd been invited to continue his stay at the "Mallard Inn" but wanted to be close to his grand and great-grandchildren. He was pleased and excited that this year he'd spend Halloween, Tim's birthday, Thanksgiving, Brynie's third birthday, and Christmas with his family.

Unfortunately, fate once again had a different idea. Two days after their family dinner at Ducky's, Mac received a call from a hospital in Florida.

"Is this Mac Fielding?"

"Yes, who's this?"

The woman identified herself and the hospital. "I'm calling about Bernie Hendricks, he asked me to call you. I don't want to alarm you but he's quite ill."

Bernie was Mac's best friend and until Jethro called Mac with the news about Tim, neither of them had any family. Now Mac had a family but Bernie didn't. He had a son but the two hadn't been in contact in decades. The two friends had pledged to take care of each other when help was needed.

Now as the nurse told Mac about Bernie's illness, he knew he had to return to Florida. He'd promised and just because he now had family didn't mean he would desert his friend. Never! Explaining the situation to his loved ones, he was relieved to find them very understanding and Sarah offered to go with him. "No sweetheart, thank you but I'll be fine and you'd be stuck at the hospital with me. I'll take a shuttle to and from the hospital. You're wonderful to offer but you'd be bored stiff!"

The matter settled; she and her brothers drove him to the Amtrak station, kissing him goodbye. "Tell Bernie hello and to get better soon. We love you!" His heart in his throat, he waved to them as the train pulled out.

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While Jethro continued to heal and do his exercises at Ducky's, his grandchildren and their parents were getting excited about Halloween. Last year, shortly before WITSEC spirited them away, Ellie helped Tim find cute costumes for the kids and they took them around to friends' houses.

This year the four of them were going together in costume. Tim and Ellie had discussed the possibilities of the "Addams Family", "Grease", "Toy Story", "Frozen", the Donald Duck family, among others. When they showed the kids the various characters and costumes, Ty and Brynie picked "Toy Story 2". In the end, Daddy was Buzz Lightyear while Ty was Sheriff Woody, Brynie was Jessie and Mommy was Bo Peep. They celebrated Halloween by first going to see Poppy and Granducky to show them their costumes, continuing to the Palmers for a Halloween party. Breena and Jimmy designed the party to be fun for the kids and the adults and the Gibbses had a wonderful time.

Poppy wondered how long they were going to continue their western theme, noting that two of the four of them had been in 'cow boy/girl' costumes. Although he wasn't giving up his cowboy boots or Stetson anytime soon, so who was he to comment?

Although he was now healthy and his knee stable, Jethro was still at Ducky's. He'd decided this was as good a time as any to have his kitchen remodeled and he didn't want to live there during the
early stages. He'd hired a design consultant and then begged Ellie and Sarah to meet with the
designer with him. His sons thought that was hysterical as neither woman cooked.

When Sarah begged off claiming promotions for her new book, Tim stepped in with his wife. Even
that was problematic because of Tim's left-handedness but the designer thrived on challenges and
got it done. The wall between the kitchen and dining area came down and the layout changed to
make the combined room more functional, comfortable and aesthetically pleasing. As far as
everyone who'd ever been to Gibbs' home was concerned, the best thing was the removal of the
ancient icebox, replaced with a shiny new refrigerator that matched the other new appliances. Back
in California, Fornell called Gibbs to cheer when he saw the e-mailed photos of the old thing being
carted away and the new shiny thing in place.

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By the second week of November, the project was nearly done with the walls painted, new
lighting, flooring, appliances, and cabinets installed. The renovation only needed the installation of
a new washer and dryer to be complete.

Working at home that morning, Tim disconnected from his second conference call. Gathering his
electronics and removing his weapon from the gun safe, he was startled when his phone squawked
with an alert: the silent alarm at his father's house.

He knew it wasn't any of the construction workers as they were off that day and if they wanted
something from the house, they would call. Because the house was the home of a federal agent of
many years, responsible for putting hundreds of criminals in prison or coffins, this could be
anything from a terrorist planting a bomb to someone seeking revenge or possibly an 'ordinary'
burglar. Tim guessed that made sense in light of the new appliances and building materials stored
inside. Not to mention the copper light fixture Ellie had fallen in love with; she'd insisted Dad's
kitchen had to have it.

Checking his weapon, he made a quick call asking for backup from Alexandria PD, as it would
take at least 15 minutes for NCIS to get there. He sent a voice text to Vance as he hurried down the
back alley. From the alert, he knew the front door lock was breached, which was odd as the door
was in plain view of the sidewalk and street. Slipping in the back gate, he waited until he had
confirmation that Alexandria PD had the front before clicking his remote to unlock the back door
and enter the house.

With none of the lights on and the drapes drawn in the front of the house, the light in the house was
dim at best. All Tim could see was a vague outline of two figures near the main wall of the living
room and a little light showing the two police officers as they came up behind the shadowy figures.
Chapter 43

Following protocol, Tim announced his presence, "NCIS, Federal Agent, freeze!"

One of the shadowy figures swore and swung quickly around, one arm in motion. In the dim light, all he could see as the figure turned was a pale object coming his way. Using one of the MMA moves Ziva taught him, he deflected the object and the body coming at him. The attacker countered with a leg kick, which Tim blocked although his shin was hit. As his opponent tried to recover and have another try, Tim caught the wrist, forcing the arm down and twisting it behind the person, saying, "Striking a federal officer is a mandatory prison sentence. You were already looking at doing time for breaking and entering, now you've given yourself additional prison time."

He felt the person capitulate. From the size of the wrist, he was certain it was a woman. He didn't relinquish control until one of the LEO's snapped cuffs on her. Reaching around Tim flipped on an overhead light and the cuffed woman stared at him with a wild, angry look in her eyes, her face pulled into a snarl.

One of the LEO's watched the woman's face, "She's thinking about trying again. Want to shackle her feet?" The officer had the shackles in one hand.

Tim looked at the still snarling woman. He got in her face. "What about it, you going to try again? I won't hesitate to use the shackles and duct tape if you're thinking of spitting. Up to you how deep you dig the hole you're in. Keep in mind your sidekick here is an accessory. Whatever shit you pull falls on her too."

Stepping back, Tim stood silently, watching her. Eventually her stance changed and she gave a slight nod. Putting the safety back on his Sig, he holstered it, noticing the frightened eyes of the second woman.

When asked their names, neither replied. One of the officers searched their bags, reporting, "The older woman is Patricia Hull, the younger one is Emma Hull and her ID says she's a doctor."

Inwardly wondering at the names and resolutely ignoring rule 39, Tim used all his training and experience to keep his face blank and his body language calm while his brain fired off questions.

The Alexandria officer cuffed the second woman, reading both their rights. They would be charged with breaking and entering with special circumstances, that is, the home of a federal agent. The older woman was also charged with assault. The women were separated, one in each of the squad cars.

Tim watched while all this was happening, deep in thought, trying his best to ignore some of the wilder suppositions running through his mind. Sometimes being a writer was a curse; his creative brain saw opportunities in the most ordinary situations, morphing them into something far more exciting, bizarre and definitely impossible.

The squads pulled away just as the bomb squad and Rick Carter's team arrived to ensure the women hadn't planted any explosive devices and to process the scene. Knowing he couldn't be involved any more than he already was, Tim stepped out onto the back deck.
Reaching for calm, he decided he'd better contact his boss before the adrenaline rush left him. After updating him, he took a deep breath before telling his boss his suspicions. Cursing, Leon ordered him to the Yard.

Giving his statement to Agent Carter before he left, Tim was on his way several minutes after his call. In the meantime, Vance contacted the Alexandria Chief of Police to explain there was something more than a B&E going on; that this was quite possibly linked to a case they'd recently closed. The Chief was happy to cooperate.

While Tim was en route, he called Abby to tell her it was time to revisit a file they'd created, encrypted and buried almost a decade ago, one titled "Never Ever Open Again". She protested until Tim gave her the code they'd devised in case of emergency, as proof this was necessary. When he arrived aboard the Yard, Security directed him to Vance's office.

Taking the elevator to the mezzanine, Tim walked across the catwalk, relieved that DiNozzo's bullpen was empty. When he reached the director's office, he nodded to him. Vance frowned as he looked up at his agent but sat quietly, waiting.

"I have a sitrep, Sir, and I've given my statement to Agent Carter."

"Very well. With everything going on and what you said earlier, I'm going to record this."

Tim nodded his agreement and gave his boss a detailed situation report, including the assault. Vance held up his hand, "Witnesses?"

"Three; the younger woman and the two Alexandria Police Officers. They'd entered the living room and were walking up behind the two women."

"All right, we'll talk more about this aspect of the situation later. Continue…"

Tim was afraid that meant Vance saw this as an assault, not an attempted assault of a federal officer. If the suspect had stopped when Tim blocked the fist, there might have been some leeway but when she used the leg block, there was contact and that changed the situation. While he would have a bruise from her block, he didn't consider himself injured, not physically anyway. He did feel like he was hanging by a fraying rope over a rocky cliff. As he finished his oral report, Vance asked him a few more questions, pro forma if this should get into the hands of an attorney or be required for testimony in court.

When Vance engaged the SCIF, Tim's eyebrows climbed his forehead. His boss shrugged, "Strange things happening today." He waited until Tim sat before saying, "I had the women brought here; they're in conference room A, under guard. We removed the cuffs from the younger woman but the older one is still cuffed and we had to warn her we'd duct tape her mouth."

"I offered to shackle her feet after she tried to take me down - and to use duct tape, thought she'd calmed down."

"We'll get to the cause of her attitude at some point. I'm breaking protocol with what I'm about to say. As the son of the homeowner and the witness who called this in, you should not be involved but I'm telling you anyway.

"I did a preliminary background on both women. Patricia Hull is a widow who's been teaching middle school in Tacoma Washington for the past 23 years, raising her daughter Emma as a single mother. I haven't had time to check her deceased husband's records. Emma Hull graduated high school in Tacoma and moved to Seattle for college. She earned her Bachelors of Science at
University of Washington and continued on to their medical school. She's currently doing her pediatric residency at Seattle Children's Hospital. Neither woman has any previous criminal record, not so much as a parking ticket. I put in a call to a contact who might be able to point us in the right direction for more information but haven't heard back."

Tim nodded and then took a breath. "There's a file we need to look at. Abby and I created it nine years ago after we met a woman who contacted Gibbs for help. It's a long story but I need to tell you the background so that it makes sense."

When Vance nodded, Tim explained that in early 2004 an intruder had taken several people hostage in Autopsy, escaping after shooting Ducky's then assistant Gerald Jackson and Gibbs. Over the weeks and months that followed, Gibbs' team worked to identify and find the man, but was unsuccessful. Tim was still a case agent in Norfolk but had worked with Gibbs and team several times.

With his background and what few clues they had as to the man's identity, Tim devised a plan to identify him. However, it required either making a copy of the current 'aging' software, the software used to post "as they would appear now" photos of missing children or buying a separate copy of the expensive software. Tim's plan was to tweak the software or if necessary deconstruct the code and rebuild it to 'de-age' rather than age.

Director Morrow turned him down, telling him if he wanted to experiment, he should buy the software himself; the agency already owned what software they needed and would not purchase additional. Nor was he to touch the software they already had although Tim hadn't asked or planned to do that.

Never one to back away from a challenge Tim bought the software himself, using Gemcity funds. Only Abby knew and he convinced her of the importance of not telling anyone, particularly Gibbs, what he was doing until his version of the software was ready. It took him several late nights but after copying the software and tweaking the programming he successfully 'de-aged' his own photos and those of his siblings and friends. He was ready for the next step of his plan: de-aging the intruder's photo and identifying him with the clues Ducky had given them.

Sensing Vance's impatience and confusion, Tim cut through the rest of the story. When Maddie Tyler appeared five years after he identified Ari Haswari for Gibbs, she had a photo of Kelly Gibbs on her Facebook page.

After the case was resolved, Abby wondered what Kelly would have looked like as an adult. Without telling Tim, she used his original software to age the photo of Kelly; then she showed Tim. He was horrified that she was poking into Gibbs' private tragedy and ashamed of herself, Abby helped Tim encrypt the file, naming it "Never Ever Open Again" and planning to delete it later. Now Tim told Vance neither he nor Abby deleted the file, they'd forgotten about it. He believed it was important to look at the file before questioning the women.

Vance trusted the younger Gibbs implicitly although he thought this was a real stretch and likely a wild goose chase. He almost hoped it was; Jethro was in a good place in his life with family and friends. If this was true, the boat that was the Gibbs' family would be on rough seas once again, especially after the woman's attack.

When Tim and Vance entered the lab, Abby had the file pulled up and at Vance's nod, pulled up the image of an adult Kelly Gibbs they'd run all those years ago. With another nod, the image was printed. Then Vance turned to Tim and Abby. "And what of Shannon Gibbs?"

Tim replied, "Abby gave her word she wouldn't do anything else."
Abby opened her mouth and closed it, looking embarrassed, "Actually I did. I de-aged a photo of Gibbs."

Vance could almost feel the exasperation of his agent but there were things he still had to know. "This was done with the software you purchased, Agent Gibbs?"

"The photo of Kelly Gibbs, yes, Sir."

"Ms. Sciuto?"

"I used Tim's software for the Gibbs' photo too, Director. Sorry, Tim."

"And the equipment?"

Tim stood straight, "We originally ran it on my personal laptop."

Abby twisted a corner of her lab coat. "With Director Morrow's approval, we transferred the software to the agency's equipment. That way we could run it for Ari Haswari's image. Well, we didn't originally know that was his name but…"

Vance cut her off. "Agent Gibbs, you can't be involved in the rest of this. You may wait in your office or mine."

Tim protested, "Director!"

Vance pulled him aside, "You called it in on behalf of your father. You're already in the middle of whatever this is, but I will not go any further across the line. Whatever case this is, you cannot be involved."

Tim shook his head, "Sir, it's too late. I'm the first one who saw the younger woman, I'm a witness and now I've seen this image. If I were a civilian witness and you knew about the photo, you'd show it to me to identify the suspect and any other photos or images you had. And if there's more proof, my father needs to be told immediately."

"We don't know…"

Tim interrupted him, "It won't matter where they've been or what they've been doing. He won't care. He's spent a good portion of his life mourning them and he needs to know they're alive. If it's them."

"And that goes for you too."

"Not so important for me; I mean it is but I've only known the story of Shannon and Kelly for ten years and my connection to them for less than two. For my father."

Vance looked at Tim and saw a vulnerability in his eyes he was valiantly trying to hide. He took his arm, steering him into Abby's office and shutting the door.

"Timothy Jackson Gibbs, you listen to me. I'm not your father but I am your friend. That man loves you as much as he did and will your sister Kelly if that is who this is. Do not go there."

Tim nodded but didn't say anything, too busy handling his chaotic emotions. What Leon suggested wasn't the problem but it was close enough. He knew he looked like his grandfather's much younger twin. They'd stood together looking in mirrors and had many photos of the two of them and more with the children. Moreover, the woman, the one he was beginning to believe was his
mother, had seen the resemblance right away. He'd seen it in her eyes along with wild anger and pain. He was fighting the feeling of rejection from his own mother. It was completely illogical and impossible; she didn't know him, didn't know her long dead infant son was alive. And yet it hurt like hell that her first actions toward him had been a physical attack.

Vance patted his shoulder. "If these people are your family, then we'll take the younger one to Dr. Mallard's home and tell your father. I will tell your father and I will inform your mother of your kidnapping. She's not going anywhere though, we can't ignore her actions."

"I'm allowed to be with my father?"

Vance gave him a look that softened when he again noticed his agent's misery. "Of course."

"And my wife."

"Yes, in fact, why don't you take her for coffee while we figure this out?"

"Sir, I can't just whisk her out of the bullpen. I promised DiNozzo I wouldn't do that. And they weren't there a few minutes ago."

"You promised; I didn't. They were at the firing range, should be on their way back by now. I'll have her meet you at the coffee cart. In the meantime, I'll bring DiNozzo up to speed. I may have him interrogate Patricia Hull."

Tim shook his head violently, "Dad would have a hard time getting past that. It'd be one thing to question but not to interrogate."

"All right; you have someone in mind besides you or DiNozzo?"

"Agents Bishop and Chalmers."

"Because?"

"Because they haven't had as much exposure to the heartbreak and drama that surrounds the legend of Shannon and Kelly. Ellie has to some extent, of course, but it is history to her. The Gibbs she and Bob know is a very different man than the one Tony, Ziva, and I knew back in the day. And I'm hoping that even if Patricia is still hostile, Emma will respond more openly to an agent closer to her age who isn't upsetting her mother. And Bob is good at calming people."

"All right, I agree with your reasoning. You'll need to find someone else for coffee. I happen to know Dr. Palmer is doing paperwork today."

"Then I'll head to Autopsy and we'll go out through the evidence garage."

"Good idea. I'll call you the second we know anything."

Tim nodded and left Abby's lab, giving her a look, still upset that she broke her word to him. She turned to Vance who held up a hand, "I know, I didn't like doing that but he can't be involved any more than he's already been this morning. Now, can you access his de-aging software and use it on an image of Patricia Hull from Conference Room A?"

Her eyes widened, "You want me to hack the security cameras?"

"Can you do it?"

"Well yes, but Tim and Gibbs forbade me to ever do that ag… ever."
Vance tried not to sigh aloud, some days he just wanted to pound his head on his desk. "I believe I outrank both of them."

"Oops, of course Director." She turned to her computer and brought up the security feed, captured an image of the older woman and sent it to Tim's de-aging application. They watched quietly as the software processed. Leon frowned, "One problem, do we have a photo of a younger Shannon Gibbs?"

Abby nodded and biting her lip, pulled it up. "Tim downloaded it this morning. Gibbs gave it to him last year."

The photo was Shannon and Jethro's engagement picture and the knot in Vance's stomach twisted. If the photos matched, he'd first have to confirm with the Marshals Service and run the DNA before going any further. He needed absolute proof.

"Ms. Sciuto, if the DNA of all parties is registered how long would it take to run?"

"With one ID, I can tell the system to pull the DNA that matches and show the percentage of the match. The system will organize it and show the likely relationship according to the percentage. Once it's done, I'll send it through the secondary system to match names to the confidential IDs. I'll tag the results for that to go directly to you. All of that will take about an hour."

"Including the secondary report?"

She nodded.

"Mind if I use your office again? If I go upstairs I'm likely to be distracted by other issues."

She nodded, smiling, "Please!"

In her office, he logged onto the agency network and accessed the secondary system she mentioned; pulling up the name he needed and jotting down the numeric ID. Logging out and closing that system, he handed the ID to Abby. Then he returned to her office to call Chief Inspector McQueen in Albuquerque. "Stan, Leon Vance. Have you got a few minutes?"

"Leon, yes. Sorry I haven't gotten back to your earlier call, we were swamped here this morning."

Vance continued, "I understand. I know we thought we had everything settled on the Stacevyko case but something's come up and I have questions. In the last 20 years, there's been a national effort to get DNA registered and it's occurred to me that your WITSEC folks have illnesses, go to hospitals, etc. I'm interested in the DNA of two women I suspect may have recently been released from the program."

"I'll need their WITSEC names, Leon."

"Keep in mind I'm only guessing at the WITSEC part, but here goes: Patricia and Emma Hull, mother and daughter."

"Did you say Hull?"

"Yes amazingly enough they have the same surname as the Gibbeses in WITSEC. If these Hulls were in WITSEC, they were in the program for more than two decades; I figured the computer reused the names."

"No, that's not how it's done. The only time might be if additional family members enter the
"Well, these Hulls weren't. We don't know where they've been, they're not talking yet."

"Huh. Well, first things first, when witnesses are released from the program each adult signs several agreements. One of those is an option to authorize sharing his or her DNA to the national databases. We don't get that with everyone anymore as the younger witnesses are usually already in there; but anyone with us for ten years or more, yeah."

"And when they're released from the program how long do their DNA records take to be available to those databases?"

"Less than a minute. If these other Hulls were released any time before this morning, they're in the national databases already, under their real names."

"Thank you. If you can hold for just a second, let me give my forensics tech the go ahead so she can get that running."

He tapped on the glass door and Abby looked up, nodding her understanding of the 'go' motion. Then he went back to McQueen. "I should probably have a contact here in DC but I know and trust you. Is this going to create a problem?"

"No, my boss authorized or post-authorized I should say, the conversations you and I have had." There was a pause and then the man sighed. "Leon, from the records I've pulled up, it looks like the computer got it partially right. However, when the name was also assigned to our Hulls, there should have been an alert sent to the assigned destination office, that's us, and the office of the original Hulls and that's where it apparently went haywire. Since we weren't notified, I'll take a wild guess that the other office wasn't either; I'll confirm with my counterpart in that office. There may be a glitch in the system. Considering the problems our Hulls have had, I almost hope it was a glitch in the system."

"Agreed. Thanks Stan, this will help in our approach with these two."

"Are they in trouble?"

"Yes. They tripped a silent alarm breaking and entering into Jethro's home this morning; Tim caught them."

"Tim, oh boy."

"Yeah, it's already a mess and to make matters worse, the older Hull tried to assault him, they had a bit of a MMA match going on. He stopped her but imagine how you'd feel if a woman you think might be your long dead mother tried to clobber you."

"You do have your work cut out for you, Leon!"

"I do and I want all the evidence I can get my hands on before I go any further."

"If you're charging them, you'll be given their WITSEC records."

"Criminal records?"

"Yes plus work, education, social, almost the entire WITSEC file."

"Huh. How formal does the request have to be?"
"This is enough. Are you charging them?"

Vance made an affirmative noise. The older woman was looking at some time. If she'd stopped before she'd tried to counter his move, they would have had some leeway. He had no idea how this would play out but he hoped having the records would help clarify matters.

"All right, I'll have the records sent to your e-mail. They should be there within 30 minutes."

"Appreciate it, Stan. If you ever need help with anything, let me know."

"Will do, Leon."

They disconnected and Leon signed into his e-mail. There was a note from the agent guarding the Hull women in the conference room that the older one was getting belligerent again and the younger one was hungry. Leon quickly authorized coffee, water and snacks for them, throwing in separate restroom breaks for the two. Then he sent a note to Pam to let her know he was in the lab and waiting for an e-mail from Chief Inspector McQueen with an attachment and to please print the attachment and get it to him.

Between his conversation with McQueen and wading through his e-mail, the first part of the DNA report was done before he had time to ask for an ETA. Abby sent it through to match up the IDs and names and the results quickly appeared in his inbox. When he exited Abby's office, he carried the report with him and Abby handed him printed images of the two women as they appeared 25 years ago and the image she'd done 9 years ago. Vance was reviewing everything when Pam called to let him know she had the information he wanted. That done, he went one more step, contacting DiNozzo and asking to borrow Chalmers and Bishop to conduct a brief interrogation. Surprised to be asked, DiNozzo agreed.

Chalmers and Bishop met him in the lab and sequestering the three of them in Abby's office, he told them of the break-in, the suspects and the hostility of one and silence of both. He did not share any of his or Tim's suspicions.

To Abby's relief the three of them finally left her lab.

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When they entered the conference room, Patricia Hull snapped at them, "It's about time! We've been sitting here for hours."

Bishop looked her in the eye. "You're here because you broke into the home of a federal agent and assaulted a second agent. We've put you in a conference room together, rather than into separate Interrogation rooms. Keep up the attitude and we'll be happy to change the venue."

The older woman opened her mouth but the younger one put a restraining hand on her arm, "Mom, please. We're in enough trouble, why don't you just listen?"

Chalmers spoke, "Actually Ms. Hull, we'd rather you tell us your original names and where you've come from."

"It's Doctor. I'm a pediatric resident at Seattle Children's Hospital. Not ready to hang out my shingle yet but I have earned the title."

"Very well, Dr. Hull. We still need to know your original names."

"Why do you think Hull isn't our original name?"
Chapter 44

"Because there are no records of you prior to 25 years ago. And we know both of you are more than 25 years old." That wasn't true; WITSEC names carried full backgrounds.

The doctor opened her mouth but her mother reached over and covered it up. "We don't have to say anything and I'd never give anybody at this agency information anyway. You people are responsible for making our lives miserable."

Bishop looked at Chalmers; they both shrugged. Ellie replied, "You give us too much credit, we've known you for less than three minutes. Trust me; we can make you far more miserable than this."

Emma shook her mother's hand off her. "This is ridiculous! We never should have broken into our house but we meant no harm."

"Your house?"

"Yes; my mother, father and I lived there years ago."

"Names?"

"My original name is Kelly Gibbs, Kelly Anne Gibbs. My mother's name is Shannon Gibbs; her maiden name is Fielding. My father's name is – was - Leroy Jethro Gibbs."

Chalmers took notes as Ellie sat very still, working to absorb the shock. This was huge! Vance was talking now, silently berating himself for pulling Bishop into this. "When no one answered the door, why did you break in?"

Patricia glared at him. His eyebrow told her what he thought of that.

Finally she spoke, "We've been stuck in protective custody all these years because you assholes couldn't catch the people who wanted to kill us. Where's Agent Franks? He was the lead asshole on our case."

Ellie thought of the painting Tim gave Jethro; from the photos she'd seen of the man, the figure in the painting bore a striking resemblance to Jethro's late friend and mentor, Mike Franks.

Vance responded, "Special Agent Michael Aaron Franks gave his life while protecting Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs." It was as close to the truth as he could get. Cobb, the P2P killer, had been lurking outside Gibbs' home and Franks would have automatically assumed a protective stance.

"He what? What do you mean Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs? Don't tell me Jethro works for this pond scum agency. And where is that bastard who hurt my wrist?"

Ellie fought to keep her anger from showing in her body language while Vance responded.

"If you're referring to the agent who stopped your assault on him, he's doing his job. There were eyewitnesses and security cameras that caught your action this morning. If you need medical attention, we'll certainly provide it."

She swore at Vance and he shook his head.
"Ms. Hull, if you don't drop the tantrum and angry rhetoric, we will lock you in a jail cell immediately. I assure you there will be no coffee and no windows. Water and food will be served three times a day; the toilet is in the cell. It's your choice."

"I want a lawyer."

"You haven't yet been charged with anything."

"You just threatened to throw me in jail!"

"We do not 'throw' anyone and I did not threaten you, I told you what would happen and gave you a choice."

Emma spoke up again, "Agents, may we have a few moments alone? We're aware we're on camera, we were told when we entered the room."

The three of them left the conference room and Ellie stalked down the hall. "Agent Bishop?"

"Need a moment, Director." She stopped, turned and came back. "Who did she try to assault?" She shook her head, answering her own question. "They broke into Gibbs' house. Tim built an alarm that's always on, for both our houses. He would have gotten an alert on his phone. He was working from home this morning before driving in for his 1000 meeting, so he was there when the alert came in. He must have called Alexandria PD for backup."

"Yes. But he wasn't injured."

"What was she going to hit him with?"

"Her fist and she did contact him with her foot."

She turned and walked down the hallway again. When she returned she looked at Chalmers who smiled, "I believe I'll go for coffee. Anyone else want anything?"

Vance and Bishop shook their heads and he made himself scarce. Vance looked at his agent. "He recommended you. Said if he couldn't be in there then he wanted you in on it. Said you and Chalmers don't have the emotional fireworks in your history regarding the legend of Shannon and Kelly Gibbs, not to the extent he and DiNozzo do. And he's right; you two did a great job in there."

"What now?" Ellie had no idea how she felt about all this. Confused and angry on Tim's behalf for starters. Beyond that, she didn't know.

"When Chalmers returns and the doctor signals she's ready, we'll go back in. I'll lay out who they are and what's going to happen next. I'm not telling them about Tim, not here. I'll go with you and Tim, we'll tell Jethro and then Dr. Gibbs will be driven over. The mother isn't going; she's facing mandatory charges for her attempts on Tim. And she doesn't seem anxious to see her husband."

"She's probably terrified he won't want to see her and from what Kelly said, they're not sure they believe he's alive. She's been gone 25 years. How are they going to get through that? They'll have to start over and she may think they're not still legally married. And then she finds out he works for the very people she blames for everything."

"I can't change what happened. I can only offer her NCIS as we are now."

Bishop nodded, "Of course. But she needs to be told that." She paused before continuing, thinking aloud, "Jethro doesn't talk much about her; all we know are the good things. None of this. For all
we know, this is an exaggerated version of how she always behaved and it's gotten out of hand. But Tim knows more; if he didn't mention it to you then there's nothing in 'Shannon-lore' about a fierce temper. And he's already on his way to Jethro."

Vance gave her a pained smile, "I can tell you from personal experience that the less positive aspects of a dead loved one fade from memory pretty quickly. Jethro and Mac may have never mentioned it."

"I'm sorry Sir; this must be difficult for you."

"I'm all right, Bishop, thanks. It is difficult but it's not my family."

They talked for another few minutes until Chalmers returned, handing each a bottle of water. He was carrying a bag and Ellie looked at it hopefully. He chuckled, "I had a thought that we might break through with some sugar so I bought donuts. If you'd rather not, Director, I'll keep them for the bullpen."

Vance raised an elegant eyebrow, "They're here now. All right, let's see what's going on."

The agent outside the door nodded as they appeared in the hallway. "The doctor says they're ready."

Re-entering the room, Ellie saw the women had been crying. She sat across from them, hoping a more sympathetic tone would bring information. "I know this is rough on you and I'm guessing you've had a difficult time. We're trying to establish who you are, what happened, why it happened and what you need so that we know how to proceed, give you the help you need. It's intrusive but it is for a good cause. And…" she smiled gently at them, "Agent Chalmers bought donuts for you."

Vance cleared his throat, "I regret you spent so long in protective custody. When retired Agent Franks died, so did any knowledge within the agency of your survival. Until this morning, no one outside the Marshals Service knew you were alive. I am grateful Franks got you both out of that situation alive."

Vance paused, "I've also learned that we have a common foe. She is formidable; she's killed 8 people and along with working for the Reynosa cartel, was a covert operative, a spy, for two hostile entities. One of her intended victims is a man she's been trying to harm and kill literally since the day he was born.

"I don't know what the Marshals told you but the agent driving you to the safe house that day was murdered by a shot fired from a sniper's nest. A well planned premeditated murder. Their intent was your deaths. Doctor, do you prefer Hull, Gibbs or perhaps Fielding?"

Startled at his segue, Kelly said, "Gibbs."

"Very well. Dr. Gibbs, you would have been collateral damage and I'm more grateful than I can say that that didn't happen. Ms. Hull, I'll ask you the same question: Gibbs, Hull, Fielding or perhaps another name?"

She gave it some thought before saying, "Gibbs, for now."

"Very well. I understand you were told at some point during your recovery that your husband was killed in Kuwait. That was erroneous information; he was critically injured in an explosion and the first responders reported his death, later correcting their report. The Corps eventually updated the records but when NIS went looking for him, they were told he was dead. In fact, he was in a coma for nearly two weeks but woke, only to be told of your deaths. He returned to the U.S. for your funerals and afterward went to NIS to find out what happened. There he met Mike Franks who
eventually became his boss, mentor and from all accounts the person who kept him alive."

He took a breath, "I can't change what happened. I knew Franks very well; he was a good agent. He was also human, we all are. Being a federal agent does not make us omniscient. I do regret the time and your belief that Jethro was dead. As the current Director of NCIS, I can only offer you who we are now."

Ms. Gibbs sighed deeply before saying, "Thank you. I'm sorry I've been so angry, such a bitch. Three days ago, we were living our lives in Tacoma and Seattle. I've taught middle school there for 20 years while I raised my daughter by myself. It was difficult and there was never any good news from our protectors. Kelly grew up, went away to college and then medical school. Then two marshals show up on my doorstep to say we're free, we're released from the program and that my daughter was being told at the same time. We didn't know what we wanted to do. Ultimately, we both took leave from our jobs, packed our bags and came straight here.

"They told me Jethro was alive; when I heard that I was enraged, that he was alive and hadn't joined us or taken care of the threat to us. I just wanted to find my parents and Jethro's father but then we got here and we both wanted to see the house, to know it was still there.

"I still had my key, I hid it in my sock when we left for the safe house and I've kept it all these years. It didn't work anymore and I got angry again. We were released but still on our own.

"I'd already tried calling my parents' phone number but it isn't theirs anymore and someone else answered the phone at Jack's store, someone who said he was the owner. We're home but there wasn't anyone or anything left. I snapped; that's when I decided to get into the house no matter what it took. I have a lock pick kit, I've only used it on my car and house in Tacoma and I felt like that's what I was doing this morning, using it on my own house.

"Then that man was there and when he said NCIS, I snapped, lost my temper. I wanted to knock him down and make him pay for 25 years of exile and the nothing we've found here. I'm glad he stopped me."

Vance gave the younger agents a look; they were not to reveal any information about Ellie's family.

"I can give you some of the information you've been looking for." Vance took a deep breath, "Unfortunately, we lost Jack, Jackson Gibbs, two years ago. He was 85, had a heart condition diagnosed just days before and died in his sleep. Jethro gave the store to an employee he knew Jack trusted. If it's any consolation, Jethro's NCIS family attended the funeral, Agent Bishop and I among them. He knew us well."

"You knew Grandpa Jack?" Kelly had tears in her eyes.

Vance smiled, "The last 6 years of his life, he'd come down for Christmas and bring treats for the whole office. He spent one summer here with Jethro and really became a member of the family, hanging out with Mike Franks, Tobias Fornell and Ducky, that's our Dr. Mallard, Jethro's best friends."

"What family? Jethro has another family?"

Ellie shook her head, "Not what you're thinking. He led his own team for many years; it was the top team in the agency for most of those years. The man you assaulted in his house this morning was one of his agents for 11 years, only leaving for a desk job to protect his young children. I worked for Gibbs for two years and Chalmers spent several months on the team. There are others: Tony DiNozzo, Abby Sciuto, Jimmy Palmer and Ziva David. You'll meet most of them in due
time. We regard ourselves as a family, as Jethro's family." She looked at the director.

"Thank you, Agent Bishop. What we'd like to do now is give you two a chance to take a breath. Dr. Gibbs, when you're ready, we'll take you to your father. He's at Dr. Mallard's home recovering from knee replacement surgery. I would ask that you relax and have something to eat as I'm going over first to break the good news. Then you'll be driven over and we'll see what happens after that."

He paused, "Ms. Gibbs, that's not possible for you, you'll be in an interrogation room until we determine our course of action. Unfortunately, you've pretty well tied our hands."

"I understand and I am sorry."

"Thank you."

He nodded at the older woman who looked like she had a question.

"Do you know anything about my parents?"

Damn! Vance hoped he'd successfully sidestepped that issue. "Yes. They're both alive. They're divorced; don't know when that happened. Your father lives in Florida during the winter and has a beach house on Fenwick Island in Delaware that he lives in late spring until the weather cools down in Florida. Last year he stayed through Christmas. I'm not sure where your mother is."

That was the truth, he didn't know what prison she was in; hadn't wanted to know.

"I'm glad they're alive. Not terribly surprised about the divorce. Will I see the young man from this morning again? I'd like to apologize."

"You will see him again, yes." He paused, "There's one more thing I'd like to tell you, about the woman who kept you in protective custody, the monster I spoke of earlier. Her name is Svetlana Stacevyko and she was arrested two months ago by a joint team of NCIS, FBI agents and several deputy marshals. A crony of hers who handled several of her 'murder for hires', was also arrested and has a life sentence with no parole."

"NCIS got both of them?"

Ellie suddenly spoke up, "Yes. The agent you assaulted this morning was one of her victims. Stacevyko murdered his father and little brother, leaving him for dead. He was the lead on the case to arrest her; he broke the case."

"If I see him again, I'll apologize and thank him."

That was enough, a little more truth than Vance intended but he understood Bishop's need to praise, defend and protect her husband.

Vance gestured to Bishop to join him but as they walked toward the door, Shannon said, "Please, may she stay with us?"

He looked at his agent who was clearly torn. He did a head tilt and she disappeared through the door. Turning he said, "She has other responsibilities, she's checking to see whether she's needed."

Kelly stirred, "We understand."

Calling Tim, Ellie quickly explained the situation and added an idea. "I'd rather be with you and Jethro but it might be better if I stay with them. How would you feel about me telling her your
"Oh my God, Ellie, that's a horror story unto itself! And I feel like it's mine to tell."

"Sweetie, hear me out. Your day started out so badly with her, I can't even imagine how you must be feeling. Yes, it is your story because you were one of the victims. However, that does not make you responsible for telling her, especially when the telling includes her mother's betrayal. She seems to trust me and it's occurring to me they need to know about all of Jethro's children and our kids. Please let me help in this one little way."

"Honey, it's in no way little but all right, I'd really like not being the bearer of the news about the J-witch. From your texts I'm guessing Leon got a little heavy-handed."

"Some things require a different touch and this day has been full of them."

"Okay. So you'll stay with them, tell them about me, who you are and about Sarah, Geo, Rob, and our kids? Geordie's picking them up, he'll bring them to Ducky's and then Sarah and Rob will arrive separately. Honey, I really hate that you're the one who'll be stuck telling her everything!"

"And Timothy, I'd rather it be me than you or Jethro."

He sighed, knowing she wanted to do this; it wasn't just a matter of obligation. "Eleanor, thank you so much. I love you."

"Right back at you."

Vance was walking toward Ellie to hear her decision when his phone rang. He answered and listened in astonishment.

"Leon, Stan here. I spoke with my counterpart who was just getting word on the whereabouts of his two missing witnesses. They weren't supposed to leave Tacoma, they hadn't been properly prepared."

"I don't understand."

"When people are released from WITSEC there's a program they're taken through to prepare them to return to their former lives. They're counseled about the differences they'll find and we do the groundwork for them so there are as few surprises as possible. The Tacoma office should have told them about Jethro, about her parents' divorce and father-in-law's death. They should have had counseling! And the Hulls should have been called into the office, not told on their doorsteps and left on their own. I probably should have said something earlier but I wanted to give my counterpart a chance to explain. Do you still have them?"

"Yes. I'm leaving in a few minutes to tell Jethro about them. Stan, does this make any difference in the charges against Patricia Hull?"

"What are they?"

Vance told him and in Albuquerque McQueen shook his head. "The charges will have to stand but the Marshals' Service bears responsibility too. What we need to do is have them taken to our office in DC where they'll be debriefed and counseled."

"So they both have to go? How soon and for how long?"

"As soon as I can chase deputies over there, within a couple of hours. The program will take them
about a day. Is it possible for Jethro to come to the office instead of them going to him?"

"Yes but would it be better to wait? No, scratch that, Tim and his wife know, too many people here know."

"I agree. Given the circumstances, they should meet before the marshals arrive. I can delay that an hour or so if you feel that will help."

"That will help. All right, I need to get busy. Thanks again Stan."

"They'll receive at least a written apology from the service and reimbursement for their airfare. There's also a re-entry housing and expense allowance, good for 30 days."

"Good!"

Disconnecting, he made a quick phone call to the Mallard home, reassuring the doctor nobody was hurt, in danger, sick or dying. Ducky said that Tim was there, he and Jethro had just come in from the pool. They'd arrive in 45 minutes and would go straight to a rarely used small conference room off the lobby. That would give the Gibbs' family more privacy without having to parade through the office. They'd bring the women down after he'd told Jethro. Done with that call, Leon continued down the hall.

After ending her call with her husband, Ellie paced while the director was on the phone. When he disconnected, she approached him.

"Director, with your permission, I'll stay with the women and tell them Tim's story. They can't hear it from him and there's no reason for you to be the bearer of those bad tidings or have it reflect on the agency. They trust me. I'll tell them about all of Jethro's children. Tim's already contacted the sibs; they'll be at Ducky's in a couple of hours, with our kids."

Vance shook his head, "Actually we have a change in plan. Jethro, Tim and Dr. Mallard will come here. It seems the marshals in Tacoma did not handle the Hulls' separation correctly. Come on, you can hear all about it."

They re-entered the conference room where the two women looked up expectantly. Leon smiled, "I have news. One, Jethro is on his way here to see you both. Two, the deputies who told you were free neglected to properly inform you. There is a Separation Program intended to help you through your re-entry to your lives as Gibses. Before you came here, you should have been told about Jack, your parents' whereabouts, divorce, and more about Jethro. You should have been given an allowance for the first month and airfare to get you here. They offer counseling sessions and help for people exiting WITSEC. Because it didn't happen in Tacoma, it'll now happen here. My contact in the Marshals says it usually takes a day; it may take you less time as you've done most of the work yourselves. You will be offered additional counseling, paid for by the Marshals Service.

"Ms. Gibbs, I don't know what will happen with the charges against you but I'm told going through the Separation Program may help your case. You weren't properly prepared. You should have had counseling for your issues and now you will. One thing, though, you must go through this or there won't be any help with the charges against you."

Dr. Gibbs smiled, "We'll go through the Program. I'll vouch for my mother."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Yes, Director, I promise to go through the Program."

Vance looked at them, "Jethro will be here in a few minutes; you can see him before the Marshals arrive."
Ellie looked at Vance, who gave her a discreet nod as he excused himself from the room. "Before you see Jethro there are some things I need to tell you."
Chapter 45

Ellie stopped to take a deep breath. She looked at Bob Chalmers before addressing the women.

"May I call you by your first names?" They both nodded and she continued, "Then Shannon and Kelly, do you mind if Agent Chalmers remains here with us? He knows just about everything I'm going to tell you and he is part of Jethro's NCIS family."

They smiled at Bob and he nodded back to the two women saying, "It's up to you."

"It's fine if you stay. After all, you brought us donuts!"

Ellie sat down again. "I have a story to tell you. Kelly, this might be new to you, your mom knows part of it. And it's not pretty."

"I've lived under an ugly story most of my life."

Ellie nodded and took another deep breath. "It started when a young girl, a young woman really, fell in love with a young man, just a bit older than she was. He was 18, starting out in the military. She was 17, a senior in high school, living with her parents. Her mother, with her father's backing, forbade her seeing her boyfriend; she said she was too young and that he was a bad influence, would never amount to anything. Her father liked the guy but agreed that she was too young. The young woman felt differently and managed to sneak away to see him now and then. Not often because, as I said, he was in the military, being moved around and she was living at home.

"They managed to meet one particular weekend in the spring and as fate would have it, they made a baby. The young woman figured it out a few weeks later but managed to get through graduation before her mother also figured it out. The boyfriend was out of the country and was not told of the pregnancy. I imagine there was hell to pay with the parents and the upshot was that the young woman, still underage as far as her parents were concerned, was taken to a home for unwed mothers."

Ellie responded to the look on Kelly's face, "I know that sounds horribly outdated, Kelly, but in the late 70's those homes were still around, they may exist even now and this particular one was affiliated with a nearby maternity clinic. The young woman was able to postpone her first term of college until the start of the spring semester, which would begin a couple of weeks after her baby was due. However, in November, the young woman went into early labor; the medical staff at the maternity clinic managed to stop it and they sent for her mother who arrived within hours. When the young woman's labor started again days later, this time nothing would stop it and the child was delivered by C-section. Nine weeks early, the baby was tiny.

"The young woman held her son, naming him Timothy and a priest came in to baptize him. Eventually, the staff took the infant to the neonatal nursery and the young woman fell asleep,
exhausted and in pain from her labor and the C-section. When she woke hours later, she was told her little son had died, that he'd been too delicate to survive. I can't begin to imagine the emotional pain the young mother had to endure.

"She managed to ask for her father and he came immediately. He'd already been told the baby had died but he hoped to hold him. Unfortunately, when he arrived he was told the child had already been buried. He went to the gravesite, prayed for his baby grandson, and then tried to find flowers but it was mid-November and there wasn't anything. He found a baby evergreen tree, really just a shoot; using his pocketknife he dug it up and planted it on the tiny little grave."

Hearing Shannon's sobs, she leaned forward and took her hand in hers. "Please listen carefully because the next part is the most important."

Shannon worked to catch her breath while Kelly gently wrapped her arms around her mother, shedding her own tears. If this had been her parents' first child, she'd never heard about him. Ellie hung on to the hand she was holding.

"The doctor, nurse, and the young woman's mother lied to her. Shannon, they lied to you. Timothy didn't die. He was too fragile to move that night so they waited a day. On the evening of the 14th, after you'd been given sedatives to sleep and your father went to a motel to rest, baby Tim was removed from the clinic by the nurse and your mother. Placed in an incubator, he was taken by medical transport to Bethesda Hospital in Maryland where Ms. Fielding had arranged for a young naval officer, Dan McGee and his wife Lily, to meet her. They gave her $50,000, she gave them the baby, and a new birth certificate was created showing the McGees as the parents and Timothy's birth date as November 15th, two days after his actual birth. We know all this and have evidence of everything that occurred. There is also evidence that someone on the medical staff administered a drug to you that induces labor. That was the first time you went into labor. As we know the nurse was involved in the kidnapping and transport, we believe it likely she gave you the drug. And because the nurse kept detailed journals, we know Fielding was the instigator behind the use of the drug and Tim's premature birth. We know from the journals that 'the grandmother' as she referred to Fielding, also known as JLF, hoped the baby would die and the adoption by the McGees was her 'Plan B'.

"A very much alive baby Tim stayed in the NICU at Bethesda until his release in January 1978 whereupon he and Mrs. McGee flew to Puerto Rico where Lieutenant McGee was already stationed. Lily McGee died when Timothy was 19 months old, 4 months after she'd given birth to a son, Patrick. Your Timothy and Patrick were best friends from the start."

Ellie stopped, that was enough of the McGee part of the story. Giving the women some time to absorb everything, she drank some water and rolled her shoulders. When she saw that Shannon had questions, she continued. "To make a very long and complex story a bit shorter, the man you assaulted in Jethro's home this morning is your son, Timothy Jackson Gibbs."

She paused at the sounds of surprise and shock from both women and the look of horror on Shannon's face. When neither said anything she continued, "Tim and Jethro discovered their relationship not quite two years ago. However, they've known each other since 2003. As I said earlier, Tim was a member of Gibbs' team for over a decade. He has his Bachelors of Science degree from Johns Hopkins and a Masters from MIT but his goal was always to work for NCIS."

She looked at them. "There's more, there's always more to tell but that was the most important. I wanted to tell you because Tim is raw from this morning, he recognized you from some photos we'll show you, and needs to be with his father while Vance tells him what's happened. And it's important to me because he's the love of my life, my husband." Ellie nodded at their additional
surprise. "We've been married for five weeks and have two adorable children who look just like Tim and Grandpa Mac." She continued, "I know this is a lot of information but basically it boils down to your son didn't die, he grew up to be an NCIS agent, one of the top 10 in the agency, he's happily married with two adorable children."

Shannon's emotions were a mixture of horror and grief, "He recognized me? He knew his own mother was attacking him, trying her best to hurt him. Oh God, I've ruined any chance of a relationship with him." She sighed before continuing, "And what about my mother? I can't believe she did that! She caused my son's premature birth, sold him and lied to me. Why would she do that?"

Bob stepped in. "I don't know why, but I do know that when Tim and Gibbs put the pieces of the puzzle together, with the help of Mac, er your father, they went to Director Vance who opened a joint investigation with the FBI." He paused, "Do you remember the nurse who attended you during your labor and after Tim's birth?"

Shannon closed her eyes. "I remember so much about that place, I hated it, hated being there but I told myself it was for the good of my baby. I do remember a woman with a thick accent, Slavic or maybe Russian, I never could understand her. She had tiny mean eyes. I don't remember her name."

"Her name is Svetlana Stacevyko and Timothy's kidnapping was, as far as we know, the beginning of her life of crime here in the U.S."

Kelly paled, "Director Vance told us about her, said she'd been stalking one man literally since the day of his birth, to kill him."

"Yes. And that man is Tim."

"He's the one that caught her."

"Yes. Until recently, he'd never had access to all the pieces of the puzzle; he didn't even know there was a puzzle to be solved. Nobody at NCIS did. For the 25 years you've been in WITSEC and several years before that, she's been doing damage all over the country and the FBI and Homeland Security have been tracking her although for many years they didn't know who she was.

"She's been a person of interest since the murders of Dan and Patrick McGee in 1986 but she was elusive and nobody ever had enough evidence to arrest her. Until NCIS, in the persons of Timothy and Jethro Gibbs, got hold of the case. They solved it and arrested her within 36 hours of them having figured out she was the danger keeping them in WITSEC."

Bob gave a wolfish smile as he told them a little about the bust.

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While Ellie and Bob helped Shannon and Kelly, Vance summoned DiNozzo to his office. As soon as he sat, Vance looked at the Team Leader. "Tony, I'm about to turn the Gibbses' world upside down and I expect yours too."

Tony frowned but Vance shook his head, "It is good news, unexpected and almost miraculous although not without a price. Tim was firm about wanting you to know and I agreed, so here we are." Quickly he told him what had happened that morning and how they'd confirmed the women were Shannon and an adult Kelly Gibbs.

DiNozzo's jaw dropped as he heard the news and he only closed his mouth when Vance gently
tapped his chin. "Leon, you've got to be - seriously? They broke in, Tim found them, his own mother attacked him - they've been in WITSEC all this time? Oh boy, Boss is going to - I don't know what he's going to do. Does Ducky know yet?"

"No, this is too big, I wasn't sure he'd be able to keep his emotions in check, I knew I personally couldn't and Tim was adamant that his father be the first to know. He isn't of course. Ms. Sciuto knows because she ran the DNA for me and because I sequestered myself in her office making phone calls while the test was running. I tried to give her the rest of the day off but she wanted to stay and work. Ellie knows because Tim couldn't be in on the questioning and asked that Ellie stand in for him and then followed that up by asking that you also be told as soon as possible.

"He's having a tough time with it all; he's happy for his father but having the mother you were torn away from assault you the first time you meet can't be easy to deal with. Shannon Gibbs was way over the top this morning, I was minutes from restraining her when Kelly called a halt and got her calmed down. I apologize for not bringing you in but I didn't want to overwhelm you and do want you with me when Jethro is told."

He exhaled, "I had an idea of introducing you as Jethro's oldest kid but wasn't sure I wanted to reduce one of my agents to someone's 'kid'."

"Thanks for that; we can straighten it all out later. What's the plan?"

"Gibbs has always been direct and doesn't want details until he needs them. So we'll go in and tell him they're alive, have been in WITSEC, that it was linked to Stacevyko. When he's ready for more, you can tell him about this morning. Tim might want to but I don't know how things are going to go."

"The sibs and the kids?"

"Tim's contacted them but with the change in plans, there's not enough time. I called the Major and explained the situation. And Lara's picking up the littles now, don't want any gossip."

"Ok, wow this is really something. Who would ever have thought?" Then he realized and turned to Vance, "That's how Gibbs and Franks met, after they were killed. Franks was the lead - he knew?"

"Had to. He was the lead on their case and someone got them to a hospital and into WITSEC after the shooting and crash."

"Oh my God. Why didn't…?"

"Don't know. I can only theorize that they hadn't yet identified Hernandez's accomplices and hoped Gibbs would help draw them out."

"We know what happened with that."

"Yeah. Then Gunny Gibbs got involved in a couple of deep cover missions. In the meantime, his wife and daughter were told he'd been killed in Kuwait."

Pam buzzed on the intercom, "Director, they're at the gate."

"All right, thanks Pam." Vance looked at DiNozzo. "You ready?"

Tony wondered how anybody could be ready for this but nodded. They hurried downstairs. When the Gibbises and Ducky arrived, Tony intercepted them at Security and took them to the conference room.
Shannon seemed to realize she was about to see her husband, her long-dead lover, for the first time in 25 years. She dug through her purse, found a comb and worked on her hair, then pulled out a lipstick and mirror. Ellie and Kelly watched until she gave them a mock glare. "I was in my 30s the last time I saw him. I can't erase 25 years but I can look my best." She looked at Ellie, "I don't suppose you have a picture on your phone?"

Ellie nodded as she pulled up photos of Jethro at the wedding and at her parents' house. Shannon took the proffered phone, "Oh, he looks wonderful." She looked closely at the wedding photo. "He's wearing cowboy boots!"

Ellie and Bob laughed and Ellie answered, "Yes. He, Tim and the kids lived in the southwest while they were in WITSEC and really got into the lifestyle. I grew up on a ranch in Oklahoma so I'm very familiar with everything cowboy. When Tim and I were planning our wedding, the kids asked if they could wear their boots and we decided to join them. Word spread and what with my family and friends of theirs, I'd say nearly half the guests were wearing cowboy."

Kelly laughed, "That sounds like fun! Did you line dance?"

"Oh yeah and that was also an eye-opener for those who only knew urban Tim."

Shannon thumbed through the photos, "Oh my heavens, your children are beautiful. OH! They're my grandchildren; I'm a grandma! Oh Lord and I tried to hurt their daddy today. I hope Tim and I can work things out."

Ellie didn't try for an answer, having an idea how tough that was going to be. Kelly broke the mood by making a comment about the children, "They look so much like Grandpa Mac; so does Tim."

"Yes, they do. They're Tim's biological children although he never met their mothers; he was literally their sperm donor. I'll let him tell you that story; it's sad and amazing. Oh geez, I hadn't thought of this, but when Tim brought the kids to live with him, he and Jethro told them their mothers had gone to be angels in heaven. Over the last two years, you two and Tony's mother have also been identified as angels in heaven. Tony is part of the family, sort of an unofficial son."

"Are you afraid they'll wonder if their mothers are coming back or why we did and not them?"

"Yes. They know what WITSEC is, that might help."

Bob cleared his throat, "Ellie, remember when Tim and Boss found them? Ty said he'd tried to wake his mommies but couldn't."

"I forgot that. As I remember I was frantically looking through the remains of the suitcases looking for diapers while Tim and Gibbs were carrying the babies down to the van."

"Granducky was there too."

"You're a lifesaver, Agent Chalmers."

"Glad to help, Agent Bishop."

"Boss? Granducky?"

Bob chuckled while Ellie explained, "While he ran the team, Gibbs was 'Boss'. Tony and Bob still call him that occasionally; Tim does when Jethro's acting like 'Boss' toward him. Dr. Donald
Mallard is our chief Medical Examiner, his nickname is Ducky. His assistant, Dr. Jimmy Palmer and his wife Breena are very close to him, like his kids. When they had a baby, they asked Ducky to act as their child's grandfather only they termed it Granducky. Tim asked the same thing of him when he brought Ty and Brynie home. There's a second Palmer child now so Ducky is Granducky to four children and will be to future Gibbses, Palmers, DiNozzos and who knows who else.

"Future Gibbses? I like the sound of that!"

Ellie's eyes grew wide. "Bob, oh my gosh I have more to tell."

"I just realized that too!"

Ellie turned to her in-laws. "Tim's a package deal, not only with the kids but his siblings. I told you his brother Patrick was murdered, but there were three McGee children, the third is his younger sister Sarah. Kelly, she's a year older than you are.

"They had a rough childhood and along the way met a little boy named Robbie who is a year younger than Sarah, Kelly's age. Tim and Sarah lived in Baltimore and after rescuing Robbie, they kept him with them and an older boy named Geordie who rescued them their first day in Baltimore. When Geordie turned 18, he became their legal guardian. Three years later, he was ready to leave for the Marines when Tim turned 18; Tim became Sarah and Rob's legal guardian and adopted Geo as his brother.

"Each adopted the others, so the 4 have been siblings most of their lives. After Jethro and Tim found out they were father and son, Jethro wanted to adopt the others too but Sarah and Rob didn't know him well and Geordie had never met him. Then Tim, Jethro, and the littles disappeared into WITSEC. When they were released from the program, Geo, Rob, and Sarah traveled to the Gibbses' location and agreed to become Jethro's children. Their adoption was finalized shortly after Tim and Jethro returned home. And I adopted Tyler and Bryn, effective 6 weeks ago, right before our wedding. Kelly, you have a nephew and niece, 2 sisters, including me, and 4 brothers, including Tony. Rob is your age and also a pediatric resident!"

"Wow, that's so cool! Not the part about the rough childhood but the rest. When is Rob's birthday?"

Ellie told her and Kelly made a face, "Dang it, I'm still the youngest!"

"Are any of them married?"

"No. Tony's seeing someone and so is Geordie. However, he was away in the Marines for over a decade so he's just sort of easing into what we'd call a normal life."

"Is he still in the Corps?"

"Yes, he's a Major, stationed at Quantico. Jethro left active duty after being blown up and losing you two. He went to work for NIS, finished his twenty in the reserves."

Shannon nodded, "He didn't know what he was going to do afterward but we'd made plans for him to leave active service after that last deployment. He wanted to spend more time with us. So, tell me about my stepchildren or whatever relation they are to me."

Ellie nodded as she told her a little bit about each of them, including Tony. "You've mentioned him a few times. He's not one of the adoptees?"

"No, his father is living although they're not close; his mother died when Tony was about 8, I
believe. He's a former police detective; Jethro met him on an undercover case in Baltimore close to 20 years ago and brought him into NCIS. Tony was his second in command until WITSEC, then he took over the team and when they came home, Jethro retired from the field, meaning he gave up the team. He planned to have knee surgery immediately but then we decided to get married right away, so he waited and had the surgery 4 weeks ago. Anyway, Jethro and Tony regard each other as surrogate father and son; he's also one of Tim's best friends."

"Wow, so I have a daughter-in-law, two grandchildren, two daughters and four sons. And you and Tim are the only ones married."

"We work long and irregular hours, it's tough to meet someone and hang onto them long enough to build a relationship. As I mentioned, Tony has been seeing someone for several months; she's an agent at NCIS, in fact, she transferred off his team so they could get serious. She's a Marine captain finishing up in the reserves. You may have another daughter-in-law before too long."

"Sarah writes, Geordie's a Marine, Kelly and Rob are doctors and the rest of you are Federal agents. I'm impressed."

Bob made a noise, "Actually you have two writers in the family. Tim has several books published. One of his pen names is Thom E Gemcity."

"I love those books! LJ Tibbs and - is that Jethro?"

"Yes. Loosely based on the team."

"Are you two in them?"

Bob grinned, "I'm in the next one; my character's name is Danilo."

Ellie smiled, "I'm Thea."

"Thea, who joined the team after Lisa left. And Tim's adopted name was McGee, is he McGregor? And then Tony must be Tommy. Wow!"

Kelly sat in thought, "Who was Lisa and who is Amy?"

After explaining a little about Ziva-Lisa and Abby-Amy, they gathered their belongings and left the room, on their way to see Jethro and Tim.
Chapter 46

As they walked into the building, Jethro turned to look at his son who had been nearly glued to his side although refusing to talk.

"Now we're gonna find out?"

Tim nodded, fighting the urge to throw his arms around his father. His father caught the look and put an arm around him. "Timothy, whatever it is, we'll get through it, we'll work it out."

Tim smiled at him, although his eyes were full of unshed tears. He helped support his father, something Dad had been resisting; today he allowed it.

Four weeks post-surgery, he was using the cane nearly 100% of the time. The family doctors insisted he take the walker with him when he went out but it usually stayed in the trunk while he walked with the cane.

He frowned when he saw Tony, "DiNozzo, are you all right? What's going on?"

"He came with me, Gibbs. Need to talk with you and Tim." Vance hurried to add, "No one is dead, hurt or in danger."

Gibbs nodded at the director, "Thanks, Leon."

Sitting on the chair Tim pulled out for him, he looked at the others. "You said no one was hurt, but is someone sick or dying?" He swallowed, "Mac?"

Tim shook his head while Vance had to hold back a somewhat hysterical urge to laugh. Instead, he took a deep breath. "It's a long story but I know you prefer the bottom line, so here it is, your wife and daughter are alive. Shannon and Kelly are alive; they've been at NCIS most of the morning. Bishop and Chalmers will bring them downstairs in a few minutes."

Gibbs stared at him, not blinking for two full minutes. Tim sat next to him, holding onto him and Jethro pulled his son's hand against his heart. His eldest was on the other side of him, holding onto his shoulder and he reached up to squeeze Tony's hand. Several more minutes passed before he finally made a noise, managing to croak, "Where, how?", seemingly unaware of the tears running down his face.

"They've been in WITSEC for 25 years. They were both badly injured in the crash on the way to the safe house but survived. We believe Franks found the sniper's nest and evidence that two people witnessed the resulting crash. The first was Hernandez. The second was Stacevyko so when you arrested her, you set them free."

"Twenty-five years. Kelly's almost 33! How is she, what does she do, what does she look like?"

Tim cleared his throat, "She's a doctor. A pediatric resident, like Rob. And Dad, she's as beautiful as she was as a little girl. You'll see soon."

"Shannon?"

Vance answered that, "She's been teaching middle school for all that time. And you'll see how she's
fared too."

"Where?"

"They've been in Washington State for 23 years. They were in and out of hospitals the first couple of years, don't know where."

Jethro frowned, "Mike got them to safety?"

"He must have, he was the lead agent."

"He knew they were in protective custody."

Tony answered that one, "Yes but he must have felt he couldn't compromise their safety. So he took care of you instead."

Jethro took a deep breath. "Still pissed at him. Grateful but pissed; he could have at least left me a note or something." He looked at Tim. "You knew - you've seen them."

"Today yes although I wasn't sure at first, it was only a crazy thought. They set off the alarm at your house this morning. I was just leaving for work, got an alert on my phone. Called Alexandria PD for backup, let the director know and I went in the back way. They looked vaguely familiar to me; it wasn't until I saw photos that I knew for sure. But when Shannon looked at me the first time, she snarled and her eyes were wild and angry."

"Did you tell her?"

"No. Before that, I'd announced I was NCIS as I came in. She tried to hit me. There was a bit of a skirmish. Both of us used MMA moves, she tried a leg block and got my shin but I defended and we got the cuffs on her. I don't know what she would have done if I'd said my name."

"Oh my Timson." Jethro pulled his child toward him, embracing him, whispering that he loved him; they'd work things out, to have faith that his mother would love him. Remembering the grief he and Tony felt when they first saw Ziva alive in that cell in Somalia, Tim realized he'd been feeling the same today, since he'd started to figure it out. Knowing his father was having an even stronger reaction, he held on tight, making his own effort to comfort.

Jethro was indeed feeling grief although joy was beginning to blossom inside him. When he and his son finally pulled apart, he had questions.

"What else?"

"First of all, I need to know if you want to press charges for the B&E. And since Tim and I talked, I've found out more from the Marshals." He explained their lives in WITSEC and the Separation Program. He paused to watch Jethro's eyes widen as he heard the name and looked to his son for confirmation. Tim whispered rule 39 to his father and Tony, who both nodded.

Vance resumed, "When they came in, neither would tell us anything. We already had confirmation from the Marshals they'd been in WITSEC and once I had the DNA test results, we knew for sure it was them."

"Yeah, no charges for the B&E. Did Abby run the DNA?"

"Yes, I didn't want to take the time to go outside the agency. I stayed with her while the test was running, making phone calls from her office."
"My God!" Jethro sat up straighter in the chair, still holding onto Tim. "What about my other kids and grandchildren?" He smiled, "Our children and grandchildren. Thanks for bringing Tony with you, what about the rest of them?"

Vance sighed, "Tim had it all set up so everyone would meet Kelly at Ducky's house but then the whole thing with the Separation Program came up."

"They have to go with the Marshals again?"

"Yes, for a day."

"What will happen with Shannon? With what she did to Tim - that's a mandatory sentence."

"Yes. I spoke with Stan McQueen who said he had some ideas and would let me know." Vance didn't want to make any promises.

Tim looked up and Vance winced, again, at the look on his face, "It's not up to me?"

"No. Because she initiated the attack and continued to resist, there's no choice."

Tim nodded. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. Any other dirtbag he probably wouldn't hesitate to press charges. But this was his mother and they hadn't been prepared. He was angry, hurt, sad, and really didn't want to meet her as Shannon and Tim. Not today. He had no idea what to say. Except he had a question.

He looked up, "Leon, why didn't Dad and I go through that program?"

Vance chuckled, "I asked Stan and he said you did, they just didn't tell you what they were doing. And because you'd already seen Tony and Ellie, spoken with the rest of the family, you knew everyone's status."

Tim thought a minute, "They asked us how we felt about going home and what we'd be doing when we got here. I said I'd be getting married and Dad said he'd be making sure I got married and then having knee surgery."

"Maybe it's a judgment call, how much they do."

Jethro cleared his throat, "We had to sign a lot of papers. Do the girls know about Jack and Mac?"

"Yes. I told them about Jack visiting here and that Mac is alive and well; we haven't figured out how to tell him."

Jethro tilted his head, "We'll figure it out."

Tim swallowed, "Dad, Ellie volunteered to tell Shannon about me; she said it wasn't something either the director or I should have to relay."

"Knew Bishop is a Gibbs! That's good then, son; Shannon will realize how you must feel and she'll know about her mother."

"Yes."

Vance cleared his throat, "She asked if I knew where her mother was and I said no. I really don't know what prison she's in."

He hid a smile when Jethro, Tim, and Tony said the name of the prison almost but not quite in
When his phone buzzed with a text, he added, "Bishop and Chalmers are on their way down with Shannon and Kelly. Dr. Mallard, I'll treat you to a cup of tea."

Ducky nodded while Tony looked at his boss a little wildly, he shouldn't stay, really didn't want to. Then his little brother looked at him, "Tony, will you please stay?"

"Sure, Tim. Director, Fuller doesn't know what's going on."

"I'll brief him. And we'll try to keep the news in-house but no guarantees. Jethro, Tim, the Marshals will be here for both women in 45 minutes."

Even with Tony there watching his 6, Tim did not want to be in the room. He supposed he'd have to suck it up. As usual, his father knew what he was thinking. He pulled him toward him.

"You don't have to hide your feelings. Ellie will be here too. Do your polite bit, that's all you'll need. I'm sure Leon has let her know how much she screwed up with you."

With a nod, Vance and Ducky slipped out of the room while Tim stood looking out the window, wishing he was on the other side of it. As this room was never used for witnesses or suspects, it had two doors and when Tim finally left the window, he hovered at the end of the table near the rear door.

His heart breaking for his son, Jethro suddenly said, "Go, Timothy. This isn't the right time or place to meet as mother and son. Wait until they're through this program, give yourself some time."

Tim looked at his father, reached over to kiss him, glanced at Tony who got a nod from their dad and the two younger men left the room. Giving Tim's arm a pat, Tony decided it would be a great time for an amble along the river walk. He gave his jacket to Tim and ducked into Security to borrow one. The Security officers were a little surprised but Henry just chuckled. "If you go back upstairs you'll get called out or someone will want something. Take mine."

When he found Tim, he was sitting on the bench closest to the building, elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. "I'm couldn't do it, Tony. I couldn't even be in the same room with her. How am I going to deal with this? I'm such a wimp."

"Not! Not in any way shape or form. Ok, maybe about heights but you've worked hard on that and do pretty well these days. Tim, she attacked you and you recognized her as your mother. I can't even imagine how that must feel."

"Angry, sad, confused, rejected, insecure, sad, hurt, angry."

"So sad, hurt and angry are the winners."

Tim nodded. They continued down the path.

Ellie pushed the door open, peeking inside the conference room, relieved Tim wasn't there. He would need some time before he met the woman who'd given birth to him and wanted to hurt him today. She held the door open and motioned for the two women to enter. She didn't go in herself. If Tim had been in there, she would have but this time was for Jethro, Shannon and Kelly.
Leaving the small hallway, she looked around the lobby. Henry emerged from the Security office. "DiNozzo and Gibbs Junior are down on the river walk. DiNozzo borrowed my jacket."

She smiled, "Thanks Henry."

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Inside the conference room, Jethro pushed himself up from the chair when he heard the door open. He turned in time to see a blond head duck out, must be Ellie, and then his girls walked in.

Shannon was crying and the tall young woman with her had to be Kelly. My God she was beautiful, his little girl all grown up. And crying. He knew Shannon had hurt his son but he needed to touch her, to know this was real. He held his arms open, croaking out their names and realized he had tears of his own.

Shannon's thoughts froze as she saw her husband. Her tears started again and she went straight into his arms, remembering not to knock him off balance.

Holding on, breathing in the scent of his Shannon, feeling her in his arms, Jethro looked up as his little girl joined her parents. He kissed each of them, holding on tight.

When the three reunited Gibbses finally pulled back a little, Shannon looked around. "Where's Timothy?"

Jethro shook his head, "He's not ready to see you. Don't know when he will be. Kelly, he's looking forward to getting to know you."

Shannon turned away, sobbing. Kelly looked at her father; she couldn't believe he was here, her dad and that she had his arms around her. She'd forgotten how safe she felt. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I've never seen her like she was this morning. She was angry, aggressive and out of control, blaming everything on NIS. She kept saying there was nothing and no one left and it was the agency's fault. She really blames Agent Mike."

"Mike Franks?"

Kelly nodded, "Director Vance told us a little about him, that he gave his life to protect you."

"He protected me from the day we met. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him."

"Vance said he kept you alive."

"He did."

He asked about her schooling and work and she told him. Eventually Shannon rejoined them although she was subdued. Jethro didn't know how he felt. Happy, angry, confused, thankful and his heart hurting for his boy.

He turned to Shannon, "Shannie, Tim's never had a mother. Lily McGee died when he was a baby, the next time he had anyone close to maternal was in college. Their landlady, Mrs. Ferguson, mothered them to some extent. He met Ellie's mom in September and she took him under her wing. He's a federal agent who grew up on the streets, in a homeless shelter for 3 years and then a transient camp for 6 years, raised two toddlers when he was still a kid, 9 years old. He knew how to throw a knife at a moving target by the time he was 10 and he used it to defend his kids, I mean Sarah and Rob, his first kids. He's tough, guess you know that from this morning. But where most people have childhood memories, he has nightmares."
She nodded, "And the first thing I do is to reject him. He looks so much like my dad, I – I don't know why that made me even more angry. He said NCIS and GOD! I've hated the agency for 25 years. It was like my worst nightmare returning for round two." She paused, "Any words of advice?"

He shook his head. "He and I have had our own problems, taken us years to get things straight between us." He sighed, "But then the problems occurred over years. I don't know. Give him space. Don't push or he'll shut down but do let him know you want to be his mother. With our problems, we just kept talking through them. He finally declared an end, said he trusted me again, that was a huge challenge."

Kelly shook her head, "Geez guys, this isn't Psych 101 or rocket science. Mom, start with an apology. He may forgive you but that doesn't mean he'll forget or that everything will be all roses and sunshine between you."

Shannon nodded as Jethro continued, "Another thing, Shannie; his kids are attuned to him. If he's uneasy with you, they will be too. Don't push them either. Start slow. Ask him questions about his life. Do you know about his writing?"

Kelly grinned, "Bob told us; he's our favorite author."

"Good, ask him questions about his books. He started an art collection in New Mexico; ask him about that. Get to know him."

They'd moved on to other topics when there was a knock on the door. Tim was there with two deputy marshals. He gave Kelly a hug but couldn't bring himself to look at Shannon. The two women kissed Jethro goodbye and Kelly kissed Tim too. When they exited the conference room, Vance was there, signing custody of Shannon over to the Marshals Service.

As they left, one of the marshals stopped to ask where the women would be living. "We'll bring them home when they're done, either tomorrow night or Thursday morning."

Gibbs gave them Ducky's address much to Tim's surprise and relief. He thought he'd be able to handle talking with Shannon at Ducky's but not at Dad's home. Not after this morning. Or maybe he'd be over this needy spell by then.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tim buried himself in work the rest of the day. Despite Vance's good intentions, the news was making the rounds at the agency. And that meant he and Ellie had to tell the children that night. Tim was not happy but with the daycare aboard the Yard, there wasn't much choice.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Ty and Brynie had a strange afternoon. They'd been thrilled when Uncle Geo came to pick them up and then confused when Aunt Lara called and said to bring them to her house instead. They were very happy to see Daddy and Mommy when they arrived at Uncle Leon and Aunt Lara's to take them home.

When they got home, their parents sat them down. Ellie had suggested she take the lead on this and Tim agreed. "There's no way I'm going to sound happy."

"You will eventually sweetie, at least about Kelly."

"You're right."
So when the four of them sat down to talk, Ellie told them, "Your daddy and I have something we need to tell you. A good something, a surprise for all of us!"

Their little faces lit up, they loved surprises. Ellie smiled at them, "There are two new people we want you to meet; we met them today and we hope you'll meet them soon!"

"Aunts and uncles?"

"One's an aunt, yes and the other is a new grandmother."

"Another grandmother? Cool Mommy, we'll have two!"

"Yes you will."

About to tell the kids the names of their new grandmother and aunt, they were concerned the kids would recognize the names and want to know why their first mothers weren't also coming back. Ellie had relayed Bob's reminder of Ty trying to wake his mommies up after their car crashed and Tim agreed that sounded like the best direction to take. "We want to tell you the names of your new grandma and aunty."

"Good!"

"Your grandma is Grandma Shannon and your aunt is Aunt Kelly."

Brynie looked at them, frowning. "Those are Poppy's angels."

"Yes, we thought they were but we found out today that they weren't taken to be angels after all."

"Why not?"

"I guess God wasn't ready for them yet."

"Does that mean our first mothers will come back?"

"No son, it does not. Do you remember when you tried to wake your mothers after the crash?"

Ty scrunched his face up before nodding, he had a vague memory of the wreck, kept alive in his infrequent nightmares, and he knew the story. "Yes, I couldn't wake them up. I saw the bad guy so Brynie and I hid. Daddy and Poppy found us under a bush."

"That's right Tyler Dean, we did. And your moms couldn't wake up because they were already on their way to heaven to be angels."

"Ok. Did anyone try to wake up Grandma Shannon and Aunt Kelly?"

"They did wake them up, son, so they didn't go to heaven. But there were bad people after them and the good guys hid them, even from Poppy."

"Was it the mean-eyed lady, Daddy?"

"Yes, she wanted to hurt Grandma Shannon and Aunt Kelly. The marshals hid them to keep them safe, just like they hid us."

"Oh! She was really bad, huh Daddy? It's a good thing you and Mommy, Poppy, Uncle Tony, Mr. Bob, and Agent Fuller caught her."
"Yes kiddo, she was very bad and we're very glad we caught her too."
Chapter 47

Brynie asked, "Can Grandma Shannon and Aunt Kelly come home now, like we did?"

"Yes, it took them longer to get home than it did us, but they might be home on Thursday."

"They missed our wedding!"

"Then it's a good thing we have lots of pictures to show them."

Brynie giggled, "With our cowboy boots!" She was quiet for a minute and then her eyes lit up with an idea, "Can we wear our boots? Oooh, we could wear our wedding clothes!"

"That's a great idea, Brynie! You and I can wear our pretty dresses, Ty and your daddy can wear their suits and all of us wear our boots! That way your new grandmother and aunty can see how fun our wedding was! And they'll be over lots of times when we can wear our boots and hats."

"Poppy too?"

"He can wear his hat but I don't know if he can wear a boot on the leg with his sore knee. Maybe one boot."

The kids giggled, thinking that would look funny.

"Daddy, do we still have to be careful with Poppy?"

"Yes, we all do. He can walk now, but it still hurts a little and we don't want to make him hurt more."

"When will he be better?"

"He will be much better by your birthday, Brynie. He might not be carrying you upstairs yet but you can cuddle with him again."

"Yay!"

Ellie and Tim laughed as their children cheered, hoping they never lost their enthusiasm. Tim picked them up, one by one and twirled them around causing shrieks of glee. Their happiness was contagious.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

While the accommodations at the Marshals office weren't luxurious, they were quiet and private. The two women were comfortable and Kelly fell asleep immediately that night. She couldn't wait to get this program thing done so she could see her dad, brother and meet everyone else.

Shannon couldn't sleep, replaying the nightmare she'd created for her son. Her son! She had a son; her baby boy had survived. She hoped this program would give her some answers and she really hoped she wouldn't have to go to jail. She spent most of the night alternating between her remorse at what happened with Tim and her worry about going to jail. In between there were hopeful and happy thoughts about Jethro.
Wednesday morning, the women went upstairs to the main office to start their delayed official separation from WITSEC. Along with surveys and government forms, they were encouraged to share their plans. They were in a conference room, still together at that point. Their guide through all this was a psychologist they were told to call Dr. R. No names and they were once again the Hulls; after all, this was the Marshals Service.

Halfway through the morning, Dr. R put her notebook down. "Emma, I need to spend some time with Patricia. I believe Deputy Murdoch has a desk set up for you in their office."

"All right." Gathering her papers and purse, Kelly kissed her mother, whispering, "I'll keep my fingers crossed, love you!"

"Love you too, sweetie."

After Kelly's exit, the doctor asked Shannon to tell her what happened yesterday. Having thought about it most of the night, Shannon had the details in order. Then the doctor asked her how she'd felt.

"How I felt? When? At that moment or before?"

"Is before significant?"

"Yes, absolutely. My daughter and I were in exile for 25 years and then two deputies show up one day and say ok, go away now, you're done, no more danger for you. Oh and by the way, the husband we told you was dead 25 years ago is alive. Surprise!"

"Your feelings?"

"Everything in the book. Relief, anger, grief, fear, some joy, confusion. A lot of confusion and anger. The marshals ruled our lives for 25 years, most of my daughter's life and then they just stopped. No other information, no party, no nothing. Emma drove home, she lives and works in Seattle and home is - or was - Tacoma. We decided we wanted to come back here, find her grandparents and maybe her father. I was pissed as hell at him. If he was alive, why wasn't he with us? He just lived his life and that was it? I was outraged. And rejected. By him, by the marshals, by my parents, by the world. Anyway, Emma and I contacted our employers, taking time off. Then we booked a flight to DC. Lucky there's a price war going on. As it was, we had a 3-stop flight but at least it was affordable.

"We landed in Baltimore and rented a car, drove to DC. We drove around the monuments, which made me start to feel like I was home again. We'd booked a motel outside the District and checked in before we tried calling my parents. The number didn't belong to them anymore nor were they listed in the phone book we found at the motel. We moved on to my father-in-law. We called his store but someone else answered and when I asked for the owner, he said he was. We probably should have looked online for all of them but we were too dispirited and I was afraid of what we'd find.

"I started to lose it then. I had no idea where my husband was, another strike against the marshals, how did they expect us to find anyone after two decades? By that time, it was late so we had dinner, watched TV and played cards. I remembered I still had my house key, the house Emma, my husband and I lived in before he was posted to Camp Pendleton and the shit hit the fan. I hid the key when we left for the safe house and still had it. I thought we'd at least see our old house, Emma remembers it pretty well. We didn't know who lived there but I was determined to see it."

She tried to take a breath but started crying. "It didn't work, the key didn't work. And the house
looked so alone - empty. Silly, I know, but I decided they'd lied about my husband being alive and there was nothing here for us. Nothing! But at least the house was still standing, even had the same house numbers my husband and I put up 30 years ago. I needed to see if there was anything of us left in the house, felt like our last chance for any hint of us. So I used my lock picks. Uh, well that was the first time I used them on a house I didn't live in. We got in and it was so dark we couldn't see anything. And then this man comes in saying he's NCIS. That's the agency that was supposedly protecting us 25 years ago when we were injured so badly and had to go into WITSEC. It was NIS then but same difference. I've blamed them for everything since then. Everything from our exile to solar flares. I hated the agency and everyone connected with it.

"Hearing the agency name broke me. I totally lost it. I wanted to hurt the mouth that said those words, wanted to make it stop. He said something about prison time for striking a federal officer; I just wanted it all to stop. We both did some martial arts moves. He blocked me, I fought back but he won. I lost again, still. Whatever."

The doctor told her to take a break and left the room, bringing back a box of tissues and a bottle of water. "Let's talk about something else. Tell me about living in Tacoma."

"The whole 23 years?"

Dr. R smiled, "Good point. Maybe just the last few years, after Emma left for college."

"I missed her horribly but I was busy with my classes and I started doing some volunteer work on the weekends Emma didn't come home. Eventually the marshals and I came to an agreement about me visiting her. They provided an escort vehicle and when I stayed overnight, a female marshal stayed with me. That wasn't bad, a little more freedom and I saw Emma, met her friends. At home, I joined a singles group, after getting approval of course, and started dating. After I got over my nervousness, it was fun. Nothing serious, just dinners and movies, coffee, a couple of bike rides, a hike or two, bowling a few times. I enjoyed that."

"Sounds like Tacoma is home."

Shannon thought about that, "I guess it is after two decades. I know my neighbors, the families of the kids Emma went to school with, my fellow teachers, all my students and their parents, of course. I taught a lot of kids in 23 years!"

"Would you go back there, to live?"

"If my son and I can't work things out, yes I think I would. My husband is alive after all and welcomed me warmly but our son wasn't there. J…my husband said he's quite upset about what happened and wasn't ready to see me. And before you ask, I feel horrible about what I did and how he must feel. Do you know about him, the kidnapping and all?" Dr. R nodded and Shannon/Patricia continued, "He's never had a mother. His 'adoptive' mother died when he was a baby and when he was 9," she told the doctor what she'd been told of Tim's life. "One of the worst parts of yesterday is that he recognized me. While he was fighting me off, he suspected that I'm his mother. Or at least wondered. How do I make that up to him?"

"You can't change what happened. You make a sincere apology and then the hard work starts. Get to know him; do you know anything about him? Other than his past and where he works?"

"Yes, my husband gave me a couple of clues."

"It's reassuring that your husband wants to help. When did they meet?"
"I think 2003 or 2004. But they just worked together; they didn't know about being father and son until two years ago. And my husband said they've had some problems to work out."

"And have they?"

Shannon nodded, "Yes. He said that our son trusts him again, which was a huge challenge and they're good now."

"Yes, I can imagine that with his history trust would be a big issue for him. This won't be a quick fix. For one thing, you don't have a previous relationship for either of you to lean on. You have to start from scratch. Is he married?"

"Yes and his wife is also an agent. We didn't know she's his wife until shortly before my husband arrived. She told us about my son, that they are married and have two small children. My son and both kids look like my dad. She showed us photos."

The doctor had a few more questions for her but Shannon felt the worst part was over. Before Dr. R left, Shannon asked what would happen next.

"I'll write up my report and the marshals will take it from there."

"Can you tell me anything?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Nodding to Shannon and wishing her luck, the doctor left.

Shannon took her completed paperwork to the main room, finding Kelly sitting at a desk.

"Hi Mom, you done?"

"As far as I know, how about you?"

"Yeah, I decided to wait for you to turn in all this stuff."

"Thanks, sweetie."

One of the marshals smiled as he took their paperwork from them. "All right, I'll take these to the Chief. You can return to your suite if you'd like. He'll need a couple of hours to go through everything. Do you have any questions?"

Shannon sighed, "Nobody promised me anything but I did hear that doing this program might make a difference in my future."

The marshal nodded, "It will although I don't know how much of a difference. All this should have been done for you before you left Tacoma. Protocol is that you are asked to come to the office to learn of your release and go through the program. The deputies there should have spent that day or the next going through everything with you. It's supposed to be a bridge between WITSEC and your new lives. I'm sorry it didn't happen that way."

"Thank you, it helps somewhat to know that."

"When the Chief calls you back up here, he'll go over your finances, reimburse you for the airfare and wherever you stayed. And for a rental car if you have one. He'll go over more financial stuff too." He smiled, "He might order in dinner for the three of you. Usually when someone is released to his or her previous life there's a party at the office, we celebrate too. It's too bad that didn't happen."
The women nodded, both feeling tired. Kelly frowned, "I have a question. If we go back to our WITSEC homes, are we allowed to use our real names? And how do we explain the change?"

The marshal smiled, "Ask the Chief, he has a great explanation and examples to use."

Shannon had more questions but decided to wait for the Chief. The women returned to their suite, changed into their workout clothes and then went in search of the fitness center.

Finishing their routines, they went back to the suite and found food in the small refrigerator. There wasn't much, looked like enough for lunch today and breakfast tomorrow. That was a relief as they were both hungry. They decided the amount of food meant they wouldn't be staying long.

After eating, Shannon took a nap while Kelly caught up with her e-mail and then made a phone call. When the phone rang at 5:30 that afternoon, it woke both women. It was the Chief, asking them to join him for their final review and an early dinner.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Jethro had been through long days before, but this one was easily the longest day ever. He did all his exercises without having to be reminded. He checked in with Tim and then with Tony, which frankly scared DiNozzo. He wanted to call his other kids but felt he should wait until they knew what was going to happen.

He spent two hours in the pool, Ducky finally ordering him out. Taking pity on him, the doctor took him grocery shopping. They hoped for a family dinner on Thursday or over the weekend, depending on everyone's schedules. Jethro didn't want to have it unless every one of his kids could be there. He just wished Mac could be there too.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tim and Ellie had lunch together on Wednesday, something that rarely happened with Ellie's schedule. They had a secret, a small secret guaranteed to make their family happy. With the changes happening, they had to decide whether to tell the secret now or wait. Over lunch, they decided to wing it. If things got awkward, that is any more awkward, when Kelly and Shannon were released, they would share the secret. If not, they might just hold onto it for a while. A little while.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

When Jethro's cell rang Wednesday evening, he nearly pounced on it. "Hello?"

"Jethro, it's Shannon and Kelly. We have you on speaker."

"So great to hear your voices, love you both! How did it go today?"

"It was a long day but we agree it was worth it. Our arrival would have been a whole lot more fun if we'd gone through it before we left Tacoma."

"All your questions answered?"

"Yes, although one of them is only half answered. The service will bring us to your friend's house in the morning after breakfast. Kelly's free; I have to have a deputy marshal with me. And I have to go to court on Friday. The Marshals Service has hired a lawyer to represent me, an M. Allison Hart." Shannon almost jumped at her husband's chuckle. "Jethro?"
"Shannie, she's an excellent defense attorney, a real bulldog. Is this a bench trial?"

"Yes, that's what they called it and it will be closed court, so no strangers or media. But my family is allowed and the Chief said Tim will have to be there."

"Ok, that's not a surprise. As agents we're used to court."

"Will you tell him?"

"No, not allowed. I'm sure he's been notified. Explains why he hasn't called this evening. Except for the days he and Ellie were away after their wedding, this is the first evening we haven't spoken in nearly two years."

"Why not?"

"I'm a conflict of interest for both of you, in the middle."

"Oh. So we shouldn't talk?"

"Nothing more."

"What if they charge me with more?"

"Can't talk, Shannon, I'm serious. Ask your attorney."

He and Kelly spoke for several minutes. After he finished the call, he called Tim. Ellie answered, "Jethro…" He interrupted her, "Ellie, put me on speaker please."

She sighed but he heard the change. "I love my son very much and promise to support him however he needs. Whatever it takes. Tell him to imagine my arms around him. When this is over, we'll spend time together, just the two of us."

"Thank you. We'll talk with you over the weekend."

Jethro sighed as he disconnected. He knew that meant Tim and presumably Ellie would not speak or sit with him or Kelly in court. Tim could not voice his opinion or be given any support until it was over. God, this was fubar!

His gut tightened, he wanted to be there for his son. After all Tim had been through and he, his own father, had promised to be there for him whenever he was needed.

Ducky tried to speak with him but quickly understood there was no good answer. When both men reached a sad conclusion, they sighed. Finally, Ducky said, "I'll call her now. Perhaps she and I can have lunch and I can take her to one of the museums. Are they giving up their motel room? Never mind, I'll advise that they don't. She can't stay wherever you are."

Jethro nodded as his phone rang, Ms. O'Connell from the Legal Department. "Agent Gibbs, I'm sure you're aware of everything going on but Director Vance asked me to go over a few things with you."

"That I'm in the middle and can't see either my son or my wife until after the bench trial is over?"

"Yes. See or speak with, unfortunately. I'm sorry all this is happening."

"Thanks, I am too and I'm sure my son is."
"He's…well I'm glad he has Agent Bishop."

"What if I picked sides?"

"It's not illegal but I'd advise you to think very carefully first."

"I'd make things worse."

She made an affirmative sound.

"My wife called to say the marshals are bringing them here tomorrow morning. She'll be in the custody of a deputy marshal."

"That won't work. She can be there or you can be there, not both in the same house."

"If I go to my home, will that be enough?"

"Are you recovered enough to be on your own? Will you have one of Timothy's siblings with you?"

"I'll be fine, I'm only here now to avoid the renovation mess, but that should be done. And yes, I could ask one of my kids to stay."

"Let me check with the director, make sure it's been cleaned."

"No need; my contractor was allowed in today and said it was."

"Good, then yes I think that's your best bet."

Gibbs hung up, feeling even worse. Ducky looked at him, "If you're not here, then should they be delivered here? Not that I mind but I'm a complete stranger to them."

"And if they aren't here, I don't need to leave."

They shook their heads as Gibbs' phone rang again. "Mr. Gibbs, this is Chief Inspector Dodson, my office is handling your wife and daughter's re-entry."

"Yes Chief, what can I do for you?"

"Couple things. First, you should know that the deputies who failed to deliver the proper information to your wife and daughter have been fired, with prejudice. They won't work in any level of government again. And second, I realize what a quandary you're in with the legal problems. I've just spoken with your wife and daughter; we're going to move them to a residential hotel, which we will pay for, tomorrow rather than meet you. They plan to do some sightseeing and relaxing and will see you in court on Friday."

"Thank you Chief."

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Ellie was glad the kids were already in bed when Jethro called. Afterward, Tim was visibly upset and finally decided to go for a run.

While he was gone, Geordie called. Ellie frowned as she saw his ID; she knew Tim had his cell phone with him. Shrugging, she answered the call, "Hi Geordie."

"Hey new sis, how's my bro?"
"Not good. You heard what happened?"

"Yeah, talked with Tony. Why didn't Tim call one of us?"

"He didn't want to prejudice you against Shannon."

"Oh geez. What she did - how on earth can we not be biased against her?"

"There's background stuff I'm not allowed to talk about."

"Stuff that will be said in court Friday?"

"Yes."

"All right; I'm sure this is rough for Dad too."

"Tim won't let him near. He can't be now because of the legal stuff but even before. I don't really understand."

"With Tim, it's two things. One, he won't want to come between Dad and Shannon, not after the man has mourned her for so long and part of that is fear of rejection from Dad, even if it's unintentional. It's an old habit from our homeless days. If you fear rejection, then you reject that person first. Then it's your choice."

"Oh. That's so sad and I hate that he's reverting to old habits like that. Ducky called and said Jethro is having a horrible time with this. He wants to support Tim but feels Shannon doesn't have anyone else. And that feeds into Tim's fear of rejection from Jethro, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But Shannon has Kelly."

"Kelly tried to stop her."

"Didn't hear that. All right, I will be there Friday and I will sit with you and Tim. Sarah and Rob will be there too. Vance turned Tony down on time off. Next question, does Mac know any of this?"

"As far as I know, he does not. Tim and I were going to surprise everyone but under the circumstances, I think it's best to just say it. Mac is coming north, leaving on Friday, he'll be here Saturday morning and we'll pick him up."

"That means Bernie's better, great news! And I'm glad he'll be here and then Shannon will have him for support."

"And you think he'll feel less conflicted than Jethro?"

Geordie sighed, "Guess not. Ok, I'm going to go before this gets any heavier. Tell my bro I love him and to please start answering our calls. Oh and Ellie, what do you think of not telling him we'll be there?"

"Mm, how about I tell him right before we go into the courtroom? Don't want surprises happening when he's being called to testify."

"Good point. Thanks, Sis!"

She hung up, feeling better. She didn't know what this would do for the future of the family and she wasn't sure she cared. As far as she was concerned, that was Shannon's problem. She'd been the
sympathetic agent yesterday but now that she'd seen the aftereffects of Shannon's attack on Tim, she'd lost all of her sympathy.

Smiling, she moved around the house, placing things here and there, dimming the downstairs lights. Then she disappeared into their bedroom.

Tim noticed the lights were low as he approached his home and he smiled. Feeling better for the run, he entered, setting the alarm behind him and then grinned at his bride's handiwork. Tiny LED lights lit his way up the stairs to his lover.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Tony woke when his phone buzzed and then made a noise at Ellie's text; she was taking two personal days, Thursday and Friday. Smiling, he tugged Maggie to him, wrapping his arms around her.

The Vances looked at each other in concern when both phones buzzed with texts. Leon's was from Tim saying he was taking a personal day on Thursday while Lara's was from Ellie asking if she was available for child minding on Thursday. That was fine with Lara; she loved the Gibbs kids.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Thursday morning, Tim got the kids up, dressed and fed, telling them their plans had changed and they would stay with Aunty Lara all day today! The kids loved her as much as she loved them and they cheered. After they brushed their teeth, their daddy drove them to Aunt Lara and Uncle Leon's house. Kissing Daddy goodbye, they ran in, waving from the front window.

Back home, Tim found Ellie in the shower. Joining her, they used up all the hot water. While they were drying off, Tim had an idea. "Want to stay home all day or take a little road trip?"

"Ooh, a road trip! Any place special in mind?"

"Yes and here's a hint, it requires our riding boots."

"Horseback riding, yes! That's brilliant, we haven't been in weeks."

Tim huffed, "We've only been twice since New Mexico."

"Once on the beach at Chesapeake and once at the stables."

Grinning, they dressed in their riding togs, including boots and hats and were out the door and on their way after one quick stop. Ellie smiled to herself, glad the idea was Tim's. She'd thought of a few other things but riding always took them away from their problems.

NCIS NCIS NCIS NCIS

Now that the kitchen renovation was completed, Jethro wanted to see his house and Ducky admitted his own curiosity. They took the Challenger and Jethro drove, the good doctor carefully watching his friend for any sign of strain or pain as they traveled.

As they walked up the steps to the front door of his home, Jethro made good use of his cane. Ducky chuckled, "All right, yes, I concede both points. You are ready to drive and to move home. Although home will have to remain the main floor for a few more weeks."

"I know. I promise I'll follow PT instructions about the stairs and I'll have my cell phone with me
at all times."

"Yes, well you may not be alone for long."

Jethro sighed, "If Kelly moves in here, that's fine. But Shannon, no, not until Tim's ready. I won't risk our relationship."

"Son over wife?"

"Are we even still legally married, Duck? I should ask O'Connell that. But yes, I won't give him up."

"But why take sides at all?"

Jethro gave him an irritated look. "She hurt him because he said NCIS. And she knew he was related to Mac. I saw the security footage, Duck! If Shannon moves in here, it's as my wife. We'll be sleeping together. Understand?"

"So resuming your marriage is taking sides? I'll admit it will make things awkward. Jethro, if I may, how do you think Tim is going to react to your rejection of Shannon?"

Jethro sat down with a sigh. "Yeah, I know. There is no right answer and it feels like whatever I do he's going to feel pressured to forgive her. Now that I'm getting used to her being alive, I'm angry with her too. She hurt my kid!"

"Without knowing who he was."

"Doesn't matter."

"And you're afraid he'll withdraw from you so that you can be with your wife."

It wasn't a question but Gibbs answered anyway. "Yes. He already has."

"Regardless of her troubles with Timothy, the two of you need time to become reacquainted, time to learn who you are now and to work out your anger and whatever she's feeling."

"Thought about that."

"Jethro, what if she has her own place while you two get reacquainted and she and Timothy work through their problems? It wouldn't have to be a big place, a one bedroom apartment or condominium. Some place neutral with a short-term lease perhaps. That is, of course, if she's not in a cell."

Jethro thought about it for several minutes before nodding. "Sounds like a good idea to me, Duck. Better than anything I've come up with. That should give Tim a clear sign where he stands and Tim could see her there if he chooses, takes the pressure off." He tilted his head, "Of course it's up to Shannon but I'll suggest it to her. I think she'll have to do some time. Can't let an attack on a Fed go unanswered, sets a precedent and then it would be open season on us."

The two finally walked into the new kitchen. Jethro smiled, "This is great. A lot brighter in here and I like the layout."

Ducky was poking around the new refrigerator. "Wonderful to have new things, isn't it? And now your kitchen has finally joined the 21st century!"

Jethro didn't answer; he'd found a note from the contractor with an envelope attached. "Found this
on the floor in the dining room, must have slid off the table when I bumped it, sorry! Thought I'd better put it in here."

He opened the envelope and relaxed his shoulders; it was a note from Tim dated this morning. "Dad, hope you like the kitchen. Thanks for your call; I know you love me. I didn't mean to pull away, just needed some time to absorb the situation. Not sure how this will work out, wish I was more religious and could rely on faith in a superior being somehow erasing the bad stuff. However, I do have faith and trust in you and I have faith and trust in our relationship. You're a good daddy and for now, that's enough. Love, your Timson"

He smiled, his eyes wet. "It's gonna be okay, Duck. I don't know how, but we'll make it through."
Chapter 48

Jethro held onto that note for the rest of the day and had it in his pocket when he went to court on Friday. He smiled at his girl and boys as they slid into the seats next to Tim and Ellie, leaving Tim on the aisle. He nodded in approval at Geordie who was in full uniform and again when Maggie came in, also in full uniform, and sat with the siblings.

Kelly looked to see who was there and her eyes popped wide open when her father whispered that all were her siblings except for Ellie and the woman in uniform and there was one sibling missing. Ellie was her sister-in-law, Tony was probably at work and the woman in uniform was his girlfriend Maggie, likely representing Tony.

Vance and Ducky came in, sitting in the row behind the Gibbs’ kids. Ms. O’Connell was next; she sat at the plaintiff’s table in front. Men in suits came in, sitting behind Jethro and Kelly; he thought they might be marshals. A man and woman came in, so obviously cops that he knew they’d been Tim’s backup.

That was it for the gallery. No media, no one who wasn’t connected to the case and/or a family member. Ms. Hart sat up front with Shannon who was dressed conservatively and looked tired.

The judge entered and they got started. His honor began by saying that what looked like a simple open and shut case was quite complex. He further explained that he’d read the charges, seen the security footage, reviewed a psychological evaluation of the defendant, notarized documents from the Marshals Service and had a few questions.

First, he called Tim forward. Walking to the front of the room, Tim was sworn in by the clerk of the court and then sat in the witness stand. The judge looked at him. “You’re Agent Timothy Gibbs.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“How long have you been with NCIS?”

“Thirteen years.”

“What’s your current position?”

“Manager of the Cyber Crimes Unit at NCIS headquarters.”

“Is that an inside position or does it involve the field?”

“It’s an inside position.”

“How long have you been in that position?”

Tim told him, adding, “My service was interrupted by 9 months in protective custody.”

“Oh yes, I saw that. You, your father and your children.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Have you ever worked in the field?”
“Yes, I was a field agent for more than 11 years.”

“Why did you change positions?”

“I became the custodial parent of my children, needed a safer job and regular hours.”

“Very well, thank you. Now, I’m a stickler for details. Why did you respond to this alarm? Did you hear it?”

“No Sir, it’s a silent alarm. I built the alarm system and when it was tripped, the system sent an alert to my phone.”

“Just yours?”

“No, alerts were also sent to my father’s phone, my brother Geordie’s phone and to Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo’s phone.”

“And did they respond?”

“No Sir. If I may clarify?” He got a nod.

“My family and I live 5 houses down from my dad’s place, on the same block. I worked from home that morning and was getting ready to go into the office when I received the alert. I knew my dad was in Georgetown and Special Agent DiNozzo at work, I’m not sure if he was aboard the Navy Yard at the time. And Geordie was likely on duty at Quantico.”

“You were closest.”

“Yes Sir.”

“All right, couldn’t figure out why an alarm company didn’t respond, calling the police department. Now, I have your report and I don’t have any questions about what you’ve written, it’s thorough. However, I think there’s more. Did you recognize the defendant?”

“When I first entered, when the attack took place, I couldn’t see much of anything. It was only afterward that I saw her. But no, I can’t say I recognized her.”

“Tell me what happened. I’ve read the report but I want to hear this in your own words.”

“Yes Sir.” Tim took a breath and began, “After I got the alert, I called for backup, asking for the Alexandria PD as they’d be there in 2 or 3 minutes while it would take at least 15 minutes for NCIS backup. I went down the alleyway behind our houses, contacting Director Vance on the way. Once I knew my backup was in place, I entered the house through the back door while the police officers came in the front. I couldn’t see much of anything. No lights were on and the drapes over the front window were closed. All I could see were dim outlines of two shapes. Following protocol, I announced that I was with NCIS, a federal agent and gave an order to freeze. Then I saw a pale object coming at me, I blocked it and the suspect tried again, this time with a leg sweep. After I’d apprehended her, I had my first visual as the Alexandria PD officers put the cuffs on her. At that point, I turned on an overhead light. She looked vaguely familiar but I didn’t know for certain who she was. I’d never met her before, not as an adult. And as far as I knew, she was dead.”

“Then why did she seem vaguely familiar?”

“Since discovering our relationship, my dad has shown me many photos of my mother and sister.”
“So you’d only seen photos?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What were your thoughts?”

“When I entered the house I was focused on apprehending the suspect or suspects, stopping whatever they were up to. With my father’s work, anything is possible, from terrorists to criminals seeking revenge. There have been at least 4 previous attacks at his home, 1 on the home of a teammate and 1 on my own home. Once the suspects were apprehended, I realized they were not terrorists but I was confused by their names and the reaction to me or at least to my announcement of NCIS being present. But by then the bomb squad and the NCIS team who would handle the crime scene had arrived and I focused on giving my statement and contacting my boss, Director Vance.”

“Why were you confused by their names?”

“They had the same surname as we did when we were in protective custody. I’m not a big believer in coincidences.”

“All right. Thank you for that. Now, the owner of the house, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, is your father. Is he your biological father and if so, why do you know him and not your mother? I ask because there’s no mention of a legal separation or divorce in the defendant’s records.”

Tim nodded, “He’s my biological father. I first met him as Agent Gibbs through our jobs in 2003.”

“And how old were you the last time you saw your mother?”

“I was a newborn, Your Honor, probably about 3 or 4 hours old.”

“Hmm, back to your father. When you met him in 2003, did you know he was your father and were you also Agent Gibbs?”

“In 2003 I did not know he was my father; I had no idea I wasn’t born a McGee and that was my surname then. I was Agent McGee.”

“When did you find out?”

Tim told him about the kids and the DNA test.

“I see. Yes, you did mention that you discovered your relationship. How well did you know him before that? After meeting him in 2003.”

“At the time we discovered our connection, I’d worked for him for 11 years, on his team.”

“Oh. When did you first hear of his deceased wife?”

Tim had to think about that, remembering it was while Gibbs was on what Tony called ‘Boss’ margarita safari’. He told the judge who nodded, saying, “I see that this is not only a complex case, you’re a complex family.”

Tim nodded and the judge dismissed him. Returning to his seat, he sat next to Ellie, taking her hand. She smiled as she felt him relaxing.

The judge looked at his papers. “Ms. Hart, please approach the bench. Ms. O’Connell, you are representing NCIS, correct?”
“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Please approach the bench.”

There was a quiet discussion and then the two attorneys returned to their seats.

“The next witness isn’t on our witness list but attorneys for plaintiff and defendant have agreed to her addition. If Dr. Kelly Gibbs is here, please come forward.”

Kelly paled but her father stood to allow an easy exit and taking a deep breath she made her way forward. After being sworn in, she sat in the witness stand as she’d seen her brother do. “Now, Doctor, I apologize for doing this at the last minute. I only have a few questions; your statement is thorough. What I’d like, in your own words, is your opinion of your mother’s frame of mind beginning the day you were told you were free.”

“Free from WITSEC, Sir?”

“Yes.”

“I wasn’t with her when she was told. I work and live in Seattle; she lives and works in Tacoma. That is, we did until this past Monday. She called me as the marshals were leaving my place. She was upset, happy and confused. I asked why she was upset and she said that my dad was alive. The day we were put into witness protection, we were told he’d been killed in Kuwait. That was during the first Gulf war. She was mad at NCIS, only it was called NIS then, for lying to us and for never telling us the truth. She’s been mad at NIS since the beginning. Now she was also angry with my father for never joining us.

“She was happy because we could contact my grandparents and let them know we were all right and confused because the deputies didn’t give her any instructions. They told her we were free, that other deputies were telling me and that we could go home or do whatever we wanted. Then they left.”

She paused to take a breath and the judge asked if she wanted water. She nodded and continued, “I drove home from Seattle and found her packing suitcases. She was crying; saying she wanted to go home, here, to see who we could find. She was scared, worried and afraid they’d lied again about my dad, that he really wasn’t alive and that her parents and my dad’s father might be dead. She was scared there was nothing here for us.”

Pausing again when the bailiff handed her a bottle of water, she took a sip before continuing. “We called our bosses and told them it was a family emergency; Mom took a month while I have three weeks. We planned to drive here but decided to fly. It took an hour or so to come up with a flight that wasn’t expensive and my mother was still upset, crying, happy and mad. She hates to fly; she has an inner ear condition that’s affected by the changes in air pressure when flying. The symptoms are the same as seasickness only in her case, it’s airsickness. And it’s worse with multiple stops.”

In the gallery, Tim’s interest was piqued, Ellie squeezed his hand and three heads swiveled in his direction, while Ducky looked thoughtful. Across the aisle, Jethro was surprised. He didn’t remember Shannon having problems with flying and then realized they’d never flown together. On the East Coast, they took the train or drove. When he was posted to Camp Pendleton, he had to report immediately and flew out as soon as he had his transfer orders. Mac, Shannon, and Kelly brought the family car to California, towing a trailer full of their belongings and then Mac flew home. The inner ear problem must be a family thing. At least Tim wouldn’t feel isolated with his seasickness anymore.
In the witness box, Kelly continued her report of her mother’s frame of mind. When she finished, the judge thanked and dismissed her. As she walked back to her seat, she wanted to look at her brother but knew that wouldn’t help anything. Still, he’d given her a hug the other day.

Next were the two Alexandria police officers. There weren’t many questions there. After that, there was a 15-minute recess. Although Tim was dismissed, he could legally leave, there was no way he was going anywhere.

When the proceeding resumed, a visibly anxious Shannon was called forward. The judge asked her a few questions about her background and those familiar with court procedures recognized an experienced jurist using a calming technique on a nervous witness. Once she was calmer, the judge took her through her actions and frame of mind that morning.

When they finished, he dismissed her. Then there was silence while the judge studied a paper in front of him. Jethro thought it might be his decision; he was probably reviewing it to see if it still stood or needed amending. Finally, he looked up, “Ms. O’Connell, are you aware of the recommendations in this case?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“What do you say?”

“We agree with them, Sir.”

“Very well.” He turned toward the defendant’s table and Ms. Hart and Shannon stood. “Shannon Gibbs, I find you guilty of assaulting a federal officer with intent to harm.

“Although it was your decision to act as you did, I find that the Marshals Service grossly neglected their responsibility toward you and your daughter. From the evidence presented, that neglect played a large part in your decision and subsequent actions. I cannot sentence the deputies who erred but I can see that you have justice.

“There is a mandatory prison sentence ranging from 2 to 10 years for the assault of a federal officer. I hereby commute that sentence and place you on 12 months’ probation. I’m also mandating psychological counseling, a course in anger management and require 200 hours of community service to be completed during your probation. You may of course continue the psychological counseling afterward. You will report to a probation officer on a weekly basis. Failure to complete any of these requirements will result in your arrest and incarceration.

“Along with your sentence, I order the U.S. Marshal’s Service to pay for your counseling and the anger management course. They will also pay any travel expenses incurred by reporting to your probation officer and any personal expenses you incur completing your community service.”

He looked at the people behind Jethro. “Is there anyone here with the authority to accept my orders?”

One of the men stood, “Your Honor, I’m Chief Inspector Dodson of the DC Marshal’s Service office. I have the authority to accept your orders.”

“Very well, Chief Inspector. Please remain after court is dismissed, you’ll need to complete the paperwork.”

“Yes Sir.”

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When he heard the sentence, Jethro exhaled, more relieved than he cared to admit. He looked across the aisle and saw Tim also seemed relieved and satisfied. He wouldn’t be responsible for sending his own mother to prison and the sentence, in his experience, was a light and just punishment.

Kelly turned to her father, “You’re happy with that?”

“You’d rather see her go to prison?”

“I thought they’d dismiss the charges.”

“No, that doesn’t happen in an attack against federal officers, unless the agent instigated a fight or there’s a proven personal vendetta. I’ve only seen that happen once in 20 years. That would be tantamount to declaring hunting season on federal law enforcement.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that. Then this isn’t bad?”

Jethro looked at his daughter and smiled, “I forget I wasn’t a Fed when we were all together. No, this is a walk in the park. There’s some discretion in the minimum sentence, I’ve seen it reduced to six months. But that’s in prison. I’ve never seen the sentence commuted.”

“Huh. Will Tim talk with Mom now?”

“Up to him and I doubt it. Not today. That’s going to take time, Kelly, and we need to let them have all the time they need. No pressure on either of them. You could go say hi to him though.”

Kelly looked around. Except for the Chief Inspector, the people in suits were leaving, the Alexandria police officers following them out the door, Director Vance and the agency attorney slipped out as well. The other man that came in with Vance stayed behind, moving to talk with the siblings. She looked over at her brother who smiled. When her dad gave her a little nudge, she crossed the aisle to Tim.

He stood as he smiled at her, “Hi Kelly.”

“Hi, Tim, hi Ellie.” Ellie smiled at her.

Tim squeezed her hand, “It’s been a horrible week for you, so wrong. You should have found flowers and huge banners welcoming you home. And a party so you could meet the whole family.”

He pulled her in for a hug and she hugged him back. Then she kissed Ellie on the cheek and looked at the others who were trying not to stare.

“Dad says you’re my sister and brothers. And Tony’s girlfriend.”

They nodded and Geo, sitting next to Ellie, stood and offered his hand. “I’m Geo. My proper name is Geordie but mostly I’m Geo to the family. I still use my biological father’s name, so I’m Geordie Perry.”

“And you’re a Marine; I bet Dad loves that. Thank you for your service.”

He nodded with a small smile and then Sarah stood, leaning around Geo, “Hi Kelly, I’m Sarah. Until 18 months ago, Tim and I believed we were biological sister and brother but we all adopted each other anyway. Welcome home!”

Geordie moved and the two young women exchanged hugs. Then Kelly smiled at Rob, “You must be Dr. Gibbs! When Ellie told me there was another doctor, I was so excited. And a pediatrician!”
He shook her hand, “Me too! And I’m Rob. I started out as Rob Brill; Tim adopted me so I was Rob McGee and then Dad adopted the three of us and I switched to Gibbs. This is so cool, not only are you a doctor, you’re our age, Sarah’s and mine.”

Kelly nodded, “Yeah, I thought that was pretty cool too but I’m still the youngest. You’re three months older.”

The other Marine was next and she shook Kelly’s hand. “Welcome home, Kelly! I’m Maggie Barnes, Tony’s girlfriend. He couldn’t get time off today so I’m representing him.”

“I’m happy to meet you, even with the strange circumstances.”

The older man who’d been sitting with Director Vance reached out his hand. “Hello Kelly, I’m called Ducky, Dr. Mallard outside of family and friends. I’m an old friend of your father’s, Timothy’s and Tony’s.” He chuckled, “And the rest of your siblings.”

Shaking his hand, she smiled, “Are you Granducky? Ellie and Bob told us.”

“Yes, that’s right! I’m so pleased to meet you, to even have the chance to meet you.”

“Thank you Ducky, that’s sweet. And I hope you have lots of stories to tell me about Dad and Tim.”

“Oh yes!”

She could see the others had questions; Sarah asked, “Are you going to stay with Dad?”

“I don’t know; my mother and I have to figure out our lives.”

“We didn’t know that you’re only here for three weeks. And almost a whole week gone already.”

“I’m sure I’ll be back and I do have two more weeks.”

They nodded and Geo said, “Blame it on the Marshals.”

She made a noise, “Yeah. Dad says my mother’s punishment is light.”

Ellie nodded, “It is; we were hoping for a reduced prison sentence. Never heard of the judge commuting the sentence.”

Kelly didn’t know what to say. Saying anything that was playing in her head might make things more awkward. Tim suddenly excused himself and walked out the double doors into the corridors.

Ellie joined him, he took her hand and they paced together. Eventually he said, “I started to feel sorry for her, for Shannon. I was about to go tell her we’d work things out. Then I realized she has not attempted to apologize to me, hasn’t said a word. Until she does, I won’t approach her. I want to because she’s my mother, but I can’t trust her and nothing she’s done so far has given me hope that I’ll be able to. And Eleanor, I don’t want the kids with her without one of us there too. I’d keep her away from them but I don’t see how that’s going to happen.”

“I agree.”

“I don’t know what this means for family gatherings, I guess we just won’t go. I don’t know how Kelly will react but I have to do this for myself. And I’m not going to try to handle this alone, or just us. I need professional help; this feels too big.”
She put her hand on his chest and pulled him to her, murmuring, “I am so proud of you, sweetheart.”

He nodded onto the top of her head. “Thank you. I’ll call Dr. Cranston; do you know who she is?”

She shook her head and then said, “Didn’t you call her for a referral for Ty?”

“Yes. Her sister was Kate Todd, our Agent Todd.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I think that’s a great idea, Tim. Let’s call her now, before we do anything else.”

He exhaled a sigh of relief, just doing this much made him feel a little lighter. They walked out the front doors and Tim found Dr. Cranston’s contact information.

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Rachel Cranston was reviewing an evaluation when her receptionist buzzed her. “There’s a Timothy Gibbs on the line for you. Says you know him as Timothy McGee.”

“Oh, sure, put him through.” She wondered at the name change. She vaguely remembered him calling for a referral for a child but they hadn’t had much of a conversation.

“Hello Tim.”

“Hi, Dr. Cranston. Thanks for taking my call. I’ve had what I guess I’ll call a trauma this week and I need help.”

The little niggles that had been nagging Rachel since Wednesday suddenly became stronger. “Tim, can you tell me in general what happened?”

“First, I don’t know whether you know this, but 18 months ago Gibbs and I discovered we’re father and son.”

“Ah, that explains the name change. Congratulations!”

“Yes and earlier this week…” Tim gave her a general outline of the break-in and attempted assault. She had to bite her tongue as she listened to his side of the story she’d heard on Wednesday from Patricia Hull.

When he stopped, she said, “I’m going to refer you to a trusted colleague.” She gave him the man’s contact information and told him she was sending the other psychologist an e-mail as they spoke.

Thanking her, he disconnected and she slumped in her chair. Those little niggles had been right, something in Patricia Hull’s story had set it off. She shook her head, she couldn’t risk thinking about it, could not get involved.

Tim immediately called the other doctor who spoke with him for a few minutes; they made an appointment for late afternoon on Monday, after work.

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Jethro watched Tim leave and Ellie follow. When they didn’t return he wanted to go after them but decided to give them a few minutes. Then his stomach growled and he moved across the aisle to his children, Maggie and Ducky. Shannon would be busy for a couple of hours, being processed for probation and the rest. Her cell phone would be returned when they were done, she could call
Kelly or him. He smiled at the kids, “It’s going to be a couple of hours and I’m hungry. Diner? My treat.”

Kelly jumped to move as Geo and Rob not very subtly tried to get past her. Sarah, used to the ways of brothers, slapped them both on their forearms. “Guys, she’s never had brothers before. Show her some respect!”

Geo apologized and Rob had started to when his stomach growled; suddenly they were all in a hurry. Rob pulled out a protein bar while Jethro gave him one he pulled from his jacket pocket. “Thanks Dad.”

Kelly still had the bottle of water and wondered if she should offer it, germs and all. But Geo took Rob by the arm, “Come on, there’s water in the corridor and Sari has a protein drink in her purse.”

“Ok.”

While the two brothers hurried out, Ducky explained that Rob suffered from malnutrition as an infant and the aftereffects required him to eat every two or three hours. If he didn’t eat, he was subject to irritability, fatigue, anxiety, dizziness and other symptoms similar to hypoglycemia.

Their father herded them out the double doors into the corridor, expecting to find Tim and Ellie. When they weren’t there, Geo pulled out his phone and called Tim, leaving him a message, “Bro, Dad and Rob are hungry, we’re on our way to the diner and Dad’s treating. Join us there, Timmo, please.”

The three siblings brightened when they found their brother and sister-in-law in the front of the building. Ellie smiled at them, “We had a couple of phone calls to make.”

Tim looked calmer and Jethro decided to let it go for now. They split into vehicles, Ducky and Geo riding with Tim and Ellie.

On the way, Tim and Ellie told the others what they’d discussed. Ducky thought about it, “I think these are wise and mature decisions, Timothy. If I can help in any way, please let me know.”

Tim smiled, “Thank you. It hurts but feels right. Maybe there will be a decent relationship between us someday although I don’t see that happening any time soon. Not without a lot of effort on her part. And yes, if she makes an effort, I’ll make one too but I’m not going to initiate anything. For once I’m going to take care of myself first.”

From the back seat, Geordie patted his shoulder, “Proud of you, Timmo. This has to be tearing you apart and getting help is a great idea.”

Ducky smiled at Tim’s words and Geordie’s support. “Wonderful to hear from both of you!”

Kelly rode with her father while she saw Dr. Mallard and Geo climbing into an SUV with Tim and Ellie. She grinned as she saw Sarah and Maggie climb in a convertible Mustang that looked almost as bad as her car. Turning to her dad, she said, “So, do you keep Rob’s car running for him?”

“Yes, with help from Geo and Tim. Is he driving? He should let Sarah or Maggie drive.”

“Sarah’s in the driver’s seat.”

“Yes, with help from Geo and Tim. Is he driving? He should let Sarah or Maggie drive.”

“Ok, good. Yeah, we’ve taught Rob a few things but don’t want his hands injured trying to keep that old thing alive! Tim says he’ll get another car when he’s through his residency.”
“That’s weird.”

“What?”

“How you said that. Like Tim made the decision for him.”

Her father huffed, “Tim raised him from a baby; Rob was 2 when they met. Until recently, Rob considered himself Tim’s son. He still thinks him more father than brother and Tim falls back into that role occasionally. I should have phrased it differently; Tim and Ellie will buy Rob a car as a gift. He’s very proud of him; Rob has worked hard at his studies and his various jobs.” He paused, “When I adopted them, we had to make a decision as to whether I was going to be their father or grandfather. I’m 19 years older than Tim and 16 years older than Geo. Barely old enough to be his dad.”

She chuckled, “You went from being a dad with one child to one with four.”

“Five and now six. Tony DiNozzo, who’s the oldest of the bunch, is what the others call my unofficial son. His father is still around although they’re not close. After I lost you and your mom, I never thought I’d have kids again but then I met Tony.” He told Kelly a little about his team and the ones he considered his kids.

She shook her head, “Ellie said there were more but I guess it didn’t hit me until I saw them sitting with Tim and Ellie.”

“Yeah, I’m glad they were all there and Maggie showing up, that was really something. Tells me all I need to know about her. And I’m proud of Tony for dealing with this as he has.”

They reached the diner and Jethro smiled at his daughter, his Kelly. “My miracle child!”

“I’d think that was Tim.”

“My miracle children!”

With a laugh, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder as they walked inside. Elaine looked at him and then Kelly, raising an eyebrow. Chuckling, Jethro tugged Kelly forward, “Elaine, like you to meet my daughter Kelly. Kelly, this is my friend Elaine. She and her husband own the diner which has been my home away from home for many years.”

Elaine smiled and transferring the ever-ready coffee pot, shook Kelly’s hand. “Wonderful to meet you, Kelly and welcome! Is the rest of the tribe, never mind, I see the Mustang pulling in and Tim and Ellie.” She looked at Jethro again, “Gibbs, special occasion?”

“Yes, Kelly has returned home after 25 years away.”

“My word! Well, you go on, the family booth is available. Kelly, are you a coffee drinker?”

“Yes please.”

“Like it strong or regular?”

“Strong enough that the spoon stands up in it.”

“Gibbs’ coffee then. I’ll bring a pot for you, your dad and brothers.”

“All of them?”
Her dad smirked, “Tim and Geordie.”

She slid into the large horseshoe shaped booth and her dad slid in after her. Rob hurried in to sit next to her so they could talk medicine. He seemed more together and when asked said the protein drink helped.

When they were all seated, Sarah beamed, “Hey we’re even, guys and girls. Yay! Thank you Ellie, thank you Kelly, thank you Maggie! I’ve been the only girl in the group my whole life. Sometimes Abby’s around or Breena but then Jimmy’s with her. And this is the first time Maggie’s here solo!”

Maggie smiled, “Glad to be of help Sarah.”

Tim cleared his throat, “Before we order, Ellie and I have something to tell you.”

When they got a few wide-eyed looks, the couple chuckled, “No baby news, we told you we’re waiting. The news is that Grandpa will be here tomorrow morning. We were keeping it a surprise but feels like we need some good news.”

Kelly was startled when everyone cheered; waiting for quiet, she asked. “Where does he stay when he’s here?”

Ellie smiled, “He has a little beach house on the beach in Fenwick, Delaware but since Tim, Jethro, and the kids came home in September he’s alternated between Jethro’s place and ours. And while they were away, he lived with us. I mean in Tim’s place with Geordie, Sarah, Rob and me. We’re only 5 houses apart so it’s not a big deal. Now I imagine he’ll stay wherever you are.”

Sarah nodded, “Can’t wait to see him but is Bernie better? Grandpa said he thought he was getting better.”

Rob grinned, “Actually Ducky and I knew too. Bernie added us as medical proxies and we’ve kept in touch with his doctors. We spoke with them on Monday and they told us Bernie responded well to the last round of antibiotics and that he had family there from Wyoming.”

Sarah nodded, “That’s his son, right? Good, then neither of them will be alone!”

Still smiling with the news about Grandpa, Kelly asked, “Who is Bernie? Another sibling? Uncle?”

“No, he’s Grandpa’s best friend. Neither of them had family or thought they had family and promised to take of each other.” Rob explained how they’d heard about Bernie and his illness.

Elaine arrived with a menu and a coffee pot, handing the menu to Kelly. “Here you go. The others have it memorized. Ducky, Sarah, your tea is steeping; I’ll bring it out in a few minutes with Rob and Ellie’s coffee. Does anyone want anything other than your usual? Tim?”

He thought a minute, “I know it’s not Monday, but any chance of meatloaf?”

“I always freeze a pan for our regulars, mostly your father and Tobias. Took one out of the freezer last night, so yes, you may have some. Mash fully loaded?”

He smiled, “Think I’d better skip the garlic today. Thanks Elaine.”

Kelly watched, fascinated as coffee was poured, cream and sugar passed to those who expected it. Her father raised an eyebrow when she put a little cream and sugar into hers. She gave him a little look, “What? I’m not a Marine!”
The others chuckled and Kelly relaxed. She missed her mother but at least she would be free and they could work things out.

As they were chatting, Kelly brought up the cowboy boots in the wedding photos and the others grinned. Geo said, “That’s the tip of the iceberg. Wait until you see their house!”

Kelly looked at her brother and sister-in-law. Ellie shrugged, saying, “We both like the western vibe and Tim’s venturing out to other cultures but some of it would look really out of place in suburban Virginia and this house so we blended it with what we already had. I didn’t take much with me after the divorce; I wanted a fresh start and no reminders. But I did bring some things from my parents’ ranch when I was there with Tim, Jethro and the kids in September.”

Neither noticed Kelly’s surprise as Tim added, “And when I left Delilah I only took my clothes, books, what art was mine and kitchen stuff. As far as I was concerned, everything else was tainted. Before New Mexico, we had photos and pictures that the kids drew and Dad framed on the wall. While we were gone, Ellie added a few things and I brought artwork and more photos home from New Mexico.”

“Uh guys, what divorce and who’s Delilah?”

Eyebrows raised, Tim and Ellie looked at each other; and then quickly told her about their twin catastrophes - both cheated on.

Kelly was properly mortified, “Wow, that’s horrible, who would cheat on either of you? I’m sure it was hurtful but you two obviously belong together.”

They nodded smugly and she grinned. Whatever else the ex-husband and the Delilah person might be, they were also total idiots!

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After a convivial couple of hours, they were gathering their belongings when Kelly finally had a text from her mother. She’d been processed for probation and Ms. Hart would drive her back to the residential hotel they’d moved to yesterday. Did Kelly want a ride?

Kelly showed the text to her father. He tilted his head, saying, “If you’d like to come over, I’ll give you a ride back later.”

Her mouth opened and shut, wanting to ask if her mother was also invited. And then noticed the others walking out the door. “Is Mom welcome too?”

He sighed, “Not at the house. I can’t do that to Tim.”

She nodded. “Ok but how is this going to work out if they never see each other?”

He stood for a minute and she saw he was angry. “Dad?”

“Has she apologized or said anything to Tim?”

“No.”

“Then how do you see this working out, Kelly? Shannon has not made the slightest attempt to start working things out.”

“Oh.”
“Yeah.”

“Where do you stand?”

“With my son. I love your mother but I will not accept crap toward or from any of my children. Tim has had more than enough abuse in his life.” He paused, “You said you expected them to drop the charges. Did she expect that too?”

She shrugged, “Yes. She felt like she lost her temper but no one was hurt and she thought Tim was just threatening her when he told her it was a mandatory jail sentence. And you didn’t press charges for the house.”

“It’s not a jail sentence, it’s prison, big difference. She lost her temper. Huh, that’s what she calls losing her temper? I’ve seen the security footage; she was out of control. Last time we had a suspect behave that way, we used cuffs, shackles and duct tape on him.”

“A suspect?”

“That’s what we call people who’ve committed a crime and attack people without provocation.”

“Dad, I’m so confused. She’s my mother.”

“She’s Tim’s mother too but she seems to be ignoring that.”

“Why are you angry with me?”

He sighed, “I’m frustrated that you don’t see the seriousness of this.”

She was silent. “I think I’d rather go back to the hotel, please. I need to think.” She looked up, “If I want to come over later or tomorrow, is that all right?”

“Of course!”

“Will you talk with Mom?”

“If she calls, yes but only to say she needs to apologize to Tim. My God, Kelly, she’s a grown woman, I can’t believe she hasn’t even made an attempt! And she shouldn’t have to be told by you or me or anyone else what she needs to do.”

Kelly nodded, “You’re right. I agree with you and I feel badly for Tim. But I won’t leave her alone.”

“You’re a good daughter, Kelly Anne.”
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 49

As Ms. Hart drove her client back to her hotel, she asked about her plans for the weekend. Shannon shrugged, "I'll have to say something to Timothy."

"An apology."

Shannon made a noise and Ms. Hart frowned. She was used to guilty clients crying about their innocence but she'd thought this one genuinely felt some remorse.

Wondering what the response would be, she asked, "You don't feel you owe him an apology? You don't have any remorse?"

"Didn't say that. Don't think it'll do any good."

"Why not?"

"I think he's made up his mind that I'm as horrible as my mother and that's it for me."

The attorney was quiet for a few minutes before saying, "Are you sure it's not you who thinks that?"

Shannon shrugged and Ms. Hart let it go. If the woman needed further legal help, she'd take her on again but she wasn't a shrink or even a friend.

They stopped at the parole office for Shannon's introduction to her parole officer. That took a few minutes and then they were on their way again. When they reached the hotel, Kelly was just going in the door and Ms. Hart spotted Gibbs' muscle car a few spaces down. No doubt watching to make sure his daughter got inside safely.

Impulsively deciding to make one more attempt, Ms. Hart parked and walked to the door with her client, meeting the daughter there. Making sure the daughter overheard, Hart smiled, saying, "Good luck, call me if you need help. And Shannon, think about my question, is it Tim who thinks you're like your horrible mother and not worth it - or you?"

Turning around, she walked back to her car, smiling at Gibbs, feeling like she'd repaid some sort of debt. Of what she wasn't quite sure.

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As soon as they got inside their room, Kelly questioned her mother about the attorney's question. When her mother just shrugged, Kelly changed tactics and told her Grandpa Mac would be here in the morning.

That got a positive reaction. Her mother's face lit up and she beamed at Kelly. "Does he know?"

"Not yet. Dad's going to pick him up and I guess tell him on the way. He usually stays with Tim and Ellie."
"Oh."

"Mom, your dad will be here! Grandpa Mac! This is a very good thing."

"You're right, sweetheart, I can't wait to see him!"

"Do you really think you're like Grandma?"

"I must be turning into her."

"Mom, she was mean when I was a little kid. I used to love her until I saw her make you cry one time. And she was always mean to Daddy and Grandpa."

"Is that supposed to help?"

"Yes! You were never mean! Even when you and Daddy were arguing, you weren't mean to each other. If you were going to be like her, you would have started a long time ago. I don't think that Tim thinks that at all. From the little interaction I've had with him, I bet he thinks you were her victim as much as he was. He doesn't know you and he's hurt but he's a nice guy.

"Think about this, he's a human being who's also a cop. And he had to order handcuffs and almost shackles and duct tape put on his own mother. He had to fight and subdue his mother, whom he'd never seen before, never met beyond his birth. And you caused that. How do you think he feels? You need to apologize to him soon or this is going to get worse. And yeah, I know things won't be instantly fixed once you've apologized, Dad's already told me to lay off you and Tim. He doesn't want either one of you to have any pressure from the rest of us. But the longer you wait, the harder it will be." She made a noise, "You taught me that when Maddie and I had an argument once."

"Your dad said that?"

"Yes. He also said he wouldn't put up with anyone mistreating his children, any of his children. Or them mistreating anyone."

Kelly patted the cushion next to her and her mother sat. "Let's make a plan."

"For?"

"For our future. Do you want to stay here or go back to Tacoma?"

"I can't leave Virginia until I've fulfilled all the sentence requirements. Can't leave for a year."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that. Well then, where do you want to live?"

Shannon shook her head, "I have no idea. And I have no clue whether or not your father and I are still legally married."

"Even if you are, you need time to get to know each other again."

Shannon looked at her, "Kelly Anne Gibbs, what are you up to?"

"Just an idea, Mom, nothing too exciting. I'm thinking you could rent a place of your own. Then that would be your place, kind of neutral territory."

"Hmm, that would be nice. That would easier for your dad and me to get to know each other. Not in the house of memories."
"I'd think it would be easier for Tim too."

"Why?"

"Don't think he'd want to see either of us in Dad's place anytime soon. Not sure I would either."

"I see your point. I'll need a job, I wonder if I can substitute. Oh, but I'm a convicted criminal now."

"Maybe there's some help for that. Maybe you could teach adults if not kids. Or do private tutoring. Ask your parole officer, or is he your probationary officer?"

"Pretty much the same. I prefer the term probationary, doesn't sound so connected to prison, even though it is. I made an appointment with a shrink for Monday. And I'll contact the Volunteer Bureau next week too."

"Good! I'm proud of you for jumping right on that."

Her mother gave her a look and then they both laughed and hugged.

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Saturday morning, Tim and Ellie took her new truck to pick up Mac. They'd reached an agreement with Dad. They'd pick up Mac; bring him back to the house where he'd be told by his son-in-law about his daughter and granddaughter. Then Jethro would drive him to the residential hotel. He'd already set that up with the two women. Sarah would stay with the kids while their parents were en route with Grandpa.

The younger Gibbses were walking into the waiting room of the train station when the 98 Silver Meteor pulled in. They stood outside the door of the depot, waiting. Mac peered out from the doorway of the 'sleeper' car, the train car that had roomettes for the 17-hour ride. He spotted his grandson right away, smiled, waved and then turned back as a porter was there to help with his bags.

Tim and Ellie hurried forward but the man waved them off with a smile. There wasn't much anyway, Mac had taken his summer clothes home and this time brought what winter gear he had. While it wasn't quite cold yet, Tim had a jacket for his grandfather. He helped him into it while Ellie paid the porter.

Mac being Mac, Tim wasn't surprised when he introduced the porter to his family.

"Art, like you to meet my grandson Timothy and his lovely bride, Eleanor. Kids, this is my friend Art Rivers."

They shook hands and chatted for a couple of minutes until the train whistle blew a 3-minute warning for departure.

The man smiled, "Tim, Eleanor, Mac, you have a wonderful Thanksgiving and Christmas and those birthdays in between. Stay warm and Mac, I'll see you going south at New Year's. I expect new photos, lots of them!"

Mac smiled, "Thanks Art, we will and you know I'll have the photos! Don't work too hard, love to Bets and the kids, and enjoy your own holidays!"

As they gathered his belongings and walked away, Mac explained, "I always take the Silver Meteor, it's the only one with a dining car and I've been doing this for almost 20 years so Art and I
have become good friends. He and his family live in Orlando; he's part of my card group; actually, he invited me, so I'm a member of his card group. And I've spent several holidays with his family."

His kids beamed, happy to know a little more about Mac's life in Florida and to know there was a family there too. No firm plans had been made but Tim was certain that when Mac took the train south, his daughter, granddaughter, and son-in-law would travel with him. If the courts allowed Shannon to travel.

As they climbed in the truck, Mac looked at it, "Ellie, you finally got the new one!"

"Yes, we picked it up the day after you left."

"Like the ride?"

"It's great but it's bigger than my old one; I'm still getting used to that."

"And Tim, how do you like the back seat?"

"I'll tell you in a few minutes, Grandpa; this is my first time back here."

"Ah. So how are you two, the kids, Jethro, the sibs?"

"Everyone's fine, Grandpa, very happy you're back home with us. We told them last night. And Dad's at home!"

"Wonderful. Does that mean the pool with the climate control thing is there or still at Ducky's?"

"Yeah, it's at Ducky's, but we'll move it over and get it set up at his place. He still needs to swim."

"Good for your dad's knee and I brought my swim stuff back with me."

"Smart! How's Bernie doing?"

"Much better, that last round of antibiotics did the trick – and I'm sure his son showing up helped too. They've got things to work out but the important thing is they're together." He smiled, "We both got our families back, how about that?"

"Pretty cool."

"I appreciate you two fetching me; you know I can always take a cab!"

"We know that but we like spending time with you; you're important to us." Ellie smiled as her husband and Mac beamed at her.

"You two going to stay at Jethro's for a while or do you have plans?"

"We'll be there. Sarah's with the kids, she'll bring them over."

"Great! And now that your dad's home, I can stay with you, right?"

"Grandpa, you know you're always welcome! We love having you with us."

After that there was silence which Ellie covered by talking about the kitchen renovation. "Wait until you see it! It's finally done and it's beautiful. Tim ended up working with the designer and me because you know neither Sarah nor I cook much."
Mac chuckled, "Guess that's true. Makes sense to have a cook work with the designer. Hope he or she knows Tim's left-handed!"

"She does and translated everything for Dad's ease of use."

"Funny that neither of your parents was left-handed but you are and Kelly was too."

That surprised Tim; he hadn't even noticed Kelly was also a southpaw. He glanced at Ellie who looked as surprised as he was.

"Must be someone in the family then. Maybe Grandma Anne?"

"Could be, never thought to ask. And you know your dad or Jack might have said when Kelly was little and I just don't remember."

"You can ask Dad now."

Mac gave a little laugh, "I sure can!"

They were driving down their street by then. Tim gripped the seat belt, nervous. He knew Mac was healthy and Ducky had confirmed that only yesterday when he'd asked, but he couldn't help worrying. The last minute or so he distracted himself by deciding from whom he'd gotten the 'worry bug'.

As they entered Dad's house, he thought it was probably Mac or maybe Jack, half of Jackson's problems with Dad seemed to have been caused by worry. Dad was waiting for them. "Mac, welcome back!"

He and Dad hugged and kissed while Tim stood, not knowing if he should go or stay. Glancing up from Mac's shoulder, his father gave him such a loving look that he stayed. Evidently, that was the right decision because a hand reached over and squeezed his neck affectionately.

They sat and then there were little footsteps on the porch and Ty and Brynie burst into the house, Aunty Sarah following behind. "Grandpa, Grandpa!"

He laughed and gathered them in his arms, including Sarah. Kissing each of them, he made a noise, "Mm, that's for my big girl Sarah, for my boy Tyler and one for my littlest girl Brynie!"

Ellie's phone buzzed and they all looked at her. She smiled, "Sorry Grandpa, the kids have a birthday party to go to. We accepted before we knew you were coming today. We'll be home by 4."

"All right, sweeties! Tim, are you going with them?"

He shook his head, "Went to the last one, Grandpa. Sarah's staying too."

His father relaxed a bit, glad his older daughter, huh, that was funny to even think, would be with her brother.

Ellie and Sarah took the kids home to get ready. The men sat, Dad on a solid wood chair, Mac and Tim on the sofa.

Tim started things off, telling his grandfather the bare bones of the silent alarm and finding two women in the house, He left out the conflict, his father would tell him about that and the bench trial. Dad picked up the story from there, "Tim had some suspicions and contacted Director Vance
who had the women brought to NCIS rather than the local police department."

He took a deep breath, "Mac, NCIS did what it does best, investigated the two. Leon made phone calls, Tim and Abby worked their magic, Abby, Leon worked together on additional research, and Ellie and Bob questioned the women. By the time they finally said their names, their real names, Director Vance had all the evidence he needed. The two women who broke into the house are Shannon and Kelly, your daughter and mine. Our girls."

Mac's mouth dropped open and he blinked rapidly, shaking his head. Tim thought it wasn't in denial but that he just couldn't believe what he was hearing. He took his grandfather's hand. "It's true, Grandpa. Shannon and Kelly are alive and here in Virginia. Kelly's all grown up and she has so much to tell you. Dad will take you to them."

His grandfather was crying now and they wrapped their arms around him. "Take your time, Mac. We'll leave when you're ready."

Mac sat quietly for a few minutes, trying to absorb this latest miracle. Then he frowned, "Where have they been all these years? Decades! And Timothy, you're not going?"

Tim shook his head, "They've been in WITSEC, Grandpa, just like us, in danger from the same person. And no, I'm not going. Dad will explain."

He kissed them both and walked out the door, Mac watching him leave with a deepening frown. When he turned to his son-in-law, Jethro sighed. "We've had a crazy week."

"Is he all right?"

"No but he will be. Need to tell you the rest of the story. Come on, I'll tell you on the way."

While they drove to Shannon and Kelly's hotel, he told his father-in-law what happened and wondered if the dismay on Mac's face was what his own face had looked like when he learned of Shannon's actions toward their son.

"Has she spoken to him? Apologized?"

"Not yet."

"Why not? Never mind, I'll ask her."

"Mac, you haven't seen her in 25 years. You believed she was dead, been mourning them all this time. Might want to do some celebrating first!"

Mac chuckled, "Of course and I can't believe they're alive! Actually I can, that Stacevyko person was as wicked as they come, can't believe how much pain and suffering she's caused us."

"Shannon and Kelly were saved; Tim's adoptive father and little brother were not."

"That's true, I hadn't thought of that. How much farther?"

Jethro laughed as he pressed harder on the accelerator.

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The women's suite was on the third floor and both men were impatient as the elevator crept slowly between floors.
When they finally reached the right room and knocked on the door, it was yanked open and Shannon flew into his arms, "Dad? Oh, Dad!" She was in his arms before he could move through the doorway and he held her as tightly as he could. "Shanny! Oh my heavens, thank you Lord! My girls, our girls!"

Kelly followed her mother and stood on the other side of her grandfather, gently touching his hand. He looked over, tears streaming down his face. "Kelly? Oh my Kelly, you're alive and grown! Oh!"

They moved into the room, his arms wrapped around his girls and the three of them spent several minutes wrapped up together, bringing Jethro in with them. Mac took a deep breath, "Tim should be here, this isn't right."

"Dad."

"I know, daughter, Jethro told me. What are your plans to fix this?"

"I need to see him, talk with him and apologize."

"He's part of this family, he's missed Kelly's whole life, you've missed his whole life and now he's missing our reunion. It's not right and I'm not at all happy about it."

"All right, Dad. I'll arrange to see him this weekend."

Kelly had a strange look on her face, "No time like the present, Mom."

Shannon's eyes widened at the sight of her son standing in the doorway looking lost. Someone pushed him from behind and Kelly smiled at her new sister as Sarah nodded to her and walked back down the corridor.

"Timothy, I'm so glad you're here."

He didn't say anything but swallowed hard. Mac reached out and took his hand, drawing him in and then re-formed the circle to include him. When Shannon could speak again, she reached over to him and touched his face.

"I'm so sorry, Tim. I'm sorry I was so horrid and wanted to hurt you. I was tired and scared; I've had a grudge against NIS for over 20 years, blamed them for everything. You look just like my dad. I don't know why that made me even angrier but no excuses, I was wrong and I hope someday you'll forgive me."

Tim tried to say something but nothing would come out. Finally, he said, "I accept your apology. But I can't trust you."

"I understand and I'll do whatever it takes to gain your trust and respect."

He choked, "You're my mother. I can't..." Giving up, he let the tears roll, only relaxing when he felt his father's arms around him. Carefully Shannon touched his arm and then reached up and kissed his cheek. "I promise."

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, still safe inside his father's arms. He felt like a three year old but these were his honest feelings. Seeing his misery, Shannon began to understand what 'losing her temper' meant to her son.

The five of them stood together for several minutes until Tim and Kelly said almost in unison, "Dad needs to sit."
They were just getting situated when someone knocked on the door. It was Ellie, who explained that Sarah traded places with her and was at the birthday party with the children.

Eventually Shannon moved to sit next to Tim and quietly said, "I'm mortified by my behavior. I have a temper but I've always been proud of being able to keep it pretty well harnessed. And here I have the worst temper tantrum in my life the moment we meet for the first time since you were born!"

Shyly, Tim opened up a little, "I'm so glad you're alive, Kelly too. I'm happy to have a mom; until I met Ellie's mother I'd never had one."

She gently touched his hand again, "I'm so thankful you're alive and found your father. Or did he find you?"

Jethro grinned, "He found me. Says since he was a kid he'd always wanted to work for NCIS; we met a couple of months after he was hired and he made an impression on me." He turned to his daughter, "So now you have the brother you always wanted."

She laughed, "I do and I love him already!"

Tim finally smiled, giving her a hug. "I love you too and I'm thrilled to have you for a sister. I've called you my sister since Dad and I found the link between us. And I'm glad you had a chance to meet our siblings yesterday."

Shannon and Mac moved to another part of the suite to talk, while Jethro took a deep breath, hoping the worst was over; that his son and his wife would be able to eventually build a relationship. He knew Shannon would have to forgive herself and that it would take time for Tim to truly trust her but he had faith it would happen.

Kelly laughed, "Two sisters and three brothers, four counting Tony! I think it's funny that I've met his girlfriend before I meet him. And it was fun talking medicine with Rob."

"It'll be good for him to have someone to talk medicine with. Sarah and I talk writing, Dad and Geo talk military and we feds talk crime and the agency."

"It'll be nice for me too! Mom listens but she doesn't really understand. What are your degrees in?"

"Biomedical engineering and computer forensics." He chuckled at the look on her face, "Believe it or not, I've used both as an NCIS agent."

"I can see the forensics, love to hear how you've used the biomedical engineering. I took a class that dealt with the newest generations of prosthetics; we should talk. Is there anyone else in the family, besides you, Rob, and me with a scientific bent? Dad has such a big family!"

"Mm, not that I know of. And Dad's family wasn't always this way. When we first met, he was close-mouthed and didn't seem to like anyone although he handpicked Tony, Kate and me for his team and later Ellie and Bob. He didn't speak much and we learned to decipher his nonverbal communications. The only people he really spoke with were Abby; you'll meet her soon, and Ducky. Then we lost Kate, she was killed on the job and he talked a little then, he was nice for a few days, which was a little scary. After Kate died, Ziva joined us and over the years, he started to mellow a little bit. Tony, Ziva, and I worked together as his team for eight years and by the time she left, we were a family. A wildly dysfunctional family, but family nonetheless. Abby nicknamed us 'the Gibblets' and called us her "Three Musketeers". And Dad's been friends with an FBI agent, Tobias Fornell, for a long time; he and his daughter started joining our holiday
gatherings, plus Jack when we still had him."

"Director Vance talked about Jack being at the agency."

"Yeah, he was great. I loved him so much; I told Dad after we found out about us that I think I loved Jack as much as I would have if we'd known. Me, Tony, Ziva, Jimmy and Abby. Ellie only met him once, the Christmas before he died."

Kelly nodded and then leaned in, "Thank you for forgiving Mom. I've never seen her like she was that day."

He started to shrug but nodded instead, "It's a start; I'm glad that first step is out of the way."

Then Shannon was there again, asking him about his siblings. He told her about meeting Geordie and Rob and taking care of baby Sarah. She shook her head, "You've already raised a family."

He nodded, "It's much better raising kids with my sweet wife."

"Your father says you grew up on the streets of Baltimore and Ellie said you had a rough childhood. What happened?"

He told her and her eyes saddened. "That's horrible; no child should have to live like that. But I'm so proud of you. I want to know about your life, Timothy, all of it, good and bad. I still can't believe you're my lost baby boy, alive and well. Congratulations on your marriage. I really like Ellie."

He nodded, "That's good; I do too!" He shook his head, "Too bad the Marshals weren't a little faster cutting you loose, you could have come to the wedding."

"We saw some of the photos on Ellie's phone. I can't believe your father wore cowboy boots!"

Tim smiled, "Yeah, I got that a lot too. I love mine." He told her about their first time back at the office and people's reactions to stern Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs and urban Agent Timothy Gibbs in their western boots. He found he could talk to her as long as it was about surface things. Anything deeper than that would have to wait.

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On Sunday, Kelly was restless while her mother was exhausted. On a whim, she called Tim to see if she could visit and she heard the smile in his voice as he agreed. Ellie picked her up so Shannon could drive their rental if she needed to go out. On the way back to the house Ellie asked if she'd like to go bowling, she and Tim had talked about doing that today. Kelly grinned; she loved to bowl!

And she loved the house. She'd never paid much attention to houses, they meant comfort and shelter but she'd never felt particularly attached to one. She'd lived in the house down the street with her parents when she was little. Next, there was a house in California when they were transferred to Pendleton; she remembered making a birdbath there. After the crash, she and Mom lived in a couple of different rental homes in Tacoma, nothing special about them. As long as her mother was there, they were home.

But this was a home with children and she saw the stamp of the occupants everywhere, from the drawings and artwork on the wall to the toys in the playroom. She'd been surprised when the kids weren't home but her brother explained they were at the Palmers for a few hours. "We exchange children once a month or so to give each set of parents a break. As this play date has been
postponed a few times, we let them go. And Victoria and Teddy are their friends and honorary cousins; it's good for them to get to know each other outside of family gatherings."

Kelly nodded and then gestured to the playroom, "If I ever buy a house, will you help me build a playroom?"

"Sure! What would you like in it?"

"A piano, a place to roller-skate, a reading nook, lots of storage and a big setup for crafts."

"Hm, playroom would have to be on the main level to move a piano in or there'd need to be an outside door to the basement. Make it what they call a walkout basement."

"Huh, so the piano might stay upstairs. Maybe a media room with everything else I said."

"Sounds like fun."

Ellie wanted to know what crafts Kelly was interested in and she smiled, "Knitting. I love to knit. It helps when I have some free time but can't decide what to do or can't sit still. Mom taught me when we first moved to Tacoma. We were both still recovering from the crash, my legs were bad and I couldn't play outside games yet. It's very soothing, fun, social and practical. I'd need storage for all the yarn and pattern books. I used to like to sew but that takes a time commitment to get anything made. Last time I tried was in medical school; took me five years to finish an outfit. By that time it was years out of fashion and I donated it to charity."

"No writing?"

Tim's little sister chuckled, "No, big brother, that's you, Sarah, and Mom." She turned to Ellie, "What do you like to do in your spare time?"

"Ride, as we've talked about, and I used to knit, I'd forgotten about that. When I first started at NSA, I had trouble disconnecting from the job. My grandmother taught me how to knit when I was 11-ish and my mom reminded me. I started again and took up painting too. I'm not very good at it but it's creative, helps when I can't shut my mind off. And I played the flute in high school."

They both turned to Tim, who'd drifted off, imagining Ellie as an artist, painting on the beach. "What?"

"Have you ever played a musical instrument?"

"No; couldn't in school, they cost money and we didn't have any."

"Would you like to?"

"Hate to admit this to my bride and baby sister but I'm tone deaf. Can't carry a tune." He paused. "But I do have hobbies. Writing. And I build and rebuild computers, phones, lot of electronics; I'm also a licensed electrician but that started as a hobby with the electronics. Love to read. Dad's taught me a lot about woodwork; I like that. Love listening to music and line dancing. Used to like playing MMORPGs but haven't played in years now. Like to cook, still learning about that. And I like to garden. Hate pulling weeds or mowing lawns but I like the whole process of planting a seed and watching it grow. Horseback riding, running, swimming, volleyball, baseball, softball, bowling, and skating. Think that about covers it. So bowling, sound good?"

They laughed as they gathered their belongings and then he stopped them. "Hang on; I need to move tonight's dinner from the freezer to the refrigerator."
Once that was done, they piled into the car. They went to Abby's bowling alley where she and the nuns bowled in their league. Kelly's eyebrows rose in surprise when Tim took two bowling bags out of the back of the Acura.

"You two really like bowling."

Ellie nodded, "Yes, it's something we can do by ourselves or with the kids, it doesn't cost much and they're open at weird hours. And the kids have fun learning how to play. When we were dating, we discovered we both like the sport and each of us already had our own bowling ball, shoes, and bag. This alley is family oriented so we don't worry about who hangs out here. In fact, our friend Abby bowls here in a league, on a team with nuns."

"Nuns, Catholic nuns?"

They nodded and she chuckled as she stepped up to the counter to rent shoes, thinking about her brother's comment that he was tone deaf. He enjoyed music so he heard it fine; he just couldn't carry a tune. That wasn't the definition of being tone deaf as she knew it. She'd talk with him later.

The three of them had a great time bowling. It was not only fun, it was a good way for Kelly to get to know Tim and Ellie better and vice versa. Later, Kelly realized that once she called, big brother Tim saw she was in need of activity and some fun and made sure she got it. Smiling to herself, she thought that was also something a parent of young children would do. It made sense that he'd know the signs of incipient boredom. It had only been a few days but she already liked having an older brother!

Chapter End Notes

In celebration of International Women's Day on March 8 2017, I'll be posting a chapter that day.
After bowling, they went to a favorite little café for lunch. As they walked to the car, Kelly looked at her watch. "It's 12:30; what time do you pick up the kids?"

"About 2:00; got something else in mind?"

"How long a drive is it to Baltimore? I'd like to see the camp and shelter where you grew up. Or is that something you'd rather do with Mom along?"

Tim thought about that. They'd just made a run recently and he would rather take both women at the same time. If Shannon wanted to go and if he wanted her to go.

"If you wouldn't mind, I would rather do that with both of you, and whoever else wants to tag along."

"Works for me! I'm not ready to go back to the hotel though."

Ellie had to think fast, "Then how about doing some sightseeing? We have about 90 minutes before we need to pick up Ty and Brynie. The White House, Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, National Mall, the Smithsonian?"

"I'd love to see all of those, but an hour isn't long enough for the Smithsonian. I want to see all the museums. And the National Art Gallery and the National Holocaust Museum."

"All right, we'll plan lots of time for those. For the Smithsonian, Tim will take a day off."

He grinned, "Can't ever get enough!"

"What's your favorite?"

"National Air and Space, followed by American History and Natural History. The African-American History museum just opened in September, we haven't had a chance to see it yet."

Kelly chuckled, "So we're talking minimum three days to see those four."

Ellie nodded, "At least and we haven't been to the American Indian history and art museum either; not together anyway."

Tim added, "I went once when I moved here from Norfolk; I spent a lot of my off hours during my first couple of years visiting each museum and monument. But it has new meaning for me now that we've met some of New Mexico's Native Americans." He told Kelly about their experiences at the Taos Pueblo.

"Wow, that's incredible! Before I go to that museum, I want to see your photos. And plan a trip to New Mexico."

"Absolutely! We have friends there who have a ranch with guesthouses on the property. Be a great base for your travels."

"Awesome! Between graduating from medical school and the start of my residency, I had three weeks off. I wanted to go to British Columbia and Alberta but couldn't get permission from the
Marshals to leave the country. However, they were okay with me going to Oregon and Northern California. Mom went with me, we rented an RV and explored the coasts of Washington, Oregon and as far south as Mendocino County in California. Along with marshals in another RV."

"They let you travel that far? We weren't allowed more than 30 miles outside the city limits!"

"Well as I said, we had marshals with us the whole time and it was the only vacation we'd ever requested. Maybe after two decades they could spend the money. We had two female marshals with us in the RV the nights we were in California and southern Oregon. I guess they might have been worried about cartel people being around. We didn't know until this week that it was really one person."

Tim shook his head. "That's not quite true. Recently yes, although I imagine her man Krose would also have been hanging around and I know she's been in Northern California, don't know specifically about Mendocino." He paused, looked at Ellie who gave him a discreet nod. "Kelly, what I'm going to tell you is not something we talk about in the family although most of the NCIS folks know and it's not classified."

At his sister's quizzical look, he continued, telling her about their grandmother killing Captain Joseph Norton and the events following, "...to make a long and gruesome story a little shorter, Dad was kidnapped by the head of the cartel, the daughter of Pedro Hernandez. Her brother, a highly placed government official, was also in on it. Mike Franks' home on the beach in Mexico was burned down, his daughter-in-law and granddaughter got out in time but one of Mike's fingers was cut off.

"Paloma went to Pennsylvania and shot up Grandpa Jack's store; luckily, Dad got word to him and the sheriff a few minutes before and Grandpa wasn't hurt. He spent the rest of that summer at Dad's, holed up with a protection detail. In the end, Paloma's brother killed her and he went to prison where a rival cartel killed him. Paloma died in September, 2010, her brother Alejandro died the following spring, 2011, so you were in danger from the cartel and Svetlana for all but the last five years. After that, it boiled down to Svetlana and Krose, both cold-blooded, relentless killers."

"And Grandma was responsible for all that?"

"Seems to have been the catalyst."

"But you, we - Dad said she's in prison for kidnapping and selling you."

Tim nodded, "Now she is, yeah and for collaborating with a foreign operative. On the more recent case, all the physical evidence led us to another Navy guy for the murder of the first one."

"Did she arrange that - what do you call it, frame him?"

"I don't know."

"So a possibly innocent man went to prison for the murder she committed?"

"He wasn't all that innocent; he'd been working with the Reynosa cartel for years, carrying drugs. He was not only a mule but a dealer and betrayed his uniform which is an act of treason."

"But he didn't do that murder."

"Maybe, maybe not. We didn't handle the rest of the case, turned everything we had over to JAG."

"Tim, you also said collaborating with a foreign operative. You mean when you were born and
Svetlana was Mom's nurse and helped her kidnap you?"

"No, the collaboration was long after that and occurred over several years. At some point, Fielding found out about Svetlana's covert activities but did nothing, told no one. There are a few documented times Svetlana needed to disappear for a few months and Fielding was her go-to person for that. She gave her money and at least one weapon and that made her a traitor."

"Oh my God, that's horrible, she's evil!"

Tim nodded and Kelly touched his shoulder, "I'm sorry she was so horrid to you."

"Not your fault."

"I know but I loved her as my grandma when I was little. Until I heard her saying mean things to Mom and making her cry. And she didn't like Dad."

"No. He says she never thought he was good enough for her daughter."

"Will she be told about us?"

"I think that would have to come from you and I personally hope no one tells her. I'm afraid of what she'd do to see you and what lies she'd tell. And yes, that's payback except it was Dad and Mac's grief and misery along with yours and Mom's."

Ellie was driving; as the grisly conversation wound down she forced a cheery voice, announcing, "We're here, there's the Lincoln Memorial. There's a lot to see in this area so I thought we'd see it first and then head over to the Washington Monument if we have time."

They parked and walked to the Memorial.

After reading everything and exploring the memorial, Kelly stood on the steps and looked to the southeast.

"Oh wow, I had no idea."

Walking slowly, they approached the Korean War Memorial with its 19 slightly larger than life, 7-foot soldiers in rain ponchos seemingly blowing in a wind. In full combat gear and carrying their weapons, the figures represent the percentage of Army, Navy, Marine and Air Force involved in the war. Then they saw the Mural Wall, made of black granite, with more than 40 panels and stretching over 160 feet, with thousands of photos of the War. It was an eerily beautiful, sad, and disturbing sight. They explored the rest of the site, Ellie softly exclaiming, "All I knew about this war was from watching "M.A.S.H.""

Tim and Kelly nodded; they'd had the same thought.

From there they saw the Vietnam Memorial and Tim told them a story about Mike Franks. "He was a Marine, served in Vietnam. When this wall was dedicated around Veteran's Day, 1982, he found the name of one of his friends who died in the war. He came here on Veteran's Day every year after that to say hello to Corporal Bud Casey. The last time he saw Dad he knew he was dying and asked him as a fellow Marine to continue visiting. Dad, who was Boss then, told Tony and me so we'd continue if anything happened to him. Last year when we were gone, Tony went to say hello to Corporal Bud. This year Geordie and Maggie will also go with Dad and I think I'll bring Tyler and Brynie." He added, "I'm sure Mike's granddaughter, Amira Shakarji, knows the story too."
"How old is she?"

"Huh, not quite sure. Dad will know for sure, she's his goddaughter, but she's probably close to 10."

They nodded and in unspoken agreement, found Corporal Casey's spot on the Wall and said hello to him. After viewing the hauntingly beautiful and solemn memorials, saying a simple hello made them feel better.

Walking from there to the Washington Monument, they got their tickets and were soon in the elevator, rising 555 feet in 77 seconds. For the duration of the ride, Tim stood at the back of the elevator and made a thorough examination of his wife's lovely head. Once they were on the Observation deck, he looked straight out the windows, never once looking down.

He'd made a lot of progress in the years since he'd cringed at climbing a ladder on a rooftop during a case. It was easier when there was an elevator involved and as long as he looked straight out from heights and not down, he no longer panicked and was only queasy for a few minutes on his return to earth.

Tapping his sister on her shoulder, he pointed in the direction of Alexandria, "If you look closely, you might see our houses!"

Back on terra firma, Tim stood still, holding Ellie's hand and let his wife answer when Kelly asked if he was all right. "He will be in about three minutes. He's had a fear of heights as long as he can remember; he's been actively working on it for nearly 10 years now."

Kelly nodded, "You've accomplished a lot then, congratulations! I'm afraid of small spaces, claustrophobic although it's not too extreme. I can be in a normal size room, a bedroom for example, with the door closed and it doesn't bother me, but I hate closets and little spaces like airplane bathrooms. Elevators are borderline but the movement helps dispel the claustrophobia." She smiled, "Ever since my first communion, I've had to have confessions outside of the confessional. I do the throwing up, panic attack too."

Tim looked at her, "That's strange, huh, both of us having spatial phobias."

"We could blame it on the J-witch."

His eyes grew big, "You heard me call her that?"

"No, Geordie. Why would you call her that? I can think of a lot nastier names."

"Bryn and Tyler had been living with me for several days when we got the DNA test results and Dad and I found out I'm a Gibbs. We called Mac and he told Dad about his dead infant son. The kids were tiny then and J-witch was as bad as I was willing to be with them around. I've stuck with it because I don't have to worry about who's around. I could never swear when I was growing up because Sarah and Rob were always with me."

She patted his face, "That makes sense. Mom's got some awful names for her and I bet she'd love to teach you some really satisfying words."

Tim grinned, "Dad can swear in 4 languages besides English. Even I know a few Hebrew, Russian and Spanish bad words." He laughed, "I can't believe we've known each other less than a week and we're discussing profanity!"

The two women laughed with him and Kelly said, "We'll just chalk it up to getting to know each
Tim sent texts to their siblings and found all of them working or busy that night. **Dinner would be just 'the Timothy Gibbeses' as Ducky labeled them.** Finally satisfied they'd seen enough for the day, they drove to the Palmers to pick up the kids. They greeted their new aunt with their customary enthusiasm and Kelly laughed in delight.

On the way home, they told Aunt Kelly all about Victoria and Teddy. Brynie said to Kelly, "They're our cousins."

"I see. How old are they?"

"Victoria's the same age as my brother and Teddy is, Mommy, how old is Teddy?"

"He'll be a year old in December, Sweet Pea, his birthday is a few days before yours."

"But I'm more than a year, I'm gonna be three!"

"Yes, you are. You're two years older than Teddy."

Brynie smiled, "I'm not the baby anymore!"

"You're the youngest at our house but you're right, you're not a baby anymore. Teddy is the youngest of our whole family."

"All the aunts and uncles?"

"Yes."

She sat back, a pleased smile on her face. Kelly leaned over, "Brynie, know what?"

The little girl shook her head and Kelly said, "I'm the youngest of the grownups in our family. I'm younger than your Uncle Rob."

Brynie giggled, "But you're not a baby either!"

"That's right!"

Tim was having a great day with his wife and sister and now his kids. He was a little disappointed the sibs couldn't join them but that was his fault for asking at the last minute. He looked at Ellie when she drove down the alley behind their house and parked at the back gate. "Hiding the truck?"

She smiled, "I just thought it would be fun to walk in through the garden. Ty and Brynie can show their aunty their flowers."

The kids beamed at that. Kelly duly admired their garden, which now boasted a few fall flowers as well as fall and winter vegetables. She looked at the apple tree and then at her niece and nephew. "That tree doesn't look very happy."

Ty giggled. "That's Daddy and Poppy's apple tree. They got it in Albakerkie so Poppy could have apple crisp with his own apples. Daddy didn't want to leave it there so it sat in Poppy's truck in the moving van and got here with our furniture."

"I see. Well, I hope it will feel better by spring and give Poppy lots more apples!"
"Are you going to be here then?"

"I hope so, Ty!"

"Good, you can help us pick the apples and all our vegetables."

She shivered, "Let's go inside, it's getting cold!"

They walked inside, following Ellie from the backyard into the garage and then into the kitchen. Tim thought about that but didn't comment. When they walked into the kitchen, there were cries of "Surprise!" and "Happy Birthday!" from his wife, kids, four of his siblings, Maggie, Dad, Grandpa and his mother. It was a surprise for Kelly too, she hadn't been brought in on it and wished she'd known but realized she and Ellie hadn't been alone together all day.

He grinned happily, "Thank you!" He was a little surprised to see Shannon there but figured it was only right since she'd given birth to him; whatever else was currently between them, she was his mother. And it was his first birthday celebration with his grandfather.

"Were you surprised?"

Diplomatically he smiled, "Of course! The fact that it's my birthday and only my wife and father remembered didn't tip me off at all!"

Sarah chuffed, "To be fair, this is the first November 13th birthday you've had at home." She looked at Kelly, "We were going to call you during the day but Ellie said not to worry about it. Said you'd be here for the party and that's all Tim would care about."

Tim hugged his wife and both sisters, "And she's right. I'm glad we're all here together. Shannon, Kelly, until Mac told us the real story of my birth, I thought I was born on November 15th. Last year, I celebrated my real birthday for the first time with Dad, Tyler and Bryn. This year, I get to celebrate it with my entire family! This is more than I could ask for. Thank you all!"

"Daddy, how old are you?"

Tim laughed, "I'm 19 years younger than Poppy and 17 years younger than your grandmother."

"Our new one? Is she here?"

Tim smiled, "Yes she is." He looked at his dad, his expression asking if Shannon had met everyone. Dad gave a slight shake of his head and Tim continued, "It's time for her to meet the rest of the family." He motioned to Shannon, who'd been standing with her father at the edge of the crowd. "How shall we do this? Hmm, ok, youngest to eldest. Brynie, you're first and your Uncle Tony is last."

"Ok Daddy."

Brynie stood with her father as he introduced her, realizing he hadn't yet called Shannon 'Mom' or mother. Mentally he bucked up, he could do this and for whatever he couldn't handle, he had a shrink. "Mom, this is our daughter, your granddaughter Suzanna Bryn Gibbs. Brynie, this is your grandmother. You'll have to ask her what her grandma name is."

"Hello Brynie!"

Brynie gave her a hug and kiss. "What's your grandma name?"
"Hm, how about Nonny? My other name is Shannon."

Brynie tried out the name, "Nonny!" She nodded and Ty stepped forward. "Hi Nonny, I'm Tyler Dean Gibbs." He shook hands with her and they exchanged hugs and kisses.

Rob was next, then Sarah, Geordie and finally Tony. Not quite sure what to say or do, the adult children each smiled and shook her hand but none hugged or kissed her. Maybe someday, if she worked things out with Tim.

Kelly might have been overwhelmed if it hadn't been for her eldest brother. When she learned that Tony grew up an only child, she felt an instant bond with him and he was able to help her cope with suddenly having so much family. She'd been fine with Tim, Ellie and the kids but when they found Geo, Sarah, Tony and Rob at the house she'd felt a little lost at first. Friday in court and the diner had been different, now she was starting to understand this was the rest of her life. The time she'd spent with her brother and sister-in-law was well spent as she knew she could trust them to look out for her.

While dinner was being prepared, Kelly stood back a little, watching and listening to the friendly roar of her new siblings, nephew and niece. Sarah spotted her and eventually made her way over. "You know, we didn't grow up like this. I have vague memories of Tim and our other brother Patrick. Then just Timmy and me. Geo wasn't legally our brother until I was 9 and he never lived with us until this past year. But he always helped look after us. Rob wasn't always there either; we didn't meet him for nearly a month after we got to Baltimore. Not that long now but back then it was weird to suddenly have this other kid with us. At least it meant I wasn't the baby anymore! We've only been Gibbs' kids since September; for all of my life that I remember my only parent was Tim. So I sort of understand what you're going through."

Kelly smiled, "Tony told me to just take it easy and get to know each of you individually, not as one lump of siblings!"

They both laughed at that and then Kelly told her sister what Brynie said about no longer being the baby of the family.

"Huh? Oh, because of the Palmers' baby. I don't know them that well. I like them and all, just don't see that much of them. They were married with kids before I ever met Breena. Different."

"That makes me feel better too, Sarah, thanks! I guess Dad is the center of the wheel, huh?"

"Hmm, I'd say Tim. Rob and I already knew Tony, Ziva, Ellie, Jimmy, and Abby before Tim made the discovery. Ducky hosted Thanksgiving and the last few years, whenever Rob and I weren't working we'd go too. The Palmers were never there; guess they go to her folks for the holiday. A few times, the NCIS folks had to work on Thanksgiving so they'd celebrate later and then Rob or I would be busy. But we knew them all."

"What's Ziva like? From Tim's books she sounds so exotic and dangerous."

Sarah nodded, "And she is in real life too or at least she seems exotic when you first meet her. The first time she snorts a beverage because she's laughing makes you forget about the exotic part although she is beautiful. Dangerous I wouldn't know about personally but there sure have been hints over the years. I know she's still missed."

"Tim said there was a special nickname for them, two of them."

"Yeah, Abby made them up. All of them are the 'Gibblets' and Tim, Tony and Ziva were Gibbs'
'Three Musketeers'. Kind of sad to think that now with no word from Ziva in almost three years."

"Except in our family, three years is really nothing, right? Have to get to 25 or more before we really worry!"

They both laughed at that and Kelly relaxed.

They had a fun afternoon, enjoying the wonderful meal Tony made for them and the delicious cake from Tim's favorite bakery. Tim laughed when Sarah strapped a birthday hat on him. "Just this once, Sari."

"We'll see. Your 40th isn't far off and I promise to be merciless."

"And you think I will have forgotten by your 40th? Be careful what you sow, little sister, for so shall you reap!" He let loose with an evil laugh that greatly amused his family.
Ten days later, they celebrated Thanksgiving at Ducky's house. In just those few days, things between Tim and Shannon were beginning to lean a trifle closer to friendly, each taking cautious baby steps away from "I'll be polite because of Jethro/Dad, Kelly, kids". By then they'd spent time together, hours with their respective doctors and were slowly moving toward the possibility of building a relationship.

Shannon saw her grandchildren whenever possible, trying not to notice she was never alone with them. She remembered having a talk with a young Kelly about consequences and she knew she was now facing her own consequences. She knew there'd been some progress but she'd hoped it would be faster. That told her how deeply her actions affected her son. Part of her therapy was dealing with having her infant son, fully grown with no influence from her, in her life, knowing he'd been stolen from her by her own mother and raised by someone else for a few years before he was forced into homelessness. It was a lot to deal with.

On the other hand, Tim was afraid that he would just cave and accept everything. He didn't want to do that, he knew he was sometimes too quick to forgive and as a result had been taken advantage of by more than one person. It wasn't just forgiveness, this would be one of the most important relationships in his life and he wanted it to start in the right direction. Or restart.

He was thankful for his father who spent time with him every day, making sure he felt safe and loved. It amused and warmed his heart that since the discovery the two of them allowed themselves to freely express their emotions with each other. Since the debacle with his mother, his father had upped the ante on father and son closeness. Aside from that first couple of days when Tim unintentionally pushed his father away, after he wrote the note there was no hesitation from either of them. Tim was loved and cherished by his father and felt it every day. Whether it was hugs, hair ruffling, head kisses or cuddling, Dad was there and Tim readily returned the affection.

He could deal with thinking of Shannon as his mother when they were together with family. Apart from those occasions, he mentally referred to her as Shannon. It helped him deal with the situation and allowed him to be happy for his father. Two things mother and son shared – love of Jethro and determination that he not be stuck in the middle.

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While the family was together on Thanksgiving, Kelly surprised everyone but her doctor brother by announcing her transfer from the pediatric residency program in Seattle to Rob's program, much to his delight. Kelly's advisor suggested it that first night they were in town and the process of applying and formal acceptance took very little time. Her father was so happy he swept her into a hug that lifted her right off her feet. When her new family cheered, she relaxed.
Between Thanksgiving and Brynie's birthday, Shannon found a sweet cottage in Arlington and arranged a six-month lease, in Mac's name to avoid any questions or problems. When their things arrived from Seattle and Tacoma, Shannon had fun decorating while Kelly enjoyed sprucing up her half of the apartment she was sharing with Rob.

Shannon was not surprised but felt the shame when she was told she couldn't teach because of her criminal record. Although the judge had commuted a prison sentence, she had been found guilty and thus convicted of a felony. She supported herself doing private tutoring at the students' homes and starting a small alterations business. The Marshals' would pay for her first 90 days' rent; once she was on her own her father would help if she came up short.

Brynie's third birthday was the first week of December and her grandparents, aunties and uncles gathered for her family party. She picked what they would have for dinner, kabobs she remembered Daddy grilling in New Mexico and her cake had horses on it. She didn't notice but Mommy, Poppy, Grandpa and her aunts and uncles saw that Daddy and her new grandmother spoke to each other without any nudging from anyone. And Geordie was sure he saw the two of them laughing together over something.

For Brynie's party with her friends, she'd wanted everything to be cowgirls and cowboys. They had a large tent in the backyard with bales of hay to sit on instead of chairs and a table. Various western items were scattered around and Brynie's cake was in the shape of a cowgirl boot. The kids' fun packs were little boots filled with goodies and they all had western hats to wear and take home.

As space for pony rides proved impossible, Mommy and Daddy brought in a small petting zoo, housed in a neighboring tent. Luckily, the sun shone that day. It wasn't warm but the main tent was heated and the kids kept warm running around playing games; the animals kept them warm in the petting zoo tent. Brynie was excited when she saw the alpacas, pygmy goats, lambs and miniature horses, telling everyone about the animals at the ranch in 'Albakeeke'.

Both her parties were fun and her new grandmother and Daddy found that laughing together brought them a little closer.

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Three weeks later, they gathered on Christmas Day and the Gibbes went all out celebrating their new family. By then, mother and son had established the beginnings of what both wanted to be a strong relationship. Still in counseling, they'd taken the unusual step of having a counseling session together, with both their doctors. That had gone well and they continued to move forward.

Tim was able to push forward after realizing that part of his problem was his feelings about the kidnapping, virtually buried since hearing the story from Mac and piecing together what happened. That was something to be shared with, not held against his mother; ultimately, it helped them through the last of their problems, their shared anger and misery at what happened when Tim was born.

He'd also dealt with the rejection and sense of abandonment he'd felt that morning. He hadn't realized how much he'd buried his feelings about the loss of his brother Patrick and his McGee father until all this brought everything back to the surface. His doctor said those feelings surfacing was a good thing, that he obviously felt safe enough now that he could finally deal with all of it. Tim told his father who hated that his son had to go through all this but was pleased that he'd been able to help his child. He hadn't been there in years past but he was here now.

Jethro and Shannon also had issues to handle and one of them was Shannon's failure to tell Jethro about their infant son. In her therapy sessions, she was dealing with that along with her assault on
Tim. Her doctor said that keeping the knowledge of her pregnancy, the birth and death of their son from his father had made things easier for her in the short run. She could push it away; pretend Tim never happened. When Jethro was told that he almost choked on his emotions but then he'd loved Tim for years now, he knew him and couldn't imagine pretending he'd never happened. Then he realized he might have done something similar with his former wives, never telling them about Shannon and Kelly.

As Shannon learned more about her son's work, she realized the pain caused him having to treat the woman he thought might be his mother as a criminal. And she was beginning to let go of her decades-long grudge against NCIS. With most of the pain and anger dissipating, they were now starting to become acquainted as individuals rather than the polite family member persona each had used.

Tim was learning more about having a mother and being Shannon's son, which was quite different from being Jethro's son. Having a mother was light years different from having a father, particularly a father for whom he'd worked for so long.

Shannon was learning the differences about being Mom to boys as well as girls. When either of the two would express frustration, Jethro was always quick to remind them that he and Tim had known each other for a decade before discovering their connection. It may not have always been ideal, but they did have that layer of familiarity.

Because Shannon also spent time with each of her new children and grandchildren, the awkwardness was beginning to dissipate, replaced by a sense of wonder that they were one family. Still adjusting to being one of 6 children and having 5 siblings, Kelly loved every minute of it.

For the holiday, it was just the family: Mac, Jethro, Shannon and their 6 adult children, Ty, Brynie, Ellie and Maggie, another welcome addition. Abby and her brother Kyle were in New Orleans visiting Abby's other brother Luca for the holiday, Ducky went with the Palmers to the Slaters, Breena's family, Tobias hadn't been seen or heard from since the wedding in October and the Vances were on a ski vacation.

The adults had a wonderful time watching Ty and Brynie opening their gifts and their parents and grandfather got a kick out of watching the grown kids tearing through their gifts. It was a fun day. With so many siblings, including Ellie and Maggie, the grown kids pulled a name each for a 'Secret Santa' gift. Attempting to keep it a secret was a fun if futile gesture as the siblings stalked each other online and in person to see what each might want.

It was too snowy and cold for grilling outdoors, even for Jethro, but the new oven had a rotisserie feature on it that he loved to use and the family feasted on the results. Tim loved having someone to cook with as he and Shannon prepared the rest of the meal. Cooking was something they'd learned they had in common and they'd discovered that working together on a meal was a good thing. While they worked on dinner, Tony made an exceptionally decadent dessert.

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While Mac loved his family, he hated the cold. When he made reservations for the train ride to his winter home in Florida, he was thrilled that his daughter and son-in-law planned to join him. Shannon's probation officer approved the trip, knowing she was a low flight risk and that her husband and other members of her family were federal agents.

One night before their departure, the trio had dinner with Tim, Ellie, the kids and Kelly. After the children were tucked in, the adults relaxed in the living room with coffees.
After some discussion, they decided to postpone the planned extended family party until late spring or early summer when they could be outdoors. They’d make it ‘potluck’, meaning everyone would bring something. Ellie and Tim compiled a list of the invitees and showed Shannon whose eyes widened. "This is the extended family? That's enough to populate a small village!"

While she'd met Abby, the Palmers and Vances, she'd been so busy getting to know her family that there hadn't been time for anyone else.

They laughed at that and explained how the family had expanded. "So this Tobias, he's your best friend, Jethro?"

"He's one of them, yes." Then his eyes grew big and he blinked. He hadn't yet told his wife about the three apparently bogus marriages, he'd clean forgotten about it! Seeing what was the closest to a panicked look Tim had ever seen on his father- former Boss's face, he quickly jumped in, explaining the Gibbs clan, the overlap with the smaller Mallard clan, adding in the Vances. When Dad gave him a signal to stop and thanked him, he stopped before he got too far into Leon's sad history.

His mother looked at him quizzically and then looked at his father. "Did you just tell him to shut up?"

"No."

Tim chuckled at the one word answer. "He thanked me for helping and said it was enough, Mom. He's got some stuff he needs to tell you."

He smirked at his father who glared at him. Mac and Ellie laughed while Kelly and Shannon watched, not sure what was going on. Apparently, Tim won, however, as his father pulled him forward, ruffling his hair.

"Yeah, I do, Shannie."

"Don't tell me you have more children tucked away somewhere?"

"No, no more kids and they all came with our Tim anyway. Except for Tony."

"And Abby."

"Uh, yeah."

Sensing a slight tension, Shannon frowned and Tim sighed. "She's not one of Dad's kids. She can't be; she and I have a history."

"Oh. So?" She looked from her son to her husband and back to her son.

Jethro shook his head, looking at Tim, "You can use that as an excuse but that's not really why." He turned back to his wife. "Yes they dated, years ago. However, before and after that, she was my surrogate daughter for years until I found out she'd been abusing her position in my affections with Tim and others at the agency. She knew she was the favorite and could get away with it. I never consciously decided to have favorites but she and Tony were at the top of the totem pole and Tim was at the bottom; that's a big part of what Tim and I have been working on. When I confronted her, she lied and that was something else she'd been doing for years. Bottom line, she's more or less extended family now, her choice."

"She sounds spoiled and in need of discipline!"
"Discipline she got from her boss, Director Vance, and she's no longer spoiled, at least not by me."

Shannon turned to ask Tim something and found that she and Jethro were the only ones in the room. She rolled her eyes, "Remember this from our daughter's childhood? Didn't like Mommy and Daddy arguing."

A voice floated downstairs, "Neither does your son!" Tim appeared in the stairwell.

"I know, I know, you weren't arguing. Mom, this is all new to you and yes, Dad and I are close now after a lot of effort on both our parts. As he said, we've been working on this for years; I’ve accepted his apologies, he's accepted mine and we've moved on. Way beyond all that. So far beyond that Abby and I are friendly again. Please don't worry about her or chastise Dad."

"All right son. Any more skeletons in the closet?"

Tim turned around and went back upstairs. Shannon looked at her husband who sighed, "I'll tell you when we're alone. There are a few things." He looked at her, "You don't have anything you want to tell me?"

She started to shake her head and then blushed and shrugged at the same time. "Maybe we can just do it all at once?"

"Deal."

They kissed and then pulled apart laughing when the trio reappeared in the living room.

Shannon shook her head, changing the subject. "I want to do something special for Ducky to thank him for all his help. I was thinking I'd make him a special breakfast before we leave for Florida."

Tim frowned, "You're leaving Saturday and today's Thursday."

"Then we'll make it brunch and do it tomorrow."

Kelly asked, "Doesn't he have to work?"

Jethro huffed, "He can go in late. If there's a case, Jimmy's more than qualified to handle it. He ran autopsy for nearly three months after the bombing and Ducky's heart attack."

There was dead silence and then Tim, Ellie and Jethro looked at each other, laughing. Mac finally said, "Daughter, you'll have to get used to it. Unless they're talking about the kids, seems like about 90% of their conversations or stories somehow involve a case, an injury or something classified."

When Tim could talk, he managed to say, "There are neutral topics. Family history is always good and the kids of course. Ellie and I talk about many things besides work. Kelly, Mom, you two must have stories to tell, please share!"

Kelly smiled, "Sure, I've got plenty of stories to tell!"

Ellie opened her mouth to say something but a yawn slipped out. Mac chuckled, "We'd better go; these three have to work tomorrow."

By the time they'd walked down the sidewalk, Jethro had persuaded his wife to wait until their return for Ducky's treats.

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While their parents were away, Kelly, Rob, Geo and Sarah would rotate house-sitting at their respective homes. Kelly stayed at her father's that first weekend and spent some time with Tim going through her old room. When she heard it had been cleared of her childhood belongings less than two years ago, she grimaced, "That's really sad, poor Daddy. I hope he threw it all away!"

Tim shook his head, "Maybe a few things. We have your books, some of your toys and dress up things but I believe the rest of it is in the attic."

"Tim, that just breaks my heart. I'm so glad he had all of you."

"But he didn't Kels, not for years. The Corps kept him alive at first, then NIS and Mike Franks. Mike retired in '96, only 5 years after Dad lost you. He met Tobias somewhere around the same time and, well you'll hear more about him later and meet him at the party. I hope he and Emily will be here."

Then Tim paled, realizing someone was going to have to tell Diane about their illegal marriage which meant she'd likely come snooping around. He hadn't seen her since shortly before the kids' arrival.

After her near death from Sergei Mishnev's sniper bullet, she spent months in the hospital, rehab and then in her sister's home in Las Vegas, completing her miraculous recovery. Very few people survive a bullet to the brain but Diane had, with minimal permanent damage. Tim, Tony, Ellie, and Abby paid her a visit before she left for Las Vegas and as far as he knew, she was still in Las Vegas, working at the local IRS office. No doubt, she was having a wonderful time sticking it to the casinos and gamblers. Fornell was by her side during her recovery but when she was well enough to return to work, they'd parted ways again, this time amicably.

Seeing her brother deep in thought, Kelly asked, "What's up?"

"Uh, geez, no wonder the kids don't like secrets! I'm just going to tell you. Dad and Tobias met through work, Tobias is an FBI agent, and at the time, Dad was married to a woman named Diane, don't know what her maiden name is. Dad went on what we call a 'float'; he was an NIS agent assigned to a Navy ship for 3 months. When he came home, he discovered that Diane cheated on him with Tobias while he was gone. He found out because Diane was pregnant. No happy family there. A grueling divorce and then she and Tobias married and had Emily, their daughter. Their marriage lasted longer than Diane and Dad's did, a few years; I don't think Dad and Diane made it to their second anniversary. Years later, she married a third Federal employee but that didn't last long either. Over the years, Tobias and Dad have worked together many times and at some point Dad forgave him for the mess with Diane. Although he says the marriage was near the end anyway.

"Dad married and was divorced by two more redheads. He finally stopped the merry-go-round when he figured out he was marrying these women because something about them reminded him of Shannon, his one, true and only love. After the wedding, when none of them magically turned into our mother, he lost interest and buried himself in work. What's weird, Kelly is that he never told any of them about you and Mom. He couldn't bear to talk about you; it was too painful. Diane found out when she went through his wallet and found photos of you two. He told me another girlfriend, Hollis Mann, found out when she played a cassette tape she found in the basement, heard you playing the piano and you and Mom telling Dad you missed him."

"That's the stuff he needs to tell Mom. Huh, I guess he wasn't legally married to any of them. Rebecca, ex-wife #2, probably won't care; I think they were married for less than a year. Stephanie, ex #3, lives in Philadelphia and is doing well, not that I'm supposed to know that but I always felt sorry for her. They were married for about 18 months and most of that time was spent in Russia
while Dad was on assignment for the agency.

"Diane has a volatile personality and wow, she's likely to blow a gasket when she finds out they weren't legally married. Plus I bet no one has had the guts to tell her about me being his son." He paused, gathering his thoughts, "She spent the night at my place once, after splitting from her 3rd husband Victor; Boss stuck me with protective custody of her, but she just cried all night. Ha, hope this freaks her out!"

Kelly just looked at him, "Grandpa's totally right, you guys do have endless stories to tell."

He huffed, "We'd have more if fewer of our cases were classified."

She grinned, "So Tobias and his daughter will be here for the extended family dinner? That will be fun!"

"Yes. Emily calls Dad 'Uncle Gibbs'."

"Ah, that's sweet. How old is she?"

"Mm, a teen now, about 16."

"Just think - she could be our sister!"

Tim chuckled, "Yeah I've thought of that."

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Their father waited until they'd reached Florida to tell his wife about the exes. Being Gibbs, he didn't get quite as personal about his exes as his son had. Not at first. By the time he told Shannon what he'd realized, why he kept marrying the wrong women, he was crying and she held him against her heart. Although they'd been reconnecting on most levels, sharing their past and their emotions brought them even closer together.

Finally, Jethro and Shannon made love, reconnecting physically and emotionally as soul mates. The only woman and the only man each would ever truly love. For both, it was a homecoming and a healing as well as a reaffirmation of their love.
Jethro and Shannon enjoyed the warmth of Florida so much they stayed four weeks instead of the planned two with her weekly probation meeting and appointments with her psychologist completed through Skype.

They flew home on a Saturday, not telling anyone. As much as they'd enjoyed the time away, they were anxious to see their children and grandchildren and if everything went well, had some news to share. Taking a cab to the house, they had the driver turn into the back alley and drop them at their back gate. The house was empty. They knew Sarah was away on a book promotion and Kelly, Rob and Geordie were working.

Once everything was inside, Jethro sent a text to Tim, asking if he had a few minutes to talk.

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Tim smiled at the text from his father. He had a good idea what the topic would be. If he was right, he was ready, happy and a little relieved, wondering if he'd have to raise the subject himself.

He answered and then told the kids their 'horsie' was tired. They'd been playing all morning, although he'd only been horsie for a few minutes. He wasn't willing to risk his back more than that. Brynie slid off his back, patting his head. "You're a good horsie!"

Ty nodded, "Thank you Daddy horsie!"

He laughed when they offered him an apple. The kids went down to the playroom while he got comfortable in the recliner, waiting for Dad to call. Looking at his watch, he wondered how much longer Ellie would be. It was her week for grocery shopping but she was meeting Maggie for coffee before she hit the stores.

He'd no sooner sat down then he heard a key in the lock. Wondering why Ellie was coming in the front door instead of the garage, his face lit up when his father entered.

"Dad!"

"Hey Son!"

Jethro wrapped his arms around his boy and Tim returned the embrace, holding on tight.

"Great surprise, when did you get in? Where's Mom?"

"Just got here and she's still at the house. Aw, missed you, Elf Lord. How are you, Ellie and the littles?"

"We're good, Daddy. Missed you lots. Haven't been apart this long since you sent me to Canada. Let me see your tan." Tim pulled back and grinned at his dad's face. "Not warm enough to sunbathe?"

"Not quite. Warmer than here but not enough for sunbathing or swimming in the ocean. We did
swim, in an indoor pool."

They pulled apart and by unspoken agreement headed for the coffeepot. Fortified with large mugs of their favorite hot beverage they returned to the living room, both keeping their ears open for the kids in the playroom.

"Kiddo, have a question for you. Not expecting an answer now, take your time and think about it."

"Yes."

"Huh? You agreeing to what I said? I haven't asked you anything yet."

"You're going to ask if I'm ready for Mom to move home, right?" Tim gave his father a cocky grin, "Who taught me to anticipate?"

"Good point. Are you absolutely sure, Timson?"

"Yes, Dad. I am absolutely sure and looking forward to having her close by. Thank you. Thank you for asking, thank you for all your support and patience, it's been wonderful and it's really helped in the healing process. I know it's been a long haul. What you've done for me, Dad…"

Tim choked up and with tears in his own eyes Jethro pulled him close again. "Want you to listen to me."

He felt a nod and continued, "What I did is what you should have always had. It's what you give your own children, Tim. Doesn't matter to me how old you are and won't matter to you when your babies are grown. Your child is your child. Forever. This is what you should have had from McGee. Unconditional love and support. You're my son, always going to be my son, my Timson, my Timiny, my Elf Lord. Always. And I'm always going to be your father. When you're 100 and I'm 119, it'll still be true. Got that?" He felt a chuckle and relaxed.

"Thank you for your big generous heart, Timomine. For being willing to work with Shannon. And thank you for being so considerate of me. Yeah, I know you two have worked hard not to put me in the middle and I'm sure that's been difficult."

They heard little footsteps on the stairs and Tim wiped his face on his father's shirt. Ty poked his head out, "Daddy? Poppy! Brynie, Poppy's here!"

Two little whirlwinds flew across the room, ending up in Poppy's arms with their father. As they were greeting each other, Brynie touched her daddy. "Daddy, what's wrong?"

"I missed my daddy, Brynie. I'm so glad he's home!"

His kids climbed right into his arms, hugging and kissing him, keeping Poppy close too. Eventually the four of them pulled apart and walked down the street to greet Nonny too.

Shannon smiled as her husband, son and grandchildren walked in the door. Tim looked at her with a shy smile and went right to her murmuring, "Welcome home, Mom."

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They announced that Shannon was moving in with their father and the kids were welcome to stay in her cottage for the rest of her lease. Sarah took her up on it and the family spent a weekend moving Mom in with Dad and then moving Sarah into the cottage.
Two weeks later, Tim and Ellie packed for their delayed honeymoon in Hawai‘i. They flew to Kaua‘i on a Saturday, leaving the children in the capable hands of Poppy and Nonny and the helpful hands of several aunties and uncles.

Staying in a condominium on Poipu beach, the couple had a wonderful time. Exhausted the first couple of days, they spent a lot of time napping on the beach. Once they were over the jet lag, they drove their rental car as far around the island as the roads went. Driving to the north end one day, they were amused at the many one-lane bridges and applauded the courtesy drivers displayed waiting for cars to cross before taking their turn.

They loved Hanalei Bay and town, having a coffee there and watching the kids jump off the pier, taking a dip in the ocean themselves. From there they drove to a ranch where they had reservations for a 3-hour private tour on horseback. They rode across beautifully lush green meadows into the forests. Riding off trail, they experienced even more of the beauty and enjoyed the flora and fauna along the way. Leaving the horses, they hiked up a steep and blessedly short trail to a breathtaking waterfall. There they picnicked and swam until it was time to return.

That evening they went to a luau, thoroughly enjoying the show. They spent the next morning on the beach and then drove a few miles to join a Movie Tour. That was a lot of fun and they learned interesting tidbits about some of their favorite movies, seeing the beautiful bays, beaches and canyons where they were filmed. The tour lasted several hours and included lunch at a bar and grill in the town of Kapaa. After doing a little souvenir shopping, they returned to Poipu where they had a late afternoon windsurfing class. Tim was excited; he would have never been able to do any water sports before he found the combination of ginger and sea bands to counteract his seasickness.

Over the next two weeks, they had many wonderful adventures with plenty of time for sunbathing on the beach, windsurfing and swimming in the ocean. While Tim was not interested in traversing a zip line, he and Ellie had a wonderful time kayaking on the Wailua River. They’d planned to take the Na Pali Coast kayak tour but those were held from April to October, they were too early. With Tim again employing his sea bands and ginger, the couple took a helicopter tour of the island that included Waimea Canyon, the coast and many other beautiful features of Kauai.

Never forgetting they were on their honeymoon, they left plenty of private time on their schedule. The condominium boasted a private hot tub and they made good use of it.

All too soon, the tanned and happy honeymooners packed to return home, laden with gifts and hoping to return someday. They’d certainly miss the beaches, beautiful canyons and waterfalls, friendly people, great restaurants, and all the activities. On the flight home, Tim reflected that it was a good thing this was a long trip; it gave him time to ponder on the wonderful times and start thinking about children, family and the wonderful times waiting for them at home.

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While they were gone, spring made sporadic visits to the mid-Atlantic. As the newlyweds settled into their lives, the weather warmed up in Virginia and heated up in Florida. Mac returned and the long postponed party for extended family and friends was given a date, plans were made and invitations sent out.

Tim, Shannon and Tony sat down to plan the food, as they'd be the cooks. More than 6 months after Shannon and Kelly's return, mother and son now had a solid relationship built on trust, faith and love. As their relationship had grown, so had the relationships of Tim's siblings with their new mother. They were glad they'd waited to have this party as it would have more meaning now – and be more fun.
The party was scheduled for a Sunday so the cooks and decorators would have Saturday to prepare whatever could be done ahead of time.

Shannon thought it sad that out of all these new adult children of hers and Jethro’s, only two liked to cook. Hoping her grandchildren would feel differently, she said as much to Tim and Tony and then laughed when Tony paled.

Tim nudged him, "Don't worry, Tony, she's got two babies, she's probably expecting more from the girls than us."

Tony had to admit that even months after the return, it still felt very strange to consider the legendary Shannon his surrogate mother. As she'd connected with each of Jethro's kids, she made it clear she considered herself as much his or her parent as Jethro. Tony was happy about it, felt wonderful to have someone claim him as their own but it was still strange.

The Friday before the party, Jerry and Barbara Bishop arrived and Geordie and Sarah picked up Grandpa. He'd stay with his daughter and son-in-law so the Bishops could spend a little more time with the grandkids, Ellie and Tim. There was an impromptu family dinner that evening as Jethro and Jerry grilled burgers and hot dogs for the clan. The Bishops were happy to finally meet Kelly and Shannon in person after a number of Skype calls and to see for themselves that Tim really was doing fine with his mother. They'd been horrified to hear what happened and had been as supportive as they could be long distance. Barbara kept in close touch with Tim, wanting to give him the support of the only other mother he'd known while he and Shannon worked things out. It was a little bit of a tightrope for her as she didn't want to intrude but did want to support her son-in-law.

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Jethro didn't tell Tim right away but Saturday afternoon while the cooks were busy at Tim and Ellie's, he had a call from Tobias. The family had been relieved to hear he and Emily would be attending the party; after months of silence, they'd been starting to worry.

"Hey, Jethro, Diane's flying in tomorrow morning, all right if Emily and I bring her along?"

Seeing no way out, he agreed. What else could he do? Even if he told Tobias who else would be there, i.e., his long dead wife and daughter, Diane would still show up. Especially then!

Sunday was clear and bright and the forecast was for a high of 78. The soiree was at Tim and Ellie's because of the playroom, giving both kids and adults the possibility of extra space. With the weather in the 70s, the children would play outside although the pool had not yet made its debut for the warm season. They'd need the space for their guests today anyway.

At Tim and Ellie's, the 8 of them, Kelly, Mac and the Bishops included, were busy getting ready. With 37 people attending, lunch would be served buffet style; benches and chairs were rounded up, borrowed from Dad and a few neighbors. They'd decided to use disposable plates, cups, napkins and cutlery.

For food, Tim made several pans of chicken enchiladas using Steve Ortiz's wife Pam's recipe. Not everyone liked or could tolerate as much spice and fire as the recipe called for so there were different pans, each carefully marked, with varying amounts of heat. Tony made sopapillas while Mom made black beans and fresh salsa. Maggie was bringing ripe avocados to make fresh guacamole, and sour cream; the Palmers were bringing chips and a 5-layer bean dip. Ducky was bringing fresh vegetables for salad and liters of lemonade and soda, Abby, Sarah and Rob were bringing desserts and Mac chipped in to help pay for the food. The Vances were bringing more
beverages, including beer; Tobias was bringing sweet corn tamalitos and Bob Chalmers was bringing Spanish rice.

Evan Fuller, Tony's SFA, and his family had also been invited but already had plans. They really weren't part of the extended family but Tony felt that with three-fourths of his team at the party, it would be a good idea to invite Evan. They had children roughly Ty and Brynie's age.

On the other hand, Bob was a member of the extended family. Tim thought it went back to Bob's first week as a TAD on Gibbs' team, the week they rescued the children. And of course, he'd been a member of Tim's 'move crew'. In addition, he knew Shannon and Kelly, one more person they'd be familiar with at the party.

Tim hadn't told anyone but Ellie that Bob had recently mentioned that he'd like to ask Sarah for a date. It was all Tim could do not to cheer. Here was a man who didn't need a background check and that everyone liked. He knew his sister liked him and thought he was interesting, very different from the other men she knew. Born in the Philippines to an American sailor and his Filipina wife, Bob had dual citizenship. His early years were spent in the Philippines and the Navy bases where his father was stationed, including two years in Norfolk VA. When his father retired from the Navy, the family moved back to his mother's hometown in the Philippines where Bob completed his education.

With a degree in Criminal Justice, he returned to the U.S., eager to experience life in his father's homeland. Already interested in NCIS he did well at FLETC and with his background, the agency was a natural. Then his new career seemed to skid to a halt. He did well during his probationary year but with additional budget cuts, found himself floating without a permanent assignment to a team. That is until Tony DiNozzo left on an extended personal leave and two drunken white supremacists orphaned two toddlers. In Bob's opinion, that was the day his NCIS career really got started, he'd found a home with Gibbs' team.

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The party was to start at 1:00 PM. At 0800, Jethro called Tim to tell him that Diane would be there. There was dead silence, sounds of movement and then a lot of swearing, apparently Tim had found somewhere private to talk.

"Dad, are you going to tell them ahead of time?"

"By the time her flight gets in, they'll just have time to take her luggage home, settle in and get over here."

"Well crap. She's going to throw a huge fit."

"I thought what I'd do is go out to greet them when they arrive and tell them then. So if she's going to have a fit, she can do it outside."

Tim huffed, "Take Mom and Kelly out with you and don't say anything. Watch Diane put the pieces together."

"Thought of that and your mother offered but as much as I'd love to do that it just seems mean."

"Still, Mom can handle her."

"Yep, so can Ellie and they know each other."

"Don't let her hit you, God, she could undo all your hard work."
"I'll take the cane with me."

"Do you still have the walker? Maybe take that, might soften her up a little."

When Tim returned to the kitchen, Ellie took one look and asked him what was wrong. "Diane's coming."

"Diane Gibbs Fornell Sterling, whatever she's using now?"

"Yes."

"Oh boy."

"Nicer than what I said."

"I bet. Any chance of damage control beforehand?"

"No, she's flying in late this morning." He told her his father's plan of meeting her outside the house.

"Huh. I could talk to her, she knows me."

"Thought of that, thought of Mom going out and just letting Diane figure it out. Dad said it felt too mean and I guess he's right."

Behind him Kelly said, "Too bad you can't tell her daughter and let her break the news. Sounds like she's as strong a character as her mother."

Tim turned to include her, "She's getting to be, that's for sure and that's a good idea but this is Dad's deal. He's going to have to let Rebecca and Stephanie know too."

Mac was behind them, "Tim?"

"It's ok Grandpa, I told Kelly."

"All right son. Too bad your father can't just go meet this woman at the airport, tell her there. Hate to ruin the party!"

Tim's face lit up, "Grandpa, that's a great idea! Tobias and Emily will be there too and Mom could go with Dad."

Ellie already had the phone in her hand, calling Jethro and Shannon. When Shannon answered, she listened to her father's idea and then laughed. "That's perfect, we'll tell them but it won't ruin the party. We'll tell her if she still wants to come, she's more than welcome. And it'll soothe her ego that Jethro is making a special trip to the airport to tell her."

When Jethro heard the plan, he took a few seconds to think it through. "I like that better than here. Fornell will buy me wanting to let Diane know I have someone new in my life beforehand. All right, Shannie, if you're okay with this?"

"Absolutely!"

Taking a deep breath, Jethro called his friend. "Hey Tobias, been thinking. I have someone I want you, Diane and Emily to meet but I'm a little worried about Diane's reaction. Thinking we'll come to the airport, meet you three there."
There was silence and then Tobias said, "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. If she's going to be upset, she can be over the worst of it by the time we get to your place, or Tim's place. Shit, she doesn't know about him!"

"Not to sound petty at all but Tim's looking forward to telling her."

"Two hits in one day? Not a good idea."

"Ok, then I'll tell her at the airport, still be two hits but it'll give her time to uh…"

"If you're thinking 'get over it', you know better. Decide to be civil or not is a better ending to that sentence."

Fornell gave Gibbs the flight number and time of arrival and they agreed to meet at Baggage Claim. Gibbs quipped, "I'll be easy to find, the old geezer with the walker."

"I forgot about your knee! They say it's worth the pain and aggravation."

"Yeah, my doctor had one knee done and is doing the other one this year. That won me over. That and not being able to chase after my grandkids without taking large doses of painkillers afterward."

"All right, we'll see you there!"

Jethro felt guilty, he hadn't used the walker in nearly 6 months, since Brynie's birthday when there were so many little kids running around. If he knew he was going to be on his feet for hours at a time, he sometimes took the cane with him, kept it in the trunk of his car but he couldn't remember the last time he'd used it.

Calling her daughter for help, Shannon and Kelly transported the two pots of black beans and the fresh salsa down the sidewalk to Tim's.

When Kelly remarked on the plan to meet Diane, Shannon looked at her, "You know who she is."

"Yes, sure. Tim told me months ago when he told me about Tobias."

"It's sad, isn't it? At least we had each other. Your poor father didn't even have his father or my father to help him."

"Yeah, Tim told me some of that too."

After delivering the beans, they hurried back down the sidewalk.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go...thanks to all my readers and commenters, it's been fun! Next story in this 'verse will be up soon. More on that later.
Back at the house, Kelly and her father chatted while Shannon looked at the time, "Honey, we need to get going."

"All right." He kissed his daughter, "See you later Doc!"

"Good luck!"

When Shannon pulled up to the curb at the airport to let Jethro and his walker out, one of the security guys spotted the Navy Yard parking sticker and walked over. "Are you meeting someone?"

"Yes."

"You can leave your car here. Not something we usually do, you understand." Jethro nodded, feeling even guiltier as Shannon locked up and joined him. When they got inside, they found seats and got comfortable. Emily walked in a minute later.

"Uncle Gibbs, how's your knee?" Emily kissed his cheek.

"It's much better, Ems. Where's your dad?"

"Here Jethro, oh, hello." Tobias smiled at the lovely woman next to his friend. She looked vaguely familiar and he looked at Gibbs and then back at the woman.

"Tobias, Emily, I'd like you to meet Shannon, my wife."

Emily's eyes opened wide, she grinned and offered her hand. "Are you the Shannon?"

"Good heavens, I hope so. Jethro's had enough trouble as it is!"

Tobias was still staring, mouth slightly open, speechless. When he finally blinked, Jethro gave him more information. "She and Kelly were released from WITSEC in November after 25 years."

"Oh, my freaking - I can't believe this! Shannon, I'm Tobias Fornell and I'm very happy to meet you." He laughed joyously, "Jethro, both of them and Tim and the babies! The universe loves
"you!" Then he stopped, "If you were released in November, does that mean that her nastiness of the mean eyes had you cornered too?"

"Yes, although we didn't know it was her."

"Wow, I'm just - oh my GOD! Gibbs, you are going to be in such deep doo-doo with our ex-wife!"

"Only she's not my ex-wife, Tobias, we were never legally married."

Emily's eyes almost fell out of her head. "Oh, can I tell her, please, please?" Then she laughed, "Good thing I'm not your kid, huh Uncle?"

He grinned, "I wouldn't mind that at all, Ems and I'm sure Shannon wouldn't either."

She smiled, "Of course not. I have several children I didn't know about, Emily! I raised an only child who now has 4 brothers and 2 sisters, counting Ellie, a niece, and nephew. I'm a grandmother and loving it all!"

The young woman laughed again. "Bet that was a surprise. And I get to meet Kelly today, yay!"

Tobias was thinking again, "Now I understand why you wanted to meet us here. Her flight should be landing any minute."

Two minutes later, they heard the announcement that the flight was at the arrival gate.

"Why is she here anyway?"

"Case, wouldn't say anything else."

Shannon's eyebrows rose in surprise, "Is she also a federal agent?"

Emily beamed with pride, "Yes, for the IRS."

"I didn't know they had agents like Jethro and your dad."

"Not quite the same but don't say that to her!"

Emily spotted her mother as she came down the escalator and moved forward to welcome her. Then she took her by the hand, "Come on, Uncle Gibbs is here too; he has something to tell you."

"What's he done now?"

"Nothing, well he had his bad knee replaced so he's using a walker."

"A walker, Leroy Jethro Gibbs? This I have to see!"

Tobias came forward to greet her with a hug and kiss and then said, "Jethro's here."

"I understand he's using a walker!"

"Yes, not bad for post-surgery. Had to stay at Ducky's for a while because his grandchildren had colds."

"Grandchildren, what grandchildren? Did he get married again, to someone with kids?"

"Nope. Come on."
Jethro was standing, remembering to lean on the walker when she reached him. When she spotted the woman next to him, she nodded to her and then looked at Leroy. "Finally got that done; good. What's this I hear about grandchildren?"

"Two of them so far but Tim and Ellie just got married, so we'll see."

"Ellie? Ellie on your team - Ellie Bishop?"

"Yes but that's not why we're here, Diane. First of all, I'm glad you're recovered, you look well."

"I am well and it was a long haul, Leroy; I'm glad to be alive."

With a smile, Shannon jumped right in. "So am I, glad we're both alive. Diane, my name is Shannon, Shannon Gibbs."

Diane's mouth dropped open and she looked at the other woman, then at Leroy, at Tobias and back at Shannon and then at Emily who was nodding.

"You're Leroy's Shannon?"

"Yes, I am. Released from protective custody after a very long time."

"Oh, my heavens. And Kelly?"

"Also alive and currently at her brother's house."

"Her brother, I thought she was an only child?"

"It was news to me too. Before Jethro and I were married, we had a baby he never knew about, one who was born prematurely and died after a few hours. I was able to hold him and name him; he was baptized. Then I went to sleep and when I woke, they told me he had died. But he didn't, it's a long story but basically he was kidnapped, adopted by a navy family and when he was grown he joined NCIS."

Diane's mouth made an 'O' and she looked at Leroy. "Chuckie? That has to be Chuckie. He really is the spawn of a woodchuck?"

"That's my boy! And he has a sister and brothers I adopted. Shannon and I now have 6 children, 1 daughter-in-law, and 2 grandchildren."

"And Ellie married Chuckie, I mean Tim? But she was married to that good looking lawyer!"

"Yeah, that ended and so did Tim's relationship with Delilah."

"The young woman in the wheelchair?"

He nodded. "Diane, you realize Shannon's my legal wife. I had no way of knowing she was alive."

She stared at him for several seconds, "That means we were never legally married! That's fine, Leroy; it means I'm a two times divorcée instead of three, actually makes me feel a little better."

She smiled, "But I'm not giving any of your money back."

He laughed, "I knew you'd say that, wasn't going to ask! At least I got my grandfather's railroad watch."

She shook her head, "That was mean of me; I'll give you that one." She turned to Shannon, "I'm so
happy you're alive and you two have found each other again. He's been a miserable SOB for so many years; I can only hope your return will cure that!"

Shannon bit back a grin, "I hope so too! Although I think Tim, the grandkids and the new knee might have cured at least part of that. Will you still come to our party today?"

"Of course, I can't wait to see Chuckie, Ellie, and their kids! Anyone else I know?"

"Tony?"

"Ah, Agent DiNozzo, always the stud muffin."

"He's dating a Marine captain."

At Diane's stunned look, Emily giggled, "The Captain's a she, Mom, and an NCIS agent."

"Of course, what was I thinking? Not that there would be anything wrong with that."

"All right, we have to get going so we'll be there to surprise other people when they arrive."

They dispersed to their own vehicles, Diane stopping behind Shannon and Leroy to watch him maneuver the walker. She shook her head, "I can't believe he's using that thing."

Tobias made a noise, "He's got a kid now who's a doctor, not like Ducky where he could go home and ignore him."

"Who's a doctor? I thought there were two children now, Chuckie and Kelly. Kelly can't be old enough to be a doctor! Oh, he said something about adopting Tim's siblings, is one of them a doctor?"

Tobias looked at his daughter for help. She grinned, "I got this one, Dad."

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When they pulled into the driveway at home, Tim and Kelly were there, borrowing the coffeemaker. "How'd it go?"

"A lot better than I thought. Having Shannon there really helped."

Kelly looked at him, "Does your knee hurt?"

"No, I have a headache; I always have a headache when Diane is around."

"Okay, I'll get you some Ibuprofen."

As she walked away, he called after her, "Need three, please!"

As he waited for the Ibuprofen to kick in, they walked down to Tim's and the rest of the kids arrived to help. While all the chairs were dusted and cleaned, two leaves were added to the table and it was turned sideways so people could walk around it.

At 12:15, Dad gave a whistle and motioned them over to him. When they'd gathered around, he looked at all of them, "Are we all set?"

"Yes, Dad. Before we start heating the food, we'll ask everyone to be seated and explain what's happening."
When the littles heard what was happening, they did their happy dance, taking Poppy and Nonny's hands as they jumped around them.

By 1:00, they were as ready as they were ever going to be. The Palmers and Ducky arrived together, followed by Abby and Bob, and then the others poured in.

Now that Tobias and his family had been told about Shannon and Kelly, all of the extended family knew about their return. When asked which was her favorite response, Shannon said it was a three-way tie between Breena, Tobias and Diane.

When told at Tim's birthday party, Breena stood still as a statue with her mouth open for so long that Tony had reached over and gently tapped her chin. She'd finally smiled, saying, "I'm so happy I get to meet you, I never thought…" She blinked back tears. "He's been a changed man since the kids and Tim and now, oh gosh, this is so wonderful!"

Jimmy's reaction had been verbal, he and Breena had been preoccupied with their children the week Shannon and Kelly had appeared; both had painful ear infections.

"Shannon and Kelly are alive? Wow, this is, wow, I can't believe it! How long did you say, twenty-five years?"

Kayla and Jared were touched when Ty and Brynie came to them at the party. "Daddy told us your first mommy is an angel in heaven like our first mommies."

They nodded, they'd heard the story and they liked thinking of their mother Jackie as an angel. "When we were in the crash, I couldn't wake our mothers up and that's when they were going to heaven to be angels. Daddy says your mommy wouldn't wake up either. Nonny and Aunt Kelly weren't asleep so they weren't taken for angels. Bad people were after them so they were hidden like we were when we went to New Mexico."

Kayla was so moved she kissed both children and then introduced herself to Shannon and Kelly who spotted her cowgirl boots. She grinned, "I saw all the great boots at Tim and Ellie's wedding and had to have a pair. Jared, Lara and Dad bought some too!"

"I think we're the only ones in the family without them! But not for long."

Abby was nearby and laughed, "I tried some on but they hurt my feet. After wearing platforms for so long I can't deal with the heels."

Kayla raised an eyebrow, "Come on, Abby, a fashionista like you? I bet there are platform cowgirl boots."

"Ooh a challenge, I love it!"

Shannon watched Abby with thoughtful eyes. On their first meeting, she had been surprised to find she was almost Tony's age, she'd been expecting someone younger than Tim. While she was having a good time, she also saw grief in her eyes and wondered at the cause. She admired her fashion sense; although it was not hers, she gave her credit for having the bravura to wear what she obviously enjoyed.

Now she asked about the woman's teaching project and her face lit up as she talked about it in detail. As a teacher of children, Shannon got a kick out of some of the 'tricks' Abby had used to teach adults, they weren't that far removed from her own 'tricks of the trade'.

Kayla wanted to talk forensics with Abby; she knew she wanted to go into law enforcement but
didn't want to be in the field. She and Tim had already had some solid conversations about computer forensics but she wanted to know more about physical evidence. She especially wanted to know how Abby was so often able to break cases for the agents. Abby beamed; someone had obviously mentioned her work. It was good to be recognized and she told Kayla that a good forensic scientist had to see herself as a member of a team. When she broke a case, she was using evidence the agents found. They brought it to her for the best interpretation and definition. Kayla liked that a lot and Lara later thanked Abby.

Leon made a mental note to include Abby in their high school and college recruitments. He smiled to himself, it would be interesting to send a former cop with excellent instincts, like DiNozzo, a 'civilian' field agent/uber tech like Tim Gibbs and Abby out together, give the students a glimpse of what and how a team worked. They could do two demonstrations, one highlighting the field agents and forensics and the second one tying in the CCU, field agents, and forensics. He liked this a lot and the three of them would be comfortable together.

Tobias tapped him on the shoulder, "Penny for your thoughts."

"Woolgathering about a project that involves DiNozzo, Tim, and Abby. Or maybe Bishop, Tim, and Sciuto. Or Chalmers, Tim, and Sciuto. Have to think about that." He paused, "Diane looks great."

"Yeah, she's doing fine now. Back here for a case. Jethro tell you what they did?"

Leon shook his head and Tobias told him about the airport meeting. When he finished laughing, Vance clapped Tobias on his shoulder, "Only Gibbs would show up at the airport with his original wife to tell wife #2 he made a mistake!"

Diane was having a great time. She'd congratulated Ellie and Tim, fallen in love with their children and admired their home. She was a bit surprised by the cowboy boots, once again, most of the family was wearing theirs but understood the reason when she heard about Leroy and Tim's sojourn in New Mexico and Ellie's roots in Oklahoma. Although that didn't explain the rest of the family wearing them!

It was fun meeting all of Leroy and Shannon's kids and she was again surprised to find there were two doctors in the family, two writers, and another Marine. She liked Tony's Marine Captain Maggie and thought he was permanently off the market, he'd found his own Shannon. That brought her up short; she hadn't realized how often she used that expression.

Mac, Leroy's father-in-law, was a hoot, a lovely man who looked like an older twin of his grandson and great-grandson. The photos of Tim, his grandfather, son, and daughter together were extraordinary; Diane thought they should go in the Guinness World Records for best lookalikes. If there was such a thing!

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When Tim announced the meal would be served in twenty minutes, Mac stood in the shade and tapped a glass to get everyone's attention. "Please gather round, c'mon, time to celebrate before we feast! Ellie, Sarah, and Rob have poured bubbly drinks for everyone so kids of all ages go ahead take a glass. Teddy, maybe your Mama or Papa will help you with the sippy cup just for you. Now hold onto those as my kids that is my original kids, have something they want to share with you."

He nodded to Shannon and Jethro who stepped forward, hand in hand. Mac continued, "Twenty-five years is a long time for a couple to be separated. But even with each thinking the other dead, neither Shannon nor Jethro ever forgot the love they'd had for each other. They've spent the last
few months becoming reacquainted and today they will renew their wedding vows, recommit to each other. They asked me to stand with them, as I'm the only one here who was there the first time. And I know they'll agree when I say this is a lot more fun!"

Smiling at the happy murmurs, he waited for silence before he helped his children renew their vows. The words were simple, full of love, joy and commitment to each other, their marriage and their clan. There were chuckles at that, mostly from the clan. With a long kiss, they completed the brief ceremony and turned, finding their children and grandchildren surrounding them. They laughed and smiled as toasts were made and glasses were raised.

As the applause finally died down, the cooks and their helpers brought the food out and the crowd was seated at the very long table.

When everyone was seated, the food on the table, Mac stood again.

"As the eldest of this bunch, I've decided that makes me the patriarch, how about that? As patriarch, I want to welcome all of you to our celebration of family and to officially welcome our daughter, wife, mother and grandmother Shannon and granddaughter, daughter, sister, and aunt Kelly back into our loving arms and lives. Please join me in welcoming home our darlings, celebrating our family and the lives we live. To family!"

"To family!" The group again raised their glasses and then broke into cheers, celebrating the reunited family.

The End

Chapter End Notes

The next story is titled Fallout and Chapter 1 will be posted on 3/19; here's a snippet:

Tim answered his desk phone late one afternoon. In the middle of reviewing a case file and expecting a call from his wife, he answered without looked at the caller id.

"Hello."

"Agent Gibbs, Secretary Porter."

Tim straightened his posture so fast he knocked a stack of paper to the floor. Rolling his eyes, he left them there.

"Afternoon, Ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"Need you to come to the Pentagon for a meeting; it is need to know and for now that means just you..."

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