

# If Found, Please Return

By Jilly James

**Title:** If Found, Please Return

**Author:** Jilly James

**Fandom:** NCIS, Stargate: Atlantis

**Genre/Themes:** Drama, crossover, second chances, family

**Relationship(s):** This story is more gen and Tony-centric. John/Rodney is the only pairing.

**Content Rating:** R for adult themes, language, and other warnings

**Warnings:** Canon-level violence, past kidnapping, references to child abuse, cases involving sexual abuse.

**Beta:** Naelany. Thank you!

**Summary:** After Tony is cleared from the attempt by Chip to frame him for murder, his life takes an unexpected turn. The FBI discovers that Tony DiNozzo is the missing son of Patrick Sheppard — kidnapped from the hospital shortly after his birth.

**Word Count:** 55,393

**Author Note:** I'm fully aware that familial DNA searches were not being done at a national level back in 2005. Call it creative license, or me being inline with the technology canon of the shows, which absolutely would have done that kind of thing. Also, I realize DiNozzo Senior is not consistent with how we see him in later seasons. However, it's my opinion that this is exactly how he was described in the early seasons.

**Timeline/Spoilers:** I tweaked the timeline slightly for SGA/SG1. It's hard to say how much since the canon timelines are so wibbly, but it's pushed out by three or four months, I think. Takes place mid season 3 for NCIS, late season 1 for SGA, and late season 8 for Stargate SG-1.

**Challenge:** Written for the Second Chances challenge on Rough Trade, Spring 2016.

**Story Inspiration:** This came about from re-watching Frame-up (NCIS season 3, episode 9). In that episode, someone from Tony's past frames him for murder. Tony is in the custody of the FBI for a time. In the course of the episode, blood on the victim was run and it came back as a match to Tony. I started wondering what if that blood was the match to a missing child.

**Thanks:** To Keira for letting me borrow Mattie. I promise to take good care of him. Though Patrick Sheppard is a canon character, I'm also borrowing Keira's fan cast and taking inspiration from her portrayal of Patrick.

Cinna Minion was instrumental in getting this story idea fleshed out. She was my sounding board and I can't thank her enough for the late night chats and all the help. She also came up with the title for me!

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## Acronyms & Rules:

### **Acronyms:**

AFOSI – Air Force Office of Special Investigations

AD – Assistant Director

CODIS – Combined DNA Index System

MTAC – Multiple Threat Alert Center

NCO – Non-commissioned Officer

SAC – Special Agent in Charge

SF – Security Forces

TAD – Temporary Assigned Duty

UCMJ – Uniform Code of Military Justice

IOA – International Oversight Advisory (fictional Stargate canon)

SI – Sheppard Industries (fictional)

### **Rules referenced in the story:**

Rule #3: Never be unreachable

Rule #5: You don't waste good

Rule #16: If someone thinks they have the upper hand, break it

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## Chapter One

*December 2005*

Tobias Fornell tipped his head to the side trying to stretch out his neck. It was late and he wanted to go home. He was happy enough that Gibbs and his team had found the evidence to clear DiNozzo of a murder charge, but it didn't lessen the paperwork Tobias had to do to close out their brief investigation into the supposed homicide of a legless Jane Doe.

He'd sent Sacks home after NCIS had found the torso of the supposed crime victim—in reality the victim of a car accident. Not because he didn't need the help to close out the investigation, but he was damn tired of the bitching about DiNozzo. Yeah, DiNozzo was a pain the ass, but why would Sacks expect the man to be cooperative when he was being framed for murder?

The harmonica DiNozzo had handed off to him as he was released from holding caught his attention, and he found himself smiling. He had a soft spot for the irreverent, pain-in-the-butt NCIS agent, and he truly was happy they hadn't had to take the investigation any further. He decided the paperwork was a small price to pay considering the good outcome.

A tap at his door interrupted his thoughts and he looked up to find the head of forensics in the doorway. "Agent Fornell, I need a minute."

"It's late, Anderson, can it wait? You should head home and get started on your weekend."

"It's about the investigation into Agent DiNozzo."

Tobias shook his head. "There's no investigation; check your email. NCIS found the body of the victim. She died in a car accident. Whole thing was an elaborate frame job."

"I received that email. This is... something else," the man hedged, looking uncharacteristically anxious.

Leaning back, he tossed his pen on the desk, and gestured to the visitor's chair. "What's on your mind?"

Anderson took the seat, a sheaf of papers clutched in his hands. "As per procedure with the Jane Doe, in addition to running her DNA through all databases, we ran a familial DNA search to cover all possible avenues in the hopes of getting an identification."

"Did you get an ID on the Jane Doe?" Fornell asked, wondering if he was going to have more work to do passing things back to DC Metro.

“No, it’s not related to the Jane Doe. But there was a small mistake made. It’s not something I would typically bring to your attention, because it wouldn’t normally be an issue...” the man trailed off.

When it didn’t seem like he was going to continue, Fornell prompted, “What’s going on? What kind of mistake?”

“Agent DiNozzo’s DNA was sent through for a familial search as well, which should not have happened since his identity was never in question. It was a simple error. We ran the DNA of both blood samples.”

Fornell frowned. The cost of a search wasn’t worth this kind of drama, so there must have been something unexpected. “What was the hit?”

Anderson swallowed as he passed over the printouts. “I remember this case,” he said lowly.

A little afraid of what he was going to find, Tobias began to review the forensic report. “Oh, fucking hell,” he whispered when he saw the names of the familial DNA matches. Who didn’t remember the case?

Jonathan Sheppard had founded Sheppard Industries in the fifties and turned it into a multimillion dollar business by the mid-sixties—so it had been national news when his three-day-old grandson, his third grandchild from his only son Patrick, had vanished from the hospital. The FBI had immediately been called in, but there had never been even a hint of progress on the case in over thirty-two years. Until now.

Fornell looked up at Anderson. “You sure about the match?”

“Positive,” Anderson said firmly. “With both parents’ DNA, there’s no doubt that Patrick and Emma Sheppard are Anthony DiNozzo’s biological parents. The father had an old hair sample from the child, so there is a mitochondrial DNA profile for the Sheppard baby that was added to the missing persons’ database a couple years ago. It will take a couple days to get mitochondrial verification for DiNozzo since that has to be sent out, but there really is no question about the match.”

Tobias’ brain was spinning madly, trying to decide on the next course of action. He quickly pulled up DiNozzo’s info from his booking: date of birth was 9 June 1973. He flipped through the limited info Anderson had provided. The Sheppard baby was born on 12 June 1973. Whoever had taken baby-Sheppard, clearly a newborn, had just fudged the date of his birth by a few days.

“Did you tell anyone about this?” he asked sharply.

“No. Everyone else had gone home when the match came in. I sealed it immediately, but protocol dictates that I inform the head of *this* unit. He’s not here and you are. Plus, you know the... victim.”

Tobias rubbed his forehead, feeling a migraine and an extra long night coming on. “Just let me handle it. Go ahead and go home. I’ll let the SAC know and take care of reopening the case.”

Anderson nodded. “I did some quick checking. Sheppard Industries headquarters is in Virginia, and Patrick Sheppard appears to actually be in town. Here’s his office number.” He passed over a Post-it.

Tobias took the sticky paper, feeling like he was about to be bit by it. Patrick Sheppard had taken over Sheppard Industries after the death of his father in the early eighties. The company now had major contracts with the Department of Defense, and was based out of Crystal City, Virginia. He didn’t know much beyond that, but that was more than enough.

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Patrick accepted the glass of Scotch from George and leaned back in the chair. He had to appear before the IOA oversight committee on Monday and had spent most of the afternoon and into the evening in preparation with General Hammond.

“There are a few on the committee who have a vested interest in your predecessor,” George offered. “They’re going to pick apart anything you say, but there’s no doubt most of the committee will see that the BC-304 program was only back on track because we brought in Sheppard Industries.”

Patrick nodded and stared moodily into his Scotch, his thoughts not really on the committee review. Being brought in to build spaceships, *real spaceships*, had been a highlight of Patrick’s career. The original contractor had consistently been over-budget and behind schedule, and the SGC had to source someone else to finish the *Daedalus*.

However, finding out that his oldest son had left on a possible one-way trip with a high probability of fatality, and hadn’t even made an attempt at contact before he left, had cast a pall over everything. Patrick and David had managed the schedule on the *Daedalus* with an iron fist to make sure that ship was ready in time to launch to go to the aid of the Atlantis expedition. When the expedition had finally been able to make contact, it had become even more urgent to get the *Daedalus* ready. The ship had launched last night, and now it was just a waiting game to hear if his oldest was still alive. He supposed he should be grateful for the bureaucracy keeping him occupied while he waited for news.

“There’s no reason to believe that John is not still in good health,” George said with obvious care. They’d become something like friends over the last few months, and Hammond had been the one to deliver the news of John’s assignment.

Patrick nodded, the brief words of John’s video message rattling around in his head.

*‘My only regret is leaving things between us as they were. I’m sorry, Dad.’*

Sighing, he took a sip of his Scotch. “I always tried too hard to keep John close, and he was always trying just as hard to get away. I just never could have expected he’d go quite that far.” He shook his head, trying to push away the maudlin thoughts.

“How are your other boys?”

He huffed a little. “David is hard to read, but his attention has been absolute since we found out John was out there. His primary focus is on running JADEM Aeronautics, and, in theory, that leaves the rest of SI to me.”

“In theory?” George prompted.

“Since you told me about John, I’ve given JADEM everything I have; I had to be sure the *Daedalus* was ready on schedule. My COO for Sheppard Industries has taken the lion share of the day-to-day for SI.” Patrick sighed. “As for Matt... I think he’s angry, but he’s avoiding me under the guise of designing engines.”

“He’s quite the skilled engineer,” George offered.

Patrick inclined his head. Matt was a *brilliant* engineer and had been like a kid in a candy store when he found out he’d be working on spaceships. Then he’d found out about John and just seemed to shut down. His work was always exceptional, but Patrick hadn’t been successful at getting much else out of him for weeks now.

“While I was in Nevada last week, I barely got the boys to sit down for an hour for Thanksgiving dinner. They were working every day, and both have quarters on base if needed.” It was easier for Patrick to go to them than ask them to come home when every moment working on the *Daedalus* had been precious. With a sigh, he forced the thoughts of his fracturing family aside, and gave George an assessing look. “I know you didn’t ask me to stay to ask about the boys. So what’s going on?”

Hammond nodded and smiled faintly. “I wanted to personally let you know that I’m retiring. I’ll be working on transition with my replacement for the next six weeks.”

Blowing out a breath, Patrick took that in. George Hammond had been singularly easy to work with, and he hoped his successor would be at least tolerable. "I can't say I'm not going to miss having you around, George, but I wish you well. I have no small amount of envy." Patrick had considered retiring early a time or two, but, all things considered, he knew he wasn't ready. "Are you able to say who will be replacing you, or will it be disclosed later?"

"Jack O'Neill," George said succinctly.

Patrick froze and blinked repeatedly. He'd met O'Neill a few times. "Really?" It was an odd fit for O'Neill in Patrick's opinion. And he was willing to admit that he was occasionally irrationally angry at O'Neill for sending John to the ass end of space.

"I can't say that he's enthusiastic about it, but he recognizes the importance of someone who has practical experience with the SGC being in charge of Homeworld Security. No doubt he'll chafe at all the desk work, but I think he'll do well. He always has."

"Well, at least he won't be obstructionist," Patrick murmured as his cell phone vibrated sharply in his suit coat pocket. He set down his Scotch and quickly perused his messages. The text was from his secretary, who should have long been away from the office by now. He frowned as he re-read the limited information.

"Everything all right?" George asked.

"The FBI urgently wants to speak with me." What in the world could that be about? It wasn't uncommon for law enforcement agencies to request information for various reasons, but they usually didn't go straight to Patrick, and certainly not late on a Friday evening.

"I can give you a few minutes' privacy," George offered politely, starting to get to his feet.

Patrick waved George back. "I'll just point them at my General Counsel for whatever it is they're trying to obtain. It'll take just a moment." He quickly dialed the number he'd been given.

"Fitzgerald," a man answered tersely.

"This is Patrick Sheppard."

*"Dr. Sheppard, thank you for returning the call. I'm the Assistant Director of the Criminal Investigative Division."*

That wasn't at all what Patrick expected. "Whatever the issue, you're going to need to talk SI's General Counsel, so I'm afraid I won't be able to help you."

*"Sir, this is not in regards to Sheppard Industries."*

"All right. I'm listening." He couldn't imagine what the FBI wanted with him personally, but he'd give the man a few minutes before sending him to the family lawyer.

*"Perhaps we could meet in person?"*

"Perhaps not, Assistant Director Fitzgerald. You can contact my family's law firm for whatever it is that you need. If you have a pen, I'll give you the number."

There was a faint sound of frustration. *"Sir, in the course of an investigation, a positive familial DNA match was made against you and your late wife. Based on the age of the man in question, the FBI is confident this is your son, Alexander Sheppard."*

The phone almost slipped out of his grasp, but he tightened his hand, hearing the plastic and metal creak. He couldn't seem to draw a breath, and it felt like his life was suddenly tied to that phone.

*"We are running a mitochondrial DNA profile against the profile from the baby hairs you provided, and should have that in a few days."*

"Is there any doubt about the match?" Patrick managed to get out.

*"No, sir. With just a paternal sample, the match would be 97%, but since you were able to add your late wife's profile, the match is conclusive. He is your son."*

Alex.

They'd found Alex. After thirty-two years, his son had been found.

"Sir?" Fitzgerald prompted after the long silence.

"Where is he?" Patrick managed.

*"We released him several hours ago."*

"Released him? Is he in trouble?" Patrick didn't care, he just needed to know if he should get his son a lawyer.

*"No, not anymore. It was... well, it's rather complicated."*

"Uncomplicate it!" Patrick nearly yelled, aware that he was dangerously close to losing control of himself.

*"Your son is a federal agent, and in the course of his career, he's made a few enemies. Someone framed him for murder, and he was detained by the Bureau while the crime was investigated. But he was cleared and released."*

Patrick couldn't really absorb the details about what his son did or what had happened. "Is he in danger?"

*"Not as far as we know,"* Fitzgerald said carefully.

"He works for you?"

*"No. He's with NCIS. That stands for—"*

"I know what it stands for," Patrick snapped. "Where?"

*"Where?"*

"What NCIS office?" Patrick gritted out, praying for patience.

*"The Navy Yard,"* Fitzgerald replied.

"Are you telling me my son is ten minutes away from me right now?"

*"Yes, sir. An agent was dispatched to apprise him of the situation. As of approximately thirty minutes ago, he was still at the office."*

"I'm on my way."

*"Wait! We would like you to—"*

Patrick hung up the phone and got to his feet, feeling completely off kilter. All he could think about was getting to his son. He was flashing back on that awful moment of finding out that Alex was missing: Emma's sobs, his father's rage and grief, and John and David's confusion. Then there were weeks, months, and years of fruitless searching. Finally, the desolation of giving up.

George took him by the arm, and started leading him out of the large office. "I'll drive you. Is it David or Matt?"

"Alex," Patrick said shakily.

George flashed him a stunned look. "You definitely shouldn't drive. Come on."

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For all that he was relieved and grateful to no longer be facing a murder charge, Tony was also incredibly tired and just wanted to go home. He was so *over* this week. Ziva and McGee were taking care of booking Chippers, Ducky was giving Abby a check to make sure she hadn't gotten hurt in her tussle with her would-be attacker, Gibbs was working on his report, and Tony was not involved. As Chip's intended victim, he had to stay away from anything related to the case if they wanted a clean case for the DA. So he was going home, having something to eat, and sleeping until fucking Monday. If he was lucky, he wouldn't dream about disembodied legs or dying of old age in a jail cell.

He had just grabbed his backpack when he heard the elevator ding. He looked up just as Fornell exited and headed right for Tony, his expression serious.

"No," Tony said immediately. "Just no. I don't care if you found a severed hand with my business card clutched in its rigor'd grip with the words 'Tony did it' scratched on the back. You'll have to wait until Monday."

Gibbs came out from behind his desk, meeting Fornell right in front of Tony. "Tobias?"

To Tony's surprise, Fornell ignored Gibbs. "I need to speak with you privately, DiNozzo."

Tony shook his head. "No. I'm done and I'm going home." He hefted his backpack up and went to move around Fornell.

"I'll take you into protective custody if I have to," Fornell said in a tone that was almost *gentle*.

That brought Tony up short. "What the hell for?"

"Tobias, what's going on?" Gibbs asked, stepping between him and Fornell.

"It's private. I need to speak to DiNozzo urgently. I don't want to have to detain him, but I will if he won't give me fifteen minutes."

Tony went back behind his desk and dropped his bag. Flopping into his chair, he spread his arms wide. "All right. Here I am. Who died?"

"Privately, DiNozzo," Fornell stressed. "I don't think you want to have this discussion in the bullpen."

Tony was beginning to feel a little worried. The last few days had been more than enough to bring him close to his limit, and he was pretty damn sure he didn't need whatever this was heaped on top. He got to his feet just as Ziva and McGee rounded the corner from dealing with Chip.

Ziva took in the situation quickly. "Another person has framed you for murder already? I told you no one liked you." McGee snickered.

Before Tony could say anything, Gibbs snapped, "Hey!"

"Sorry, Boss."

"Sorry, Gibbs."

It wasn't lost on Tony that they'd apologized to Gibbs and not to him. He had mixed feelings about his teammates at the moment. They'd both really pulled it out for him to solve the case and keep him from being tried for murder, but they'd picked some shitty times to get their jabs in over the course of the last couple days.

"The two of you go home," Gibbs ordered. "This has nothing to do with you. Tony, you're with us."

Getting to his feet again, he followed Gibbs as he led them to a small conference room. As soon as they were inside, Fornell gave Gibbs an implacable look. "This is personal, Jethro. I need to speak with DiNozzo alone."

What the *fuck* was going on? "Gibbs can stay," Tony interjected, not prepared to go this alone.

Fornell nodded. "All right. But if you decide you want him to leave at any point, you just say so and he's gone. He's got no authority here."

"What the hell, Tobias?" Gibbs asked incredulously.

"This isn't about you, Jethro. If DiNozzo wants you gone, you're gone. I asked someone else to come up to help explain some things... let me just tell him where we are." He sent off a quick text, and Tony exchanged bemused looks with Gibbs.

"Can't you just tell me what is going on?" Tony finally asked, feeling the weight of the last few days settle on him like lead.

"Just give it a minute. I'd prefer someone you trust explain the science of this to you."

Tony's brow furrowed. "The science of *what*? And who is this person?"

The conference room door opened, and Ducky stepped in. Last Tony had heard, Ducky was going to finish checking Abby over and then go home.

"Ducky? What's going on?" Tony asked.

"I'm not sure, my dear boy. Agent Fornell asked if I would wait for him to arrive so I could explain some information he has to you."

Fornell needed Ducky to explain something? *Ducky*? "Oh my god. Did you find some horrible disease or something? Is the plague back?"

"DiNozzo," Gibbs said sharply, yet somehow it was also gentle.

"Right, Boss." Tony cracked his neck, trying to get his bearings. "Hit me with it, Fornell."

"This is actually Ms. Sciuto's area, but I know Dr. Mallard can explain as well as she can, and he's less... *excitable*." Fornell blew out a breath and seemed to be trying to figure out what to say. "Do you want Dr. Mallard here for the entire explanation? I can ask him to step into the hall until we need his expertise."

"Ducky can stay," Tony said getting a little exasperated with the super-confidential tap dance going on.

Fornell nodded. "All right, then. Tell me, are you familiar with familial DNA searches?"

"Of course I am, Fornell," Tony retorted with no small amount of annoyance. "I didn't fall off the forensics cabbage truck yesterday."

Ignoring the comment, Fornell continued. "When FBI investigates a case with a John or Jane Doe, if the initial CODIS search is negative, we'll often run a familial search. Such was the case with the severed legs."

"Don't tell me you got a hit," Tony retorted. "There's no way Abby would have missed running a familial search. She didn't get a hit until she went to the bone marrow donor registry."

"No. Not on the Jane Doe. Our lab sent both yours and Jane Doe's through for familial search. It was an error that the run was even requested, something that would never have been noticed under normal circumstances, except that it came back with a match. Against *your* DNA."

"What?" That didn't even make sense. "How could that— Wait. In what context?"

"Missing persons' database. It's a thirty-two-year-old cold case. Child abduction."

Tony blinked, his mind oddly resistant to putting the pieces together. Gibbs' hand settled on Tony's forearm, grounding him and allowing his brain to get started again. "Are you saying you think I'm this missing kid?" It sounded so ridiculous Tony could barely get the words out.

"I *know* you are. Our lab ran the tests twice. The exemplar gives a match to your DNA profile, and that profile is a 99.92% match to the combined parental profile. We're sending out for a

mitochondrial DNA run to check against the child's hairs, but that will take a few days, and no one has any doubt that this result is accurate."

Tony could only stare. He wasn't Anthony and Claire DiNozzo's kid; he was adopted. Hell, that wasn't even true. There's no way he was legally adopted if he'd been abducted.

*Abducted.*

The word just rattled around in his brain like it didn't belong there. What the hell was he supposed to do with this?

"Tony? Hey... look at me, Tony," Gibbs ordered. He shifted his gaze to Gibbs and registered the concern. "Take a couple deep breaths."

Tony followed orders and belatedly realized he must have been breathing funny, because he felt less drifty for just breathing. "This can't be happening, Boss," he finally whispered.

Gibbs' expression softened briefly. "Stay focused on the problem. We'll figure the rest out later. All right?"

"Yeah... yeah. I got it." The implied offer of support helped. He looked over to find Ducky reviewing some papers Fornell had handed off.

"Ducky?" he prompted, wanting the opinion of someone he trusted more than Fornell.

Ducky looked up, his expression rather saddened. "I'm afraid these results are quite conclusive. You are the missing child of these poor people, Anthony."

"Oh, hell," he said softly on breath. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he tried to get his thoughts in order. "So whose kid am I?"

"I'm rather afraid that piece of information has been redacted from these reports," Ducky replied as he showed a piece of paper with several heavy black lines.

Tony's brows shot up. "Why?"

"That was just a precaution in case you didn't want anyone to know," Fornell replied.

He felt like he was about to step off a precipice, but he had no choice but to take that step. "I know Ducky and Gibbs will keep it quiet, so... who?"

Fornell actually looked uncomfortable. "Your mother died a long time ago. When familial DNA search capabilities were added, your father had her exhumed in an attempt to get viable DNA."

Fornell hesitated. "He was one of the first entries in the database. He's never stopped hoping he'd find you."

Tony didn't know how to respond to that. This man he didn't know was more invested in Tony than the man who raised him. It all felt incredibly weird and not a little uncomfortable. "Just tell me their names."

Fornell was quiet for a long time, then finally replied, "Emma and Patrick Sheppard."

"I'm sorry... what?" Tony asked his mind going blank.

"Are you referring to Dr. Patrick Sheppard of Sheppard Industries?" Ducky asked immediately.

"That's the one," Fornell confirmed.

"Tony's the lost Sheppard baby?" Gibbs asked incredulously.

"No..." Tony shook his head. "That's not possible. This is completely crazy."

"The Bureau wants to keep this under wraps for as long as possible, but it *will* get out, and it will be a media circus."

Tony was numb. He couldn't even react. How could he even have a reasonable reaction to *that* news. The Sheppard baby kidnapping was one of the most famous child abductions in modern history.

"We plan to move on this quickly and go interview your— I mean, we'll interview Anthony DiNozzo this weekend," Fornell finished haltingly.

"I'm going," Tony said with conviction. It was easier to focus on the tactical situation than think about what any of this could mean for him.

"No, you're not," three voices said in unison.

"Oh, I so am," he bit out. "You think he's going to admit anything to you? No. You don't know my—" He broke off and took a breath. "You don't know Senior. He's a practiced conman, and you won't get anything out of him. But he will talk to me."

Fornell looked uncertain. "I'll think about it. But I have to talk to my AD first and get his okay."

"Well, you tell him he can approve me going with you, or you can find me in New York doing it anyway." There was no one getting between him and confronting Senior. Who wasn't really 'Senior' of anything. Tony took a steadying breath. "Unless there's something else you need to tell me, I need to get out of here. I'm tired, and totally at my limit."

“That’s fine. We’ll—”

A knock at the door interrupted whatever Fornell was going to say. Ziva stuck her head in and said, “There are two men looking for Agent Fornell.”

With a look of consternation, Fornell left the room at speed. Ziva glanced around, smirking Tony’s direction. “What did you do now, Tony?”

His hands clenched on the table.

“Thought I told you to go home, Ziver,” Gibbs ground out.

She looked startled. “We were waiting to see if everything was all right with Tony.”

“It was an *order*. And you’ll stay out of this situation with Tony. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Gibbs.”

“Go!”

She left, and Tony got to his feet and went to the window. He stared out into the dark, the lights of the Navy Yard, and across the river into Anacostia keeping his attention. He could sense Gibbs come up behind him. “Tony—”

“DiNozzo,” Fornell interrupted, “I’m sorry to spring this on you, but Patrick Sheppard is here.”

Tony whipped around and smacked into Gibbs, who steadied Tony with a hand on his arm. Before he could get a word out, a tall man who Tony immediately recognized stepped in behind Fornell. His gaze snapped to Tony immediately and he looked so torn up that it made Tony’s breath catch.

“Oh god,” Sheppard breathed.

“We’ll give you a moment,” Fornell said stiltedly. Ducky quickly left, shooting Tony a supportive look as he passed. Gibbs seemed conflicted for some reason, but gave Tony a concerned glance then moved away, leaving Tony feeling vulnerable and bereft.

A moment later, the door closed, and Tony was alone with... his father.

The man took a few hesitant steps nearer, closing the distance between them. “You look like your mother. You and John and Matt all have her eyes,” he said as his gaze took in every inch of Tony’s face.

Brothers.

Fuck.

Tony's hands curled into fists and he tried to figure out what to say. "I have two brothers?" he finally got out.

"Three. John, then David, you, and finally Matthew."

He didn't know what to say to that. He'd always been alone, and now he had an instant family complete with three siblings. "This doesn't feel... real. I don't have any idea what to say." Tony was never at a loss for words, but now he was floundering.

"You don't have to say anything." Sheppard stepped closer so they were only a couple feet apart. "I never thought I'd find you, but I never stopped hoping. Never stopped praying that you were alive and safe somewhere."

Tony was completely frozen as the older man moved a few inches closer and shakily reached out. He didn't try to stop him or move away from the hand that tentatively landed on his shoulder then moved up to cup his face.

Patrick Sheppard's eyes filled with tears. "My perfect son... I've missed you so much."

He felt his throat get tight, and he didn't know how to respond. "What was my name?" he found himself asking haltingly.

"Alex. We named you Alexander James Sheppard." Abruptly, Patrick pulled Tony into a hug, holding on tightly. Though it felt incredibly weird and awkward to him, Tony surrendered to letting his *father* hold him. "I'm so relieved that you've been returned to me," Patrick whispered.

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David pulled up in front of the house feeling more relaxed than he had in some time. He always worked hard, but he knew he'd been driving himself beyond his limits lately. Once the *Daedalus* had been completed, the exhaustion had come crashing down on him. Though he almost never took vacation days, he immediately scheduled a couple days off. After a day of sleep, he'd woken up this morning and impulsively decided to go hiking. Backpacking and hiking were passions of his, and he hadn't had time for them in longer than he could remember.

Now it was late, he was covered in dirt and grime, and was the really good kind of tired. He'd even managed to not obsess about John while trekking through the desert.

He noted that Matt's car was gone, which wasn't really a surprise. Matt's idea of downtime lately was hanging out with the Asgard and talking engine schematics. Although, he kind of

hoped Matt was actually out getting laid or something. Like everyone else, Matt had been working way too much lately.

His father was still in DC preparing for the IOA committee review. Dave felt he should probably be present for that, but his dad had encouraged him to stay in Nevada and take a few days of downtime. Considering how much better he felt, he couldn't say he regretted the decision.

After punching in the security code, he dropped his gear in one corner of the entryway—he'd deal with it later. The housekeeper wouldn't mess with it—everyone knew Dave was very particular about his equipment. Right now, he just wanted a shower.

Thirty minutes later, he was clean and feeling the effects of the long hike in the form of a familiar soreness in his legs. Grabbing a beer, he went to his desk to check email. He wanted to be sure nothing had come up while he was gone, though his phone was free of any urgent texts.

He wound up getting easily pulled into work, and was halfway through his management team's weekly reports when his cell phone rang. The display read, *'Dad'*. It was after one in the morning in DC, so why was his dad calling?

"Dad?" he answered quickly. "Is everything all right?"

*"David..."* his father's voice trailed off, and caused David a spike of worry. *"Is Matt home?"*

"No, not yet. I had an email from him a couple hours ago saying that he was still working on his new design and would be home late. What's going on?"

*"I... hell, David, I'm not even sure how to say it."*

"Dad, what's wrong?"

*"We found Alex,"* his father said simply.

Dave's stomach tightened into knots and he felt an old dread rise up in him. "I thought we were past this. We agreed no more people claiming to be your son. I can't deal with it anymore, Dad." It had been nearly a decade since his father had entertained someone's claim about being his lost son, and David thought those days were truly behind them. He hated how it stirred up old hurts just to always wind up being nothing. When DNA testing became more widely available, he thought this crap would stop. He couldn't keep being pulled apart because some asshole wanted the Sheppard family money. And right now, with everything going on with John, it was just too much.

*"The FBI found him, David. The DNA match was conclusive."* His father's voice sounded somewhat tremulous.

The forgotten bottle slipped out of Dave's hand and began spilling beer all over the floor. "What?" he croaked out.

*"It was a fluke. His DNA was run by accident. Christ, David, he lives less than fifteen miles from the house."*

"I don't... I don't understand," he managed to get out. His brain wasn't even processing in the most minimal of ways.

*"David, take a couple deep breaths. This is happening. It's real... I promise."*

"Hold on a sec." He set the phone down and did as instructed, trying to get his thoughts in some kind of coherent order. His memories of Alex were extremely hazy as to be almost non-existent. He was only two when Alex was born, and all he remembered was a vague image of sitting next to his mother in the hospital bed and being *helped* to hold the new baby. Alex had vanished the very next day.

He pulled his t-shirt off and dropped it over the spilled beer then picked up the phone again. "All right, tell me what happened."

*"First, check your email."*

A couple clicks and he was pulling up an entry on the Ohio State Alumni webpage. His breath caught in his throat. "Oh my god, he looks like mom." His eyes started to sting and he rubbed at them furiously. "How?" Alex was living under the name Tony DiNozzo. And fuck it all if Dave didn't remember Alex being in the Final Four when Dave was in grad school.

*"He became a cop and then a federal agent—he's with NCIS. Some enemy he made when he was a cop in Baltimore framed him for murder, and he was in FBI custody. They accidentally ran his DNA for a familial search instead of the supposed victim."*

"Is he in trouble?"

*"No. He was cleared, and the guy who set it up was arrested."*

"Jesus, Dad..." What amounted to a wrong click of a mouse had found his brother. "Have you met him?"

*"He's asleep in one of the guest rooms."*

“Really?” Dave was oddly stunned by that. He’d talked to his father before he set out this morning, and now he had his long lost brother in the guest room.

*“I’m not even sure it’s what he wanted. I can tell he’s feeling lost and more than a little bewildered, but I couldn’t imagine being parted from him after just finding him. I think it was simply compassion for me when he agreed to come here. And after the week he’s had, he just fell into bed and was out like a light.”*

“And yet you’re already talking about his college days?” he asked, finding it odd that Alex’s alma mater would have been discussed in the midst of all that.

“Well...”

“Dad,” Dave said on a sigh, “what did you do?”

*“After he fell asleep, I called Max and had him run a thorough background check.”*

“Dad!”

*“I’m not trying to spy on him or anything, David. I just want to know everything about him—where he’s been, what he’s done—and I don’t want to overwhelm him with questions when he just had his world turned upside down. I needed to know.”*

“All right, I get it. Look, I need to arrange for the jet to be ready in the morning. Matt and I will be there as soon as we can.”

*“You might want to wait until Sunday.”*

“What?” Dave asked incredulously. How could his father ask that?

*“The FBI wants to get a jump on the investigation before word gets out that your brother was found. You know this is going to be a media nightmare. They want to move on this DiNozzo person first thing tomorrow.”*

“What does that have to do with Matt and me coming home?” he demanded.

*“Alex insisted on wearing a wire and going in to get the information himself. And where he goes, I go. We’re leaving for New York in a little over four hours.”*

“That seems like a terrible idea,” Dave said, anxiety making his stomach flip over. “I don’t...”

*“I know, David. We’re reacting like he could vanish again at any moment, and he’s just doing what he does every day.”*

Dave rubbed at his eyes again. "You know I already hate that he's in law enforcement."

*"Yeah, I know. Believe me, I know."*

"I can maybe be patient, but you know Matt won't be."

His dad sighed. *"Just do your best to corral your brother. If you arrive before we get back from New York, it won't be the worst thing."*

"Yeah, I'll do my best." Though, really, there was no corralling Mattie when he didn't want to be corralled. He seemed even-tempered at first glance, but Mattie had a stubborn streak bigger than John's, and that was saying something.

He talked to his dad for a couple more minutes then hung up. Briefly, he considered not telling Matt until tomorrow, but he knew his brother too well, and Matt would be furious for an age if Dave left him out of the loop.

After pressing Matt's speed dial, he waited for his brother to pick up. Matt was sometimes hard to reach these days, and if he didn't answer his phone, Dave would be off the hook for explaining things tonight.

He answered on the fifth ring. *"What's up, Dave?"* he asked, sounding distracted.

"I need you to come home, Matt."

*"Everything okay? 'Cause I'm kind of right in the middle of something."*

"Engine?" Dave guessed.

*"Propulsion system."*

"Matt, listen, there's always going to be a project pulling your attention. You need to come home. I have to talk to you."

Matt made a little frustrated sound but muttered, *"Yeah, okay. Give me a minute."* Then he hung up.

Dave wasn't looking forward to this at all. For each of them, the loss of Alex had affected them in different ways. He, John, and Matt grew up with extremely over-protective parents. Dad and John fought hugely when John wanted to join the Air Force, because Dad didn't want one of his sons in the military, taking the huge risks that went along with it. And for all that John had always chafed at Dad's hovering, it hadn't stopped him from hovering over Mattie. Actually, all of them hovered over Matt, who had been born three years after Alex's disappearance. By the time Matt was old enough to understand about Alex, Dave had expected resentment, but Matt

had instead taken the loss of his third older brother really hard, and had struggled with it just as much as any of them over the years.

Needing a distraction, he decided to get on with cleaning the spilled beer before Matt got home.

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Matt shut the car off and grabbed the pile of schematics he planned to work on over the weekend. With Dad back home in Virginia, he didn't have any reason to avoid the house. He had his own condo in DC, but when they'd taken the gig at Area 51, his father had suggested they all share a house. At the time, it had seemed like a fine idea. Until he'd found out about John.

He was furious with John on a level he couldn't even articulate. And since the big reveal, Dad was always trying to *talk* to him. So Matt had started avoiding the house. He was used to his father and brothers pushing his boundaries, they were all ridiculous when it came to trying to protect him, but he wasn't ready to talk about John.

Finding out John had left without saying goodbye to him had filled Matt with an incredible sense of betrayal. In all the fights between John and Dad, Matt had always tried to be there for John, to try to get Dad to understand John's point of view. Matt had always been on John's side, and defended him even when it didn't seem rational. Dave was more inclined to agree with Dad or just stay out of it. But Matt *understood* how stifling being in this family could be. He'd never doubted for a minute that his parents loved him, but the loss of Alex had changed them in ways that were sometimes tough to take.

So for John to go on a mission he knew he might not come back from, and not say a damn word, hurt Matt like nothing he'd experienced since he lost his mother. It was at times like these that he really missed her—she'd died when Matt was only seven, but he'd always been able to tell her his secrets. In his distorted childish memories, she always knew the perfect thing to say or do to make him feel better. And he was pretty damn sure she'd kick John's ass for taking off that way.

He stared at the front door and really hoped this conversation wasn't about John. Matt had found his dream job at twenty-nine, and all he could think about every day was getting John back. As mad as he was, he'd do anything to see John safely home—he just didn't want to talk about it.

Steeling himself, he went inside and found Dave sitting on a barstool in the kitchen, picking at a fruit salad. Of all of them, Dave was the most conscientious eater, but even so, Matt couldn't imagine a big bowl of fruit for a late-night snack.

“All right, what’s going on?” Matt asked, dropping his files and papers on the island.

Dave pointed at a barstool. “You’ll want to be sitting down.”

Matt’s brow furrowed. “Dad okay?”

“Yeah, Mattie. Everyone’s okay. Just sit.”

Feeling alarmed, Matt decided not to be a pain in the ass and took the seat. “You’re freaking me out, Dave.”

“I’ve got something to tell you, and you can’t go off half-cocked,” Dave said with a stern look.

“No promises. You know me too well to believe it anyway. Just tell me whatever the hell has got you so wound up.”

Dave huffed in obvious annoyance. “What I’m gonna tell you has been verified, okay? This is not a hoax, or a scam; it’s straight from the FBI.”

“Oh, like that’s not worrying. What the hell?” Dave shot him a glare and Matt subsided, making an impatient gesture.

“The FBI located Alex.”

Matt stared at his brother. He knew all those words individually, but he couldn’t make sense of them when put together. For several long beats he tried to get his brain working. “What?” he whispered.

“He’s an NCIS agent living in DC. He’s with Dad now.” When Matt didn’t reply, Dave prompted, “Mattie?”

His name finally got him moving. “I’ll pack my bag,” he said getting to his feet. “What time will the jet be ready?”

“Tomorrow night.”

Matt froze in his path toward the hall door then slowly turned back to Dave. “Excuse me?”

“Dad asked us to wait.”

“What the hell, David! This is not just about Dad!” Alex was *all* of them. Every damn day for Matt’s entire life.

“I know, Matt. But do you want to hear the whole story, or do you just want to get angry?”

“Fuck you,” Matt said irritably as he slid back onto the barstool. “I hate it when you’re all rational and shit.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “All right. Go.”

Dave ran through everything he knew about the situation in DC, and Matt found himself making a face. “I don’t want him to go,” he finally said.

“I know, Mattie. But, like Dad pointed out, he does this for a living.”

“I’m not happy about that either,” Matt retorted, and he knew he was being petulant.

“Welcome to the club, kiddo.”

“Fuck!” Matt growled with frustration. “I won’t get on the plane tonight, but we’re leaving in the morning, and we’re going to be there when they get back from New York.”

“Matt...”

“No, David! I’m going home in the morning to meet my brother. You can come with or I’ll ask the Asgard to beam me back.”

Dave gave him an exasperated look. “You know you can’t do that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m awesome and the Asgard love me, so you can compromise, or I’ll get home my own way.”

The glare would have probably worked on anyone who hadn’t been coddled by David their entire life. Finally, Dave threw up his hands. “I don’t know why I even bother.”

“Me either,” Matt replied tartly.

Dave just shook his head and got to his feet. “Come on, baby brother, I want to show you something.”

Matt readily followed Dave up to his office, taking note of the scent of hops in the air. “Why does it smell like beer in here?”

“Just sit down,” Dave grouched, pointing at the desk chair.

“Okay. Sitting.”

Dave leaned over his shoulder and grabbed the mouse, bringing up a webpage. “That’s Alex.”

Matt bit his lip, suddenly overwhelmed. He was having a hard time seeing all of a sudden, but the image was firmly stuck in his brain. “How can he look that much like mom?” he whispered. “And John. He looks a lot like John, too.”

A warm hand settled on the back of Matt's neck, squeezing reassuringly. "Dad said he has mom's eyes, just like you and John." The three of them had Mom's green eyes, while David looked more like Dad with the squarer jaw and blue eyes. There'd always been something a little off in their family, for all that they were close and loved each other. Was it wrong to hope that Alex was that missing piece?

"Right now I hate you a little for not letting us beam straight home right this minute."

"Me, too, kiddo."

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## Chapter Two

Tony rolled his head from side to side, trying to work out the kinks in his neck, while they got him wired up in the back of an FBI surveillance van. He wasn't surprised that the Assistant Director of Criminal Investigations had approved Tony for this job—after all, he had the best chance of getting any information out of Senior. It was a little surprising, however, that he was sitting in the back of the van with Patrick Sheppard.

For all that Tony had been raised around money and influence, it wasn't at the level of Patrick Sheppard's, who could call the President's private cell if he so chose. And apparently that level of influence got a civilian in the surveillance van.

Fornell had managed to include Gibbs as well, and that was reassuring to Tony. He'd be going in alone, but it helped to know that Gibbs was on his six.

Last night had been beyond surreal. All Tony had wanted to do was retreat to his home and get his head together in private, but he saw the look on Patrick's face at the prospect of being separated from him so soon, and he'd caved like a cold soufflé. Tony had felt like it would be cruel to do anything but stay with him. Because for all that Tony was thrown off-kilter, he knew this had to be more difficult for the Sheppards. Or maybe Tony just wasn't dealing with it yet. He had a fucking PhD in not dealing.

"You sure you're ready for this, DiN— Tony?" Fornell asked awkwardly, highlighting the issue that Tony's legal name was not DiNozzo. It wasn't even Tony. But he sure wasn't ready to be Alex Sheppard. Still, he'd have to sort out the name legalities sooner rather than later.

"I got this, Fornell. It's not my first rodeo."

"Yeah, but this is your— the man who raised you."

Tony laughed mirthlessly. "*Right*. The man who raised me."

"Son?" Patrick asked, looking concerned.

He just shook his head, not wanting to get into it. Everyone would understand soon enough, and Tony didn't need to psych himself out. Pulling open the door to the van, he started to get out, but Patrick laid a hand on his arm. He raised a brow in inquiry.

"Please be careful."

He forced himself to smile reassuringly. "It'll be fine." He hopped out of the van, not really surprised that Gibbs was right behind him. Meeting the older man's heavy stare, he murmured, "The things you're gonna hear..."

“Don’t matter,” Gibbs interjected. “Rule 5, Tony.”

Feeling himself relax a little, he gave a short nod.

“Get going.”

“Yes, Boss.”

He jogged across the street and entered the Manhattan high-rise. DiNozzo Enterprises used to take up several floors in this building, but now were confined to a small set of offices on the seventh floor. He got in the elevator and tried not to fidget.

“*Keep it simple, Tony,*” Fornell’s voice came over his earwig.

“You need to let me be the expert on Senior,” Tony said lowly in response. “And don’t be yapping at me while I do this.” He steeled himself for the utter shit he was about to put himself through. After all these years, Tony knew how to play Senior. It just wasn’t going to be pleasant for him.

When he entered the offices, he didn’t recognize anyone, which wasn’t surprising; he hadn’t been to these offices since he was a teenager. He asked to see DiNozzo Senior and explained that he was the man’s *son*. The receptionist looked skeptical but made the call. Senior was obviously playing a power game because he made Tony wait for almost fifteen minutes before he was allowed back. As tempting as it would be to charge into Senior’s office and get pissy, that wasn’t how to play the man.

The secretary met him at the door. “Mr. DiNozzo only has a few minutes today,” she said curtly.

“I promise to be brief,” Tony responded with a smile.

She gave him a suspicious look, but opened the door and waved him inside.

Senior didn’t even look up for several long moments, just stayed focused on whatever paperwork he was reviewing. Finally, he glanced up and gave Tony a quick once over. “Junior,” he acknowledged. “You don’t seem any the worse for wear.”

“Meaning?” He noted that Senior didn’t offer to let him sit, but he felt better on his feet, so he didn’t push the issue and kept a careful distance.

Senior made a vague gesture. “They called me and said you were dying. But you don’t look like you were at death’s door.”

Though there'd been a host of minor injuries recently, there was only one time that he was at death's door. "That was six months ago. I'd either be recovered by now or dead. But I see the outcome wasn't of much concern."

Waving it away, Senior replied, "Well if you had died, I assumed they would have called again, so everything must have worked out."

"Right." Tony fought back the lifetime of hurt simmering under the surface and kept up his nonchalant demeanor. "Well, law enforcement isn't without its dangers."

"You could come to your senses at any time and come work for me. Despite your atrocious choices in educational pursuits, I'm sure I could find a way to make you an asset."

"Ringing endorsement if I ever heard one. I like what I do, and I don't regret my field of study." All Senior knew about was the sports science bachelors, and, really, nothing else was his damn business. Tony hated getting into this personal shit, but he had to play this in a way that wouldn't make the old man suspicious.

"I told you when you chose to go to Ohio State and play those foolish games that I was cutting you off until you came to your senses. If you don't like the situation you find yourself in, that's not my concern."

Tony felt annoyance rise up in him. "That's a bit of historical revisionism, don't you think? You disowned me when I was twelve. Why the hell would I factor your wishes into my educational decisions?"

Senior made a dismissive gesture. "You know I didn't mean that. I was just angry that you had created that ruckus with the police in Hawaii."

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" Tony snapped. "You forgot me! I was twelve and alone—I couldn't live in that hotel room by myself indefinitely. Someone was eventually going to figure it out!"

"I'd have remembered eventually," Senior retorted defensively. "There was a deal that needed to be taken care of first, and I'd have sent for you when I finished. But you were always weak and whiny—even when you were an infant. Sending you to military academy was to teach you a lesson about standing on your own two feet! But you wasted it and chose to play *sports*."

"And you trying to seize my educational trust from Grandpa Jasper was what? Another lesson?"

"I wasn't going to pay for you to throw balls around for four years!"

"It wasn't your money," Tony countered. "You wouldn't have been paying for anything."

"Your grandfather coddled you, but I refuse to have any son of mine playing sports, or living his life as a civil *servant*. I don't know why you're here, Junior, but until you're ready to rethink your choices, I won't have any part of it," Senior declared, looking back at his papers.

"Now, see, that's the thing... I'm not, am I?" he threw out, waiting to see how Senior responded.

"Not what?" Senior asked without looking up from his work.

"I'm not 'Junior'."

Slowly, he lifted his head. "Meaning?"

"I'm not really your son, am I?" Tony asked without any inflection.

Senior leaned back in his seat and threw the pen on the desk. "So you found out you're adopted. Did one of your mother's idiot family members tell you?"

"*Adopted?*" he asked incredulously. "Is that what you're calling it?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Senior snapped, losing a bit of his cool.

"Adoption implies something that's *legal*. We both know my *adoption* was anything but."

Senior narrowed his eyes. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm flat out *saying* that there was nothing *legal* about how I came to be in your care. What'd you do... buy me?"

"And if I had, so what? People do it all the time." He gave a dismissive wave as if illegally purchasing a baby was no big thing.

"That's true, it does happen all the time. But that doesn't exactly make it legal, now does it?"

Senior scoffed. "Do you think people like me concern ourselves with petty regulations?"

Tony had a feeling Senior was being deliberately obtuse, and he decided to go with his intuition. "Tell me why. Why buy a kid you clearly never wanted?"

"Had to have an heir. Claire's father insisted on us having a child before he'd loosen his stranglehold on her trust fund. But Claire was infertile, and those *legal* avenues were problematic."

"Because mom was a fucking lush," Tony snapped. He'd cared for Claire DiNozzo, but he wasn't blind to her faults.

"She had a drinking problem, yes, but that was no one's business but ours!"

Tony gave a mirthless laugh. "So there you are, saddled with a kid you didn't want, but what the hell... I was mom's responsibility, right? But then she died and Grandpa Jasper pulled his financial support."

Senior's face twisted into a snarl. "That old bastard blamed me for his daughter's death."

"Well, you were behind the wheel, and you were drunk."

"Bu that's not in any reports, now is it?" Senior retorted with a little smirk.

"No, it sure isn't. You bought your way out of that vehicular manslaughter charge, didn't you?" Tony said almost lightly. "Were you disappointed that my injuries were only minor? That I didn't go with her?"

"What is it that you really want, Junior? If you just came here to have an emotional bloodletting over the fact that I never cared about you, well, frankly I don't have the time."

"You think it's news that you didn't give a shit?" Tony asked incredulously.

"I think you were always whiny and needy, and clearly nothing has changed." The old bastard just had to seize any opportunity to get another barb in.

"Right. Well, I'll get out of your hair after you answer my question."

"And what question would that be?" he asked, sounding almost bored.

"Did you actually solicit my kidnapping, or did you just not want to know how I was *acquired*?"

Senior's hands twitched and his expression went blank.

"Seriously, *Dad*," Tony said mockingly, "did you know I was an abducted child and just not care? Or did you actually have someone kidnap me."

"I did not solicit any child to be abducted," Senior said carefully. "I was told a young mother didn't want the child."

"Do you think that's going to make a difference? We both know that you were fully aware that you weren't getting a baby through *volunteer* placement. You knew that I had been abducted."

Senior scoffed. "Let's say that's true. So what?"

"It's called accessory to kidnapping, and it carries the same penalties as the actual kidnapping."

“That was thirty-two years ago. There’s the statute of limitations.”

Tony decided not to enlighten Senior yet about there being no statute of limitations in Virginia for felony abduction. “You really don’t care that you took someone else’s child, do you?”

“They’re lucky they didn’t have to deal with you and your incessant whining and weakness.”

“How’d you do it?” Tony pressed.

“You think it’s difficult?” He laughed, as if it were a trivial matter to just take a child whenever you wanted one.

“How?” Tony wasn’t going to be deterred.

Senior snorted in amusement. “Why do you want to know so desperately?”

Tony knew he had to make it seem like he wanted the information for some pathetic personal reason. At least, that’s the way Senior would see it. “I want to know who was responsible for taking me from a family that might have actually cared about me.”

“You’re so weak, Junior. No one was going to care about you.”

“Who abducted me?” he demanded again.

“Why do you care?”

“I want to know!”

Senior scoffed. “You think I know the names of petty criminals? Paul took care of those details.”

“So that smarmy attorney *friend* of yours, Paul Albright, was responsible?”

“He knew people. The kind of people who could *seize* an opportunity when the moment was right.”

Something wasn’t adding up to Tony. Senior wasn’t stupid. The Sheppard baby kidnapping had been all over the papers and the news. Alex Sheppard’s birthday was the 12th of June, but Tony’s fake birth certificate said the 9th of June.

“And when did you *seize* me?”

“Don’t forget, I didn’t do any of the seizing, Junior.”

“Just answer the question,” Tony snapped.

“You don’t get to demand anything from me!”

“I want to know when you got me,” Tony persisted.

“I’ll have you removed, Junior,” Senior warned.

“Right. The police are going to do something about your *son*, the federal agent,” Tony said with a laugh.

“June 16th. We were told you were a week old, so June 9th was the date on your birth certificate.” There was something off in Senior’s tone, though.

“So, out of curiosity, what is it you had against Patrick Sheppard?”

“*DiNozzo!*” Fornell exclaimed in his ear just as Senior lunged to his feet, features twisted in anger before the affable mask was back in place.

“What are you on about, Junior?”

“I mean, it’s obvious that you must have had some kind of grudge against him. What’d he do? Turn you down for a business deal?”

Senior suddenly rounded the desk and got right in Tony’s face. “I did not know you were his son!”

Tony smirked. “I didn’t say I was his son. I just asked what you had against him. You dug your own hole on that one.”

Senior swung at him, but Tony had a lot of experience ducking Senior’s fists. Although, he had to admit that the man was usually drunk when he lashed out, so Tony didn’t turn away quite enough from the blow and got more on the jaw than he expected.

He shoved Senior back, watching the man stumble. He should just put him in cuffs, but he needed to maintain the illusion that this was between them for now. “You know that’s assaulting a federal agent, right?”

Breathing hard, Senior glared at Tony, fists clenched. Then he smirked. “You used to dodge better than that.”

Tony picked up the thread of the confrontation. “It was all over the news, wasn’t it? Every freaking newspaper—you couldn’t have missed it. And two days later, there’s a baby who looks damn close to the picture in the paper. You expect me to believe you didn’t know exactly whose kid you had?”

Senior snarled, "I didn't *know*."

"But you suspected."

"Yeah. But suspicions aren't a crime!"

Tony was sort of grateful Senior's knowledge of the penal code was so sketchy. When it came to contract law, the man was top notch, but apparently he thought he was above having to pay attention to criminal law. "Whatever you want to call it, you had strong reason to believe you had Patrick and Emma Sheppard's baby, and you kept that information to yourself."

"Why should I give a damn about that son of a bitch! Besides, he had two other sons—*decent* sons."

Cocking his head to the side, Tony asked, "Seriously, did he turn you down for a loan or something? I mean, what the fuck? What could he have done that was so awful that, in your mind, it justified keeping his *child*?"

"He wouldn't even see me!" Senior roared.

Tony huffed, not exactly surprised by the revelation. "And that is the greatest sin in your mind, isn't it? You do hate being ignored, don't you, you narcissistic old fuck."

Senior pointed at Tony. "You don't talk to me that way, Junior. You owe me some respect!"

"I owe you exactly NOTHING!" Tony yelled, feeling like he was finally starting to lose his cool and therefore his control of the situation.

Senior had just taken two steps toward Tony when the door slammed open. Gibbs, Fornell, and two other FBI agents stormed in and converged on Senior. The man started to rage, threatening lawsuits and trying to bluff his way out of it as he was handcuffed by Fornell.

Tony took a few deep breaths and tried to tune out Senior's ravings about being set up and how he would be calling his attorney.

Gibbs stepped in front of him, expression neutral, but Tony could see concern and sadness in his eyes. He gave Tony an assessing look, then turned Tony's head to the side, peering at the red area. Finally, he dropped his hand and gave Tony a faint smile. "You did good, Tony."

"Thanks, Gibbs," Tony replied, not feeling like this was a 'Boss' kind of moment. "Rule 16."

Gibbs' lips twitched. "You need to get downstairs," he said lowly so that only Tony could hear. "We barely managed to persuade Sheppard that he could hurt the case if he interfered, but I don't think they'll be able to keep him down there much longer."

Tony felt like everything was suddenly catching up to him. He really didn't want to have to face Patrick after all the shit Senior had spewed.

"Go, Tony," Gibbs prompted. "It'll be okay."

He blew out a breath, trying to get his bearings, then left the office, mentally leaving everything *DiNozzo* behind him for good.

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Filled with a helpless rage, Patrick paced the sidewalk outside the office building. Two FBI agents were guarding the door like he couldn't be trusted not to go inside. And perhaps he couldn't. He didn't want to harm the case against the man who he saw as responsible for Alex's abduction, but listening to that horrible conversation was one of the most difficult things he'd had to endure in a long time. He just wanted to take his son home and never let anything hurt him like that again. Because for all of his clear-headed command of that situation, Patrick had no doubt that Alex had been grievously wounded by *DiNozzo*.

He was mentally preparing himself to not overreact when Alex reappeared; years of fights with John and Matt, and even David to a degree, had finally taught him that being overbearing with his protectiveness just drove his sons away.

The doors to the building opened, and Patrick stopped his pacing as Alex stepped out. His son looked wary, and Patrick knew this wasn't the time to ask all the questions that were running through his mind. He moved closer and reached up to touch his son's jaw, which was clearly going to bruise in short order.

Pushing his anger aside, he just smiled and said, "I'm really proud of you."

Alex's eyes widened and he looked oddly vulnerable for a moment before all the emotions seemed to get locked away. "Sorry you had to hear all of that," he finally said.

"You never have to apologize for anything that man says or does." Patrick took a steadying breath. "Do you have to stay? Can I take you home?"

"I'll need to write a report, but it can wait until Monday," Alex replied, though he looked a little bit surprised for some reason.

"Then let's go. The driver's waiting and the jet's ready to depart whenever we arrive."

"Yeah... okay." Something about Alex's body language struck Patrick as defensive, but he couldn't quite put his finger on why that might be. Patrick was just relieved Alex was letting him take him away from this mess. Alex suddenly looked over his shoulder just as Gibbs exited the

building, as if he had some weird sixth sense about the man's presence. "Just a sec," he said absently, then turned and went over to talk to his boss.

Patrick was perfectly willing to admit he envied the way Alex looked to Gibbs. He couldn't even articulate what his son was seeking from the other man, but there was no doubt he trusted Gibbs. But envy or no, he was glad Alex had someone he felt he could rely on considering what his *adopted* father had been like.

The two had a very brief conversation, then Alex surrendered the earwig and wire he'd been wearing. When he returned, his expression was still closed off, but he seemed lighter despite no obvious outward change.

Once they were in the car and on the way to the airport, Patrick broke the silence. "I can't imagine any of that would be easy to talk about. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know everything about your childhood." Alex flinched a little. "But I won't push you. That said, if you ever want to talk, I want you to know that I'll listen."

"It's fine, you know? It could have been worse," Alex replied vaguely.

Patrick turned on the seat to more squarely face his son. "I will never stop trying to care for your hurts just because they could have been worse."

Another moment of vulnerability showed in Alex's eyes before it was closed off again. He gave a nod, but didn't say anything.

Smiling faintly, Patrick said, "I really will try not to push about your childhood, but I do have a question, if you don't mind?"

"All right," he replied cautiously.

"You almost died recently?" There was nothing easy about anything he'd heard over that wire, but that particular piece of information had been alarming. The idea that Alex could have died six months before their quirk of fate nearly undid him.

"Pneumonic plague," his son replied succinctly.

Patrick blinked several times in astonishment. "Plague?"

"It was sent in an envelope to the office. I opened it and got covered in this white powder," Alex offered neutrally, as if it were an everyday occurrence.

"I don't understand. How did they get around the irradiation of federal mail?"

Alex huffed a little, then explained the method used to get around postal irradiation. It was ingenious, but it scared him that Alex was exposed to that level of risk on a daily basis. And his son didn't seem to have much reaction to it at all.

"Pneumonic plague is certainly rarer and more difficult to treat than Bubonic," Patrick mused, wondering why Alex had nearly died. "Were they unable to find an effective antibiotic?"

"It wasn't that... the bug was bioengineered to be resistant to antibiotics."

Patrick forced himself not to react to the terror that was rising up in him. He had to remind himself that the danger was already past, but the idea of someone having to recover from plague without antibiotics was almost unthinkable. "The pneumonia must have been horrible. How are your lungs?"

Alex stared at him, then suddenly laughed.

"I think I missed the punchline," Patrick offered wryly.

His son just shook his head. "Sorry, something just struck me as strange. It's hard to explain." He looked like he was considering something, then seemed to come to some decision. "My lungs are scarred, and I have to do exercises every day to maintain the lung function I have."

Patrick's stomach twisted in knots. "Have you seen a specialist?"

"I'm fine, Patrick, there's no reason to worry, okay? But, yes. They're quite curious about my progress since there aren't many cases of pneumonic plague anymore. And not many who have survived it without antibiotics."

He reluctantly nodded, even though he wanted to spirit his kid off for medical tests right this instant.

Alex cocked his head to the side. "It's driving you up the wall isn't it?"

"What's that?"

"Having to rein in the paternal thing," Alex observed astutely.

"Yes!" Patrick took a breath, then laughed a little. "It's so difficult not to try to take you away and protect you from everything."

Nodding, Alex looked thoughtful. Finally, he said, "I need you to understand that I'm not used to this. I don't know how to react when someone asks me if my lungs are okay, or if I'm seeing the doctor. This—the whole thing—is going to take some time to get used to."

Patrick could hear the plea for patience in the words not said. He wondered if his son realized what he'd revealed. How is it that Alex could nearly die due to his work, and no one was asking how he was recovering?

"Take things at your pace. The last thing I want to do is drive you away, but I won't be able to help pushing a little sometimes. But if you tell me no, I'll respect that. Okay?"

"Yeah... yeah, that's good. Thanks."

"I should have asked before now, but what do you want me to call you?" Patrick asked cautiously.

"You think of me as *Alex*, don't you? *Tony* doesn't even register."

Patrick winced a little. "Yes. I'm sorry about that. I can't imagine how unsettling this is for you. But you look so much like Em and your brothers, I look at you and I see my Alex. But I'll do my best to respect your choice about how you'd prefer to be addressed."

Alex nodded, gaze vacant as if he were lost in thought. Clear green eyes eventually fixed on Patrick again. "Look, I don't know how to be your son. Lately, I've started thinking I don't even know how to be Tony anymore." He huffed a little and dragged his hands through his hair, causing it to stand on end, which was so like John it sort of unnerved Patrick. "The thing is, if we leave it up to me, we'll move at a glacial pace. I normally do everything I can to hide it, but I..." He trailed off and looked away. "It's hard to be close to people. I've got issues by the buttload, not the least of which is major daddy issues," he shot Patrick a speaking look, "that are now compounded almost beyond my ability to comprehend. I guess the point is, that you're gonna have to push some. Because I don't think I can."

That was all delivered in a casual manner, but Alex's tone was almost brittle. There was a sort of dissonance between the way he was acting and the words coming out of his mouth. It made Patrick infinitely sad that his son had been hurt so often.

"I can do that. But when it's too much, tell me."

He nodded shortly. "And you can call me *Alex* if it's what you want. I'm not sure how the name thing is going to shake out, but I— you calling me that is okay... fine... yeah." Shrugging one shoulder, Alex looked uncertain of himself.

"Thank you, Alex," he said sincerely. "You can call me Patrick as long as you need to, but if you ever feel comfortable, I want you to know, I'd welcome being *Dad*."

Alex shifted in his seat and cracked his neck. "Yeah... Okay."

There was one other thing he really wanted to know about, and was considering asking, when his phone vibrated. He pulled it out and sighed when he read the message. “Your brothers have arrived. They’re waiting at the house.”

“What?” Alex asking, sounding a little strangled.

“I’d hoped they’d wait for tomorrow, but I can’t say I’m truly surprised. They both really want to meet you.”

Alex stared, round-eyed and then huffed out a breath. “I guess we haven’t really had much time to talk. Other than their names, I don’t really know anything about them.”

“John’s the oldest, we named him after my father, and he’s thirty-five. In fact, his birthday is just two days after yours. I didn’t mention it before but he’s an Air Force Major on classified assignment. We have high hopes that he’ll be able to come home soon.” And that was a sticky situation. He was going to need to ask George for permission to read Alex in on the Stargate program. The idea of everyone in the family knowing but Alex being the odd man out was quite uncomfortable.

“His master’s is in applied mathematics.” Patrick pulled out his wallet and retrieved the picture of John. “Of all your brothers, I think you have the strongest resemblance to John.”

Alex’s brows went up. “Uh, yeah. Wow.”

“David is thirty-four—born on July 28th. His undergrad studies were in electrical engineering, but he chose to pursue an MBA for his post-graduate work.” He handed over the small photo of David.

“Strong family resemblance, but he looks more like you,” Alex observed. “He runs JADEM Aeronautics & Aerospace, right?”

“Correct.”

“Out of curiosity, why choose the family initials for the name?”

Patrick found himself smiling. “So few people catch that.”

Alex quirked a brow. “It’s my job to notice things.”

“Em is the one who came up with the idea for Sheppard Industries to move into aeronautics and then eventually into aerospace as well. When it came time to choose a name, I was feeling... sentimental, I suppose. And all of your initials work well together.”

“And what about Matthew? How old is he?”

He passed over the photo of his youngest. “Matthew was born on the 2nd of April in 1976, so he’s twenty-nine. He finished his master’s in mechanical engineering when he was twenty-three. He went his own way for a few years designing engines, but joined JADEM two years ago.”

Alex touched the edge of the photograph, looking oddly uncertain. “There really is a strong family resemblance with everyone.” He handed the pictures back. “I know you have a Ph.D., but not what your field of study was.”

“Chemistry. I’m afraid you got the math bug from you grandfather James—Emma’s father. Just like John. He’d have been quite proud to have his namesake follow in his footsteps.”

Alex’s head jerked up. “What?”

It took him a second to determine the source of the surprise. “I confess that I looked up some basic information about you.” He quickly held up a hand. “Not because I was looking for anything, but because I want to know about you and didn’t want you to feel overwhelmed with questions.”

“I...” He gave a short laugh. “I want to be annoyed, but considering that I’ve run background checks on every person I’ve worked closely with for the last five years *and* two of my neighbors, I guess I can’t be throwing stones.”

“You can be annoyed if you want, Alex. Checking into your coworkers isn’t exactly the same as investigating on your family.”

Alex shrugged one shoulder, looking uncomfortable. “So you know about the math degree?”

Patrick frowned. “Yes. And that you finished your master’s this summer. Was it a secret?”

“I just don’t talk about it. Not really relevant to what I do.”

“I’m not sure I understand...” Patrick trailed off.

“Look, let me explain it some other time. It’s part of a bigger story.”

“All right,” he conceded, sensing this was *not* a subject on which he should push.

Obviously ready to jump on the subject change, Alex said, “Anyone married?”

“John was married for a short time. David was engaged for a year, but it ended abruptly, and he has never discussed why. Matt...” he sighed. “Well, you’ll find out. But suffice it to say that Matt has no interest in settling down at the moment. What about you? I know you’re not married...”

“I was engaged a few years ago. She left me at the altar,” he said bluntly.

“I’m so sorry, son.”

Alex crossed his arms. “I’m just going to be blunt. I certainly don’t talk about this at work, because I don’t want to get killed, but I’m bisexual. These days, it’s more likely that I’d bring a guy to dinner. If that’s an issue, we should get it out now.”

Patrick understood why this would be a defensive topic, but he quickly set out to reassure his son. “It truly doesn’t matter to me, Alex.” Well, it did matter, in the sense that his two bisexual sons were in careers where it could get them killed, but he’d learned the lesson about fighting that battle with John. He wasn’t going to make the same mistake with Alex. “I don’t care who you love, as long as they treat you well.”

Alex blinked a few times, looking astonished.

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Well, that’s like a parental response that I thought only existed in movies,” he admitted.

Giving a huff of laughter, Patrick replied, “I made mistakes, Alex, a lot of them. Particularly with John. I sometimes think the second half of life is a test to see if you learned from the mistakes you made in the first half.”

Alex made a noncommittal noise and seemed to be looking for something as he studied Patrick. After a minute or two, he nodded. “So the bisexual doesn’t bother you?”

“It doesn’t change my opinion of you in any way, if that’s what you mean. It worries me with your line of work considering the antiquated notions about sexuality that are pervasive in law enforcement and the military—of which you are basically involved in both.”

“Yeah, okay. Fair enough.”

Patrick directed the conversation to lighter topics, finding out that his son was interested in the history of Ancient Greece and Rome, and that movies and music were his primary hobbies. He was curious about his son’s musical interest. Emma had been passionate about music, and though all his sons played one instrument or another, none of the others had her passion for it.

After they boarded the Sheppard Industries jet for the short flight to DC, and were in the air, Patrick decided to push on one thing he rather desperately wanted to know about. “Would you be all right telling me about Hawaii?”

Alex didn’t respond for the longest time, and Patrick was about to withdraw the question, when he shrugged one shoulder and replied, “You know it was a long time ago, and it doesn’t really

matter now, but, uh... Mom died when I was eight. Sorry, *Claire*, died when I was eight. I went to boarding school the first four years after her death, but I was home during the summers. The summer I turned twelve, Senior took me with him to Hawaii—the guy he was doing a deal with had a kid about my age. I woke up one day and he was gone. Found out later he forgot I was there. He'd just left the room key for housekeeping, gotten in a taxi, and headed for the airport. I put up the *do not disturb* sign, so they never knew and didn't process his checkout. I lived on room service until his accountant called after a couple days to ask about fraudulent charges. The hotel called the police."

Patrick felt physically ill. Alex delivered the facts like it wasn't a big deal to forget that your child was traveling with you and leave them behind. Even worse, the bastard apparently never noticed since his accountant blew the whistle. "What happened to you?"

"Eh. The police were pretty nice once they figured out what was going on. They didn't even send me to a group home. One of the detectives let me stay with him while they tracked down Senior. The state of Hawaii planned to press charges for child abandonment, and possibly child endangerment, but the charges just went up in smoke after Senior and his lawyer showed up. Danny, the cop I was staying with, was enraged, but it wasn't like anyone consulted him about it.

"Senior was furious with me for the clusterfuck, and 'disowned' me as he shipped me off to a year-round military academy. Next time I talked to him was when he found out I'd accepted a sports' scholarship to Ohio State." He shrugged casually as if none of it was important.

"I... see. Um." What was he supposed to say to that? If Alex's affect had been at all congruent with the story, it might have been easier, but his son acted as if it didn't matter. "Was Danny why you wanted to be in law enforcement?" he finally asked.

"Yeah." Alex actually smiled sincerely. "He and his partner Steve were really good to me, and set an impression of what cops were supposed to be like, and the good they could do."

"Do you know what happened to them?"

"Both still live in Hawaii. Retired now. We exchange letters a couple times a year since I went to RIMA." He glanced away, looking lost in memories. "I wanted to be that kind of cop, ya know?"

"I'm absolutely certain that you are, Alex."

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Tony paid more attention as the car approached the gates to the Sheppard family home this time. He'd been so tired last night, and just numb, that he hadn't noticed much about the house or the grounds, other than to note that they were *big*. Considering how wealthy the

Sheppards were, it certainly could have been bigger, but Patrick didn't strike Tony as someone who had a lot of shit he didn't need or couldn't use.

The grounds were well tended and fairly minimalist, but Tony wouldn't have really expected much different from a house that was primarily full of men. When he caught himself trying to identify the type of trees lining the drive, he had to admit that he was mentally distracting himself from his nerves about meeting his brothers.

Patrick touched his arm. "You have nothing to worry about."

Turning his gaze away from the landscaping, Tony contemplated his father's expression for several beats. He appreciated that Patrick was trying to make this easy, but absolutely nothing was going to accomplish that. "I don't have any experience with this."

"Siblings?"

"Family," Tony countered. An expression of sadness flashed over Patrick's face, and Tony looked away just as the driver pulled up in front of the main doors.

"Alex," Patrick called as Tony was getting out of the car, "no one expects you to be anything but who you are."

He looked back and nodded briefly then got to his feet and shut the door behind him. Staring at the house, he was aware when Patrick rounded the car and stepped up next to him, waiting in silence.

Before Tony could finish steeling himself to go inside, the front door opened and Matt came out. His expression was tight and he only hesitated briefly before jogging down the steps and coming to stand in front of Tony. Without pause, he pulled Tony into a hug, ignoring the way Tony gave a start of surprise.

"Welcome home," he whispered. He pulled back, hands clasping Tony's upper arms. "I wasn't going to wait in there while you worked yourself up. God knows I'd be freaking out in your shoes. 'Cause seriously, man, this is some surreal shit. Now come inside and tell me all your bad habits. I have a bet with Dave that I have more vices in common with you than he does."

Tony barked out a startled laugh. "You're already at one." He could tell Matt had noticed the bruise still forming on his jaw, and appreciated that he hadn't asked about it.

Matt tugged at Tony's arm and started leading him up the steps. "Oh? Which one?"

"Levity makes everything better."

Flashing Tony a blinding smile, Matt retorted, "We are going to get along so well. And I just know Dave is going to have to loan me his car for the week."

"Nice car?"

"'67 Shelby Mustang."

"Okay, yeah, I need to win a bet with David," Tony remarked making Matt laugh. He was aware that Patrick was following as they crossed the threshold.

David was pacing the foyer, but halted when they entered. "Hey," he said, sounding a bit stilted. "I didn't want to overwhelm you out there. Mattie's a force of nature sometimes."

"I'm good," Tony replied as he faced his older brother. And that was such a strange thought he didn't even know how to slot it into place.

"Is there anything you..." David trailed off, looking uncomfortable. "Yeah, I can't do this." He crossed the few feet between them and pulled Tony into a bone-crushing hug. "I'm so glad we found you." When he finally let go, Tony noted that David's eyes were wet with unshed tears, and it made him feel odd. "I remember holding you as a baby," he murmured, his gaze moving over Tony's face, lingering briefly on his jaw.

And really, Tony didn't know what to do with David's memories of him, but Matt stepped in and started herding everyone further into the house. "I already got one on you, David."

"That doesn't mean anything, baby brother. The game is just beginning."

An hour later, Tony felt thoroughly interrogated, but the subjects were so innocuous it allowed him to relax. Plus, he got to find out about his new family in the process. He was relieved that neither of his brothers had asked about what happened in New York. Although, Tony was not at all naïve, he knew they would discuss it when he wasn't around.

"I win!" Matt declared consulting his notes.

"If John were here, he'd win," David countered.

"John did not enter into this bet, Dave. Deal with it."

"You won by two, Mattie. It's not a landslide."

As soon as Matt opened his mouth to counter, Patrick said, "Boys," in this really *dad* tone that sort of made Tony feel weird things he couldn't identify.

Both immediately let it go, and Tony found himself the focus of their attention again. After a few more benign questions, Matt asked, "In the sunlight, I noticed that scar on your neck. Do you mind if I ask how you got it? Because David's crap with a straight razor, and I might need to place another bet with him about who has the most skills in common with you."

"Scar?" Patrick asked, getting up from his wingback chair and moving over to the loveseat Tony was occupying.

Tony covered the scar with his hand, mind whirling. It was a very faint mark now. Barely an inch and a half, though it had been longer—one end of the slice healed completely scar-free, but the deeper end had left a permanent mark.

Patrick sat next to him. "May I see?"

"It's very tiny and faint," Tony protested.

Patrick just raised his brows and Tony dropped his hand with an eyeroll.

"Seriously, Alex," Matt began, "I didn't mean to bring up anything uncomfortable."

He felt Patrick's touch on the side of his neck briefly as he replied, "It's okay. It's just something that happened at work."

Matt and David both immediately frowned, and Patrick asked, "What about your work could put a scar like that on your *throat*?"

Tony looked at Patrick. "Look, suspects don't always cooperate. I do the best I can to be safe, I promise."

Patrick's eyes narrowed. "That is a thin scar... it looks like it was done with a razor or a knife."

Not sure how to navigate what was starting to feel like a minefield, Tony cautiously replied, "Knife."

Patrick paled so abruptly that Tony was a little worried. "A criminal had a knife to your throat?"

One of his brothers made an odd sort of strangled sound, but Tony kept his attention on Patrick. "It's not a big deal. It was an undercover assignment and the suspect got suspicious. And when he tried to get rid of me, I handled the situation. I'm fine."

"Alex... someone tried to *kill* you."

“Don’t go down that path, okay? My work is dangerous, but we do a damn good job of mitigating the risk. And serial killers aren’t every day fare.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Tony could have headslapped himself. Because that sure as hell didn’t help things.

“A serial killer tried to murder you,” Patrick repeated woodenly.

Tony opened his mouth, but wound up just snapping it shut again. After a couple beats, he said, “There’s no way for me to gracefully dig myself out of that. I just... this is my *job*. I’m good at it, but sometimes it is dangerous.”

“Do you deal with serial killers a lot?” David asked, his tone much more flat than it had been thus far.

“No. There’s just been like four since I joined NCIS.”

“Four?!” a trio of voices said in stereo.

“You’ve only been at NCIS four and a half years,” Patrick bit out.

“All right, we have gone too far down this path. I am the Senior Field Agent for NCIS’s flagship Major Case Response Team. My team has the second highest solve rate in the alphabet soup. I’m also one of NCIS’s best undercover assets. Those are just the facts. And they add up to sometimes there’s danger. But I wouldn’t be in the position I’m in if I wasn’t good at it. You need to have a little faith in me.” Tony knew every word was true, but he spent so much time downplaying his abilities at work, it actually felt odd to verbalize his competencies.

“Oh, Alex, this isn’t about having faith in you. I completely believe you’re the best at what you do.” Patrick looked truly stricken, and he reached out and gently touched Tony’s scar again. “You’re my son. I don’t want you to ever be hurt. I can’t help but imagine losing you to a serial killer’s blade, and I just want to do everything in my power to protect you.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Tony managed to say, feeling incredibly off-kilter.

“I know,” Patrick replied, sounding infinitely sad. “I struggle with John’s military service for the same reason. I just...” he paused and took a deep breath. “I’m not trying to pull you away from your career, okay? But I’m never going to be sanguine about you being hurt. Certainly not by a serial killer! And before you get it in your head to hide the danger or injuries from me, that would just make it worse. It’s easier to deal with facts than whatever the imagination can conjure.”

Tony wanted to protest, though he wasn’t even sure why. He just wasn’t used to anyone really caring if he came home hurt at the end of the day. He made a mental note to talk to Danny about it the next time they managed a phone call.

Patrick seemed to read something in his expression and offered a faint smile. "I'll try not to be a lunatic about your safety, but please be honest with me if you get hurt."

Somewhat reluctantly, Tony nodded, but he'd have to see how that shook out. He couldn't imagine calling Patrick after a bad day and saying something like he sprained his knee tackling a suspect. It was just too weird.

"Come on," Matt interjected suddenly, "let's watch a movie. I want to test Alex's movie trivia knowledge." Tony noted that Matt's smile was a little strained, and he appreciated the effort to change the subject.

They went down to a truly amazing home theater room, and David prompted, "John Huston."

Tony bit back a smile. "American director, screenwriter, and actor. Directed more than forty feature films. His feature film debut was *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941. Arguably, his best film is *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, 1948. Disturbingly, he's also well known for *Annie* in 1982." Tony made a face. "And in *Casino Royale*, 1967, he directed the scenes in James Bond's home and the castle in Scotland."

Matt and David just stared at him, and Patrick started laughing. "I don't think your idea to bet on movies with Alex is a sound plan, Matthew."

"Uh, *no!*" Matt agreed, coming out of his stupor. "Okay, then. Since you say *Sierra Madre* is the best, and I've never seen it and I doubt Dave has..." At David's agreement, he asked, "Dad?"

"I've seen it, but Alex is right, it's a great movie, so I'm in. And then we'll have dinner after."

Movies were something Tony was completely comfortable with, so he settled down to watch, accepting how he was maneuvered to sit between David and Matt.

About forty minutes into the movie, he wasn't enjoying it like he usually would. He hadn't stopped to consider the theme of the film—the adoration and addiction to wealth. The central issues of greed and self-entitlement were making him feel ill. All he could think about were a lifetime of Senior's words, his ambitions and aims, and how Tony was never important enough. How Senior's search for gold had led him down the path of taking Tony from his family, and then leaving him behind over and over. Tony's life was a casualty of greed and ego, and the movie parallels were just too much. It was like being slapped in the face with everything he hadn't been thinking about or dealing with since Fornell stepped off the elevator last night.

He realized he was on his feet and Matt was scrambling to pause the movie.

"Alex?" Dave asked.

"I have to go." He felt like if he didn't get out of this house, right now, he'd lose his ability to keep his emotions under wraps. "I'm sorry... I just need some time to think."

"Alex," Matt began.

"It's okay, son," Patrick interjected, speaking to Tony. "Will you call me tomorrow, let me know how you're doing?"

"Yeah... yeah, I can do that."

"All right. Your car is still at the Navy Yard. Do you want me to take you, or you can take one of my cars to the Yard, and I'll arrange to pick it up later?"

"The car," Tony replied feeling hemmed in. Under normal circumstances, he would just take a cab, but he couldn't wait the half hour or more that would take, and he didn't see the Sheppards letting him leave on foot. "I don't want to..." *talk*, he wanted to say, but winced. He felt like he was letting them down. Letting everyone down. But he needed some time to think without needing to be *Alex Sheppard*.

"That's fine. Come on, then. We'll get your coat and the keys to my Audi."

Tony couldn't say what he said or did on his way out the door. He kept a distance between him and everyone, said something in the way of goodbye, and climbed into the silver Audi S8 Patrick pointed him to. He knew Patrick was concerned, but he couldn't deal with that right now. And certainly couldn't absorb what was going on with his brothers.

Mind blank, he drove the short distance to the Navy Yard and retrieved his own Mustang. Under normal circumstances, he'd have delighted in driving the Audi, but he barely registered anything about it. Behind the wheel of his own car, he headed for home, needing solitude and time to get his head together. He couldn't be so weak!

He realized he was sitting and staring vacantly out at the twilight sky. Looking around, he was surprised to find that instead of going home, he'd driven to Gibbs'. The truck was in the driveway, so he knew his boss was home. Torn about whether to stay or go, he clenched his hands on the steering wheel until they started to ache.

Uncertain how much time had passed, he only knew that it was now dark, Tony pried his hands off the wheel and got out of the car.

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David watched Alex drive away, feeling incredibly conflicted. Had they pushed him too far on something? He and Matt had talked about keeping the subjects light and giving Alex time to get

acclimated. They'd agreed not to even ask about the confrontation with Mr. DiNozzo. But maybe their efforts weren't enough.

"What happened?" Matt asked as the door front door was finally shut, blocking the chill December wind. "Everything seemed to be going fine."

His father looked tired and older than his years all of a sudden. "I don't think it has anything to do with this afternoon. Come up to my study and we'll talk about it."

David wasn't surprised that his dad had some insight into what might be going on with Alex. Although, to be fair, he'd had his life turned upside down the last twenty-four hours, on top of spending a week trying to get cleared of murder charges. It probably wouldn't take much to suddenly be *too much*.

He and Matt settled on the small sofa in Dad's study, while Dad took one of the chairs.

Mattie immediately asked, "Did we push too hard? I know he said he was okay with being called *Alex*, but maybe we should be calling him *Tony*? I want him to be comfortable, so I'll call him whatever makes this easier for him. Hell, I'll call him Robert if he wants, and you know how I feel about men named Robert."

"Matthew," Dad interjected, briefly making a face at the mention of the guy who had harassed Mattie through grad school, "I don't believe you pushed too hard. I think it's a combination of reaction to this morning's events and just the sheer difficulty of the situation."

"Any idea what set him off?" Dave asked.

"I think the movie was the tipping point. I didn't think about it, and clearly he didn't either, but the themes of the movie might be troublesome after what happened this morning."

"You want to fill us in, then?"

Dad sighed. "That man, DiNozzo, he bought Alex, but he *knew* Alex was my son." He clenched his hands into fists and then deliberately stretched them out, a telltale sign that he was angry. "I'd apparently refused to hear some business proposal of his at some point. The man's ego and self-entitlement is appalling. I think when he realized the baby he'd *purchased* was likely my son, he felt I deserved it for refusing to meet with him." Dad looked away, jaw tight.

"Jesus," Dave whispered. "He admitted all that?"

"More or less. Your brother was excellent at pushing the right buttons to get him to admit who arranged the transaction, and that, yes, he was aware of whose child he had."

Dave was horrified. He already knew the basics about Alex's upbringing—that his "mother" died when he was eight, he went to boarding school for four years, then off to military academy in Rhode Island—but beyond basic biographical *facts* there was no real information.

"Tell me this DiNozzo freak at least treated Alex well? I mean, he wanted a kid badly enough to buy one. Did he care for him?" Matt asked.

Dad just shook his head. "I noticed you both avoided asking about that bruise forming on his jaw—that was not related to his work. DiNozzo gave that to him this morning, and it was clearly a habit."

Mattie abruptly got to his feet. "I'm going for a run. Dad, I'll talk to you about it later." And just like that, his baby brother was out of the room.

"I hope Matthew knows he can't have the man killed," Dad remarked calmly. "That's my job."

"Dad," Dave said with exasperation.

"If that man isn't convicted, I *will* handle it."

Dave couldn't really say anything to that, because he completely agreed. With his family, Dad had always been very different than he was with the rest of the world. You couldn't run a multi-billion-dollar conglomerate and not be cutthroat when necessary—which was most of the time when he wasn't dealing with family.

"Tell me what else happened today."

Dad sighed and looked sad. He then gave Dave a summary of the things he'd learned about Alex's life. The plague really worried him and increased his anxiety about Alex's job. Serial killers *and* biohazard attacks, and he had no doubt Alex dealt with terrorists, too. But the Hawaii thing made him so angry he could barely see straight. What kind of sick bastard forgets his child, travels nearly five-thousand miles away, then acts like it's the kid's fault when he's discovered?

Of his brothers, Dave was typically the one with the cooler head, but he was having a hard time finding that sense of equanimity right now.

Deciding he needed a change of subject, he asked, "Have you heard anything yet about the *Daedalus*?" Okay, maybe talking about anything tangential to John wasn't the best idea.

"No, but it's not due in Pegasus until Monday. I'll call George in a little bit to see if there's an update. When the news about Alex gets out, the hubbub could draw attention to Sheppard Industries and all our current ventures. It's unlikely anyone would look too closely at JADEM, but we need to be prepared."

“When will the press release happen?” Dave let himself shift into work mode. There would be a lot of PR issues to deal with. Technically, since Dave ran JADEM and the furor was more likely to affect Sheppard Industries, most of this would fall to his father, but Dave was fully briefed on everything major happening at SI, and he would help his dad in any way he could.

“The SI PR team is working with the Bureau, and they’re going to hold it as long as possible to give us time to adjust before the media circus begins. But I doubt we’ll have more than four or five days. A week at most.”

Dave began mentally running through all the things they’d need to handle this week, letting the familiar rhythm of work distract him from just how angry he was.

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Like he had many times, Tony walked down the steps into the basement and watched Gibbs sand the boat.

“Wondered when you’d get here,” Gibbs commented after several smooth passes of the sandpaper over wood. He looked up at Tony and then frowned. Setting the sandpaper on the bench, he reached for the jar of nails and screws.

“No,” Tony said, not wanting bourbon. “Normally it’s good, but I can’t model his coping behaviors. Not tonight.”

Gibbs moved a couple pieces of wood off two saw horses and pointed Tony at one of them.

He sat and just stared around the basement, feeling lost and confused.

“Talk to me, Tony.”

“You hate talking,” Tony countered immediately.

“I hate talking about stupid, pointless shit. This is not that.”

Tony found that oddly heart-warming. “I met my brothers.”

“And?”

“And they’re great. David is a middle child, but he definitely is what I always thought an older brother would be like.”

“And Matthew?”

Tony looked up sharply, but he probably shouldn't be at all surprised that Gibbs was up to speed on the Sheppards. "Total baby brother."

"Spoiled?"

"Um... no. Not from what I could tell. But definitely indulged by everyone around him, no doubt. He's charming and very likeable."

"Sounds like it went okay."

"You didn't ask about John."

Gibbs smirked a bit. "He's on classified assignment. No way you met him."

"You and your contacts are really annoying sometimes." When there was no response but a quirked eyebrow, Tony huffed. "I get the sense there's some tension about John, but it wasn't clear to me why, and I wasn't going to poke at that when I haven't even known these people a day."

"Mm hm." Gibbs murmured. "Why aren't you with your family, Tony?"

He felt all the feelings from earlier rush up and nearly overwhelm him again.

A strong hand settled on Tony's shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze. "What happened?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just... I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to be *Alex Sheppard*. I'm thirty-two years old and I don't know how to *be* someone's son."

"You just be *yourself*."

Tony scoffed and got up, pulling away from the supportive touch. "And who would that be, Gibbs?"

Gibbs frowned. "Tony—"

"No! Seriously. Who am I? Am I the clown I've become for NCIS, because I sure as hell wasn't that way before Kate."

At Gibbs' expression, Tony threw up his hands. "Fuck, Gibbs! You used to know that was all bullshit." He laughed derisively. "I guess I should have known you'd forgotten when you started telling the junior members of the team that they didn't have to follow my orders."

Gibbs' brows shot up, and he opened his mouth, but Tony didn't want to talk about it.

"Forget it. Doesn't matter. But that sure as hell wasn't *me*!"

"I know that, Tony," Gibbs said softly. "I'm not referring to whatever persona you put on. I'm talking about the brave, compassionate, intelligent man who has dedicated his life to getting justice for others."

Tony deflated and slumped against the workbench. "I can't do this."

"You *can*. The question is: Do you want to? Do you want to be Patrick Sheppard's son?"

Staring at the floor, Tony shrugged his shoulders. Actually, he knew the answer. He did want to be Patrick's son, he wanted it desperately, but he didn't think he could say the words. Instead of addressing the question head on, he said, "I hated that you and Patrick were listening to that shit this morning."

"Why?"

"I don't want you thinking of me that way."

"Tony..." Gibbs sighed. "Would you think less of me if you knew I'd had a painful experience?"

Tony froze for a beat, because he knew all about Gibbs' painful experience. "Of course not."

Gibbs' eyes narrowed, and he cocked his head to the side, obviously studying Tony. He met the man's gaze squarely. "You know, don't you?"

Tony nodded. "It's not hard to find, and I checked into you before I came to work at NCIS. I figured you had your reasons for not discussing them, so I never brought it up."

"Right." Gibbs ran his fingers through his hair, looking supremely uncomfortable. Finally, he met Tony's eyes again. "I want you to listen carefully, Tony."

At his nod, Gibbs continued. "I can tell you that there is nothing in the world more painful than losing your child. Patrick Sheppard suffered the worst thing a parent can possibly endure, and now he has a second chance—an opportunity I would kill for. You may be a grown man, but you're still his son, and I promise you, that's all he cares about. That DiNozzo voice in your head telling you that you're not good enough needs to shut up. Whether you were really DiNozzo's son or not, he was full of shit. Considering what you grew up with, that you turned into a such a good man, says a lot about you. And if you were my son, I'd be incredibly proud of you."

Tony glanced away, blinking furiously.

"I *am* proud of you, Tony. Every damn day."

And fuck if that didn't make Tony feel nearly broken. He wanted to ask why Gibbs' always withheld that approval, but he also didn't want to know.

But Gibbs' seemed to have his psychic decoder ring on, because he added, "I'm sorry I never told you that before."

"Fuck." Tony pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as if it could push back the emotion he was drowning in.

When he thought he had himself under control, he asked, "So I should give them a chance?"

"No," Gibbs replied softly. "You should give yourself a chance."

"Gibbs..." Tony trailed off feeling choked up.

"Let your family love you—whichever you choose to be. You deserve it." He stepped close and set his hands on Tony's shoulders. "But whatever you decide, I've got your six."

All the emotions he'd been compartmentalizing came to the fore and Tony gave himself permission to fall apart.

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Tony opened the door to the apartment in the wee hours of the morning. After the emotional bloodletting was over, Gibbs had offered Tony the couch, but he wanted time alone, for all that he *really* appreciated Gibbs' support. He also felt oddly out of step with Gibbs, even though he felt more supported by the man than he ever had before.

After shedding his coat, he found himself sitting at the piano. His mother's piano. Except she wasn't his mother.

They'd shown him Emma Sheppard's piano earlier today. He found it peculiar that both of them loved the piano. Because of Claire, he'd grown up with a passion for piano, which now might make him seem more like Emma than he actually was.

Claire DiNozzo was a lush, and usually neglectful, but he had loved her and been devastated when she'd died. He wanted to believe she had no clue that he had been kidnapped, but there was no way to be sure, and it cast an even bigger shadow over his memories of her—moreso than the drinking and strange behaviors.

He sat thinking about his mothers for a long time, wondering what kind of woman Emma Sheppard had been. Would they have been close? Tony was about eleven when she died. Would losing her have been harder than losing Claire? He let himself indulge in "what-if." What if he had grown up a Sheppard? What would be different? Of course, there was no way to know, but he was pretty certain he would have been happy.

Anger at his “adoptive” parents rose up in him as he realized everything they’d taken from him. He felt powerless to do anything to remedy the pain he was feeling and he *hated* being like this.

After long moments, lost in his thoughts, absently touching the piano, he realized his face was wet. Disgusted with himself, he muttered, “DiNozzo’s don’t cr—” He broke off and felt so many of the rules he’d had pounded into him crumble into dust.

“Dammit!” he yelled as he grabbed the nearest thing, a crystal vase, and threw it at the wall. He stood there breathing hard, furious with Senior and Claire and their fucking voices in his head.

When he had wrestled himself under control again, he struggled to figure out what to do. He knew he wouldn’t sleep, and he couldn’t think of anything that would help.

Well, that wasn’t strictly true. There was something he wanted, but he knew he shouldn’t. It was two in the morning.

Despite knowing it wasn’t the right thing to do, he found himself dialing the phone.

“Alex?” his father’s voice came over the line on the second ring. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah.” He paused. “No. I don’t know. I just wanted...” he trailed off, not even sure how to say that he wanted to, for the first time in his life, reach out for his father and have him be there.

“Can I come to you?” Patrick asked carefully.

He should say that Patrick didn’t need to do that, that he’d see him another time, but what came out was, “That’d be good.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

After he hung up, he went to get the dustpan and the broom and let the monotony of cleaning up the broken crystal occupy his mind. He’d done it badly, but he’d reached out for help from his father, and he was actually getting it. He felt infinitely sad and wrecked inside, but his father was coming, and, for once, Tony wasn’t going to have to be alone at the end of another bad day.

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## Chapter Three

Monday morning, Tony strolled into the bullpen extra early. He been informed last night that he was on stand-down this week—other than writing up his report of the op Saturday morning. He wanted to get it knocked out, then he was going to meet Matt for lunch to check out David's sweet ride that he'd lost to Matt for the week in a bet.

After his meltdown Saturday night, Patrick had spent the whole night at Tony's place. They talked about a few serious things, but mostly the conversation was light. After he'd taken a long morning nap, he'd spent a big piece of Sunday with his family. No one brought up Tony's hasty departure, and the time together was good. There was a palpable tension anytime Tony brought up John, but he assumed everyone was worried with John being out of touch on his assignment.

Tony had just finished booting up his computer when Gibbs appeared in front of his desk and set a cup of coffee down—causing Tony's brows to shoot up in surprise.

"You okay?" he asked as he clearly gave Tony an assessing once-over, eyes lingering on the vivid bruise on Tony's jaw.

"Better," Tony replied. He wasn't great, but he was definitely improving. The magnitude of the situation hit him at the oddest times, and it would be like suddenly feeling disconnected from reality—but mostly he was coping.

"Director might call you up this morning. Also, Fornell sent over a list of preliminary questions they have for you. Everyone will understand if you want the family lawyer to look them over." Gibbs made a face at the word "lawyer," and Tony nearly smiled.

"If something raises a red flag, I won't answer it, but I can't think of what that might be," he replied. He didn't think he could tell the FBI much, but he sure as hell wasn't going to hold back.

"All right. Get it all done and get out of here."

"Gotcha, Boss."

An hour later, he was done with his account of the op the day before and was wading his way through the FBI's questions about Tony's background, and lots of in-depth questions about Senior. There were also a few sections about his mother and her family. He wouldn't be surprised if the FBI reached out through channels to the Paddingtons to see what they might know about the situation or any of Senior's other activities.

Gibbs had ventured off to wherever Gibbs went when they were between cases. He was aware of McGee and Ziva arriving, but stayed focused on his work. McGee had become a bit of a pain

since Ziva joined the team a few months ago. Tony didn't want to think Ziva was at the source of that, but it was a reasonable conclusion given how she seemed to like to sow divisiveness.

Ziva, on the other hand... well, he was on the fence about her. He could put up with her petty bullshit while she tried to find her feet, but he was a little mystified by some of the stuff Gibbs let slide. She didn't think the rules applied to her, for starters, and that created problems that, more often than not, Tony had to cover for or fix. Although, he'd be less inclined to put up with her if he could verify that she was the source of McGee's recent twattiness.

"So, Tony," Ziva said as she approached his desk, "what trouble are you in now?"

He glanced up and noticed McGee sitting on the edge of his desk, smirking. "No trouble. But you'll have some if you don't fix that report from two weeks ago that Gibbs keeps kicking back to you." He looked to McGee. "And you never submitted the loss report for that camera you broke."

"It was an accident," McGee said defensively.

"Well, hell, McGee, we don't get to just submit reports for things that you break on purpose. Actually, that's a whole different report. It's called a reprimand, and it goes in your permanent employee record," Tony said sarcastically. "I need all the loss reports done to finish the month-end Summary of Incidents report. And I need it today, so get crackin'." He looked at Ziva. "You, too."

"We don't take orders from you," Ziva shot back. "And what has happened to your face? An angry boyfriend, perhaps?"

"Actually, you do," Tony retorted, feeling annoyed at the completely blatant acknowledgement of what he'd seen in her behavior. He ignored her baiting him over the bruise. "I'm second in command, and when Gibbs isn't around, I'm in charge. And right now, you have a report to fix."

McGee actually had the audacity to look uncertain about getting to work, while Ziva crossed her arms over her chest and glared. "Gibbs is not away, he is simply not at his desk. You are no better than the rest of us."

Tony got to his feet abruptly, his chair slamming back against the file cabinet. He was completely aware that he was overreacting, but he knew before he ever came in this morning that he wasn't in the best control of his temper. "I'm not—"

"You got a problem with taking orders from my Senior Field Agent, Officer David?" Gibbs asked as he rounded the corner, cup of coffee in hand. He stepped right up close to her and waited.

She dropped the defensive posture. "I do not think Tony has proven his qualifications sufficiently to be in command when you are away."

Tony's mouth actually fell open in astonishment, but he quickly snapped it shut.

Gibbs' glare should have frozen Ziva where she stood, but she just raised her chin in defiance. "You are a *liaison*, and it's not your place to question the NCIS chain of command or the qualifications of anyone on my team!"

"It is simply my opinion," she said stubbornly.

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it. Until then, keep it to yourself. You ignore orders from my SFA again and the director can find you another team. We clear?"

Her brow furrowed. "I thought we had—"

"Are we clear?!" Gibbs barked.

"Yes, Gibbs," she quickly replied, obviously figuring out that she'd crossed the line.

"Then get to work."

She went back to her desk, but shot Tony a dark look as Gibbs turned to McGee.

"Agent McGee, next time you follow someone's lead into being insubordinate, you can find another team. Clear?"

"Yes, Boss," he responded, straightening his shoulders. "Sorry, Boss."

"You've got half an hour to get the loss report to Di—" He halted suddenly and then said, "Get it done immediately."

"Yes, Boss!"

As soon as Gibbs turned back to his own desk, McGee caught Tony's eye and mouthed, "*Sorry.*"

Tony just inclined his head as he took his seat. Gibbs' actions were wholly unexpected, but welcome. He wasn't sure if Gibbs had done some serious thinking, or if he was just being nice because of all the recent changes. Tony hoped it was the former, because he didn't need Gibbs backing him up out of pity.

He returned to trying to get everything done so he could get out of there ASAP. Gibbs hadn't mentioned doing the month-end reports, but they were due on Wednesday and Tony sure as hell didn't want to leave them in Gibbs' hands! Last time Gibbs filled in the SFA paperwork

while Tony was on vacation, Tony had come back to hate mail from nearly every department. Gibbs did his own paperwork just fine, but seemed to have a mental block about the very detailed reports his SFA had to produce. Tony added to his reports as the month wore on, so finishing them wasn't a huge task. He just needed that one thing from McGee.

McGee knocked out his report quickly, and Tony was able to finish everything inside of another half hour. He submitted the electronic copies to Gibbs for approval while the paper copies were printing. Gibbs had to approve them online, but he preferred to read everything on paper. It was an extra step, but Tony didn't really care if it's what Gibbs wanted.

Paper copies in hand, he stepped in front of Gibbs' desk. "Here are the hard copies of the month-end reports. All the case reports are current except for the one of Ziva's that's still outstanding."

He could see that Gibbs was grateful that Tony hadn't dropped the ball on the reports, but his boss just said. "All right, get out of here before something else comes up."

"You're getting a TAD?"

Gibbs made a face, but nodded. "After lunch." Tony's desk phone rang. "Just go," Gibbs ordered.

"Gotcha. See you next week, Boss."

"Where is Tony going?" Ziva asked, getting to her feet. McGee stayed at his desk, but looked perplexed.

"I'm on vacation the rest of the week. I'll see you guys in a few days."

Her eyes narrowed. "After the FBI's visit on Friday, you expect us to believe that you are not in trouble? Are you going on a lan?"

"On the *lam*," Tony corrected automatically. "And my personal life isn't any of your business. I'm on vacation."

"Back to work, Ziver," Gibbs said chidingly before Ziva could say anything else. "Get out of here, Tony."

"Just a minute, Agent, DiN-nozzo," the director said hurrying down the stairs, stumbling over his name. Seriously, did everyone think he was going to freak about his name? His fucking *badge* still said DiNozzo. He wasn't even sure yet what he was going to do about the permanent issue of his name.

"Tony's on leave, Director," Gibbs interjected.

"I'm aware, Agent Gibbs. I authorized it, if you'll recall." She didn't seem to be paying too much attention to Gibbs, instead focusing on Tony. "I need to speak to you a moment. You, too, Jethro."

Tony wondered what the hell could be going on now?

He followed her over to the windows, waiting a beat for Gibbs to step next to him. "Is there a problem?"

"Director Fitzgerald just called. There was a leak to the press. ZNN called the Bureau and us for fact verification. The FBI tried to stall, but they'll be going live any minute now."

"What?!" he yelped. They needed more time. *He* needed more time. This was supposed to go down as a very carefully crafted press release, not whatever the fuck this was going to be. "How?"

"The FBI is certain it's an internal leak. Some of the facts ZNN was checking were known only to the investigative team and those in the chain of command."

Tony fisted his hands in his hair and wanted to scream. He'd had barely two days to wrap his head around this, and now the entire world was about to find out. "Please tell me they're leaving my name out of it."

"We don't know. No one is certain the breadth of information they have obtained, and they haven't been receptive to anything the FBI has had to say. SecNav is trying to stop it, but no one thinks he'll have success. They're worried about another news outlet getting the story before they can run with it."

"Fuck!" Tony growled, not even caring about the director's presence.

The director's phone chimed, and she grimaced when she read the text. "They're airing as soon as the current commercial ends."

"McGee!" Gibbs barked. "Bring up ZNN on the plasma."

Tony wanted to protest, but there was no damn point. He would only be delaying his team's knowledge by minutes. They all went to stand in front of the plasma just as Tony's phone started buzzing like mad. He ignored it.

"What's going on, Boss?" McGee asked as he adjusted the volume.

"We're about to find out, McGee," Gibbs retorted.

With dread, Tony watched the cat food commercial come to an end.

The words **BREAKING NEWS** scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

*“This is a ZNN special report. Sources inside the FBI have confirmed that the Sheppard baby kidnapping has been solved after more than three decades. Most of our viewers will remember that on June 15th, 1973, when he was a mere three days old, Alexander Sheppard disappeared from the nursery at Dominion Hospital in Falls Church, Virginia, never to be seen or heard from again. ZNN has been informed that this past Friday, in an unrelated matter, a positive DNA match was made, and it was confirmed that a man known as Anthony Dominic DiNozzo, Junior, is in fact Alexander James Sheppard.”*

“What?!” was yelled out from so many directions, Tony didn’t even try to figure out where. All he could think of was that he was screwed.

*“DiNozzo,”* a fucking picture of him from his NCIS file flashed on the screen, *“is a special agent with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, or NCIS, based out of Washington DC. We’ve been told he’s already been reunited with his family, and the FBI has made several arrests in conjunction with Agent DiNozzo’s abduction. ZNN has contacted the Sheppard family for a statement, but have not yet received a reply. We will continue to follow this story and will apprise our viewers as we have new information. To recap, the case of one of the most infamous child abductions in modern history has been solved. Sources at the FBI—”*

Tony ripped the remote out of McGee’s hand and nearly broke it as he turned the plasma off. “Did anyone think to tell them I work undercover?” He was beyond furious. News agencies were supposed to blur out the faces of undercover agents, not slap up a color portrait for everyone to see. He was fucking ruined.

“SecNav was going to bring up the issue, but I don’t know if there wasn’t time, or if they didn’t care,” the director replied as she watched Tony with a concerned expression.

“I’m never going to be able to go undercover again!”

“Agent DiN—Tony,” Shepard corrected, “Your primary role is to investigate. You’re not a fulltime undercover operative.”

He glared at her. That was hardly the fucking point! He went undercover all the damn time! And there sure as hell was no one else on this team who could do it. His phone started vibrating again.

“That’s not the point, Jen!” Gibbs exploded, looking as furious as Tony felt. “They compromised an agent’s safety with that report!”

“And what am I supposed to do about it now, Jethro? SecNav and I will take them to task for their lapse, but it’s not going to solve anything for... Tony.”

“Is it true?” McGee asked, sounding bewildered.

“It can’t be true,” Ziva chimed in.

Tony glared at her so fiercely, she took a step back. He switched his gaze to McGee. “What do you think, McClueless?”

“Tony,” Gibbs said softly.

“No, Gibbs,” Tony said, completely aware everyone on the fucking floor was staring, and he couldn’t be bothered to give a shit anymore. “This is my *life* and no one here has any rights to it.” He looked back at McGee. “Is it true that my undercover career is wrecked? Or is it true that I’m Patrick Sheppard’s son? If you’re not enough of an investigator to figure out those answers, I’ve been wasting my time,” Tony snapped.

“Tony!” Gibbs barked.

Tony glared at him, managing to bite back the vitriolic response.

“Patrick Sheppard was here with that general and Fornell on Friday,” McGee said, looking ashen.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Seriously?” Tony had no patience for stating the obvious. He stepped around Director Shepard and grabbed his bag.

“Tooonyyyyyy!” Abby’s voice came from behind the cubicle, then she came around it at a run. “Is it true what they said on ZNN?”

Tony closed his eyes and prayed for patience. “It’s true,” he bit out.

“How could you not tell me?” she yelled as she socked him in the arm.

“Abby!” Gibbs barked.

“It’s not fair, Gibbs. How could Tony keep this all to himself?”

Tony stared at her open-mouthed. Yeah, Abby could be spoiled sometimes—Tony and Gibbs and practically everyone indulged her relentlessly—but he’d never heard her be quite such an entitled little twat before.

“It’s Tony’s personal life and none of your concern. You need to go back to work. In fact,” he raised his voice to carry out over the entire floor, “all of you need to get back to work!”

For once, people weren’t listening to Gibbs, or at least, most of them weren’t. Not even Abby.

“Gibbs!” Abby said insistently. “Tony has to tell us these things!” She spun back around to face him. “Oh my god. Do they call you Alex or Tony? Have you decided what name you’re going to use? Do you get along with them? Wow... do they even like you?”

Tony took a step back, smacking into his file cabinet and getting a sharp corner right between his shoulder blades. He just stared at Abby, utterly appalled at how she was acting and the things coming out of her mouth.

Gibbs tried to take her arm, but she shrugged him off. Before he could say anything else, Shepard yelled, “Ms. Sciuto! You will get ahold of yourself, or I’ll have you escorted from the building.”

Abby stopped flailing but actually vibrated as she bounced on her heels. “You don’t *understand*, Madam Director! This is so exciting. And we’re Tony’s family... he needs us. He has to tell us these things so we can take care of him!”

“We’re not family, Abby,” Tony said, hoping his voice was soft enough to not carry to the *entire* floor.

“Tony,” she said, looking stricken, “how could you say that?”

“Because I finally spent some time with a family this weekend. And my father, who has been looking for me for thirty-two *years*, put less demands on me the whole weekend than you did in five minutes.”

Abby’s mouth just hung open for several long moments, and no one said anything. Finally, she snapped her mouth shut and said, “I’m going to forgive you because I know you’re upset and saying things you don’t mean.”

“I *do* mean it,” Tony replied, feeling weary and incredibly disappointed.

Starting to look pissed, Abby started to say something, but Gibbs barked, “That’s it! You’ve done enough, Abby. I don’t want to hear another word.”

“Gibbs!” she said in a tone that was way too whiny for Tony’s nerves at the moment.

“Alex?” a familiar voice said, and David stepped up behind Ziva with his security escort trailing behind, looking uncertain.

“Dave... what?” Tony began, utterly bewildered by his brother’s sudden appearance.

“We’ve been trying to call, and, well, I was closest. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. No. I mean...” he shook his head. “They aired my picture. From my NCIS file,” he said sharply as he shot a pointed look at Shepard. She looked startled, but he turned his attention back to his brother.

“I’m so sorry, Alex. Dad’s trying to do damage control, but it’s bedlam right now. I don’t know if anything we can do is going to be able to help. But... can I take you home?”

“That’d be really good,” he admitted, wanting to end the spectacle.

David moved so he was between Tony and Abby, and grabbed Tony’s bag. “Come on... let’s go home.”

Tony walked out with his brother, not caring about the chaos he was leaving behind.

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Tony stared out the window of the car, vaguely listening to David’s half of the conversation as he talked on his Bluetooth headset while driving. Apparently Patrick was in some oversight meeting all day and had called for a recess to set his PR and legal teams into motion to deal with the situation. He’d spoken with Tony briefly, promising to get to the bottom of things, and he’d get out of his meeting as soon as he could. Tony appreciated the thought, but he recognized that there was very little to be done about it *now*. The damage was done.

David disconnected his call and glanced at Tony. “Press are already amassing outside your apartment building. There are only a few now, but I expect it will be a zoo soon.” He hesitated briefly, then added, “You know we want you to think of home as with us, and I really want to take you home, but I’ll take you wherever you want. We’ll get some help dealing with the press if you want to go back to your place.”

Tony considered for a few seconds. He’d planned to spend a big portion of his days off with his family, but there was really no reason he couldn’t just stay at the Sheppard family home. If it got to be too much, he’d leave. “I’d need to get some things...”

“Hey, if you’re okay with it, we can arrange for someone to get whatever you need.”

Not too thrilled with the idea a stranger going through his shit, he considered for a few seconds, then fired off a text. Despite the fact that Tony had been pissed as hell in the bullpen, he knew Gibbs wasn’t going to hold a grudge over it. And, yeah, it was ballsy to ask his boss to get him a change of clothes, but his give a fuck was broken.

The response came back almost instantly. “Gibbs will drop off some stuff for me later tonight.”

“Perfect. Listen, I mentioned to the legal department about the photo being from your NCIS personnel file... is that picture anywhere else?”

“No. It was taken by NCIS and is part of my employee file.”

“All right. NCIS isn’t the source of the leak, everyone’s pretty sure it’s the FBI, but they’re going to make sure NCIS has to answer for that photo getting out.”

The media would have managed a photo of Tony somehow, but they clearly went to someone at NCIS for background information and that person pulled the image from Tony’s personnel record. Anyone going into employee files for that purpose needed a serious fucking reality check. It’s not like it would have been difficult to obtain a photo of him without violating agency procedure. Someone could very easily get fired over something really stupid. And considering how angry Tony was, he couldn’t find it in him to care at the moment.

Tony had been trying to imagine how bad the media shitstorm was going to be, but he so far hadn’t been able to wrap his head around it. “Any idea how out of control this press nightmare is going to get?”

“It’s not going to be good,” David replied with a shake of his head. “Dad and I were already consulting with a couple carefully selected people on the SI PR team, and they were planning for a media *siege*. It’s not going to be pretty, and it’s not going to be over with very quickly.”

“Shit.” Tony glared out at nothing.

“Look, Dad’s going to want you to have security on you for a while. And before you say anything,” David said quickly when Tony started to reply, “just think about it, okay? This is going to be crazy. I know you’re a fully trained federal agent, and you probably don’t need actual protection, but I have a hunch you’re going to need some help with crowd control and people to run interference.”

Tony made a face, but considered all the ramifications. “No commitment, but I’ll consider it after we see how big of a mess this is.”

“Fair enough. At some point this afternoon, someone from our PR team will come by to talk about an official press release. Dad wanted to talk to you about that later in the week anyway, but our timeline got shot. But we’re not going to say anything to the media without discussing it with you first, okay?”

“Yeah.” It was all overwhelming, but he appreciated that his family wasn’t trying to run roughshod over him. “And thanks.”

He spent a few minutes wondering if things were truly going to be bad enough to warrant dragging security around with him to manage the press and crowds. On the one hand, it was ludicrous to think of his life in that kind of light, but he'd certainly seen stranger things over the years. "This is going to be a nightmare," Tony mumbled, rubbing his temples. He considered the impact this would have on all the Sheppards and nearly cringed. "I... damn, Dave, I am so sorry about this disaster."

David abruptly changed lanes, startling Tony, then pulled the Mustang over in a no-parking zone, slamming on the brakes.

"What the hell?" Tony exclaimed, looking at David, who was turning in his seat so they were facing off.

"Don't ever apologize for any of this!" David said vehemently. "I wish there was a way to make this easier for *you*, but I am nothing but impossibly, unbelievably grateful that we found you. None of the BS even matters."

Tony blinked a few times, trying to get his bearings.

"I know you don't get it yet, but your absence has been this incredible empty spot in all of our lives. Having you back is worth *anything*."

"All right, David," Tony finally managed to get out, not sure what to say in the face of such a raw declaration.

David was watching him closely, but eventually nodded and pulled back into traffic. "You know you can call me *Dave*," his older brother offered after a few minutes of silence. "Of the people close to me, only Dad calls me 'David'. Well, Mattie does when he's annoyed or making a point. He seems to need the extra syllable for emphasis."

Tony couldn't help but laugh. He was just getting to know his younger brother, but that seemed just like him.

By the time they arrived at the house, it was clear a couple of media outlets had beat them. But at least there were big-ass security gates and a fence, which Tony did not have at his condo. Plus, there was private security to keep the driveway clear so Dave could get through.

Matt was waiting for them in the entryway, looking annoyed. "Those assholes! How could they leak that *and* show your picture?!" He shoved a handful of clothes at Tony. "Our plans to go *anywhere* are shot, so we'll just have to find something else to occupy our time." He pointed at Dave. "And don't think you're out of the bet. You're still going to cough up your car, just not today."

Bemused, Tony stared at the handful of sweats Matt had given him. He was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, which seemed casual enough. Why did he need *more* casual?

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With experience borne of much practice, Tony absorbed the elbow to the stomach and kept control of the ball, feinted left, then went around Matt to the right and took the shot. "Game point!" he declared as the ball sank through the net.

He braced his hands on his knees and caught his breath, the November cold annoying his lungs slightly. Suddenly he started laughing. "I can't believe you fouled me!" he said around his laughter, even as something caught his eye.

Matt was panting, too. "Leveling the playing field," he retorted. "Only way in hell I have a chance of beating you!" he said ended with a grin.

Still laughing, Tony strolled over to the edge of the small outdoor court behind the Sheppard family home and picked up his phone. He ignored the flood of text messages, missed calls, and voicemails and began typing out a text to Dave.

"You're not going to beat me, foul or no," he retorted with a cocky grin. Basketball had been the perfect way to get his mind off the situation. He reached for the hoodie and pulled it on over his sweaty t-shirt.

"What's up with Dave?" Matt asked, staring at where their older brother had just emerged from the back entrance. Dave was glaring out over the property with his arms crossed over his chest. Security guards came from around the sides of the house at a brisk clip.

"I texted him that there's someone with a camera in the bushes about thirty yards due east."

Matt's mouth dropped open as he spun around and watched as the security team roused the photographer from the shrubbery and escorted him away. "How the hell did you see that?"

"Have to pay attention to my surroundings," Tony said with a shrug.

"All right, Super Agent Man, let's hit the showers. Carmen will have lunch ready soon."

Normally, Tony would be all over figuring out how the reporter go on the property and trying to fix the situation, but, for once, he decided to just let someone else take care of it. Besides, Tony had already sampled Carmen's cooking and was not going to miss out.

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Patrick settled into his customary chair in Hammond's office. He knew George wouldn't have asked to see him if it wasn't important, so he'd set aside his desire to go home and check on Alex. His hope was that George had some news about John.

"How is your family, Patrick?" George began with obvious concern.

"In some ways better than we have been in a long time. Today was a nasty surprise for Alex, but I know he'll rebound. John is a worry, of course."

George nodded. "Hopefully my news will set your mind somewhat at ease. The *Daedalus* reached Pegasus. The situation is still hot but at last communication just a couple hours ago, John was alive and well. I expect we'll know more in the hours to come."

Patrick felt like an incredible weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He knew there was no guarantee, but knowing that John was all right as of *today* was an unmeasurable relief. "Will there be any chance of him coming home?"

"Decisions are still being made about the future of the expedition, but at a minimum, the expedition leaders will come in for debriefing. Whether they'll be returning to the city is still under review. It could be that the entire expedition will be recalled."

"And what about John?" Patrick asked again.

"Major Sheppard is the military commander of the expedition."

"What?" Patrick blinked in shock. The SGC and Homeworld Security had been vague about the details of what actually was going on in Pegasus—classified, of course—but he was sure they hadn't mentioned John going out there in command.

"His CO was a casualty very shortly after they arrived, and Major Sheppard assumed command. I'm afraid I cannot give you any more specifics, but because of his position in the command structure, he *will* return to the SGC for debriefing." George gave a smile. "So, yes, John will be coming home."

Patrick took a steady breath, getting himself under control. All his boys might be together soon.

"There was one other issue. It certainly crossed my mind, but the issue was actually raised by President Hayes—that three of your sons are read in, to varying degrees, on the Stargate program."

Immediately, Patrick was concerned. He'd known Henry Hayes for years, and the man was, on occasion, completely unpredictable. "What did Henry do?"

“He’s simply requested that we have... Alex?” George paused to ask, and Patrick nodded. “He’s asked that Alex be vetted by Homeworld Security.”

“To what end?” He certainly wanted Alex to be cleared to know what the rest of his family was working on, but he was wary of what might be motivating Henry.

“I’ve discussed it briefly with General O’Neill and General Landry, who is assuming command of the SGC when Jack moves to Washington, and they’re both interested in finally setting up a Resident Unit for investigations. Either at Area 51 or at the SGC directly. It’s been an unresolved issue for several years, and Agent Sheppard might fit the bill perfectly. I admit Jack groused rather loudly about the possibility of finally having an internal investigator *after* he has left.”

Patrick blew out a breath. That was completely unexpected. It would certainly be easier to have Alex aware of what the rest of the family was involved in, but the idea of another son being sucked into working for Stargate Command did not fill him with joy.

“I appreciate the heads up, George. I’ll give Henry holy hell the next time we speak,” he added wryly.

“There should be some traction on the matters of both your sons over the course of the week. I’ll keep you apprised personally.”

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Tony peered around the corner and found the hallway to be empty. He glanced back at Dave and Matt and gave a nod. The three of them crept down the hallway until they got to the door. He half expected someone to jump out with a camera, but he put his key in the lock, and the three of them made it inside his condo without incident.

Once the door was closed, Matt jumped over the back of Tony’s couch and sprawled out as he glanced around. “That was slick as shit how you snuck past those reporters.”

“It helps that it’s three in the morning and the reporters aren’t expecting anything to actually happen. Though if any of my neighbors saw me, we’re screwed. There are at least half a dozen that would sell me out for a free order of fries,” Tony remarked with a laugh.

Dave was looking around and went to the piano. “When we showed you mom’s, you didn’t mention...” he looked over at Tony. “Do you play?”

“Yeah. That belonged to my—” he sighed and rubbed the back of his head. “That was Claire’s piano. It was the only thing she left me in her will.”

Matt slipped up next to him. "You know it's okay if you call the woman who raised you your mother."

Tony shrugged one shoulder and stepped back a bit. "Let me just grab some stuff and we'll get out of here before we press our luck. And please remind me of this if I ever ask Gibbs to pack for me again. Seriously. I ask him for my kindle and he brings me a porn magazine. And I own one damn polo shirt and he manages to find it," Tony muttered as he walked toward his bedroom.

He heard his brothers following him and so was prepared for Matt's, "Dude! What's with the bed?" Matt sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed and peered up at Tony.

"I'm just not in the habit of bringing people here, so the big bed seemed like a waste." He started dropping the clothes he wanted on the free portion of the bed.

"Okay, no. There's way more story than that, but I can practically feel Dave's glare drilling holes in my skull, so I'll bother you about it when he's not around." He leaned back on his elbow, practically lying on Tony's jeans. "And I love your boss. Asking for a Kindle and getting gay porn is the most righteous packing mistake of all time. Besides, it helped us get that awkward Kinsey discussion over with."

Tony huffed out a laugh as he started folding the clothes to fit in his duffel. "That's one way of looking at it."

"It's the best way! Can you imagine how long that discussion would have taken to come up *naturally*?"

"Not long with you around, Mattie," Dave remarked dryly from where he was leaning against the wall.

Matt made a dismissive wave. "I'd have given him some time to settle in before asking, but having him open his bag and there being gay porn was the perfect segue. Now we all know where everyone is at... Alex is an equal opportunity employer, I'm gay all day, and you're missing out on making friends with your prostate."

Tony's folding was getting sloppy because he was laughing at Matt.

"Really?" Dave asked dryly. "Some women have strap-ons, Mattie."

"No. Way." Matt sat up, eyes wide. "You did not."

Dave just raised a brow.

"Oh my god, David! That's totally awesome. Who?" Matt bounced a little on the bed.

Rolling his eyes and sighing, Dave finally replied, “Melinda.”

“Oh. Yeah. Wow.” Matt paused and shook his head. “Dude! I’d have let her fuck *me*, and I totally don’t swing that way. Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Yes, because that’s the sort of thing that comes up in conversation.”

“I can’t believe you and the being dignified thing again! You making up with your prostate is news.”

“Matthew,” Dave said severely.

“David,” Matt shot back.

The two were glaring at each other and Tony couldn’t help it, he started cracking up.

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After breakfast on Wednesday morning, Tony broke away from his family to go read, but found himself in the sitting room where his birth mother’s baby grand was the obvious focus. The piano was beautiful, and it oddly made him feel connected to a woman he’d never known.

The last couple days had gone better than expected. As much as possible, his father and brothers were taking the week off of work to spend time with Tony and get to know each other. Dave and Patrick periodically had to deal with a meeting or two, and several times Matt had been nose down in a pile of schematics that Tony couldn’t hope to understand.

Sometimes it was overwhelming and he wanted to retreat, but mostly it was good. Better than good. It was family—and Tony had finally seen just how far off the mark he’d been about what that even meant. And it felt good that this was for him, that he was accepted without reservation, that he didn’t have to pretend or keep up a front. When it got to be too much, and he needed to be alone, no one said anything, they just let him be.

The biggest source of frustration was actually the rest of the world. The media circus was bigger than he’d expected, which was sort of hard to believe. He was glad for the Sheppards’ PR and legal teams, because he knew he was insulated from the worst of it, but it was on the news. All. The. Time.

Worse was the people he hadn’t heard from or talked to in years coming out of the woodwork, all wanting to “reconnect.” Right. So far the entire Sheppard family was lying low, but he’d been warned that Patrick would need to make a statement soon. Tony could be involved or not, and he truly believed that whatever he wanted was okay with Patrick.

He was still trying to figure out what he was going to do about NCIS. He planned to return to work on Monday, but something about his identity being revealed the way it had been felt like an ending of some sort, though he couldn't even put his finger on why yet. It certainly limited his role on the team to purely investigative. In some ways, that made the job less interesting for him, and he felt ridiculous for being so put out about it. He could still be a good agent; he didn't *need* to be able to do undercover work. Since he had no clarity in his own mind about the job or his future, there was no reason not to go back to work and see how things shook out.

Tony sat at the piano and lifted the fallboard. Music was how he de-stressed, but this was Emma Sheppard's piano, and she was a rather sacred topic. No one had hesitated to tell Tony about her, but they spoke of her with such reverence. He lightly touched the keys, not allowing his fingers to press at all, and wondered what kind of music his mother had liked.

"She played to you all the time," Patrick's voice came from the doorway.

"I'm sorry. I was just curious..."

"You have nothing to apologize for. She was your mother... she'd be so delighted to have you sitting at her piano."

Tony touched the keys again softly. "She played to me, you said?"

"Yes—when she was pregnant. You were so restless at night, you'd keep her awake. One night, she played the piano, just to pass the time, and you settled right down. Over the last two months of her pregnancy, she tried several pieces of music, but Loch Lomond worked every time—anything else was hit or miss." Patrick smiled wistfully. "Almost every night, I'd lie in bed reading and listening to her play Loch Lomond until you'd settle down enough for her to sleep."

He found himself smiling a bit. He'd always loved Loch Lomond, and he suddenly felt very connected to a woman he'd never met. "I was a sleep terrorist," he murmured.

"Your mother used to say that you were a night owl and that you didn't like to be bored. So when we'd settle down to go to sleep, it got quiet and dull for you, and that's why you'd start to kick and squirm. She said, '*Mark my words, Patrick, we're going to have a hell of a time keeping this one occupied.*'" Patrick smiled and shook his head.

It was so strange because she was right about that. Tony did hate to be bored, he was a night owl, and playing the piano had always helped him relax and clear his mind.

"John and David were both single-minded and very focused, even as children. Matthew, on the other hand..." Patrick shook his head. "I think he's more like you from what I've seen."

Tony nodded. He identified with Matt's ability to do six things at once, jump from topic to topic, and concoct elaborate strategies to avoid boredom.

"Do you play? I saw the other piano, but that's no guarantee," his father asked leadingly.

"Yeah... it's how I relax. Clear my head." He shot Patrick an amused look.

"Will you play something for me?"

Though he didn't usually play for others, Tony nodded and settled squarely in front of the piano. He tested the tone of a couple of keys and found the piano to be well tuned. He considered playing Loch Lomond but thought it might be too emotionally charged. Instead, he went for something more contemporary. Yiruma's *May Be* began to fill the room, and Tony felt himself fall into the music.

Patrick watched his son play, heard the notes fill the room, and felt his heart break a little. Alex played so much like Emma—he clearly had her passion and gentle touch. He often thought the reasons his other sons stayed away from continuing their piano lessons was because it was too wrapped up in their mother. He'd understood, but still grieved that one of Emma's passions wasn't carried on in their children. It struck him how despite Alex not being raised with his brothers, he was still so much like them. But in so many meaningful ways, Alex was the one most like Emma.

Patrick had a lengthy list of things he needed to do today—not the least of which was talk to Hammond about John, and get an update on the FBI's investigation into their leak—but as the room filled with music, he settled in to listen. And remember.

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Tony stood with Gibbs outside the courtroom door on Friday morning, one of the Sheppard family lawyers nearby but keeping a respectful distance. It was probably odd that he asked Gibbs along for this, but when the time had come, he'd needed that familiar strength and someone who wasn't so emotionally invested in what Tony was about to do.

This part of the courthouse was closed to the media, but they'd had a hell of a time getting past a throng of reporters outside. Someone at the courthouse had clearly leaked Tony's presence in civil court to the media. He'd thought his father's insistence on sending bodyguards along had been overkill. It wasn't. And Tony was damn tired of seeing his picture plastered all over the place. He'd agreed to attend a press conference with Patrick tomorrow morning, and maybe things would start to calm down after that.

"Decided what you're gonna do?" Gibbs asked as he surveyed the area, probably looking for threats.

“No,” Tony admitted.

Gibbs finally met his gaze. “Seems like you’re out of time to be makin’ up your mind.”

“I know. When the judge asks me, I’m gonna go with my gut. I’m sure it’s making the family lawyer crazy that I haven’t decided what to put on the forms.”

“He’s gettin’ paid no matter what,” Gibbs said dismissively.

Tony chuckled. “Right.”

The door to the courtroom opened, and Tony muttered, “Showtime.”

It took some time for the judge to look through all the paperwork, before he addressed Tony. “It’s a terrible thing that was done to you and your family, young man, and it’s my intention to do everything that is within the power of this court to see you are kept whole. In reviewing the provisions for your trust from your grandfather, it was noted that the Paddingtons were aware you were adopted, so there’s no legal basis for Mr. DiNozzo’s challenge of your ownership of your trust, and certainly he has no basis to claim any of your other financial assets. However, as I’m sure you’ve been told, since you were never legally adopted, your legal name is in fact Alexander James Sheppard.

“If you choose to do nothing in regards to your name, we’ll issue the orders to have all your assets assigned the proper name. However, if you wish to use a different name, of any origin, I will grant you a legal name change immediately and then issue the orders to clear up these little problems.” He paused and gestured to all the paperwork Tony had gathered when he’d gotten the unexpected notice from DiNozzo’s lawyer that they were trying to seize his trust and some of his other assets. Plus, NCIS had been having fits over Tony’s real name, because you couldn’t have a name that wasn’t legally your own on your badge.

“You simply need to decide what name you’re going to use,” the judge concluded.

And that was the decision Tony had been putting off making in his own mind. He’d known all along he’d have to make a choice quickly because his name legally *was* Alex Sheppard, and all his assets were in the name of Tony DiNozzo. Senior had just forced his hand and he’d had to do it a little sooner than expected.

Gibbs’ steady presence on his six helped him feel grounded, and he suddenly knew what he was going to do. Once he made the decision, he found he had no doubts at all.

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“Sorry that took so long,” he called out as he tromped up the stairs to Patrick’s study. He gave a start of surprise when he realized Matt and Dave were there as well. “Oh. Hey.”

“You were on the news. Repeatedly. Did you know there are a bunch of videos on YouTube with Gibbs being a dick to the press? I have a big old platonic crush on the man now,” Matt commented lightly. It was obvious he wanted to ask, but was containing himself. It was clear they all wanted to ask. David was too casual, and Patrick was trying to look only politely interested.

“Bunch of vultures,” he muttered, still annoyed about the media, then said, “We stopped by NCIS to deal with some paperwork and get my new badge.” He pulled it out of his pocket and tossed it to his father.

Patrick opened the badge and looked at the credentials. “Special Agent Alexander J. Sheppard,” he murmured, touching it like he thought it might not be real. No one had put any pressure on Alex about the name, but he hadn’t been oblivious to what they’d been hoping for. He wasn’t going to try to get people at NCIS to stop calling him Tony, but legally, he’d chosen to be Alex Sheppard from this day forward.

“Yes!” Matt crowed and snatched Alex’s badge from Patrick. “Special Agent Sheppard is in the house!”

“You good with this?” David asked softly as he stepped right next to Alex.

“Yeah, I really am,” Alex replied with a smile.

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Alex arrived at NCIS extra early on Monday morning, glad that the press were easily contained when inside the Navy Yard and were being kept entirely away from the NCIS building. He’d done a press conference with his father on Saturday morning, letting Patrick take most of the questions, but he answered a couple of the more innocuous ones. The PR people thought engaging with the media would help things die down quicker, and he hoped they were right. Although the list of interview requests was ridiculous. He’d joked with Matt that he was holding out for Oprah.

He was glad he’d arrived early, because by the time he got up to the bullpen, he was completely over all the staring. And people he barely knew kept trying to talk to him. Awkwardly, at that. The awkwardness was worse than the random conversations with near strangers.

Sitting at his desk, for the first time in his career, he felt out of place. He didn't want all this *stuff* to affect his job any more than it already had, but he was worried about how the day would go. About how his coworkers were going to treat him.

Instead of dwelling on the growing feeling of discontentment, he focused on the cases his team had worked the prior week and copied out the information he needed to keep his reports current.

"Agent DiNozzo, can I see you in my office?" He looked up to find Director Shepard a few feet away.

"It's '*Agent Sheppard*', ma'am," he reminded.

"Of course. My apologies." She smiled broadly at him, and it struck him as odd. "It's a name I'm rather fond of myself." His smile felt plastic as he rose to his feet and followed her upstairs.

The meeting was weird and uncomfortable. She seemed to have a lot of questions about how things would go with the media, which he didn't know. She wanted to know if he needed any additional support from NCIS. Why would he? Did he need anything from her personally? That threw him for a loop *and* made him uncomfortable.

Alex usually read people well, but he wasn't certain how much was her doing her job, how much was his own recent celebrity affecting her, and how much was just her making nice with the son of one of the wealthiest and most influential men in the country, *and* a good friend of the President. It was probably a combination of all of the above.

By the time he escaped her office, it was quarter to eight and McGee and Gibbs were in the bullpen at their desks. Alex rounded the corner and stopped abruptly at the sight of his desk. There were *seven* cups of coffee!

He stared in complete bemusement. "What the hell?"

"People keep dropping them off," McGee said, looking uncomfortable. "They stopped after Gibbs told them to go away."

Huffing in annoyance, he started dropping them in the trash.

"You don't want them?" McGee asked incredulously.

"Anonymous drive-by stranger-coffee? Are you kidding, McRisky?"

"Tony..." McGee said with no small amount of exasperation.

“And since half of them were from my shop,” he continued, “I don’t even know which one was actually mine!” Gibbs cleared his throat and Alex glanced over to find Gibbs cutting his eyes at a cup on his own desk. “Did you rescue my coffee?” Gibbs just raised a brow, and Alex grinned. “I knew you loved me.”

After he retrieved his coffee, McGee halted him on the way to his desk. “Tony, can we talk a minute?”

“I’ll be in MTAC.” Gibbs got to his feet and left the bullpen.

Alex sat on the edge of his desk and sipped his coffee. “Shoot.”

“Look...” McGee ran his fingers through his hair. “I tried calling you last week.”

“I had literally hundreds of messages, McGee. NCIS has issued me a new cell, and I already got a new personal one.” One of his father’s personal assistants had volunteered to listen and transcribe all the messages. He wanted to just delete them all and be done with it, but there were security concerns and so he’d agreed to let someone check all the calls that came in over the week. Alex had been raised around money and influence but not on the Sheppard level. With it came crazy on a whole new level.

“Oh. Right. Well, that makes sense.”

“I’ll be sending out the new NCIS number to the team shortly, but you never give it to anyone. Clear?”

“Yeah. Of course. Listen, I’m sorry about how things went when we all found out about your family. I was just really surprised, and I wasn’t thinking about how much worse it all must have been for you.”

Alex sighed. “You weren’t the problem, McGee, and I shouldn’t have blown up at you. I’m sorry I took my frustrations over the situation out on you.”

McGee moved a little awkwardly. “Abby’s kind of mad still even though Gibbs has talked to her a few times.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. Gibbs had reported that Abby had come around. This made him think she was saying the right thing to appease Gibbs but bitching when he wasn’t present. “Her wounded feelings aren’t my problem.”

Blinking in shock, McGee sputtered, “But it’s *Abby*.”

“Are you capable of being objective about the things she said?”

McGee shrugged. “She was kind of insensitive, but you know how Abby is. She just says what’s on her mind.”

“All right then. So, here’s how it is—we’re going to work together fine, but I suggest you not try to be a go-between in this situation. I don’t regret what I said, and I’d say it again. She has no free pass on this subject. If you can’t respect that, you need to let me know now.”

McGee held his hands up a bit in a surrender gesture. “I’ll stay out of it. I promise. But I can’t help it if she talks to me.”

“That’s fine. Just keep it to yourself.”

“I will. Listen, do we need to start calling you Alex?”

Alex made a face. He actually didn’t want his coworkers addressing him by a name he felt belonged to his family. It was weird and illogical and he knew he’d get over it in time, but right now, it felt like an invasion. “My name is legally Alex Sheppard, but you can call me Tony. I’d prefer it, really. I’m not going to have everyone at NCIS get used to a new name.” He pointed a finger at the junior agent. “But you will have to get used to calling me Agent Sheppard when it’s appropriate.”

They talked for a few more minutes, and Alex deflected several of the questions that were venturing into the too-personal territory. It was his own fault really. He’d never been willing to answer personal questions, but people *thought* he was incredibly open about his personal life, so they never asked the *right* questions. Now, with his personal life spread all over *People* magazine, people knew exactly how to be intrusive and had no idea it was anything out of the norm.

Ziva’s arrival halted their conversation. She put her stuff down and offered Alex a bright smile and a cup of coffee. “I picked up your favorite. The office was not usual with you away.”

“Not the same,” he corrected automatically as he reflexively accepted the cup of coffee, wondering what kind of pod-Ziva was this. She’d never brought him coffee before. He sniffed it and got a whiff of vanilla, so he set it far away.

She frowned. “I did not prank it, Tony.”

“I smell vanilla.”

“Of course. I got you your vanilla latte.”

Alex had never in his life been into vanilla lattes, though he didn’t turn them away when they were the only thing on offer. At least, not until about two months ago.

“Uh, Ziva, Tony prefers a flat white, though it used to be hazelnut lattes. And we’ve all been off anything vanilla since the Lieutenant Bradley crime scene. Remember?” McGee offered. “When the wife tried to cover up the scent of her husband’s remains with the vanilla essential oils?”

Alex shuddered at the memory and pushed the coffee cup a little further away.

“Oh.” Ziva looked annoyed briefly but quickly masked it, making Alex wonder what the hell was going on. “I do not know what this ‘flat white’ is, but I will remember it for tomorrow.”

She was bringing him coffee tomorrow? “You feeling all right, Ziva?” Alex asked, noticing McGee’s bemused look.

“Of course. It was not the same without you here last week.”

Okay, maybe. He’d seen this with Kate a time or two where she’d been more appreciative of him after he’d been gone for a bit. Still, Ziva didn’t seem the type to express appreciation even if she had actually noted his absence.

Ziva flashed him a look he would almost describe as *coy*. “Did you not receive my voice messages?”

“I had to get a new phone. You’ll have the new number shortly. Was there something you needed?”

“I simply wished to assure you that I will have your back, and that if you need me, I will, of course, be there,” she said with a smile.

“Right,” he said cautiously, feeling confused. “Appreciate it.” He pushed off his desk and moved back into his seat. “Okay. I read all the reports from last week. Catch me up on anything you think I need to know,” he directed to McGee, who was the senior of the two. And an actual NCIS agent.

Before McGee could get a word out, Ziva jumped in and started explaining the week, including how difficult things were without ‘*Tony*’ there. He shared a brief confused look with McGee, but then focused on what Ziva was telling him.

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When the first news van arrived at their crime scene, Alex stayed focused on the scene sketch, not wanting to have to re-do the measurements he was working with. Sometimes the press caught wind of a murder and showed up trying to get a shot of something interesting.

They caught his attention again when they tried to cross the crime scene tape.

“Hey!” Gibbs barked, moving into Alex’s eye line. “Get back behind the line! This is a crime scene.”

“We have questions for Agent Sheppard,” a woman replied. “Agent Sheppard!” she called out. “Just a few questions! What do you think of the criminal charges against Anthony DiNozzo?”

Gibbs snarled at the reporter and backed her and her cameraman up.

Alex tried to focus on the sketch and was almost done when another news van arrived. The chaos started to grow and they barely managed to finish processing the scene before it was complete chaos. The local LEOs had to erect a barricade and help with traffic so the NCIS vehicles could leave the scene.

Gibbs was stony-faced on the ride back to HQ and growled for Ziva and McGee to shut up when they started to ask questions.

Alex wanted to bang his head on the dash.

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The base housing neighborhood seemed quiet enough, but Alex’s awareness was heightened even more than usual after the run in with the press earlier in the day. Gibbs had felt it safe enough to drag Alex along to interview the neighbors of the victims.

He rapped on the door, and as soon as it was opened by a woman in her mid-thirties, he said, “I’m Special Agent Sheppard with NCIS, and I have a few questions for you ab—”

“Are you really? Oh my god! You are. You’re Baby Sheppard! Oh, this is so exciting. I can’t believe you’re here! Can I hug you?” She didn’t even wait for his permission before she glomped on with an Abby-worthy strangle-hug.

Alex flailed a bit, trying to figure out what to do, but Gibbs had no hesitation as he literally pried them apart then stood between Alex and the witness and began asking questions.

The rest of the neighbor interviews weren’t quite so *touchy*, but everyone was distracted by Alex’s presence, and he could see the writing on the wall. Damn whoever leaked his info to the press! If they hadn’t put up his damn picture and where he worked, he might be able to get away with just being Agent Sheppard, not THE Agent Sheppard.

Fuck, who was he kidding? It wasn’t like he was never going to be seen in public with his family. People were going to put a face to the name no matter what, and this shit would have happened anyway. Maybe not immediately, but eventually.

When they got in the car, Alex stared out the window, and silence reigned for a long time. "I can't do my job," he finally said.

"Not now, no," Gibbs agreed without inflection.

Alex clenched his jaw and tried not to be angry. There was really no one to be angry at. "I can't just sit in the office running backgrounds and financials all day." He'd done that a time or two when he'd been injured and absolutely hated it. He couldn't stand not being in the field with his team.

"The director thought this might come up. She wants to transfer you to the Cold Case Unit in Norfolk."

"Boss!" Alex yelled, completely dismayed.

"I didn't say it was gonna happen, Tony." Gibbs seemed to be wrestling with something for several minutes. "Think you should take leave till the new year."

"What?" Gibbs wanted him gone for a *month*?

"Take the time before Shepard does something drastic and transfers you. Let things cool off." Gibbs shot him a quick look then turned his attention back to the road. "We both know you need the time. Your family needs it. So take it."

Alex was conflicted. He wouldn't mind more time to get to know his family and let that part of his life settle down, but he did not like the idea of leaving his team behind. "I don't like not being on your six," he grouched.

"I'll manage."

Alex huffed. "Yeah, I know. You probably won't even miss me," he said lightly, though there was a thread of worry there. What if he was replaced?

"Always miss you when you're gone, Tony. Expect this will be no different."

Waiting for the punchline, Alex was a little startled when it never came. He readily admitted he always appreciated validation from Gibbs. He worked his ass off for the man, and the recognition on occasion was needed.

"Also might be good to get a break from Ziva making those passes at you."

"Oh my god!" Alex exclaimed. "I thought I was imagining it." At Gibbs quick look of incredulity, Alex amended. "Okay, I *hoped* I was imagining it. What the ever lovin' hell, Gibbs? Just... why?"

“First time in a long time you’ve been deliberately that dense, Tony,” Gibbs remarked dryly. “You understand people’s nature as much as anyone I’ve ever known. Lot of possible advantages to someone who is crawling under your sheets.”

Alex made a face. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life questioning the motives of his bed partners. “Can I print out the rules? Maybe put rule 12 in a big font? Then circle it. Add a dash of highlighter?”

Gibbs just smiled.

Two days later, Alex was on one of the Sheppard Industries private planes on the way to Nevada with his brothers. Dave and Matt were going to be working part-time at JADEM the next couple weeks, before taking the last two weeks of December off for the holidays. Patrick would join them in a few days.

He hadn’t had this much time off work since the plague, and he felt oddly unfocused and uncertain about the future. Parts of his work that he loved had already been cut off to him forever, and it was unclear if he’d be able to execute the rest of his duties effectively—even after more time had passed.

Alex didn’t like not knowing what was coming but as he listened to Matt’s animated recounting of the disastrous date he’d been on the night before, he suddenly had confidence that everything was going to work out.

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## Chapter Four

Alex set aside the one-inch-thick stack of non-disclosure agreements and veiled threats. It had taken him nearly an hour and a half to read just the highlights and sign everything. This was not at all what he expected to be doing with his Monday.

He'd arrived in Nevada with Matt and Dave last Wednesday, followed on Sunday by Patrick. Shortly after Patrick arrived, he'd mentioned that the Air Force was going to read Alex in on the top-secret project the company was working on, but he wouldn't explain *why* they wanted to read him in. And it didn't make sense; he had no real connection to JADEM, so he couldn't imagine what they would have to tell him. Yes, it could be awkward on occasion that everyone worked on a project Alex couldn't know about, but he was *used* to tiptoeing around classified materials.

Regardless, it seemed important to his father, so he had read and signed the huge stack of forms presented to him by an Air Force major named Davis. "Okay," he said, leaning back in the chair, "now what?"

"How about we take a ride?" Matt suggested before the major could get going. "It's easier to explain if you can see it." Major Davis inclined his head in agreement, and all of them were quickly on the way to who knew where.

Despite the oddness of the whole thing, Alex was glad to have something tangible to do. He didn't know how he was going to occupy his time for the next month, and he was not accustomed to sitting around all day. He was already going stir crazy.

Not that he didn't enjoy getting to know his brothers, but there was only so much togetherness Alex could stand. Plus, Dave and Matt had actual work to do. The only blip on the horizon since he'd arrived had been the call from the FBI letting him know about an issue at NCIS. They had the CODIS entries related to Alex tagged to send an alert if anyone accessed them. NCIS had apparently run a familial DNA search on Alex just last week.

Alex had immediately called Gibbs, who'd taken nearly a day to call him back. Apparently Abby hadn't been content with the FBI's ability to submit a DNA profile to CODIS and had decided to run the check herself '*to be sure.*' Alex had been livid—to him, it didn't feel like it was being done out of care. It felt arrogant and intrusive as fuck.

Without any input from Alex, the FBI had filed a formal complaint with NCIS, and Abby had been officially reprimanded. For some reason that made her angry at Alex, which he did *not* understand, but he also didn't really care. He knew his anger at her was covering a lot. He'd been close to Abby for a long time, and her lack of support in this situation had thrown him for a loop.

There'd also been the news that John would be home on leave sometime this week, so Alex was wondering how *that* was going to go. He wasn't oblivious to the tension surrounding the subject of John, and it wasn't just because he was in the military. There was something else going on, but Alex hadn't pried into it.

When the car pulled up to the gates of an enormous military base in the middle of nowhere, Alex tried to get his bearings and figure out where they were. He prided himself on knowing all the military bases in the US. There was really only one place it could be, and Alex was suddenly flummoxed.

After all their IDs had been carefully checked and they were moving again, Matt grinned at him. "Welcome to Area 51."

What in the hell was going on?

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Two hours later, Alex rejoined his father and Dave after going on an exhaustive tour with Matt and Major Davis while everything was explained; the stargate, Atlantis, aliens... everything. He kept swinging between awed and stunned.

"Are you all right?" Patrick asked as Alex slid into the seat next to him at the conference table.

"Confused," he admitted.

"Something not explained completely?"

"No, not that. Why tell me?"

"We want to offer you a job," a two-star general replied as he walked into the conference room. The man was about Alex's height with grey hair and brown eyes. "Man, that was good timing," he remarked as he crossed to the table. "Seriously, how often do you time things so perfectly? I didn't even have to lurk in the hallway."

Alex's lips twitched as he got to his feet and shook the general's hand. "Timing is everything. I'm Alex Sheppard. It's a pleasure."

The general's grip was firm. "Jack O'Neill. Please tell me you have all the questions and disbelief out of the way, because I was carefully avoiding that portion of the program."

"I promise to wrestle with my disbelief in private," Alex assured.

"Good man," O'Neill remarked. "All right, let's get to it. Homeworld Command has never wanted to read AFOSI or NCIS in on the program. We've always handled investigations in

house—that hasn't worked well for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which is our senior officers, who are tapped to run the investigations, do not have the requisite skill set. Plus, we just don't like doing it.

"Frankly, the task kept getting back-burnered as we dealt with problem after crisis after catastrophe. Finding the right fit for this loony bin was a time-consuming effort that just never rose to the top of the heap. Truthfully, we were asked to vet you to be read-in on the program because of your family connections. And before you get your pride tied in knots, we could read you in without offering you a job."

O'Neill leaned forward bracing his elbows on the table. "In my estimation, you're a bizarrely perfect fit for this madhouse. You think outside the box, are resourceful, unflappable, and good in a crisis."

"How could you know that?" Alex asked.

"How about Sergeant Atlas?" O'Neill retorted.

"Ah."

"Anyone who can wake up chained to a pipe next to a corpse and a near corpse, keep his head, and get himself and the near-corpse out alive is uniquely qualified to work for us."

The other three Sheppards at the table looked horrified, and Alex rubbed his temples. "Thanks for that, General."

"Kid, come clean with your family about the last eleven years of your life. They'll have the warm fuzzies about you working for us," O'Neill advised, and Alex glared. He held his hands up. "Just a bit of advice."

"What is it exactly you want from me?" Alex asked, getting the topic back on track before he got grilled like a trout by his family.

"Set up a one-man Resident Unit here at Area 51 and liaise formally with AFOSI so you can cover both the Marines on base as well as the Air Force. Frankly, we want you to handle the shit that goes wrong around here. Thought about offering you Cheyenne Mountain, and that's on the table if you want it, but Area 51 has more actual investigations. More personnel, less containment... it's a bigger problem. Though, if you choose to join us, we'd likely pull you to Colorado if there was a need."

Alex just stared.

“I’m sure it’s not an easy decision. Our information-mining little moles down in the computer jungle tell me you have a strong connection with your team and roots in DC.”

Alex nodded. “I definitely need to think about it.”

“Well, I find thinking goes better with concrete information. Instead of you finishing out your leave, how about we borrow you for the month? You can check into the issues here, get familiar with the base, maybe make a run to the SGC. I can promise you, the media won’t be an issue here or in Colorado Springs. You’re due back at NCIS HQ on January second; we’ll give you until February sixth to make a decision. That work?”

He stopped himself from reflexively saying no, not even sure where it was coming from. It was a good offer, and, if nothing else, it would keep him from being bored out of his skull for the rest of the month. “Yeah. That works.”

“Questions?”

“No. I’ll wait and see what comes up.”

O’Neill got to his feet. “I love a short meeting. You keep all my meetings this short, we’ll get along great.” He made a face. “It probably says something about my life choices that I judge the day by whether I can keep my meetings short.”

Alex laughed. “Meetings suck.”

“If I’d known being a general was about meetings, I’d have said no.”

“Ah, but it’s about paperwork, too,” Alex countered.

O’Neill snorted. “You’re a smartass, kid. Whatever happens, find a way to keep hold of your sense of humor.”

-----

The last year in Pegasus had apparently made John paranoid. It was either that or everyone in the damn mountain knew something he didn’t. Stepping through the stargate and returning to Earth had given him mixed feelings. He’d begun to think of Atlantis as home, and not having the city humming in the back of his mind was an adjustment. But, by the same token, he was glad to be back and anxious to see his family.

But it seemed that there had immediately been whispering and sidelong looks, and he was pretty sure he wasn’t imagining it. So far, there hadn’t been an opportunity to talk with Rodney, Beckett, or Weir to see if they were seeing the same thing. They’d been ordered to report to medical first thing and would begin debriefing after everyone had been cleared by the base

CMO. He'd briefly met General Landry, the new head of the SGC, but had also seen General O'Neill propping up a wall, and he seemed to be watching John rather intently. One more thing that seemed strange.

They'd already been in medical for four hours, and John felt like everyone was staring at him. The nurse who was taking his blood pressure, *again*, murmured, "Has anyone mentioned—"

"Unless what you were about to ask something regarding the major's blood pressure, I suggest you keep quiet," Dr. Brightman snapped, coming around the corner.

"Yes, ma'am," the nurse quickly replied.

Brightman picked up John's chart. "Major Sheppard's blood pressure has been checked quite enough. I think it's time to leave this particular patient alone, don't you, Lieutenant?" John was utterly bemused as he watched the nurse nod and walk out of the room they were waiting in.

Dr. Brightman replaced the chart. "Dr. Beckett and Dr. McKay will be back from imaging shortly, then we'll have the four of you on your way as soon as all the test results are complete—maybe another hour or so. After that, we'll finish up with the rest of the Atlantis contingent." They'd only brought eight people through on this trip. In a few days, more were scheduled to return.

"Hey, Doc," he said as she started to turn away, "is there something I need to know?"

She hesitated briefly. "General O'Neill will meet with you as soon as you're medically cleared."

So there was something up. Now he was starting to worry.

He exchanged a look with Elizabeth after Brightman had left. "Any ideas?"

She shook her head slowly, eyes narrowed. "No, but it does seem focused on you. No one has spared the rest of us a glance."

Rodney and Carson entered a moment later, and Rodney stood next to John's bed, hands on hips. "You're one of *the* Sheppards?"

John blinked. "What the hell is going on?" he hissed.

"I don't know! I didn't get any more out of the radiology tech than your father is Patrick Sheppard before Brightman was on the scene, glaring everyone into silence." Rodney huffed. "How could you leave that out?"

He knew that he and Rodney needed to have a talk, but right now, there were bigger issues. It felt like there was a lead weight in his stomach. Hopping up, he went into the main part of the infirmary where Brightman was reviewing paperwork. "Is something wrong with my family?" he

asked without preamble. Everyone knowing who his father was could only mean his family had been in the news.

“General O’Neill will be meeting with you right after you’re cleared medically,” she repeated, not answering the question.

John was getting pissed. Something was wrong, and every damn person in the SGC seemed to know about it. “I need to know what’s wrong.”

“Major—”

“I’ve got this, Doc,” O’Neill said from the doorway where he stood, hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels. There was a folder tucked under his arm.

“He’s not cleared yet, General,” Brightman said sternly.

“Well, he’s just going to be with me. I’ll take the risk. If he brought some weird Pegasus-bugaboo back with him, I’ll just keep him company in isolation until you save us from our own stupidity.”

Glaring she said, “I won’t have him out of medical yet.” Then she sighed. “But I’m also tired of corralling my staff. I’m giving them all a refresher on following orders. That said, just use my office.”

O’Neill nodded and tipped his head, indicating John to follow. Stomach in knots, John trailed O’Neill into the CMO’s office.

“Sit,” O’Neill ordered as he took one of the two seats.

“I’d prefer to stand, sir. What’s wrong with my family?”

“Nothing at all, Major. Now sit.”

Anxiety lessening and confusion increasing, John sat. “But you do have something to tell me.”

“Your family is perfectly *fine*. Everyone on base is acting weird because you need to be briefed on a situation, and I didn’t want you to hear it piecemeal. So they were all ordered to keep their yaps shut.”

“I... what?” What could the general possibly need to tell him that everyone on base would know about?

O'Neill rubbed the back of his head. "Hell, John, I volunteered for this and I don't know where to start. Let's begin with the easy stuff. I love easy stuff. Your family—father and brothers—were read into the stargate program."

John's eyes widened and the feeling of dread suddenly intensified. "Why?"

"Contractor for the *Daedalus* was behind schedule and over budget. Homeworld put pressure on the IOA to get a new contractor on board, see if we could salvage the schedule. The aerospace division of JADEM was the final choice. I swear, your brother Matthew is the only human Hermod actually *likes*. It's really kinda creepy."

"My family knows I went to Atlantis?" he confirmed.

"They do."

Yeah, he was screwed. Part way into the trip, he'd known he wanted to square things with his father if he ever got the chance. He spent a lot of time trying *not* to think about his brothers. Especially Mattie. He'd screwed up massively, and now there was no chance of keeping just how much he'd screwed up from his family.

"So people figured out I'm the oldest of Patrick Sheppard. I can't say that I see how that accounts for the sheer level of weird going on here the last few hours."

"You're right. There's another issue, and I guess we'll just start at the beginning so you have less questions at the end." With a heavy sigh, O'Neill opened the folder and said, "Fifteen November of this year, Quantico Virginia, a pair of severed female legs were found in the woods, identity of the victim unknown."

John blinked in astonishment, not at all prepared for that opening. Was this someone he knew? What was the connection of severed legs to him or his family?

"Bite mark and blood on the leg led to an NCIS agent, now prime suspect, by the name of Anthony DiNozzo, Jr," O'Neill continued.

"Why do I know that name?" Despite his confusion, John racked his brain, trying to bring up the vague memory.

"College ball," the general prompted.

"Right! Final Four... mid-nineties?"

"1994 and 1995," O'Neill confirmed. "Damn good player."

“Okay, so this DiNozzo guy killed a lady and cut off her legs. That’s creepy as hell, sir, but what does it have to do with me?”

O’Neill shook his head and consulted whatever papers he had. “FBI arrested him, but he was later cleared when the rest of the body was found by NCIS—the woman was a Jane Doe victim of a car crash.”

“So this guy does creepy things with the legs of dead people?” John made a face. That was really disgusting.

Obviously fighting a laugh, O’Neill replied, “No. Someone he’d pissed off in his years in law enforcement elaborately framed him for a non-murder.”

“Okay,” John drew out, getting more confused by the minute.

“With the supposed victim being a Jane Doe, the FBI does something called a,” O’Neill glanced at the notes briefly, “familial DNA search. Except the lab screwed up, sent DiNozzo’s DNA through for a search as well. In my experience, screw-ups rarely have such a good outcome.” He pulled out an 8x10 picture of a man and passed it to John. “DiNozzo’s blood sample was a match to Emma and Patrick Sheppard. Mitochondrial DNA confirmed he’s Alexander Sheppard,” the general ended bluntly.

John couldn’t breathe as he stared at the picture, immediately seeing the clear resemblance to his mother. He suddenly felt like he wasn’t on steady ground—like he’d taken one step out of reality. “They found my brother,” he finally managed. Holding the picture tightly, he looked up. “They’re sure? This isn’t a mistake?”

O’Neill nodded. “Because of your family’s connection to the program and a few other reasons, I had our people confirm the match. He’s Alex Sheppard.”

Closing his eyes briefly, John tried to get control of himself. He’d been living with the pain of Alex’s disappearance for over three decades, and, oddly, the news seemed to have ripped all those old wounds wide open. “When can I see my family?”

“Tomorrow night.” O’Neill was watching him carefully. “We have to do an initial mission debrief—which we both know is going to take all damn day—then you’ll be on your way. Before you leave, you’ll be notified when you need to return to meet with Landry and the IOA for detailed review on certain issues. Your father has already arranged to have one of his planes waiting to take you to Nevada.”

“Nevada?” he echoed.

“Near Area 51.”

John's brain clearly wasn't working, because Nevada should have been obvious. If JADEM was working on the BC-304, of course some of the team would be at Area 51. "So all the sheer *weird* around here...?"

"The media circus has been *ridiculous*. You might have flown under the radar here at the SGC, but the press aren't limiting their attention to your brother. All of you have been mentioned in various reports. Including that the oldest Sheppard son, John, is an Air Force major. The connection to you isn't exactly hard to make."

Blowing out a breath, John couldn't think of what to do. He wanted to call his family, hear Alex's voice immediately, but knew he couldn't even do that until after the debrief.

O'Neill passed him the folder, and John took it hesitantly. "Background on Agent Sheppard. Thought you might want to get caught up when you have a minute." O'Neill got to his feet. "There's a letter in there for you as well." He hesitated for a moment before saying. "My door's always open to you."

John didn't know O'Neill all that well, so the offer felt out of left field, but he still appreciated it. He rose as well and nodded his appreciation. "Thank you, sir."

When they exited the office, Brightman was waiting with a set of BDUs. "Clean bill of health, Major Sheppard. There's an Airman in the corridor ready to show you to your quarters."

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied reflexively, accepting the clothes.

-----

John paced his temporary quarters, the folder on his bed remained unopened, and it felt like a landmine. When he'd joined the others, it was clear they wanted to know what had happened, but he wasn't up to talking about it. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. He really wanted to talk to Rodney, but he had no way to justify singling the man out at the moment.

Before he could talk himself out of it again, he flipped open the folder and found the letter O'Neill had referenced. It just said '*John*' on the front in Mattie's handwriting. He opened it carefully.

—

John.

If you'd been here, you'd have won.

-Matt

—

The list was titled 'Alex's bad habits and vices' and checked them off against each of the three other brothers. He found himself smiling as he began to peruse the list. Then he started to laugh. Mattie had listed Johnny Cash as a bad habit but had only given Alex a half point for 'lack of fanatical appreciation.' Another 'bad habit' Matt had noted they had in common was 'math degree.' His baby brother was such an engineering snob.

John suddenly felt choked up. God, he'd fucked up. How was he going to explain this to his family? Hell, he wasn't even sure he'd even explained it to *himself*.

Pushing the thoughts away, he settled on the bed and began to read the file.

For some reason, the SGC had done a thorough background on Alex, including big portions of his personnel file. He started to feel like he was invading his brother's privacy, but couldn't seem to stop reading.

John knew his own job was dangerous—he was in no position to throw stones at Alex's career—but why in hell did his brother get hurt so often? Beatings, gunshot wounds, knife wounds, sprains, breaks... oh, and the *plague*. What the fuck was going on at NCIS?

The very last thing in the file was a printout of genetic tests done on all the members of the Sheppard family. They all had the ATA gene, but none as strongly as John... and Alex.

Everything snapped into focus—the thorough background check, the genetic testing—the SGC planned to recruit his brother. Anxiety settled on him like a blanket. He didn't want his brother pulled into this madhouse.

His eyes strayed to the folder and he closed it sharply. Well, this sure seemed like a lose-lose proposition.

John lay back on the bed, trying to pull his chaotic thoughts into some kind of order.

He wasn't sure how long had passed before he heard a tap on his door. Although he was hesitant to answer, he was relieved when he found Rodney waiting on the other side. Meeting like this was risky as hell, but he let his lover in anyway. The relationship was still new, and they were careful to keep it well below the radar. Being trapped in another galaxy, unsure if they'd make it home... well, John had been willing to take some chances he might not normally consider after he'd nearly lost Rodney during the Genii invasion.

Rodney wandered the small space not saying anything. John sat in one of the chairs and waited for the Rodney-ness to be over.

Finally, Rodney took a seat in the other chair—farther away than John wished were necessary. "We know the rooms are under video surveillance, but they're not under audio. They said they

weren't, but not like I'm going to trust the military." He snorted at the obvious absurdity of that.

John found something to smile about. "Do you have a scanner in your pocket?"

"Of course. One that beeps if it finds something. Now..." he trailed off, watching John carefully, and his expression softened. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He rubbed his hands over his face. "No. I don't know."

"All of the above?"

"Yeah."

"You... why didn't you tell me?"

John sighed. "I don't talk about it. My COs usually know my father is Patrick Sheppard, but I've tried to fly below the radar on that. I never wanted my family connections to matter. As for Alex..."

"That I understand. You can't exactly reveal one without revealing the other." Rodney glanced away briefly.

"Does it matter? About who my father is?" he asked, feeling concerned.

"Of course not, John. I felt like... I talk too much—sometimes about stuff that isn't even important—and maybe I hadn't given you any room if you wanted to tell me."

"You do talk a lot," John agreed with a grin. "But I like that. You don't overwhelm me, so just stop whatever's going on in that big brain of yours. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to get into it." He blew out a breath. "You can't know what it was like... growing up, meeting new people, and them wanting to ask about Alex. The specter of my brother's loss has been hanging over my family my whole life. When I joined the military, I just wanted to be John Sheppard, pilot. Not Patrick Sheppard's son or Alex Sheppard's brother."

"You know I don't see you that way, right?"

"Yeah, I know. But we're still finding our way. It hasn't been that long, for all that some days it seems like we were out there forever."

Rodney huffed a little. "I want to find my way into your lap."

"Fuck, Rodney." John groaned. "You think I don't want that? But—"

“Right.” Rodney rubbed the back of his head, looking thoughtful. “So... they found your brother. They tell you anything about him?”

John tilted his head, indicating the folder still lying on the bed.

Rodney was up and had it in hand in a blink. Then he paused. “This okay?”

John figured he probably shouldn’t but he nodded. It wasn’t like he could stop Rodney from finding out information if he wanted it. “Just keep it all—”

“I’m not going to say anything.” And then he was reading. John leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes.

Rodney made a little disgusted noise. “Are all your brothers this freakishly attractive?”

He choked on a laugh. “Rodney!”

“What? It’s ridiculous. If the other two are like you and Alex... you’re like bloody movie stars.”

“Don’t start lusting after my brother,” he teased.

Rodney snorted. “Lusting after you is a full-time occupation.” He went back to his reading. After a few minutes, he suddenly asked, “They ran mitochondrial DNA? Seriously, how’d they have your brother’s hair?”

He found himself smiling. “Alex had a ton of hair when he was born. Started falling off here and there almost immediately. Mom... she collected some of it and stuck it in an antique pillbox.”

“You remember him?” Rodney blinked. “You were three!”

“I remember,” John replied, not really wanting to get into it.

Rodney cleared his throat. “So... is Homeworld recruiting your brother?”

“That’s your take on it, too, huh?”

“No reason to run your family’s DNA unless they were looking for the gene. And he has your freakily strong expression of it.”

John felt his expression get hard. “It’s not happening.”

“John—”

“No. I don’t want my family getting hurt.”

“They’re building our ships,” Rodney said more gently than John would have expected. “They’re involved. And you don’t know what kind of offer they’re going to make him.”

Feeling a change of subject was in order, John braced his elbows on his knees. “I want you to come with me.”

“No. We talked about this already. Your family isn’t going to feel free to yell at you if I’m hanging around. I’ll join you after you play nice.” At John’s expression, Rodney added, “Will you feel the torment is evenly distributed if I go see my sister?”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. But you said you weren’t going to do that.”

“Yeah, well, that was before I found out that your family knows about the program. It’s not like you can hide how much of a dick you were. This is me trying to be fair.”

“Rodney,” John said, completely exasperated.

“What? You were.”

“So were you.”

“Well, yeah, but I’m going to get away with it.”

John grabbed the half-empty bottle of water off the table and threw it at his lover. But with Pegasus-honed reflexes, Rodney ducked and went back to reading.

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After twelve hours of debriefing, and hoping the pilot would let him fly for the under-two-hour trip to Nevada, John boarded his family’s private plane. But thoughts of flying evaporated as he halted in his tracks at finding Mattie sitting in one of the chairs, expression stiff.

They stared at each other for several long minutes before John dropped his bag and said, “Jesus, Mattie... I missed you. And I hate myself for doing something that put that expression on your face.” Mattie wasn’t meant to be closed off—he was too vibrant.

Matt’s expression became a little pinched, then he was out of his seat, and John half expected to be punched. But then he was being hugged, and he mentally kicked himself in the ass. “I’m so sorry, kid.”

“I’m so fucking angry at you, John,” his brother whispered, holding on even tighter, “but I’m so damn glad you’re safe.” Matt finally pulled away and turned abruptly, wiping at his eyes, and John felt like a complete dick. He hated making Mattie cry.

A few minutes later, they were underway, and John wasn't sure what to say. "I half expected it to be Dad."

"I think he would have—he wanted to—but I'm so pissed, John, and we need to clear the air. I don't want to drag Alex into this. So it probably makes me an asshole, but I came so we could talk this shit out." For all that Matt was saying he was angry, mostly John was picking up a lot of hurt, and it broke his heart a little.

"It doesn't make you an asshole, Mattie."

"Yeah, it does. I should just be giving you a hug and saying welcome home, but I want to strangle you."

John sighed. "Just get it out, Matt."

"Just tell me why. Why not at least say goodbye? Say *something!*" The plea for there to be a real reason made him wince.

"It was pure stupid selfishness. I didn't want to face Dad and see the worry. *And* get the lecture. And, honestly, this kind of mission isn't something you can do if you aren't cocky and convinced you're going to make it back."

"Was—" he stopped abruptly, then tried again. "Did you not call me because the last time we talked, I tried to get you to see Dad?"

"Oh god, Mattie, no. It had nothing to do with you. Or David, or even Dad. I just..." He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get his fractured thoughts in order. "It all made sense at the time, even though I knew I should say something more than that stupid email about a new post. And then everything went ass over tits out there, and it was like having the blinders ripped off. There were a couple times when I thought we were so far beyond fucked, and my only regret was not making things right, not seeing you guys before I left."

Matt looked away. "You're gonna go back, aren't you?"

"If they let me," John said gently.

Eyes slipping shut, Matt was silent for a long time. "I don't know how to be okay with that."

John didn't know what to say. "How angry is Dad?"

"He's not," Matt snapped, and the re-surfacing anger surprised John.

"Mattie—"

“No, John. Your head needs to part ways with your ass, and you need to listen for once! Dad is hurt, and he has every right to be. David’s hurt, *I’m* hurt. But it’s you who’s stuck in the past. *You* who can’t let go of past mistakes. I spent years defending you and trying to make Dad understand, and you know what? Along the way, Dad changed. He *got* that he was being overbearing and pushed you away. But you wouldn’t hear it!”

“You think I didn’t try to see Dad? There was always that goddamn look in his eyes, no matter what he said,” John insisted.

“What. The. Fuck!?” Matt looked so aggravated that John worried for his continued good health. “That’s *family*, John! You expect him to turn off the worry? I never did! I just hid it better. You went off to *war*! *Repeatedly*! And yet you think he’s just going to pat you on the back and be proud? Dad is incredibly proud of you, but he worries... he’ll always *worry*. And, yeah, it feels shitty to worry Dad, I get it, but you’re a fucking adult! Man up, for fuck’s sake!”

John was stunned. Mattie had never blown his lid like this before. Not at John anyway. “Dad and me... the history—”

“Oh, stop it! I was there! I remember the fights, okay? I know that was hard on you, and I’m not defending Dad being an overbearing asshole when we were growing up, but he’s changed, and apparently he’s the only one!”

“That’s not fair, Matthew.”

“Oh, it’s completely fair! I’ve been on your side in every fucking argument, but you need to see the other side for once! Dad has been different for a long time, but you are stuck in his micro-management of your life. And he hasn’t tried any of that in more than a decade!

“But you! *You’re* the one who took off to another fucking *galaxy* and couldn’t be bothered to say a fucking word to anyone! I sure the fuck don’t know why everyone says *I’m* the stubborn one. You’re the most stubborn, grudge-holding asshole I know.”

John took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Dad’s not a saint, Matt.”

“No, none of us are. But just because Dad screwed up after Mom died, did not mean you needed to find a way to win the asshole-of-the-family trophy.”

“I know I screwed up, and I am sorrier than I can possibly express. You can yell at me all the way to Nevada if that’s what you need to do. But, Mattie, I don’t know what you want here.”

“I want you to fix shit with Dad!” Matt insisted.

“For fuck’s sake, Matt, I’m going home, aren’t I?” John retorted, utterly exasperated.

“Oh, please. You’re coming home because of Alex.”

“No,” John said sharply. “Just *no*. Before I stepped through the gate, I knew that as soon as I could manage it, I was coming home. I told Dad in that message that I was sorry, that I wished I had done things differently.” Matt looked away, a muscle in his jaw working. “I’ll take the anger, Matt, I deserve it, and I’ll fix things with Dad—I’ll do my best anyway—but don’t expect me to rewrite history and pretend like it didn’t happen.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to have a little fucking perspective. I know it hurt you that Dad was supportive of what David and I wanted, but kept shutting you down. I can only imagine how that felt. David and I wanted to be engineers and got patted on the head, and you wanted to be a pilot and join the Air Force and got years of arguments. I know you felt singled out. And I’m not defending Dad, it was complete bullshit, but his infant son was taken, and then he lost his wife to cancer. Nothing scares Dad so much as losing another one of us.”

John just shook his head. He got it intellectually, but that didn’t help with feeling rejected by his father for years—feeling like he was never good enough. And he felt like he’d been living under the shadow of Alex’s kidnapping his entire life.

Matt sighed. “All right, John. Change of subject. So, what do you know about Alex? Did you get my note?”

Latching on to the new topic, John nodded. “The SGC ran a thorough background on him and let me read it. You know they’re going to recruit him, right?”

Matt started laughing. “That ship has sailed, brother mine. They offered him the job on Monday.”

“What?!” John’s hands tightened on his armrests. “Did he accept?”

“Sort of, but not exactly. He agreed to trial run for the rest of this month.”

“Trial run of what?”

“NCIS/AFOSI Resident Unit at Area 51. Oh, and Ancient light switch. Though he’s apparently creeped out by the look of avarice in the eyes of the scientists when he’s around.”

John felt like his heart was in his throat. “He’s already working for Homeworld? With his propensity for major injury and near-death experiences?”

Matt raised an eyebrow and gave John a look that he could only describe as pitying. “Okay, John, do I really have to spell this out for you?”

He glared at his baby brother. “Spit it out, Mattie. Don’t be a condescending prick.”

“Alex’s line of work freaks you out, huh?”

“Hell yes! Have you seen his injury reports?”

“No... no, I haven’t. I’ve heard about the plague, and serial killers, and bees and sewers. That was more than enough. But, yeah, no one is thrilled about his line of work.”

“No kidding! He’s gonna get himself killed!”

Matt raised that patronizing brow again and smirked, and suddenly John twigged into his hypocrisy.

“Oh. My. God. I’ve turned into Dad!”

Mattie started cracking up. “You so deserve this epiphany. I am going to treasure this moment for years to come.”

John buried his head in his hands and groaned. “I hate you right now.”

Matt eventually managed to contain his mirth and his expression softened. “I’m glad you’re home. I’ve missed you.”

Throat feeling tight, he managed to say, “Me, too, Mattie.”

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As soon as John entered the front door of the unfamiliar house, he was unceremoniously pulled into his father’s arms. For the first time in so long, he just let himself relax and accept his father’s care. “Hi, Dad,” he whispered.

“Welcome home, John,” his dad replied softly. He pulled back and gave John a thorough once over. “You look good.” For the first time since he was a kid, John didn’t bristle at the concern in his father’s eyes. “Come upstairs. David is on the phone with Alex.”

John stopped and stared. “He’s not here?”

His Dad huffed. Literally *huffed*. His father. Huffing. It was so fucking bizarre. “No. And I have no idea what’s going on.”

He wondered if he was going to feel this spike of anxiety every time his brother walked out of the house. Mattie skirted around him heading for the stairs, biting his lip, obviously containing his amusement. John rolled his eyes and followed. Matt was such a pain in the ass.

Following Matt through the unfamiliar house, he entered a spacious study on the second floor. Dave was sitting in one of the wingback chairs, talking on his cell, but his eyes snapped immediately to John. He looked incredibly relieved, but he wasn't giving anything else away.

"That's okay, Alex, we'll see you whenever you get here." ... "No, I'm sure John will understand." ... "Yeah, I'll pass on the message." ... "Okay. Bye." David set his phone down and got to his feet. "It'll probably be a few days before I'm ready to really talk, John, but..." He yanked John into a bruising hug. "Thank you for coming home."

He and David had always had a somewhat weird relationship. They were almost the same age, but David was so much like their father that John had often felt at odds with him. David was usually more uptight than John or Matt, which had sometimes caused them to butt heads. But, no matter what, John loved David fiercely. He'd wait until Dave was ready to talk.

When they were all seated, he asked, "So, what the hell? Where is he?"

"He's arresting people," David said with a sigh. "He apologized for not being here."

John blinked in surprise even as his father said, "He's doing what?"

"He's been on this job for four days, and we knew he'd stumbled onto something because he's barely been home, but he wasn't talking about it. Guess whatever it is came together and threw off his plans to leave early. He said they finally had everyone in custody and he hoped to leave soon."

"Seriously?" Matt asked incredulously. "He's at the base for four days and he has to arrest *multiple* people? What the hell was going on?"

David shrugged. "He said now that it was almost wrapped up, he'd explain what he could when he got home."

"I'm just gonna get it out there," John began, "and Matt has already pointed out the irony of my position, so let's not, okay? But, his job..." He dragged his hand through his hair. "I'm gonna go grey."

"No one likes it, John," Dave replied.

"Boys, let me talk to John, please," his Dad said gently as he watched John closely.

John nearly flinched. Way too many *discussions* with his father had started with just those words. Matt and David left, Matt giving a squeeze to his shoulder on the way out then closing the door.

His father looked pensive. “I messed up with you, John. In reality, your mother did, too. And before you get pissed at me, I’m not blaming Emma. We all have her so high on a pedestal, it’s easy to forget that she wouldn’t let any of you out of her sight. It wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t right, and I have so many regrets. There were reasons—so many reasons—but not one of them is an excuse for not accepting your choices, and I’m sorry, son.”

John didn’t even know what to say, so he just stared at his hands.

“It wasn’t just my relationship with you that was strained; I had to work things out with David and Matthew as well. You just weren’t here to see that they too were chafing under the restrictions caused by my overprotectiveness.” His Dad held up a hand. “That was not blame, it’s just a fact. You did not see that I had to sort out these same issues with *all* of you. I *need* to have learned from my mistakes, John.” His expression was pained. “And not repeat them.”

John wasn’t sure how he felt about this sudden empathy he felt in regards to his father. He’d been resenting his father’s attempts at control for so long—he knew that wasn’t going to vanish in a day—but his desire to wrap Alex up and protect him was giving him some insight he wasn’t sure he even wanted.

“What’s he like?” John finally asked then found himself smiling. “I saw the bad habits list.”

“He’s a little like all of you... he hides his feelings the way David does. He relates to Matthew’s sense of humor, though I sometimes think he’s a little more like you in that regard—he has a caustic edge to his humor that I think Mattie lacks. He’s incredibly intelligent, like all my boys. Though, honestly, he reminds me most of your mother.”

John swallowed hard, wondering what that would be like. He missed his mother so much, every single day. “How?”

“He has her conviction and compassion, and though it doesn’t make much sense, he seems to have her temperament.” His Dad looked away. “He plays the piano like her. I swear, if I wasn’t watching him play, I’d think it was Em.”

Rubbing his hand over his face, John tried to process that. Alex edged out Mattie for looking the most like their mother, and apparently was the most like her in many other ways. “Is it hard?”

“Sometimes. But I wouldn’t change it. I wouldn’t change *him*.” His father’s gaze was intense. “I never wanted to change you, John, and I was always proud of you. I just couldn’t bear to lose you. And when you were the one trying the hardest to get away, I held on tighter. Too tight.”

John felt like he’d been living under the specter of Alex’s disappearance for so long, but he wondered if perhaps that shadow had lifted a long time ago, and it took something drastic for him to finally see it.

“I don’t want to screw up with him,” John admitted.

“None of us do, but we probably will. But I think he’s also like your mother in his tendency to forgive. He already knows none of us are comfortable with his line of work, and we have to get over it. I don’t want him hiding important things, like injuries, because he’s shielding us from the reality of his work.”

John blew out a breath. “So tell me everything. The SGC gave me background on him, but the details of his kidnapping and the criminal trial against DiNozzo were sketchy.”

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Alex finished reviewing Dr. Michael Purnell’s statement. For all that Dr. Purnell was why this had all started, he was one of the last to give his official statement.

“Is there anything else I need to do?” he asked tentatively, his body language still protective and closed off.

“No. This looks fine for now. And it’s late—you should go home, rest, take some time off.” He held up a hand when the young scientist looked like he was going to protest. “Listen, I know all about going stir-crazy at home and wanting something to distract yourself. But they’re not going to let you resume your work until you’ve passed a psych eval, which means mandatory counseling. Take the time.” Casually, he mentioned, “Quite a few people are being given leave in the wake of the investigation. I believe Corporal Miller is on leave as well.”

“Oh.” Purnell looked both pleased and worried by that, but Alex knew they’d do better sorting this out together. “What’s next?”

“You’ll be contacted by both JAG and the federal prosecutor when they’re ready for depositions. In the meantime, just focus on you. And if you need anything, you have my card... just call. Airman Miranda Phillips is waiting to to escort you to your vehicle.” He made sure to give the Airman’s first name so the scientist knew he was being escorted by a woman.

Once Purnell was gone, Alex began getting all his paperwork in order. He had a mountain to do, but now that he had the arrests done and the victim and witness statements handled, he could take care of the rest tomorrow.

“Didn’t know you were going to kick over a hornet’s nest this big your first week on the job,” Jack O’Neill said casually from the doorway. His posture was relaxed and almost indifferent, but his expression was intense.

Alex had heard one of the generals had left Colorado Springs earlier today to deal with the aftermath of his investigation. He wasn't surprised that it was O'Neill and not Landry. "Oh, it's way bigger, General."

"What?" O'Neill's brows drew together sharply in a frown.

"Close the door." Alex was too tired to care that he was ordering a general around. Once the door was shut, and O'Neill was propping it up, he continued. "I prioritized the extortion and coercion investigation because they involved human victims, but I believe a sizeable piece of this base's security forces, those close to Captain Hynson, are involved in multiple crimes on base."

"Explain," O'Neill ordered.

"I'm still investigating, but Hynson ultimately controls the duty roster for the SFs. Almost all the missing goods and even petty crimes occurred when the same group of people were monitoring the base security feeds."

"How does coercion and extortion fit in?"

"I think they started with smuggling supplies and even arms off base. They're keeping the shortages small in the arms, but other supplies, including some expensive scientific equipment has, frankly, gotten less scrutiny than it should have when it went missing under the last CO."

O'Neill made a face but didn't say anything.

"This is a guess but I think they started subtle campaigns of sexual harassment against the civilians they found attractive—many of them younger and willing to buy into the threat against their position if they told anyone. I'd liken it to psychological warfare. They even stalked some of them. When they began to coerce sexual acts... it was just an escalation. If they found out secrets people didn't want revealed, they'd use that to extort money or more leverage for coercion."

O'Neill was starting to look pissed. "How long?"

"At least two years, but I'm still figuring everything out. I really need a team for an investigation this large. As I said, I focused on the sexual coercion and the extortion, but it's just the start of this investigation."

"I understand you also have one NCO and four enlisted men and women who gave statements."

“Yes. A combination of threats, blackmail... whatever they could use to force cooperation and coerce sex acts. But, figure the real count is probably at least three times that many, maybe more. When the investigation goes public, a few more will come forward, but certainly not all.”

“How do you figure the numbers?”

“Subordinates are a safer target than civilians; they have more real power over actual military personnel in their command. I’ve got five civilians and five military who would talk to me. There’s no way those numbers are equal. The civilians were too high risk. They were the last phase of their criminal enterprise. They would have focused where they had more power first: the young and naïve enlisted personnel.” And just thinking about some of the stuff he’d found when he’d searched Hynson’s office had Alex’s blood boiling. He had to compartmentalize or he couldn’t do his work. “There’s a bit of a conflict of interest I should warn you about.”

Eyes narrowing, O’Neill made a go-on gesture.

“I found these earlier when I was searching Hynson’s stuff.” He passed over the folder.

O’Neill’s eyebrows shot up as he looked at the photos. “Well, yeah, Sheppard, that is a conflict of interest.” He sighed. “And that’s just too bad. You’re staying on this case. I’ll get you some more help. You’ve met Colonel Carter?”

“Sure. Before I met you, actually.”

“She’ll report to you in the morning. When we could spare her, she handled several investigations at the Mountain, so she at least has some familiarity and is magic on a computer. Let her help while I figure this out.”

“Sir,” Alex began cautiously, “the investigation... I have to look into why so many problems were swept under the rug. That’s going to lead me up the chain of command,” he said leadingly.

“You mean right to the former CO of this base who just was reassigned to the SGC?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, I figured that. Just keep going and we’ll deal with whatever you find. If you get to the point that you need to question Landry, you talk to me first.”

“Right.”

“I’m curious about what tipped you off,” O’Neill said, head cocked to the side.

Alex sat back in his chair. "First thing you do in a new post is look for patterns in reports. Supply discrepancies, petty crimes, quashed reports of sexual violence or harassment. A lot of it was obscured in the reports but it's there. Also, my first day, I went into one of the labs where they work on Ancient tech."

"I heard about that. They said you lit that lab up like a Christmas tree," the general said with a smirk.

"Right. There was a whole sciencegasm going on that I'm not interested in repeating, thank you very much. But it was Dr. Purnell who caught my attention. Everyone else was excited and chattering, and he was quiet and nervous and acting peculiar. At first I thought he might be involved in my suspected theft of scientific equipment, but the more I observed him, the more he reminded me... well, he reminded me of a rape victim," Alex said bluntly.

O'Neill winced. "And so you..."

"Talked with him, drew him out, got him to tell me about the leverage they used and how long it had been going on. I'll spare you the details. It's ugly." Also *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* was a thing; Purnell's Air Force boyfriend would likely get outed no matter what Alex did, but he wasn't helping it along by doing any actual telling until he had to. It would all come out, Alex was sure, but he wasn't going to do anything to damage Corporal Miller's career if he could help it.

"The thing is, General, they weren't trying too hard to hide their actions. Records of it, yes, but they were pretty blatant when I went looking. It only took me another day to figure out some of their likely other victims and, well, this is what I've been doing for the last four days."

Nodding and looking thoughtful, O'Neill asked, "In the course of your limited investigations into the other malfeasance on base, did you determine if any alien technology or artifacts have been compromised by the security issues?"

"I don't believe so. From what I can tell, your most highly trained and best SFs are assigned to the high priority areas. Ultimately, it was a few of them personally vouched for by Colonel Vlahakis who aided me in the arrests."

"I'll make sure Vlahakis knows to give you whatever support you require as you continue the investigation."

"Thank you."

"By the way, your brothers are here. I held them off until I talked to you—General's privilege."

"Wait. What? Which ones?"

“All of them.”

Alex suddenly realized his mouth was hanging open. He’d put off his mental preparation to finally meet John for the drive home. Now he didn’t have that buffer.

O’Neill just grinned. “Suck it up, Sheppard.” He handed the folder back. “Talk to your family about that.”

“I don’t—” He knew he had to, *needed* to, but he certainly wasn’t prepared to do it *now*. “Yeah. Okay.”

Hand on the doorknob, O’Neill paused and pointed a finger at Alex. “You are a pain in my ass. But good work, Sheppard. Now more than ever, I hope you’ll consider making your permanent home with us.”

“Still percolating, sir.”

O’Neill just shook his head and left with a parting, “Two doors to your left.”

Taking a steadying breath, he locked up some files, grabbed the stuff he needed, then set the security code on his cobbled-together office.

John wasn’t waiting in the room O’Neill mentioned. He was leaning against the wall, watching Alex closely, brows knitted.

He halted a couple feet from his oldest brother. “Hey,” he said awkwardly. “Sorry about—”

“Hell, kid,” John interrupted, “just get over here.” Alex found himself unceremoniously hauled into another Sheppard-style hug.

“So not a kid,” he retorted when he pulled back. He felt lighter; he’d been dreading meeting John for some reason. It was probably a side effect of all the family tension around John’s absence, but now that it was over, he suddenly felt more settled about the whole situation.

John had hold of him by the upper arms. “You’ll always be my kid brother, and damn, but I’m glad we finally found you. I’ve been missing you for thirty-two years.”

For some reason that really got to Alex, and all he managed was a nod.

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John leaned back in the slightly uncomfortable office chair as he chatted with his brothers. For all that Alex looked exhausted, his personality was evident, and there was definitely some quality that reminded him of Mom. He wasn’t even sure how that could be, but it just *was*.

He'd gotten tired of waiting for his brother, not really wanting to admit he was worried and his mind wouldn't settle until he'd seen Alex for himself. At almost 2300 hours, he'd decided to go to the base and either retrieve his younger brother or sit with him until he could come home. Of course Mattie wasn't going to let John go alone, but he was a little surprised that Dave came along, too.

Since Alex had finally joined them in the conference room a few minutes ago, they'd been doing idle get-acquainted conversation, but John wanted to get out of here as soon as possible. "You finished with whatever held you up, or do you need more time?"

"I'm done for tonight. But the investigation is ongoing. Before we leave though, I need to apprise you of a situation, Matt. Officially."

"Are you serious?" Mattie asked.

"I wish I wasn't. I can hold this until tomorrow if you like. Also, I have to ask if you'd prefer we talk in private. Normally I'd hand this off to another agent because of our relationship, but there is no other agent."

"What is going on?" John began, but Mattie shot him a quelling look.

"Be the protective older brother later, John. He's talking to me." Mattie looked to Alex. "There's nothing I'm not going to tell them, so just get it out."

Alex took a deep breath. "The details I'm going to give you are sketchy, because I *can't* tell you more, and I'm going to ask that what you do learn, you not discuss with anyone."

"You are totally weirding me out, Alex."

"Yeah, well, with good cause. There's some systemic criminal activity and corruption in a portion of the security forces for this base. I'm still determining how much and how far reaching, but we arrested seven SFs today, two people who work the base security station, and their CO, Captain Hynson."

"Hynson?" Mattie repeated. "I've talked to him a few times."

"Yeah, I know, Matt," he replied.

"You do?"

"My working theory is that they were working their way up the criminal ladder. They moved on from theft and extortion to coercing sex from some of their junior enlisted personnel."

"Oh my god. Who?" Matt asked, sounding bewildered.

“That I can’t say. I think about six months ago, they moved on to some of the younger, more attractive civilians.”

John was trying to treat this like a mission debrief, or *something*, but his hands were clenched so hard, they were white. He knew exactly where this was going.

“Are you telling me they’ve been raping the civilians on this base and no one has done anything?” Matt asked, outraged. And John knew Mattie was going to blow his lid when he found out the UCMJ did not classify sex by coercion as rape. It was, at best, classified as sexual assault. It was ugly, but it was reality.

“I’d say they were very good at getting people to keep quiet,” Alex said gently.

“Why are you telling me, Alex?” Matt asked, looking furious.

Alex opened the folder John had been wondering about and spread out about a dozen photographs of Matt. Some were clearly from security feeds, some were telephoto, others were just candid shots.

Matt was staring, horrified, until Dave put all the pictures in a pile and turned them upside down. Alex retrieved them and shoved them back into the folder.

Alex cleared his throat. “Hynson seemed a bit obsessed with a couple of the male civilians. You’re the subject of one of two sets of photos we found locked in his office. I don’t know how they intended to approach you, or what they planned to do, but I don’t know that we’ve caught everyone. Until we’re sure we have the whole ring, you’re going to have a guard. And we’re going to have a long talk about situational awareness.”

“Now wait a second!”

“Matthew!” David and John yelled at the same time.

Matt subsided back in his chair and pinned Alex with a look. “Is this my brother talking or the person responsible for investigating crime on the base?”

Alex’s brows shot up. “As your brother, I’d like you to stay at home for the foreseeable future or find some way to work out of the JADEM labs. But as an NCIS special agent investigating criminal activity on base, of which you were an intended victim, I’m assigning you a Marine. A really big one with excellent range scores and a total badass at hand-to-hand. I’ll readily admit protectiveness is at play in my selection criteria.”

Matt’s eyes were narrowed, and he seemed to be assessing Alex’s intent. Finally, he sighed. “Okay, Alex.”

John's mouth fell open. Mattie never agreed to anything that easily.

Matt suddenly winced. "Do we have to tell Dad?"

"Yes," Dave and Alex said in unison.

Alex added, "He's on base sometimes. You think he's not going to wonder why there's a burly Marine shadowing you?"

"I'll take care of it, Mattie," John offered.

"You will?" Matt asked incredulously.

"Yeah. Let me talk to Dad." John was furious about the situation and angry about the danger to Matt. Plus, he was still upset about Alex's whole career—and this situation shone a light on exactly why. He wondered if it escaped Alex's notice that he could have easily been a target of these men as well. Although, Alex carried a gun and his constant awareness of his surroundings wasn't lost on John.

For all that he wasn't thrilled about the situation, he was really impressed with his little brother, and proud of him, too. Having the four of them together still didn't feel completely real, but it did feel whole.

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John watched his father's shifting expressions as he absorbed the information John had relayed. Eventually he asked, "And Matthew has agreed to a guard?"

"Yes."

"Hm," his father murmured noncommittally.

"What are you thinking, Dad?" John asked, worried about the expression his father wore.

"You're not thinking of interfering in Alex's case, are you?"

"Of course not, John. I'll let the legal process grind to its inevitable conclusion and then I'll ensure that every single one of them is ruined."

His father had been overbearing and protective most of John's life, but he'd always known he was loved. And it was easy to forget just how ruthless his father could be. In that way, John was more like his father than he thought any of his brothers were. He certainly knew the extent of his own ruthlessness—the time on Atlantis had shown him all his rough edges and how far he truly was willing to go.

After a long silence, John offered, "I get it, you know? And I feel like I should admit it. Maybe I was being deliberately obtuse when I was younger, or just too young to understand, but I want to wrap them both up and keep them safe, and it's making me crazy."

Dad's eyebrows shot up. "You know, John, I'm not less wrong just because you understand where I was coming from."

John shook his head. "I don't know why you're making this so easy for me, but I'm grateful."

"Because you're my son."

John glanced away. Maybe it was that simple. And, yeah, he'd deliberately ignored some things in order to justify the decisions he'd made.

"You rode back with Alex. How was that?" his father prompted, obviously moving to safer ground for John's sake.

"He's... I don't know. I think I had this mythical image of what he might be like if we ever found him. The reality is better. He *fits*. And, god, Dad, so much like mom." It kind of hurt in a way to have so much of her. "He even quirks his eyebrow the way she did. How can that be?"

"I have no idea, John. But for all that it's a little painful to be so reminded of Emma, I'm also grateful for it. I need to be reminded of your mother."

"I miss her," he murmured. "Having Alex here... it's filled that void we all lived with all these years. But it's more, because it's also like getting a little of mom back."

"Your mother would be so proud of you, John. She'd kick your ass for making Matthew cry, but it wouldn't change how she felt about your accomplishments. I know because it's how proud of you I am."

John had always wanted his father's approval, but he wasn't sure how to react to it now. "And are you going to kick my ass for making Mattie cry?" he asked somewhat avoiding the subject.

Dad gave a bark of laughter. "Matthew can handle you just fine without any of my help."

"Well, that's certainly—" he broke off when he heard the faint sounds of the piano. "Alex?" he asked.

"I'm not surprised, really. I've noticed he seems to need to play more when he's upset about something. He's been playing every night after work. It helps him calm, and probably allows him to get all the ugly things he sees compartmentalized. Since we're all up so late, I expected it."

John got up and cracked the door open so he could hear better. Then he leaned back against the wall of his father's study, listening as the soft sounds of Loch Lomond filled the house. "Did you tell him about the song?"

"Just that when Em was pregnant with him and he'd get restless, she'd play this and he'd settle down."

John thought it was probably kind that Dad hadn't mentioned how, for years, whenever she'd feel despondent about her lost son, she'd go to the piano and play Loch Lomond. For all of them, the song was forever associated with Alex and the horrible pain of his loss. There was a sort of tragic completeness in Alex playing it now as they thought of her.

"Welcome home, Alex," he murmured.

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## Chapter Five

Alex walked down the stairs listening to the familiar, steady rasp of sandpaper on wood.

“Tony,” Gibbs acknowledged without looking up. When Alex set the bottle of Rip Van Winkle Family Reserve bourbon on Gibbs’ workbench, he glanced over then did a double-take.

“Particular reason you brought me a \$2500 bottle of bourbon?”

“It’s not from me. From my family. Something about thanking you for keeping me alive despite my clear attempts to the contrary,” he replied with a grimace. “But I’m just supposed to say *Happy New Year*.”

“Hn.” Gibbs went back to sanding.

Alex set an envelope next to the bourbon. “I got you VIP access tickets to that boat builder’s thing in May that I saw in that woodworking magazine of yours. Happy Holidays.”

“Two tickets?” Gibbs asked idly.

“Yes.”

“Good. You’ll come with me.”

Alex’s lips twitched into a smile. “All right.” He picked up some tool he couldn’t even name and fiddled with it. “Air Force offered me a job.”

Gibbs looked up with a frown. “Knew you were working somewhere—Jenny was put out it was classified above her. You thinking about going to AFOSI?”

“No, it’d be an NCIS Resident Unit, and I’d liaise with Air Force special investigations.”

“You’ve been working a month already. Seems you’re decided,” Gibbs replied without inflection.

“Not really. The general who offered the job... he suggested I do it to evaluate the work and keep myself busy. My media issues weren’t a problem on base.”

“And? How was it?” Gibbs asked with what almost seemed like disinterest, but Alex could hear a little something in his voice.

“It was... different. Stumbled into a big mess on my first day. Complicated investigations, but they’re also very contained on base. It—” He broke off and ran his hands through his hair. “It’s not the same. But it’s not even possible to get *‘same’* back. That ship sailed when the FBI ran my DNA.”

“You can’t work undercover, doesn’t mean you can’t investigate crimes in DC.”

“I know. I haven’t made up my mind. General O’Neill wasn’t thrilled that I gave him a ‘maybe’ when I left the base on Friday. But I need to see how much of what I loved about this job is salvageable. Hell, I don’t even know how it’s going to feel now that everything is so different.”

“Guess we’ll know tomorrow.”

Alex sighed. “I admit, I’m not able to read you at all right now.”

Gibbs straightened up and set the sandpaper down. He grabbed his old coffee cup and the jar of screws, upending the screws on the work surface. To Alex’s surprise, he cracked open the new bottle of bourbon. He handed the jar off to Alex.

He took a sip, feeling the burn, but it was a *lot* smoother than Gibbs’ regular poison.

“That’s nice,” Gibbs said, sounding surprised. He turned his attention back to Alex. “I understand why you’d want to be closer to family. You’ve been denied that your whole life—makes sense to be with them. Doesn’t mean I want you to go.” He took another swig of the bourbon then set the mug down. “I picked you for my team because I want you there. I’ve been thinkin’ and you were right, somewhere along the way I bought into your act a little too much. But whether I was short-sighted or not, doesn’t change anything. I want you on my team. But that’s me sayin’ what I want as your boss.”

Alex was surprised that Gibbs had said so much, but it felt good to know that Gibbs *did* want him around.

“But as your friend, I just want to see you happy,” Gibbs said gently, surprising Alex with the care. “You deserve it, and if your journey takes you to Nevada, nothing changes. I’ll still have your six anytime you need me.”

Not sure what to say but feeling a little choked up, Alex just watched as Gibbs took a last drink of his bourbon and went back to sanding.

“How’d the visit go?” Gibbs asked, attention seemingly back on the boat.

“Good. Got to meet John and his boyfriend.” He watched Gibbs carefully.

Gibbs glanced over, one eyebrow raised.

“Okay, is that a judgy eyebrow or a surprised eyebrow?”

With a snort of amusement, Gibbs shot back, “Oldest is in the military. He not trying to keep it quiet?”

Alex fiddled with the weird tool with a handle that rotated. "We're his family," he near-whispered. "He shouldn't have to hide."

Gibbs expression became assessing. "I've never judged you, Tony. But next time, I'm not packing your porn."

"Oh my god, Gibbs! Do you have any idea the uncomfortable conversation that caused? Why did you pack that magazine?"

Gibbs frowned. "You told me to get your kindle out of the bed table. Thought that was some weird euphemism for whatever gets you off."

Alex started to laugh. "A *Kindle* is an electronic device you read books on."

"Huh." He began sanding again. "How'd that go over?"

"Fine. No one cared. Well, Patrick worries about it with my line of work."

"He's right to, but you've been hiding it all this time."

"I may not want to keep hiding," Alex snapped.

Gibbs stopped sanding and raised that eyebrow again. "Then don't. I'm not telling you what to do. If you want to hide, you'll do it as well as you've always done. And when you're done hiding, you bring him by." The rasp of sandpaper began again.

Alex blinked. "Why?"

"Need to make sure he's good enough for you," Gibbs remarked to the boat.

"Gibbs," Alex began.

"How was it with the oldest brother?" Gibbs interjected.

"I- it was good. Mostly. I don't know." Alex felt really flustered. "I like all my brothers, but John..."

"Just say what you have to say, Tony."

"He's so weirdly over-protective," Alex blurted out. "I had a resisting arrest a couple weeks back, and the corporal got in a lucky shot and kicked me in the ribs."

"You okay?"

“Yeah. Nothing but a hairline fracture. But John just lost it. He was on base with me and...” Alex huffed. “I had to practically jump on him to keep him from going to the stockade and beating a corporal black and blue.”

“Sounds like a good brother,” Gibbs remarked idly.

Alex threw up his hands, nearly hitting himself with the tool he was holding. “It was just a broken rib!”

“Uh huh. So if this corporal had hit your younger brother and broken his rib—”

“Now wait a minute. Mattie’s a civilian!”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow again, but this time, Alex understood it.

“Stop being reasonable. It’s fucking with my worldview.”

That actually made Gibbs laugh, and he turned from the boat to face Alex squarely. “He driving you crazy with it?”

“No,” Alex admitted. “I just see how much he worries, and he keeps trying to protect me. I mean, hell, Gibbs, I needed to go question a suspect and John volunteered to *go for me*.”

Gibbs’ lips twitched. “That’s family, Tony. If John got hurt, would you be okay with it because he’s military and it comes with the territory?”

Alex scowled. “Seriously, stop it.”

“I talked to Ziva,” Gibbs said, obviously changing the subject. “Told her straight to stop making passes at you.”

Rubbing his forehead, Alex wondered how that had gone down. “And?”

“She claimed I misunderstood, but I warned her off anyway.”

“You know I could have handled it, right?”

“Oh, you will. She’s not going to stop until you put her down. Hard.”

Alex made a face. “Great.”

“Fornell got in touch while you were gone. They concluded their investigation into the information leak.”

“And?”

“Indirectly, it was Agent Sacks.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Why?”

“According to Tobias, Sacks was bitching about you to his girlfriend—pillow talk—and let stuff about the investigation and your real identity slip.”

Alex was nearly grinding his teeth. “That fucking prick.” He ran his hand through his hair. It wasn’t like it wouldn’t have all happened eventually, but he didn’t appreciate Special Agent *Slacks* forcing their hand. “So because I refused to be cooperative in his attempts to put me away for a murder I didn’t commit—and that didn’t even *happen*—he just—” Alex broke off, too frustrated to continue.

Gibbs let silence reign for a few moments then said, “He’s been suspended for a month, but Fornell wants that to be the end of it. Told Fornell he needs to talk to you.”

“Meaning, Fornell wants me to persuade Patrick to let it alone.”

“Yup. Told him I wasn’t getting involved and he could damn well ask you himself.” Alex got that this was information sharing, and Gibbs most decidedly was refusing to get involved.

“Right.” Deciding a subject change was in order, because he knew Gibbs wasn’t fond of listening to Alex rant, he asked, “How’s Abby doing?”

“She’s coming around. No excuses though for the way she’s been acting. I love her, but she’s being a brat.”

He sighed, not knowing how to fix the situation. The frustrating part was he didn’t even know if he wanted to. The last email he had from her, she was still clearly pissed at *him* that she’d gotten in trouble for running his DNA and stepping on the FBI’s sensitive little toes.

Gibbs stepped close and gripped Alex’s shoulder. “Listen. You do what’s best for you. I’m not gonna tell you to go, but I’m not gonna ask you to stay either. That’s bullshit pressure either way. Never doubt I want you on my team, but if you need to go... we’re good. I’ve always got your six.”

Alex nodded. “Thanks, Gibbs.”

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Shrugging out of his coat, Alex dropped it over the couch even as he was dialing his cell.

*“It’s about damn time!”*

"Hello to you, too, Rodney." He got a huff in his ear. "Is everyone there?"

*"Yes, I'm sitting here with your entire freakishly attractive family. We're having some sort of weird New Year's Sheppard bonding that involves high-stakes pool and alcohol. I think I won a car. John's being all huffy because his math-bro went home and so math-bros versus engineer-bros pool tournament will have to wait for next time,"* he said derisively.

"Rodney!" he could hear John call out from the background.

"Rodney," Alex chided on a laugh. He sort of adored Rodney and his caustic little attitude. They'd gotten off to a bit of a bumpy start, because every time Rodney got really scathing, Alex started to laugh and Rodney had thought he was being mocked. He'd griped about Alex being too much like John and not taking him seriously. But they'd gotten past the get-to-know-you blues when Alex managed to convince Rodney that he really liked him. Alex hoped John held onto Rodney, because Alex so needed Rodney at every family function. Although, his nerves could do with a little less of Rodney and Matt trying to blow up the back yard!

*"Your brother is giving me an eyebrow and has his hand out. I suppose that means he wants the phone. Don't get dead out there being crazy,"* Rodney warned.

"I could say the same, Rodney." He hoped he'd get to see John and Rodney again before they left to return to Atlantis at the end of the month, but nothing was guaranteed.

"Alex," David's voice came over the line. *"Give me a second to get away from some of the noise."* There was the sound of a door shutting. *"Everything go okay?"*

"I've known Gibbs for nearly five years, Dave. Nothing bad was gonna happen."

"No pressure to stay?"

"Nope. He wants me to stay but supports me going."

Dave sighed. "I know we haven't done the best job not pressuring you."

"I'm not used to people worrying about me, but I get it," Alex replied. There was also that Matt had expressed quite clearly that he just wanted Alex closer. Patrick spent more time in DC, and Dave's time was split between DC and Nevada.

After concluding the conversation with his brother, Alex sat at his piano and began to play something random, his thoughts on the last month. For all that the time getting to really know his family was great, it was good to finally have some time to himself. Working at Area 51 had been challenging in some respects and restrictive in others. Just working on a *single* base felt a little confining to him, but it was a *huge* base, and just the things he'd begun digging into could

keep him busy for the next year. The investigation into corruption on base was ongoing, but Alex had left O'Neill with enough information to determine if Landry should be questioned. Alex thought he should, but he didn't get to decide if a general was going to be called on the carpet for deliberately brushing problems under the rug, which ultimately allowed corruption to spring up on the base.

The holidays had been weird for him. He hadn't spent the holiday season with family in so long he couldn't remember, and it had certainly never been like holidays with the Sheppards. Alex was used to working over the holidays, but his brothers had been so horrified, he'd given in and found himself on the family jet, piloted by John, for four days in Paris. His father had given him a car. Well, two cars—a Lexus SUV in Nevada and an Audi in DC. He'd had a moment or two of wrestling with himself before he'd just accepted and said thank you. It wasn't like he couldn't afford the cars himself, and Patrick knew that, so Alex felt it was a genuine gesture of affection and not some sort of misguided attempts to take care of him or buy him.

The gift he'd liked best was that while they were in Nevada, Patrick had remodeled the family home in Virginia to convert two guest rooms into a suite for Alex like the ones his brothers had. He'd said he wanted Alex to know it was home whenever he wanted it. Alex couldn't see himself giving up his independence but there was something about knowing he had a place to land if he needed it that was new and suddenly very vital.

He thought about what he had facing him going back to work: Fornell, Ziva, Abby, the media... Change.

He scowled. Some discordant notes were the result of his annoyance. With a sigh, he got up from the piano and decided to go to bed.

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Alex had just finished using the bathroom and washing his hands when Ziva slipped into the men's restroom. He met her gaze through the mirror's reflection. "Something I can do for you, Ziva?"

"I wanted to speak with you." Though it wasn't overt, her body language was definitely all come on. "You have been avoiding me, no?"

"No. I was gone until last night. But you know that already," he said without inflection as he finished drying his hands.

"I left you messages," she said stepping close.

"I noticed. Interesting that I never gave you my private phone number."

Ziva shrugged one shoulder. “We are on the same team, are we not?” She reached out to touch his lapel, and he stepped away.

He leaned down so his mouth was right by her ear and whispered, “I’m just going to say this once. Don’t ever follow me into the restroom again.” With that, he turned and left.

Ziva didn’t immediately follow—no doubt getting her temper under control—so he took the opportunity presented by her absence. “Need to go see Abby, Boss.” Gibbs nodded, so Alex headed for the stairs.

Like he had so many times, he entered her lab to the blaring heavy metal and called out, “Abbs!”

She spun around on her stool. “Tony!” Launching herself at him, she wrapped her arms around him tight. “Tell me you’re home for good!” she yelled over the music, right into his ear, nearly deafening him.

He pried her off of him, went for the remote for the stereo, and turned it off.

But before he could reply, she added, “Did you talk to that nasty assistant director at the FBI yet? They need to withdraw that complaint so Madam Director will remove the reprimand in my file. I wasn’t doing anything but making sure they weren’t getting your hopes up for no reason!”

“I’m not calling the FBI,” he snapped, trying to get his temper under control. “Even if I had any sway with them, which I don’t, you were reprimanded for using NCIS resources for what amounted to personal reasons, and you got caught. There was no active case!”

“I had to make sure they didn’t screw up!”

“I’m not discussing this! I told you in the email that this has nothing to do with me! The only person who can reverse your reprimand is Director Shepard since she issued it!” He blew out a frustrated breath, trying to find his patience. “I came down here to tell you I was offered a job in Nevada, and—”

“You’re not taking that!” she interrupted as she blew a raspberry. “This is home. You belong here. With us.”

“It’s not a straightforward decision,” he countered, and why they fuck did she think she got a say?

She propped her hands on her hips and glared at him. “It’s only complicated if you make it that way, *DiNozzo*.”

Her deliberate use of his old name brought him up short. He wasn't even sure what she was trying to do other than upset him. "What are you doing, Abby?"

"This is where you belong! You are Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. That's who you've always been, and you can be again. You just need to stop letting shiny things grab your attention."

He blinked, and his mouth opened and closed a few times before he managed to get out, "Are you really calling me a magpie and making my family out to be nothing more than bottle caps?"

She looked abashed briefly, but then this stubborn look entered her eyes that didn't give Alex much hope for the recovery of their friendship. "We are your family, Tony."

Shaking his head, he felt the ties of their friendship snapping under the strain of her behavior. He decided to just change the subject. He'd known Abby for years, and when she got her heels dug in, there was very little hope of redirecting her. "Ziva called me a few times over the holidays."

"So? She's your teammate. She can call you if she wants."

"So, I didn't give anyone my private cell except for Gibbs, and the phone is registered to Sheppard Industries. I'm hoping you weren't stupid enough to hack my father's company, and I know Gibbs didn't give it to either of you, so how'd you get it?"

"What makes you think I had anything to do with it?"

"Well, I don't think Ziva would use Mossad to try to get my phone number, and she sure as hell didn't do it alone. My gut says it wasn't McGee, and so that leaves you."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him but said nothing.

"I think you should answer the question, Abby," Gibbs' voice came from the door, and he didn't sound pleased.

Alex straightened his spine. "I can handle this, Gibbs."

"Not your job, Tony." He looked at Abby, who was wide-eyed. "I didn't give you Tony's cell. How'd you get it?"

Their stare off went on for longer than Alex thought it would, but Abby finally cracked and said, "I pulled up your cell phone records and figured the number registered to Sheppard Industries was Tony."

Gibbs pointed at Abby. "You wait there." He then crooked his finger at Alex. "With me." In the hall Gibbs quietly said, "You need to let me handle this. She crossed the line. Go get caught up on what you missed."

"Yes, Boss." Before he could walk away, Gibbs halted him.

"Ziva corner you? Noticed that she followed you earlier."

"Right into the men's room," Alex remarked dryly.

Gibbs' jaw muscles clenched. "I'll take care of it."

"I can handle it."

"Not the point, Tony. I'm not having her pulling this shit. I'll deal with it. Right after I deal with this. Get back to work."

He started to object but suddenly wasn't even sure what the hell he was objecting to. Putting those thoughts off until he had some time alone, he went back to his desk, leaving the mess with Abby behind him.

----

Alex had just finished rolling out a sheet of pasta when he heard the distinctive sound of the Sheppard town car in the drive. After a hectic workweek, including working through Saturday, he'd been antsy and bored at his condo. Patrick and Dave were due back from Nevada today for business meetings in DC all week, so he'd impulsively decided to go to the Sheppard family home rather than find something to distract himself with.

"Alex?" David said from the kitchen doorway, looking surprised but pleased. "Are you responsible for whatever smells so good?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I decided to take over the kitchen. Gave Carmen and Marco the night off so she didn't freak out when I turned her spotless kitchen into a pasta factory."

"Is that Alex I hear?" Patrick asked, coming up behind Dave and smiling. He didn't even blink at the mess Alex had made, he just walked in and gave Alex a one-armed hug. "Hello, son."

"You just got flour all over you," Alex laughed, holding his hands as far away from his father's Armani casualwear as possible.

He waved it away. "I'm sure there'll be more once you tell me how I can help." So he put his father and brother to work finishing up dinner.

Forty minutes later, they were sitting down in the small dining room.

“This is so good,” Dave said after the first bite. “How’d you manage to hold out on the culinary skills all month?” The question was clearly rhetorical, because Dave was too busy eating.

After a few minutes, Patrick asked, “How did the first week back go?”

Alex shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a mixed bag. The press is still giving me some issues, so it’s not exactly business as usual.”

“And everything else?”

With a huff of frustration, he set his fork down and braced his elbows on the table. “Nothing fits. People stare, ask insane questions, try to order me around.” He added the last thinking of Abby who was giving him the cold shoulder again. “Twice I’ve been approached about investing in someone’s business, and one request to pay for someone’s college tuition.” He rubbed his forehead. “People are insane.”

Patrick gave him a sympathetic look. “I wish I could tell you that it will stop, but I know it won’t. You get used to it and just start handing out your accountant’s business card, telling people they have to get past him. Well, *her* in my case. Elaine is particularly vicious.”

“I like vicious women. I need her number.”

“She’s entirely too old for you,” Patrick said dryly.

Alex blinked, then started laughing. “That was so—” His cell began ringing the distinctive tone he’d programmed for Gibbs. “Sorry. I need to take this.”

“What rule is that?” Dave asked. “Three?”

Grinning, Alex nodded. “Never be unreachable.” He answered the phone. “Hey, Gibbs.”

“*I expect a heads’ up when you skip out on this shit, Tony,*” Gibbs said sounding exasperated but not angry.

“I’m sorry, Gibbs, but I left my psychic decoder ring in my other pants.”

“*What?*”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he clarified. “What did I skip?”

There was a long silence. “*Ziva didn’t invite you to dinner.*” It wasn’t a question.

He leaned back in his chair. “No. I take it I was the only one not invited?”

*"You got it in one."*

"Well that was... petty."

*"That, too."*

"Too?"

*"In addition to stupid."*

"Gibbs," Alex said on a sigh. "It doesn't matter. She's playing games—she only wins if I get upset." He gestured to his family to see if he should take the call out of the room, but they waved him back in his seat.

*"Not just about you, Tony. She's trying to mess with my team. I'm not letting that go."*

"All right. Do what you've gotta do. I just don't want to get involved. It'd just play into what she wants." Alex really didn't care what Gibbs did about it. It was a childish ploy on her part to try to hurt him, and he wasn't biting.

*"I planned to send you two to follow-up on a tip about some smuggling through the port in Norfolk tomorrow morning..."*

"No reason to change that, Gibbs. It's work."

*"All right. There's a priority ride from Anacostia at 0615. Be on it. Check out a car from the Norfolk office. Expect you two back by lunch unless you find something."*

"Gotcha, Boss." The line went dead. He stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

"Everything all right?" Patrick asked.

"Fine. Just one of my coworkers trying to create friction on the team."

David frowned. "Why?"

"Could be because I won't sleep with her, but I actually don't think that's it. She's been trying to create tension since she got here about five months ago. The sex is new—since my real name was revealed."

"Oh." David made a face like he'd smelled something nasty. "That's not going to stop either, you know? People trying to climb into your bed because of your last name."

Alex took a bite of his pasta and chewed it like it had offended him in some way.

“Did Gibbs need you for something?” Patrick asked. “Should we reschedule lunch for tomorrow?”

He did some quick math on the short flight to Norfolk. If they found nothing, they should be back well before lunch. “I don’t think so. I need to check out a tip on something in the morning, but these things are routine, so it shouldn’t take long. If something comes up, I’ll give you a call and we can reschedule.” If there was any substance to the tip, he’d just call his father and bump lunch to later in the week.

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Patrick paced his office, waiting to hear something about Alex. His son was supposed to have lunch with him but hadn’t shown and hadn’t called. His cell was going straight to voicemail. Agent Gibbs had refused to answer his questions, likewise with Director Shepard. By late afternoon, he’d been hung up on twice, given the runaround by a bureaucrat repeatedly, and gotten no answers. Frustrated, he’d gone to President Hayes, who Patrick had known for years. It was high-handed and likely a huge overreaction, but he was fairly certain it would be a long time before he stopped overreacting about Alex.

“Any word?” David asked as he entered Patrick’s office.

“Nothing yet. Henry said he’d call the Secretary of the Navy personally.” It certainly wouldn’t matter to Henry that it was after business hours.

“You know Alex could have just gotten a high priority case and is out of cell phone range, and he’ll be pissed if we brought the President into a matter of lack of adequate cell towers,” Dave replied, clearly not believing a word of it. If it were cell towers, why wasn’t Gibbs affected? Why couldn’t Gibbs just say that Alex was out of range? No, something was wrong.

“Did you say anything to Matt?”

“Not yet. He’ll raze NCIS on principle, and we might need them. But he’ll be home soon and he’s gonna call...”

Patrick snorted. People *thought* Mattie was the sweet one, but he had the devil’s own temper. It was difficult to rouse it, so most people didn’t expect it when Matthew went on a tear. The only grace they had in the situation was that Matt was in Nevada.

“John?”

“Yeah, he knows. He’s pissed that they hadn’t given Alex a subdermal implant yet. I’m pretty sure Rodney is hacking NCIS as we speak.”

“We’re going to have to tell Matt something soon. He’ll raise hell that he’s the only one who doesn’t—” His cell ringing interrupted him and he scrambled to answer. “Sheppard here.”

*“Dr. Sheppard, this is Secretary Davenport. President Hayes asked that I fill you in on the situation at NCIS.”*

“So there *is* a situation?” he asked, feeling like his heart was being squeezed.

*“Yes, sir, there is. Agent Sheppard and his partner were following up on some intel about small arms smuggling. What we’ve been able to deduce is that there was a firefight and the agents wound up trapped in a shipping container, and presumably locked in.”*

Patrick’s hand tightened on the phone. “My son is in a metal box in the middle of January?” With Alex’s lung problems? Somehow he knew that wasn’t all of it. If it were just the shipping container, they’d have him out by now. “What else?”

*“The container was loaded on a truck and driven away. We are searching for the agents and the container as we speak.”*

Closing his eyes, Patrick struggled for equilibrium. “You’re telling me my son has been abducted?”

A glass shattering pulled his attention, and he met David’s horrified gaze.

A few short minutes later, Patrick hung up with the Secretary of the Navy and began shrugging into his coat. “I shouldn’t ask you to do this but I need you to tell Matt and update John.”

“Dad, where are you going?”

“I’m going to NCIS. And I’m not leaving until they bring my son back.”

— — — —

Patrick paced the conference room at NCIS, the same conference room where he’d first seen his son after thirty-two years. Though it hadn’t even been two months yet, he’d come to admire the man his son had become, and he loved Alex with every fiber of his being. He prayed he wasn’t about to hear about his son’s death.

Director Shepard had been by briefly, setting him up in the conference room with a Marine outside the door to act as an *escort*—but he knew *guard* when he heard it. The director had assured him she would notify him as soon as she had intel, seeming to be much more cooperative than she had been on the phone. So far, he’d heard nothing.

The door opened, and Patrick halted his pacing, staring in shock as David, Matthew, John and Rodney all came in.

“Any word?” Matthew asked immediately.

“Nothing.” There was really only one way his boys could have arrived so quickly; they’d gotten the SGC to beam them to Virginia.

John offered, “I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask, and O’Neill said yes.” Considering the circumstances, he couldn’t find it in him to be upset. “What happened, Dad? David wasn’t clear on the details.”

“There aren’t even any significant details in their system yet,” Rodney supplied. “Believe me, I looked. There are just some forensic tests that don’t have any context and a few other small things.”

Patrick was still getting accustomed to Rodney McKay but he rather liked the man and appreciated his determination to help in the situation. “The director said that Alex and another agent were following up on a tip about small arms smuggling, but it was a bad tip. She wouldn’t give additional information.” Rodney made a face, so Patrick knew he at least had more information about that part. “An unknown number of men with automatic weapons started firing at them, and they took cover inside a shipping container. The container was then removed from the port. They’re searching for the container.”

John looked homicidal and turned away. It was obvious to Patrick that he and Rodney knew something else.

Matthew crossed his arms over his chest. “So whatever is in that container is worse than small arms, and whoever was protecting it now has Alex.”

“Mattie...”

“This can’t be happening,” Matt said.

Patrick looked to John and Rodney. “What do you know?”

John turned back. “It doesn’t matter, Dad.”

“Wait. You know something?” David asked, looking angry.

“Stuff that doesn’t help!” John retorted.

“You don’t get to make that decision for us, John,” David bit out.

“Boys,” Patrick admonished softly before they could get going at each other and before Matthew could get into it at all. “John, just tell us what you know.”

“It doesn’t mean anything out of context,” John replied. “They found a body at the port, shot three times, all the slugs were a match to Alex’s registered NCIS sidearm. How does that help any of us right now?”

John was right, it didn’t help, but Patrick knew his oldest, and John was holding out. “What else, John?”

“Dad.”

The stare off lasted for several long moments before John finally said, “The bad intel... they think it was actually explosives.”

Matt made a small, wounded sound and abruptly went to stare out the window.

Patrick asked, “Do they think Alex is actually in the container with the explosives?”

“Yes,” John eventually replied, and he and Rodney exchanged a look, so Patrick knew there was more.

“Son, please just tell me.” Patrick already felt like he was about to snap.

“The body they found... It ties back to al-Qaeda,” John said, obviously reluctant to deliver the news.

Patrick finally sat down. Terrorists were looking for his son.

“They’re going to get him back,” David asserted. “And he’s going to have spent all day in a metal box in January, so let’s deal with that.”

“Right,” Patrick said, letting himself be refocused. “Alex’s lungs. Let’s make sure we have a specialist lined up to look him over. Alex already told me that his records are all at Walter Reed. We should plan to go there if possible.” He took the diversion and began to plan for any contingencies they might need if Alex was wounded or ill.

An hour later, they were all sitting in silence, still waiting for news. The director had been by with another non-update. Whatever was going on at the port wasn’t being relayed back to HQ, though she had mentioned that cell reception was poor.

Mattie had briefly entertained the idea of going to Norfolk to be closer if there was news, but they all knew that wouldn’t help. They could accidentally interfere with the search, and there was no guarantee that’s where Alex even was anymore. It was categorically a bad idea, though

it was difficult that Alex might be three hours away when they found him. Part of the preparations they'd made was having a helicopter on standby in both DC and Norfolk in case urgent transportation was needed.

The shrill ringing of his phone startled him. He hadn't wanted to accidentally miss a call so had taken it off vibrate. He pulled it from the inner pocket of his suit. "It's Gibbs." He answered quickly even though he was filled with equal parts anticipation and dread. "Gibbs?"

*"Hey... It's me. I'm fine,"* Alex's strong voice came over the line.

"Alex," he whispered, not even fighting the way his eyes stung and his throat closed up. "Son, where are you?" Matt dropped his head to the table and seemed to be taking deep breaths. David was staring anxiously. John and Rodney were shoulder to shoulder, John's expression fixed and intense. Rodney just looked worried.

*"We're just leaving the port authority. I waited until we were away from the warehouses because cell reception was shit and we couldn't get a clear signal. But I'm fine. Gibbs found us, and I'm on my way back."*

"Alex..." he had so many questions but he knew this wasn't the time. "Are you all right?"

*"Just a little wound to my arm. I'm okay."*

He hoped Alex was right about the severity of the wound. "We have a helicopter waiting to bring you home if you need it." The idea of waiting for them to drive back from Norfolk was horrible.

*"We already have a flight. I should be back in a little over an hour, but I need to go to the Navy Yard first. I'll be home tonight... as soon as I can be."*

"We're at NCIS," he admitted.

"You are?" Alex asked incredulously.

"I wanted to be here in case there was news. We'll wait for you."

*"You don't have to."*

"Yes, I do."

*"Right." Alex took a deep breath. "I'll see you soon, then."*

"Be safe, son." He waited until Alex hung up then looked at his other sons. "I didn't get any information other than he's fine and he's on his way back. He'll be here in about an hour."

“Fuck.” John scrubbed his hands over his face.

The wait was interminable before a Marine stuck his head in and said, “Agent Gibbs’ team has returned. He said he would join you shortly.”

“Who? Gibbs?” At the Marine’s nod, Patrick started towards the door. “I don’t particularly want to see Agent Gibbs. I want to see my son.”

“Sir, if you’ll wait here...”

“No.” Patrick wasn’t going to be moved and the Marine had been ostensibly assigned as an escort not a guard, so he gave way and escorted them down to the office area where Alex’s desk was located. Patrick was the only one who’d seen his son’s work station—on the day they’d met.

Two people were seated at their desks, a rather soft-looking younger man who Patrick thought from Alex’s descriptions was McGee, and a petite woman with dark hair, covered in streaks of what looked like soot. They both got to their feet when the Sheppards and Rodney all appeared in the bullpen. Before anyone could say anything, there was a ding and Gibbs strode off the elevator, not faltering for a second at finding five additional people in his territory.

“Told them to tell you I’d be up,” he fired off without preamble or pleasantries.

“Where’s my son?” Patrick countered, not in the mood for conversation.

He and Gibbs were involved in a brief stare-off when the one he thought was McGee said, “Uh, we left him in autopsy.”

Patrick’s knees felt wobbly and he was grateful for John and David on either side of him. Alex was supposed to be *fine*.

“What?” Matt asked weakly.

Gibbs reached over and smacked the back of the agent’s head. “He’s getting his arm checked by our ME, Dr. Mallard. Come on, I’ll take you.” When they all started to move, Gibbs glared. “One of you. He’s fine. The rest of you can wait for him to get up here.”

“Boys,” Patrick began.

“Go, Dad,” Matt said as he rounded Alex’s desk and took a seat. “We’ll wait. But not too long.” He shot Patrick a meaningful look. “We’ll just be getting to know Alex’s coworkers.” His tone was icy and, under normal circumstances, Patrick might have tried to spare the agents Matthew’s mood, but he couldn’t care less at the moment.

In the elevator with Gibbs, he asked, "How badly is he hurt?"

"He let the paramedics clean and wrap it but insisted on waiting until he got back to have Ducky check it over. Tony's stubborn about hospitals."

"Hm." They passed the next floor and he added, "You hung up on me."

"No time to deal with the ruffled feathers of family. My only job today was to find Tony. You want someone to talk to, call the director."

Patrick was torn. He knew in normal circumstances he'd appreciate Gibbs' focus and determination, but it worked against him today and he kind of wanted to smack the man. Plus, from what little Alex had said on the phone, it sounded like Gibbs had saved his son today, so he was grateful *and* annoyed.

"I can't help but worry about him, and I won't hesitate to use any means at my disposal to take care of him."

Gibbs flipped on the emergency stop and turned to face Patrick. "Your *means* includes the President of the United States. It does him no good to have his father calling the President every time he runs into a problem."

"Then answer my damn questions next time!"

"I was busy looking for your son!"

"And what would you have done, Agent Gibbs? If your child were missing? Would you stay home and hope it came out all right?"

Gibbs' expression hardened. Patrick thought Gibbs might be set to really tell him off, but instead, he flipped the elevator switch back to 'run.' "You're gonna get a pass on this one because he was in real danger."

"With him or with you?"

"Both."

Patrick wanted to resent Gibbs just for his sheer knowledge of Alex, but also for the bond he shared with him. But all he could manage was gratitude that Gibbs had found his son. "How close was it?"

"Don't ask that question. You'll make yourself crazy. He's alive—focus on that." The elevator doors opened and Gibbs strode out, other doors immediately swished open.

Patrick stepped into autopsy to find his son sitting on a metal table, shirt off, arm bloody, and a short older man standing in front of him, peering at an x-ray. The arm looked much worse than he'd expected, and his son was covered in sooty streaks. But he was *alive*, and Patrick felt like he could breathe again.

Alex met his gaze and held it, even as he said, "Thought you were gonna tell him I'd be right up, Gibbs."

"You're his kid, Tony. I wasn't gonna keep him in the bullpen without a gun," Gibbs retorted as he leaned back against the wall with his arms crossed. "How's he doing, Duck?"

"I'm rather afraid it was a mistake to bring Alexander to me. He will need to be treated in the emergency room."

"Ducky," Alex began. "Come on. Just stitch me up."

"I certainly cannot do that, my dear boy. You have a bullet sitting near your humerus. While the penetration is not terribly deep, I'm not prepared for any difficulties should they arise during its extraction. There are also several splinters in the wound. You'll need IV antibiotics."

Alex had been shot? Patrick's stomach felt like lead.

Gibbs pushed off the wall. "Ziva said you scratched it on a crate."

"Through my winter coat I scratched myself badly enough to take my arm out of commission and make myself bleed?" Alex asked dryly. "I think the angle was just right for the round to have been slowed down by the crates we were behind. It probably came through the corner where the wood is thickest and into my arm. Along with a bunch of damn splinters. Or it could have lost velocity passing through a crate and ricocheted off another. So, yeah, I guess I hurt it on a crate."

Gibbs' expression was thunderous, and he was clearly holding onto his temper by a thread.

"When I asked for your condition why didn't you tell me?"

"Boss, I didn't know," Alex said in a placating tone. "I thought I'd been grazed. The paramedic pulled some big splinters out, but the bleeding had mostly stopped. He agreed I could wait no more than a couple hours for stitches." He turned his attention back to Dr. Mallard. "What's the worst that could happen if you take it out?"

"My dear boy, you could bleed profusely. The bleeding is fairly minimal for a penetrative wound and the round could be acting as a cork, if you will. Just removing the projectile without being prepared for actual surgery would be very risky. And you certainly know that between dirty

wood fragments and the bullet itself that you need IV antibiotics. I'm afraid you'll need to go to the hospital posthaste."

"Ducky," Alex said again.

"Alex," Patrick whispered, trying to figure out how to navigate this minefield. "Please..."

Suddenly Alex was up and standing in front of him. "I'm okay. This isn't a big deal."

"You've been shot," he said, not sure how to express his horror at the idea without overwhelming his son with trying to take care of *him* rather than focus on his own injury.

"Dad," Alex replied softly, but firmly, and it was the first time he'd called Patrick 'Dad.' "I'm okay. It's all done and I'm fine. I promise."

"You spent all day in the cold. And did you inhale smoke? You're covered in soot." He didn't want to make his son carry the burden of Patrick's worry, but he wasn't going to back down about professional care.

"We were burning counterfeit money," he replied off-handedly. At Patrick's expression, he added, "It's a long story."

"But you inhaled smoke? With your lungs?"

"Alexander, your father is quite right," Ducky added. "I should have considered that. You most assuredly need to go to the hospital."

Alex made a face, and Patrick wasn't sure how to navigate the situation.

"Tony," Gibbs said firmly, and Patrick watched as the two exchanged looks until Alex slumped a little.

"Gotcha, Boss." He gingerly got back up on the table. "Wrap me up, Ducky. My father can get me to the hospital."

Patrick looked to Gibbs and exchanged nods. Though he somewhat envied Alex's bond with Gibbs, right now he was grateful for it.

Dr. Mallard insisted on Alex wearing a sling. He passed Patrick the x-ray. "It will save you some time in the emergency department." He looked back to Alex. "You are not to use that arm, and straight to the hospital."

"What hospital?" Gibbs asked. "I can send the rest of the Sheppards after you."

“Wait,” Alex said. “Which Sheppards?”

“All of your brothers are here, Alex,” Patrick replied. “And Rodney.”

“What? How did they get— Never mind. I know how.” He blew out a breath. “I’ll go tell them we’re going to the hospital.”

“What are you thinkin’, Tony?” Gibbs asked.

“That they need to see I’m okay and maybe they’ll go home rather than a big Sheppard-processional to the hospital.”

“Make it quick,” Gibbs ordered as he led the way out of autopsy.

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Alex leaned back against the elevator and closed his eyes for the short ride up. He could practically feel eyes on him: his father, Gibbs, and Ducky. His arm was throbbing like a bitch, but he needed to keep everything together because he had a situation to manage. He always had a situation to manage, whether it was Gibbs, his teammates, a case... there was always *something*.

After a dangerous situation, he’d normally find a way to joke with his team and lighten things up, but he already knew that wasn’t going to work with his family. And it seemed to make them worry *more* whenever he tried.

He pushed off the wall when the elevator dinged, and he regretted it because he jostled his arm. While everyone was still watching him after his pained gasp, he strode out of the elevator in the lead for once.

He noticed everyone was clustered in the bullpen, and only John’s head turned when they got off the elevator. His oldest brother’s eyes were filled with concern as they gave him a critical once-over. At least with the bandages and the sling, his bloody shirt was mostly covered.

John gave way as he approached the group of people. Mattie and Ziva were squared off with McGee holding on to Ziva and Abby’s arms, and David doing the same for Matt.

He made it just in time to hear the tail end of Matt’s harshly whispered sentence. “...won’t stick his dick in your poisonous cunt.”

“Whoa!” Alex exclaimed. “What the hell did you do?”

Everyone spun around and Matt exclaimed, “Alex!”

Ziva pointed at Mattie. "He had the nerve to say—"

"Not him. *You*. What the hell did you say to my brother?" Alex demanded, knowing Matt had to have been pushed pretty far to come up with *that*!

Ziva's brows snapped together, and she glared as Abby screeched, "Tony!"

"Jesus, you're messed up," Matt remarked. "Is any part of you huggable?"

Alex held out his good arm. "This side," he said with a smile.

Matt gave him a careful hug. "You're really okay?" he whispered.

"Gonna be fine." He nodded to his older brother. "Dave."

"God you're a pain." But Alex could see the stark relief, so he offered a reassuring smile.

"Someone want to tell me exactly why Mattie was commenting on the toxicity of Ziva's lady parts?" he asked.

"Tony," Gibbs said in a warning tone as he circled the group of Sheppards to move closer to his own desk.

Alex shot Gibbs a look, cautioning him to let Alex handle this. "Seriously. What the fuck happened?"

Dave answered, "She just was informing us of how you caused the situation today."

"Did she now?" Alex asked dryly, pain and fatigue having completely broken his give-a-fuck.

"Yeah, in Mossad they teach them how to stand out in the open in the crossfire of two AK-47s with only a handgun and not need cover. Hell, they probably manage it with a paperclip. We do it the hard way at NCIS and seek whatever is going to keep us from being bullet-riddled."

The odd little half-wounded sound from Matt made him regret his decision to snark at Ziva's expense. He blamed the pain as he squeezed his brother's shoulder. "I'm fine," he whispered again, ignoring Abby's indignant tirade and Ziva's huffing.

McGee rolled his eyes. "Way to play it up, Tony. You're just making your family worry over a scratch."

Before Ducky, his father, or Gibbs could go off, Alex softly asked, "Is that right?"

"Ziva told us how you scratched your arm on a crate and made a big production at the scene with the paramedics," McGee added.

“Really?” He pinned Ziva with a look. “Interesting.” He cracked his neck then looked around the office, trying to see if there was anything he missed. His backpack had been brought up by McGee and his sidearm had been surrendered because he had killed someone with it—he’d get a new one when he reported for duty again. “I guess we’re ready. No point in hanging out here.”

The group was already dividing—his family veering off to join him, and Gibbs moving close to Ziva and whispering lowly. Ducky was shooting him a concerned look, but Alex could only manage a nod.

“I have a helicopter waiting to take us to Walter Reed,” his father murmured, getting everyone’s attention.

“Wait, what?” Matt said.

“Yeah, I was hoping we could avoid the group hike to Bethesda. I got this, I promise. They’re just going to check me over,” he reassured his brothers.

Suddenly, Ziva was pushing through his brothers and hissing, “You tattletale.”

“Tattletale,” he corrected automatically. “I’m tired, Ziva. Go away.”

“How could you tell Gibbs that I shot you?” she hissed.

Alex frowned. “I didn’t.”

“Ziva!” Gibbs barked.

“You told him you were shot when my bullet ricocheted. You were not to tell anyone!”

“What the hell is she talking about, Sheppard?” Gibbs asked, shouldering Dave away so he could get closer.

“She’s talking about when she panicked and opened fire to try to escape the container, causing a bullet to ricochet all over. And I never even intimated that I wouldn’t say anything, because it most certainly was going in my report. Just like the fact that you missed everything you shot at when we were under fire,” he snapped. “And it damn well should be in your report, too!” he took a breath and prayed for patience. “What I told Gibbs was that a bullet likely ricocheted and then passed through a crate, losing velocity before it hit my arm. You know... when the bad guys were shooting at us.” And now he was furious with her for forcing this conversation.

“I want out of here,” he said to his father as he turned to leave. But suddenly his world exploded with pain and his vision completely whited out.

He knew he was sitting on the ground and propped up against something, but spots were swimming in his vision. He blinked a few times, even though the world felt like it was spinning. The pain in his arm had gone from a horrible ache to feeling like it was being ripped off. "What the fuck?" he finally managed to get out.

Ducky and Rodney, of all freaking people, were kneeling by where he was propped against his own desk, and Ducky was unwrapping his arm. "Ducky, stop," he croaked.

"My dear boy, I must check it. You're bleeding again, and I must ascertain if it has become exigent. Do be still."

He sort of managed to put the pieces together in his mind. Ziva had grabbed his arm when he'd turned away from her. There were a ton of raised voices, and he thought he heard Director Shepard a decibel or so below Abby. He wasn't hearing Gibbs, which worried him. What he could see was his father and Matt keeping back but watching closely. Dave was turned away, looking toward the source of the yelling.

"Rodney, are you playing field medic, because that seems improbable. John seems more the type," Alex remarked randomly.

"Shut up. I'm awesome at everything," Rodney snipped as he handed Ducky something. "And John's busy keeping the toxic twat's face in the carpet."

"Oh my god." He started trying to get up or at least move enough to see what was going on, but Rodney's hand thunked in the middle of his chest and held him still. "Oh no you don't, Sheppard. I'll sit on you if I have to. You're a bigger moron than John! Running around with a bullet in your arm and acting like everything is okay! Were you thinking? No! You clearly were *not* thinking. So, you can just stay put."

"I have to fix this."

"Shut up. There are more than a dozen people involved, and at least two of them are adults. You don't need to manage this or them. Now be still."

"I'm not one of the adults in that equation, am I?" he asked.

"Definitely not! Next time you get shot in Norfolk, you go to the hospital *in Norfolk*, for fuck's sake. What is wrong with you Sheppards?" he bitched and then ripped some tape with his teeth, passing it to Ducky. "I swear to Christ, you're just like John."

"Hey!" John yelled from a few feet away.

“Oh, shut up. Alex has made me cranky at all of you, because I know you all carry this same stupid-gene, and I’m rethinking my life choices.”

Alex laughed at the ridiculous threat—because it was obvious how much Rodney adored John—but it ended on a groan as any movement made his arm hurt worse than it had since he’d been shot in the first place.

“No time for any further dallying, Alexander. I fear that projectile has moved. It seems that you’ll need to sort out your interpersonal dramas some other day.”

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Alex woke, thoughts muzzy and trying to piece things together. He knew from the leaden feel in his limbs that he’d been under anesthesia, and even vaguely remembered the nurse waking him in recovery. He didn’t hurt too badly, so he knew he’d been given pain meds, but he didn’t feel too floaty or overly stupid.

Blinking a few times, he cautiously glanced around and found his father sitting by his bed, watching him intently. “Hey,” he rasped.

Patrick quickly helped Alex get a drink of icy water. “Nausea?”

Alex shook his head. “Time is it?” He finally took in the room, which was ridiculous. He knew money bought a lot of privilege—hell, he’d grown up with it—but not quite on the scale of the Sheppards. Money and influence apparently got you a huge private *suite* and likely a private nurse or four. There was even a sofa, and Mattie was on it, obviously deeply asleep. It had to be the middle of the night so visiting hours clearly didn’t apply in this room.

“About four in the morning,” Patrick remarked, not seeming at all tired.

He thought about telling his father to go home, but he had a hunch it wouldn’t work. “I remember the helicopter but it all gets fuzzy after.”

“When we landed, the doctor felt surgery was needed immediately for the best chance that you’d recover full use of your arm. He believes that Officer David,” his father scowled, “grabbing your arm shifted the bullet right into a nerve cluster. It’s why you were in so much more pain after she accosted you. The short ride seemed like torture for you.”

The tension in his father’s voice nearly made him wince. “How bad is it?” He hadn’t even considered that he might lose functionality in his arm.

“Doctor Fulenwider said you should get full use back if you’re careful while it’s healing and then complete your rehabilitation program.”

Relief washed over him, letting him know just how much worry he'd been pushing away. His arm definitely ached but he was surprised by the lack of real pain. He must be on pain meds. "I don't feel particularly stupid."

"Pardon?" his father asked, looking startled.

"I'm not in a lot of pain, but I don't feel like I have a raging case of poor judgment."

Patrick finally smiled about something. "Ducky mentioned you have issue with some pain meds. You boys all get that from your mother. I suggested they try the medication your brothers tolerate. Did Matthew tell you how he came out?"

Alex felt like he'd missed a conversational shift. "Uh, no?"

"He was fourteen and broke his collarbone skateboarding. The doctor gave him a shot of morphine, and I come back to the treatment room to find my baby boy flirting with every cute *male* nurse and doctor he could get to stand still for five seconds." Alex laughed, but Patrick's expression became more serious. "I almost lost you again today."

"I'm okay. My arm will heal—"

"It's not even the gunshot wound, though that horrifies me. Someone *took* you. I saw you Sunday night and the next morning, you were gone." Patrick stopped and rubbed his hand over his face.

"Dad..." Alex said, the change in address feeling natural. He reached out and grabbed his father's hand. "I'm fine." He hadn't even considered how the events of the day before might mirror the first abduction for Patrick.

Squeezing Alex's hand, Patrick got to his feet, leaned down and pressed a kiss to Alex's head. "I love you, son," he whispered. Pulling back, he patted Alex's cheek. "Get some sleep."

Alex blamed the pain medication for the stinging in his eyes.

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When he woke again, sun was pouring through the windows, and Gibbs was sitting by his bed, reading glasses on, paper in hand, drinking coffee. Alex tried to move but his arm made itself known, and he groaned. Gibbs set the paper aside and pressed the call button. "You're overdue. Told the nurse I'd ring when you woke."

A few minutes later, after *two* nurses got him squared away, Alex was propped up in bed, feeling no pain, and drinking some juice. "So am I getting out of here today?"

“No.”

When Gibbs didn't offer anything further, Alex prompted, “Why?”

“Infection had already set in on that arm. You get to leave tomorrow.” Gibbs pointed at him. “No trying to escape.” Alex's eyes narrowed, and Gibbs sighed. “Where does this hatred of hospitals come from. You father asked, but I really don't know.”

“Not like you're any better about it,” Alex retorted.

“Staying? No. But I go when I need to. I let them fix me when I've got a bullet in me.”

“I didn't know,” Alex shot back.

“You suspected,” Gibbs countered. “You've been injured before—shot before. You knew it wasn't a simple graze.”

Alex looked away.

“Talk to me, Tony.”

It took a long time but he finally said, “Senior... always said real men don't get sick. I'd have to be on death's door before he'd take me to the doctor. I know it's not right, but...” he trailed off and shrugged his good shoulder. “Plus hate needles from stupid plague shit.”

“Hn.” When the silence stretched out, Alex looked back to Gibbs, who was watching him closely. “And because Ziva already thinks you're weak, you weren't going to expose a weakness in front of her,” Gibbs stated bluntly.

Alex winced. “I wouldn't say the thought was that well-formed.”

“You need to get the DiNozzo-voice out of your head. You're as strong as anyone I've ever met, Tony, and that has nothing to do with how much pain you can bear. Don't let the past take the future from you,” Gibbs concluded, and Alex felt like they were dangerously close to this venturing into Gibbs' family territory. He knew pushing right now would send Gibbs out the door, just as sure as it had kept Alex from admitting how injured he was.

“My family freaked out?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yep.” Gibbs' brevity said a lot.

“I don't know how to avoid that.”

“You can’t avoid it. Just don’t try to hide from them because they’re worried—they’ll only worry more.” Gibbs scrubbed a hand over his face. “Your father is on the phone with John right now, Rodney is in the next room yelling at someone on the phone.” Gibbs’ expression told Alex that the man didn’t know what to make of Rodney McKay. “Matt went for more coffee, and David is with John.”

“So, what happened after Ziva grabbed my arm—I didn’t even see anything afterward. And what the hell was she thinking?” If she’d permanently damaged his arm, he couldn’t even begin to figure out what he’d have done.

“I don’t know what she was thinkin’, Tony. I’m not sure she was. John broke her nose when he put her down. Jenny had a fit, went to SecNav to complain.”

“Oh, hell. John going to get in trouble?”

“No. Ziva screwed up. She didn’t accidentally grab your arm, no matter what she says, and she took a fairly stable injury and could have made it life-threatening or caused you permanent disability. That may not have been her aim but apparently she nearly killed you more than once yesterday, and I’m not gonna have it.”

“Boss...”

“Shut up, Tony. It’s not your job to defend her or McGee or anyone else. You’re my Senior Field Agent, and you’re not on the job to cover for them. Don’t know how long it will take SecNav to review Jenny’s complaint, but Ziva’s off my team.”

Alex sighed. “But I might not even be on the team.”

“Doesn’t matter. Can’t have a loose cannon. It’s done. She was off the team no matter what. What the hell was she thinking opening fire in a metal box?!”

“I think she was panicking.” At Gibbs’ expression, Alex held up his good hand. “Not justifying, just explaining.”

Gibbs gave what could barely pass as a grunt of acknowledgement. “Her stunt with the dinner party... she’s trying to drive a wedge in the team, and it won’t fly with me. By the way, you were right. You hit your target three times and she didn’t land one.” Before Alex could ask any more questions, the door opened and Matt came in carrying two trays of coffee.

“Any chance one of those is for me?” he asked hopefully.

Matt smiled but shook his head. “Not even. One for me, one for Dad, two for Rodney, and *four*,” he shot Gibbs an incredulous look, “for Agent Gibbs.”

“Just Gibbs, kid,” he cut in.

“And *Matthew* or *Matt* will do just fine, Agent Gibbs,” his brother retorted immediately.

Gibbs snorted in amusement and inclined his head. Getting to his feet, he grabbed one of the coffees. “Need to check in.” And since he left three coffees, Alex knew he’d be back.

Matt took the seat by the bed, coffee in hand. “Do we need to engineer your escape?”

Alex blinked then began to laugh. “Okay, that’s not what I was expecting.”

Shrugging, Mattie replied, “Rodney’s going to yell at you for not getting treated sooner, Dad’s going to worry, John is going to frown and try not to yell at you, David will try to fix everything... that covers all the points on my mind except keeping you entertained.” He shot Alex a grin then his expression got more serious. “But, really, what is with those people you work with? How can you stand it?”

“That bad?”

“Jesus, Alex, they’re horrible. I mean, Gibbs is okay, and he obviously cares about you. Plus he’s got that hot older guy thing going on.”

“Jesus, Mattie!”

“What? Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed?” At Alex’s unimpressed face, Matt laughed. “Okay, I’ll drop it.” His expression sobered again. “Your director is a suck up. At least until her pet spy got in trouble. McGee is a supercilious little twit. Abby is spoiled and entitled beyond belief. And that Ziva chick? What a horror show. How do you stand it?”

“They’re not that bad,” he said weakly.

“True. Ducky is made of awesome.”

Alex rolled his eyes. But then he got to thinking about it. “What exactly happened?”

“McGee was telling us about you and making jokes, but it was all a thin veneer for calling you incompetent. Ziva was just a fucking bitch. Then after she grabbed you, the thing I can’t forgive, is other than Gibbs and Ducky, none of those assholes cared what happened to *you*. They just screamed and yelled about that bitch getting schooled by John.”

Alex rubbed his hand over his face, easily able to visualize the whole situation. And it hurt. But he didn’t want to dwell on it. “I’m sorry about... everything.”

“Fuck that, Alex. I don’t care about anything but that you’re alive. None of that shit matters. None of those horrible *people* matter.”

He mentally added some more things to the tally of stuff he had to think about.

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By lunchtime, the mood in Alex’s hospital room had brightened considerably. There was actually a reasonably sized table in his room, and, except for John, his whole family was sitting around it eating. Gibbs had showed up briefly to claim his coffees then left for NCIS.

Alex was poking at his hospital food suspiciously, but it wasn’t as bad as it could be. The door opened while Matt and Rodney were in the midst of plotting something. No doubt there’d be an explosion at the end. A familiar person appeared, and Alex grinned as he got to his feet.

“Hey there, Buckeye,” Brad said cheerily as he shut the door.

“Wolverine,” Alex countered and shook his doctor-turned-friend’s hand.

“Heard you were here. Stopping by to check on you.”

“Let me introduce you.” He pointed to everyone at the table. “My father, Patrick Sheppard; older brother, David; younger brother Matt; and Rodney McKay, here to plot world domination with Pinky over there,” he finished pointing back to Matt. “This is Brad Pitt, no relation, infectious disease specialist.”

Everyone suddenly frowned. It took him a second but Alex got it. He rolled his eyes. “He treated me for the plague. Seriously.” Turning back to Brad, he asked, “This is just a social call, right?”

“Eh. Since I’ve got you here, thought I’d give you a quick check. Maybe drag you down to radiology to get a CT scan so I can look at your lungs.” He looked over toward the family. “While there are quite a few documented cases of bubonic plague survivors, there aren’t many pneumonic plague, and none who survived without antibiotics. Alex here is a bit of a wonder, and he agreed to let me follow his progress.”

“Yes,” Alex agreed readily, eager for a little space. He didn’t care if it was out of character to agree to a medical test. He was torn between appreciating how much his family cared about him and feeling weird about being in this enormous hospital room with everyone sitting around just watching him *mend*.

“Let me get a chair,” Brad said, turning toward the door.

Alex made a face.

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“Just how much smoke did you inhale?” Brad asked, pulling off the stethoscope.

“I don’t know. Didn’t seem that bad at the time.”

“You’ve got a rale in that left lung. Could be complications from the plague, the smoke inhalation, or even related to the surgery. I want to monitor it, however. Also, your lung function has decreased since the last time I saw you. Since I have you as a captive audience for the next twenty-four hours, I’m going to send respiratory therapy up to see you every four hours. So behave,” Brad said sternly.

Alex made a surrender gesture. “Do you really think I’m going to get away with anything?”

Brad leaned against the wall. “Oh, probably not. Your father especially was watching you like a hawk. Not that I blame him. How are you doing with all of that?”

“It’s an adjustment.”

“Well aren’t you just the master of understatement.”

Alex snorted. “Yeah. But it’s good. I wouldn’t change it.”

“Nearly called you, but figured I’d give you some time to settle in.”

Waving that away, Alex retorted, “You’re always welcome to call. Wouldn’t have sent you the new number otherwise.” They talked for several minutes before they were interrupted by some actual pulmonologists who wanted to poke at him and listen to his deep breaths until he was ready to pass out.

When Alex finally got back to his room, it was just Gibbs and his father talking in low tones. Climbing out of the chair and shooting it an evil look, he started toward the two, but Gibbs’ glare had him rolling his eyes and heading for the bed. He shot back over his shoulder, “If you want me to actually stay here, you’d better fill me in.”

His father stepped up to the bed and squeezed Alex’s shoulder. “You doing okay?”

He thought about just skirting around the question but he was coming to see that avoiding the difficult stuff with his family just made it harder later. “Mostly fine. They’re going to seize the day, so to speak, and bother me with respiratory therapy for the rest of my visit.”

Patrick’s eyes narrowed. “Your lungs?”

“A little stressed, but Brad wasn’t overly worried. So, I agreed to the RT. And now, we’ll all go back to the portion of the program where we don’t talk about my lungs or the plague.”

Lips twitching, Patrick nodded. “All right, son. I’m going to leave you and Gibbs to talk. I’ll return soon.”

Frowning, Alex watched his father leave then looked up to Gibbs. “What happened?”

“Ziva’s being sent back to Israel.”

Alex blinked. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope. SecNav asked to see the surveillance footage and, considering that she made your wound significantly worse and could have caused permanent damage, he concluded that she battered you, and John was acting in your defense. I had already said she was off my team, but Jen was going to reassign her. But...” He trailed off, making the face he got whenever he had to deal with politics.

“Let me guess, SecNav wasn’t going to have the woman who assaulted the son of a friend of President Hayes working for him.”

“Right.”

“Gibbs.”

“Don’t take it on, Tony. She was off the team no matter what.”

“So it’s over.”

“Not completely. SecNav is having the director come to the Pentagon day after tomorrow to justify her decision to place Ziva at NCIS. No telling how that will go.”

“Damn,” Alex whispered.

“Whether you like it or not, this is the reality of the family you’re in. When people fuck up with you, it’s going to come under closer scrutiny than your average agent.”

“I don’t want special treatment,” Alex insisted.

“Too bad,” Gibbs said bluntly. “Is that price too high, Tony?”

“Of course not,” he snapped back. Even if he had to choose between his family and NCIS, it would be an easy choice. That thought brought him up short, and he realized how much he’d changed. NCIS used to be everything.

He blew out a breath and let the random thoughts coalesce into some sort of picture. His family *was* the most important thing now, but that realization didn't solve his big dilemma. Special treatment wouldn't be as much of an issue in Nevada. He'd be a one-man unit, and there wouldn't be any public or coworkers to care that his father was friends with the President.

It was another data point, but it still didn't give him an answer.

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Alex watched as John came in and sprawled in the visitor's chair. His brother carefully followed the activity as Alex finished up with the respiratory therapist. As soon as she was gone, Alex raised a brow in inquiry.

"Everything's settled. Air Force isn't going to take any action based on Secretary Davenport's recommendation."

"Good." He watched his oldest brother for several moments. "You look pissed."

John's hands curled into fists. "She's just lucky the only thing she got was a broken nose and a dose of humiliation." He glanced away. "I'm never going to be rational about someone hurting you." He met Alex's gaze. "None of you. Just... be careful, okay?"

There were several things Alex could have said, like pointing out that John should know it wasn't always in his control, but all he said was, "Okay, John."

John leaned back and propped his feet up on Alex's bed. Reaching out, he grabbed Alex's Kindle. He smirked. "So... Gibbs thinks a Kindle is porn?"

Alex groaned. "Matt spilled the beans?"

"David actually."

"Well, hell."

"So, I heard I missed the asshole who broke your leg."

Alex threw a pillow at John. "He probably saved my life. Plus, he's a friend, so don't be a dick."

"Guess he gets a pass then," John said with a grin. "You know I watched that game? Always been big on college ball." He scratched the side of his neck absently. "I even remember noticing you looked like a Sheppard."

"John..."

“I mean, it’s weird. I think back on that and wonder why I didn’t really *think* about that. But I remembered that I was seeing you in everyone with even a passing similarity to us. Whenever I’d see someone with eyes like mom or dad’s nose, I’d wonder. And I had to stop, because it was making me crazy.”

Alex wasn’t even sure what to say to that.

“I can’t help but want to have figured it out back then,” John admitted.

“Don’t do this to yourself. And that’s not even your brother talking. That’s someone with nearly a dozen years of law enforcement experience who has seen hundreds of people drowning in regret and guilt for things that they had no control over.”

John was quiet for a long time. “We couldn’t deal with losing you twice.”

Alex sucked in a breath, letting that settle for a minute. “You know your job isn’t a cakewalk, right?”

John rocked back and looked up at the ceiling. “I know. And I wish I could be reasonable and not so damn hypocritical, but—” He blew out a breath. “Just... don’t be gone again.”

Alex nodded, not even sure what he was agreeing to really, but he got this wasn’t about promises, it was about wishes, hopes, and needs.

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The doctor gave Alex a final check then wrote his discharge paperwork. He was even fine with the wheelchair—whatever got him out of the hospital fastest. His arm still felt like shit and he had two weeks in the damn sling to look forward to, but he was so over the hospital food, IVs, blood tests, and just being stuck in one place.

He got situated in the front seat of David’s car and waited until they were on the road before saying, “You want to get it off your chest now?”

“Pardon?”

“Well, everyone else has found time alone with me, said what they had to say. Our timing has been bad, so...”

David laughed. “I’m just glad you’re okay, Alex. It shined a light on some things we need to get straight.”

Alex’s brows drew together. “Such as?”

“Who has your medical proxy? Where are your medical records? Who is going to be notified if you’re injured? Who are your doctors?”

“David, you don’t have to plan for the worst,” Alex said as gently as he could.

“It’s not—” He sighed. “I just need to be prepared. I want to know what to do if something happens to you. I want to be sure you’re taken care of.”

“Hm.” Alex considered that for several seconds. “And that’ll make it easier?”

“Easier? Hell no. But I don’t want to flounder over logistics when you need me.”

“Okay. I’ll get you the info you asked for.”

David’s shoulders relaxed a little and he nodded. “Thanks.”

After a couple minutes of silence, Alex asked, “You want me to go to Nevada, don’t you?”

After a pause, David replied, “I *want* you to be a concert pianist, but that’s me just wanting you to be safe. And don’t think it’s just you. You think I like it that Mattie works with things so prone to blowing up over the tiniest error?”

Alex had to concede that point. He pretty much hated that, too.

“But, yeah, I’d like you in Nevada. I think it’s safer. I like the idea of Matt having someone there to pull him away from his engines, and I think I’d see you more, and I want that. But I’m not going to ask you, Alex. I want you to do what you *want* to do. And whatever it is, I’m your brother, we’ll be fine.”

Alex appreciated the lack of pressure and the honesty. After several miles, he decided to broach the subject of something he’d noticed in Nevada. “I’m gonna get all up in your business for a second.”

David gave a surprised laugh. “Okay.”

“Ask her out.”

“Who?”

“Colonel Carter. I see the way you look at her. You should take the chance.”

His brother huffed. “Who else knows?”

“Just me. Only Matt and I see you with her enough, and Matt only has eyes for things mechanical when we’re on base.”

“I’m only in Nevada part time, Alex. That doesn’t seem fair to her.”

“Seriously, Dave? Have you paid attention to what she does for a living? She’s probably gone more than you. And maybe that’s a good balance. You both have stressful lives that keep you busy a lot. So maybe you’ll click and when you’re together, it’ll be that much better.”

David was quiet for a long time. “I’ll think about it.” He glanced over. “You got your eye on anyone?”

“Nah. Not right now. Bad time for that considering I don’t know what I’m doing or where I’ll be.”

“So you haven’t decided to stay here?”

“Believe me, everything is up in the air. I’m just flying blind right now.”

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Alex sat out back, looking at the grounds and thinking about his future. He’d sought some privacy after lunch, needing to get his thoughts in order, but so far, nothing was coming into focus.

“I get it,” Rodney’s voice came from behind him then the man himself moved into view and took the seat next to Alex.

“What is it you get?”

Looking off at nothing, Rodney replied, “Your self-worth coming from you work.”

Alex gave a start of surprise. “What?”

“It’s easy to seek validation from something you do well when you don’t get it anywhere else.”

And that was a little too on the nose. “What’s your point?”

Rodney finally looked at him. “My point is that you have so much more than your work—a family that *loves* you, friends, skills, creativity, a damn good head for math and it drives me crazy that you don’t do anything with it!” He huffed then added, “But the point is that you need to stop thinking about the box you’ve been in and what that’s done for you. When you eliminate the box, is what you get from that job worth it? Is it all that you want?”

Alex made himself not get defensive and think about what Rodney was saying.

“You don’t get it. You could do so many things. Hell, you could even come with us. I mean, do you have any idea how many more jarheads they’re sending us? We need them, but *they* need a minder.”

Unable to stop the laugh, Alex only managed, “Rodney.”

“Seriously. You could work at the Mountain, Nevada, our house, DC. It seems like a Sheppard thing that you guys are just great at whatever it is that you do.”

“I couldn’t go with you.” Not that it didn’t have appeal, because what an adventure. “I could never do that to my Dad. I don’t know how he’d handle me leaving.”

“Yeah, I figured. But I needed to say it. O’Neill wants you at Homeworld—he’ll probably let you pick your assignment. You just need to stop dwelling on what you had and think about what you want.”

“It’s not easy.”

“No one said it was easy,” Rodney snapped. “But ask yourself if you’re holding on to what you had here for you or for Gibbs.”

Alex shot Rodney a glare. “This isn’t about Gibbs.”

“Isn’t it? I’m not one of your brothers, I’m not going to pussyfoot around you. I met all those assholes you work with. Gibbs might be a bastard, but so am I. And he’s okay as far as bastards go. But the rest? I’m gonna have to stop being your friend if those idiots are why you’re holding on to DC.”

Alex sighed heavily. “You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“I know.”

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Alex paused at the top of the steps and watched Gibbs working on the boat. When Gibbs finally glanced up and quirked a brow, he started down the stairs. He’d gotten his stitches out today and done away with the sling. Initially, he’d been thinking that in a few days, he could resume desk duty. But something had clicked in his brain. All the bits and pieces and the long hours thinking had finally come together, and he’d known what he was going to do.

He leaned against the wall and considered what he was going to say for several beats. “I’m going to Nevada.” Sometimes blunt was best.

Gibbs paused his sanding briefly then nodded. “I figured.”

"I thought I'd go now. Not a lot of point to coming back for desk duty. While my arm was healing, you got used to being without me anyway. Seems like the time is right."

Putting the sandpaper down, Gibbs turned to face Alex. "That's something I'm never gonna get used to."

"Gibbs..." Alex looked down, his feelings getting the best of him. "I realized you were the only reason I wanted to stay."

"Selfishly, I want you here. But if I were your father, I'd want you away from this, too. Can't even say that a part of me isn't grateful you won't be under fire all the time." Gibbs placed his hand on Alex's shoulder. "I couldn't be any prouder of you, Alexander Sheppard. It's been my honor to serve with you."

Alex glanced away, blinking rapidly. The remark customary amongst military said a lot coming from the dyed-in-the-wool Marine.

Gibbs pulled him into a hug, and Alex readily returned it, thinking of the years he'd felt safe with Gibbs watching his back. "You take care of yourself," Gibbs whispered.

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Alex pulled up to the house that had begun to feel like home. He stared at the house as he considered the future. Saying goodbye to Gibbs had felt like the last thing holding him here was done. He would miss some of the others, but only his bond with Gibbs had been anywhere close to keeping him in DC. Rodney had been dead on about that.

John and Rodney had returned to Colorado a couple of days after Alex got out of the hospital. John was now a lieutenant colonel, officially in command of the military side of the expedition, and he and Rodney would be leaving for Atlantis soon. Matt and David were leaving for Nevada in two days, both needing to get back to work. All Alex needed to do was let them know he was going with them.

When he'd been framed for murder, he never could have even imagined that this was the direction his life would take; that he'd finally gain everything he'd always wanted. The job wasn't perfect, but no job ever was. But he'd finally seen that the work wasn't all that mattered; it didn't define him. His Dad, John, David, and Mattie... that's what mattered.

He finally got out of the car and headed inside, managing to not see anyone as he went up the stairs to his father's study. Tapping on the door, he entered and let his father's smile of greeting and the real pleasure at Alex's presence wash over him.

"Hey, Dad."

The End