Summary

As Tony and the others draw closer to identifying The Calling’s new leader, the group takes steps to throw the task force off their trail. They redouble their efforts to locate Joanna and Tony, and decide it’s time to make their presence felt in the US. Meanwhile back in DC, Gibbs and the MCRT have cause for concern and decide to investigate when a series of seemingly unrelated events all lead back to Tony as the common denominator.

This story is the final installment in a three-part series. They are meant to be read in order, so if you haven't read the first two stories, 'Turning the Page' and 'Blank Pages', you've missed a lot and might be a little lost! Go! *waggles fingers* Go read those first!! Um...please ;)

Notes

Takes place immediately after the events in 'Blank Pages.'

Beta'd with the usual "I can't leave things alone" disclaimer. Any remaining mistakes are mine.
The Calling uncover lies and betrayal perpetrated by one of their own. Back in Seattle, Tony and Joanna read the team in on the first case involving The Calling and the new information uncovered in Shanghai. Well, most of the new information...
“We give the agents what they think they want. It’s time we went fishing...with a lure they won’t be able to resist. When they take the bait then we set a trap; one that will put an end to their interference once and for all.” – LaPointe, Blank Pages

~Shanghai~

LaPointe tapped his fingers impatiently on the ornate desk in his office. The room had been thoroughly cleaned; all evidence of the violence that had taken place there hours before had been completely removed, including the body of the ill-fated Chan. Now he was waiting for Rousseau to return from searching Chan’s home and accessing his computers. With the exception of Rousseau, LaPointe trusted virtually no one completely, so critical members and operatives within his new network were under periodic visual and electronic surveillance. LaPointe felt certain Rousseau would find something that would help them to determine what Chan might have been storing on the flash drive he dropped in his haste to escape the earlier raid.

Chan’s loss of the flash drive was highly problematic. Their principal informant on the local police force, Officer Wei, confirmed the police had not recovered it so it was highly likely that the CIA had. Another reason to find Teague, he mused in annoyance. The woman operative who’d proven to be such a thorn in their side in the past now seemed intent on pursuing them again. He wondered what made her so driven and focused on them. Daniel had probably known this woman’s motivations as well as the identity of the American agent that eventually killed him. To their detriment, his protege hadn’t seen fit to keep him entirely in the loop on certain aspects of their past operations in Shanghai. That was past and in the present, it was more important that they ascertain what information fell into the CIA’s hands and act quickly to mitigate any impact from potential disclosure of their operations.

Chan was one of a number of accountants employed by the Calling to manage the flow of funds from their various global operations; he also arranged to pay bribes and local informants, including some of those assigned to locate the CIA woman and her associates. The lost information was most likely damaging and he’d already made arrangements to relocate their some of their operations in Shanghai and beyond.

A tap at the door pulled LaPointe from his musings, and he looked up as Rousseau entered and took the seat opposite his desk. “Well, Emile?”

"It appears Chan was a traitor working both sides. We need to step up our monitoring of key members in the group to prevent further infiltration,” Rousseau reported.

LaPointe's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What did you find?"

“I reviewed the warehouse surveillance footage for Chan's movements before and during the raid.
Other than confirming the presence of the CIA woman, there was nothing telling to be seen; it appeared he could have dropped the flash drive inadvertently,” Rousseau began. “However when we searched his home and laptops, we found indications he had been feeding limited information to the CIA for some time. It’s highly likely he was the leak that gave up the location of the arms warehouse and may have dropped the flash drive intentionally, hoping they would find it and we would not come to learn about it.”

“Do we know why he turned on us?”

“I believe so.” Rousseau ventured. “His covert communications with the CIA show our mousy little accountant had no qualms about the cyberterrorism operations of our network. When it came to the chemical weapons, arms, and explosives we’re stockpiling, he seems to have developed a moral objection. He’s given up both warehouses here at the port.”

“Well, he won't be giving up anything further, and we've made an example out of him for the others to see how we deal with those who would seek to infiltrate and betray us,” LaPointe seethed. “Now, we need to act quickly to protect our assets and operations. Our plan to plant evidence and false trails for the CIA and their operatives to follow should be implemented immediately. We also need to identify who Teague is working with. Perhaps arrange some infiltration of our own, yes?”

"Yes," Rousseau agreed, "but that will take some time. We have the more immediate issue of the flash drive to deal with. As you know, we're using key logger programs to monitor activities of those in the group with access to our more sensitive information. In addition to giving up the warehouse locations, Chan appeared to be compiling other information about us to turn over to law enforcement. We should assume anything he had access to has been compromised."

“Were you able to determine exactly what he accessed?”

“Yes; some very damaging information to us. Along with the financial records held here in Shanghai, he appears to have found information tracing back to our roots in France, including funding sources. He also had locations of some of our weapons stores and regional operating cells outside Shanghai.”

LaPointe furiously pounded a fist on the desk. His chair scraped noisily as he rose and paced in irritation while wishing he'd not acted so hastily in eliminating Chan. After hearing what the man had managed to hide from them, he would have liked to have spent a few days investigating Chan’s pain threshold first.

Rousseau smiled at this expression of his leader’s ire, their longtime association allowing him to
guess exactly what the man was thinking.

“You can’t torture the dead, LaPointe,” he offered with a knowing smile. “Yes, it’s too bad we did not have this information earlier; I so love to watch you work. But what’s done is done.”

“Yes, Emile. You’re right of course.” LaPointe took his seat again with a sigh. The fanatical light was gone from his eyes and his aristocratic features were now composed again, as if a switch had been thrown. “We need to move quickly to transfer funds and relocate weapons stores. Fortunately our operating cells are already designed to be mobile. It will not be a difficult matter to relocate them.”

“I've already begun those arrangements to move,” Rousseau began, “the men are prepared, we just need to transmit the new locations.”

“Good. We’ll finish setting up the new location outside the city first. Perhaps that will buy us some time away from the CIA’s prying eyes here within Shanghai. In the meantime…perhaps in death, our traitor can be of some use. I think his betrayal can be turned to our advantage.”

“I don’t see how,” Rousseau ventured.

“The flash drive could present an opportunity to wait for our pursuers to reveal themselves to us.” LaPointe explained. “The CIA will suspect we know about the loss of the drive and that we will act to make the information obsolete. Even so,” he continued, “they will still investigate the information. We keep all the locations Chan gave up under surveillance, watch covertly as they carry out their work. Perhaps we can identify their operatives and the extent of their reach. We plant evidence to mislead them and we’ll leave just enough bread crumbs that are accurate to avoid raising their suspicions.”

Rousseau nodded, pleased with the spur-of-the-moment plan LaPointe formulated. “That could work very well for us,” he agreed. “The information on the flash drive will lead them to France…and almost certainly back here. Our informants in the police department will ascertain where Teague and her operatives are based in Shanghai. Our people at the airport will track her travel.”

“Yes, perfect,” LaPointe said. “It’s nearly time to shift some of our operations to the United States. Eventually we will learn where they are based. Once we do, the American government and their allies will learn we will not be defeated so easily this time. And they will learn it at great cost.”
Joanna walked alone through the nearly empty corridors of Sentinel Security Systems or ‘S3’, as they often referred to their headquarters. The false front company behind which the task force concealed their domestic and overseas counterterrorism work kept a skeleton crew on at night, gathering intelligence and coordinating with offices in other far away time zones. She’d chosen an after-hours meeting to minimize the number of personnel around when the rest of the team arrived for the debriefing on The Calling.

Joanna intended to keep the agreement she’d made with Tony to read in the rest of the task force on the first case and the disturbing information they’d discovered in that recent raid in Shanghai. She’d agreed to disclose the background of her previous confrontation with The Calling as part of the NCIS-led investigation, and everything about why it tied in to their current efforts.

Well, almost everything. Tony was still resistant to the idea of continuing to keep his true ‘Tony DiNozzo’ identity a secret from his team, predicting it would cause future problems and questions of trust.

She sensed Tony was under a great deal of stress maintaining the cover, and increasingly resentful at having to do so though he hadn’t specifically spoken to her about it. Still…The Calling had somehow gotten an early warning about the raid and all but two of their people in the warehouse had escaped. Until they identified who was feeding The Calling information, she was adamant that they take no unnecessary risks with his safety. At this point they had no idea if the new leak was someone here or in Shanghai, so he’d reluctantly agreed.

Joanna entered the S3 secure conference room and was surprised to see Tony already there, organizing stacks of files. “You’re early, Nick. What’s up?”

“Hey Joanna. Shut the door and lock it, would you?”

Joanna raised a questioning eyebrow, but complied and then took a seat at the table. “So, what’s going on?” she asked, mystified by his request.

“I’ve got the CIA file copies you provided on The Calling, but they’re heavily redacted,” Nick began. “The NCIS case files are more detailed. Before I resigned, I copied my own case files and everything we had on The Calling.” Nick explained. “I’ve gone through them with a fine-tooth comb and removed any references to my name. I’ve got copies for the team. They’ll help give us a
place to start while Lena and Melanie work on decrypting the flash drive files.”

“Ah, excellent,” Joanna nodded, pleased Tony thought to bring the NCIS files with him when he came onboard the task force. That meant they could avoid any potentially awkward questions raised by making official requests to NCIS for the information. The last thing they needed was NCIS involvement. “Anything else before I open the door?”

“They aren’t going to be happy about not getting the old case files sooner, especially Matt and Gary. Lena and Melanie are among the best out there in computer forensics. They are going to eventually figure out that you’ve given them an altered flash drive and not the original copy.” Nick pointed out. “I’m assuming the files with my face are now missing?” he asked.

Joanna nodded. “Yes,” she confirmed. “I left all the files that showed me in them. I had someone I trust at HQ edit the security video footage from the raid to remove the parts where you appeared.”

“I hope you’ve thought about how you’re going to handle that, and the issue of sharing the case files this late in the game. I can’t help much since ‘Nick’ isn’t supposed to know about them either.” he said, making finger quotes around the name. “Other than that, I think we’re ready to go.”

“Just in time, too,” Joanna said as she opened the door. “Here they come now.”

Once everyone was seated, Joanna began her briefing.

“As you all know, we’ve recently received intelligence that’s given us our first solid leads on a terrorist organization based in Shanghai. They refer to themselves as The Calling,” Joanna began. “We recovered a flash drive during the raid Nick and I conducted in Shanghai two days ago. Most of the files are encrypted but a few weren’t. Those files present a new wrinkle in this investigation that the rest of the team needs to be read in on.”

Joanna paused, walked around the table and passed out copies of the case files. “We’re turning over all other open investigations to the FBI and Homeland in DC. The CIA HQ at Langley will handle any loose ends overseas. For the time being, we’ll be putting everything we have into pursuing this new lead on The Calling.”

“Hey, wait a damn minute!” Gary, the quick-tempered ATF agent on Nick’s team objected strenuously. “We’ve been working a couple of these cases for most of the year. Now that we’ve
almost got them closed, we’re just supposed to turn everything we have over?”

“Right,” Matt chimed in. “And why are we devoting all our resources to one fledgling group?”

Nick and Joanna’s eyes met briefly, and he gave her a slight nod.

“They aren’t a fledgling group,” Joanna said. “I’ve dealt with them before and if past history is any indication, they are as ruthless and dangerous as ever.”

As Joanna explained the highlights of the CIA’s involvement in the NCIS-led investigation the previous year, the questions came fast and furious from Nick’s team. After several minutes of fielding the team's questions, she finally got the one Nick warned her to expect.

“So you didn’t tell us about this until now because…?” Matt queried as he and the others looked at Nick accusingly.

“It was my call,” Joanna said in a hard tone that didn’t invite argument. “We had no clear reason to believe we were dealing with anyone involved with the group previously, simply a new group inspired by their actions and successes before we managed to shut them down. Now we know differently.”

“How so?” Lena asked.

“During the recent raid in Shanghai, we uncovered evidence they are again dealing in cyberterrorism as a means to fund their more conventional operations…”

“We know all that already,” Gary interrupted.

“Yes, but in raiding that warehouse, we found a significant weapons cache and learned some things about the new operation,” Joanna stated. “We also found they’ve become involved in illegal arms trade including chemical weapons. They’re doing business with some of the world’s most prolific and dangerous arms dealers.”

“What has that got to do with why we’re finding out about all this now?” Matt asked.
At Nick’s urging, Joanna also disclosed the suspicious deaths of operatives, witnesses, and informants connected with the old case two years earlier, ending with the fact she was also most likely being targeted for assassination as confirmed by the flash drive they’d recovered. She left out nothing, except Tony’s name.

“So you see,” Joanna summarized, “with the confirmation that I’m a target, by association all of you could become targets as well. Certainly by proximity, if the complete disregard they’ve shown for collateral damage is any sign.”

The team glanced at each other uncomfortably as Nick took up the conversation. “We need to work as quickly as possible to decrypt and assess the contents of the drive,” he continued. “They probably know we have it and will act to mitigate the damage from anything it might reveal.”

“What about these files?” Matt asked, glancing up from his copy. “Why have they been redacted?”

“It’s not uncommon when the CIA shares information with other agencies; often done to protect operatives and sensitive overseas work” Lena added. ”It does seem highly irregular for NCIS files. We could be missing key information here.”

Nick spoke up as Joanna seemed hesitant to answer. “You aren’t missing anything pertinent. The files are redacted to protect the identity of the NCIS agent who killed The Calling’s last leader, Daniel Budd.”

“Where is this agent now?” Gary asked. ”He could be a big help to us.”

Nick took a moment to appreciate that little bit of irony before he answered. “He’s no longer with NCIS; he resigned from the agency sometime last year,” Nick explained, feeling a little strange talking about himself in the third person.

“Is he aware he’s a target?”

“He is, and measures have been taken to protect him,” Joanna said firmly. She went on with barely a pause; cutting off any further questions along those lines. “Now…let’s clear out for tonight and get some rest. We’ll get back on it in the morning,”
Nick’s team rose and filed out of the conference room. He followed more slowly, stopping in the doorway and turning back to Joanna.

“They’re too sharp to let it go, you know. They’ll bring it up again if they feel it’s warranted,” Nick warned.

Joanna sighed tiredly. “I know. We’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

Nick just nodded doubtfully and followed his team down the corridor.

Joanna shook her head as she gathered the files she used for her briefing. The conversation hadn’t gone as well as she hoped. Nick had been correct in predicting his team’s reaction. No; they definitely were not happy at being left out of the loop for so long. Hopefully, the flash drive encryption would be broken soon, then they’d have new information to work with. They needed new leads that would serve to divert attention away from the redacted case files before they could raise even more uncomfortable questions from the others. Questions she’d rather not be forced into answering for the time being.

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Next up: How is Gibbs handling mandatory counseling? Yeah, about like you’d expect.
Gibbs was uneasy as he walked down one of the few unfamiliar corridors at Walter Reed hospital. He paused, leaning on his cane as he checked the wall signs, making sure he was headed in the right direction. Grace called him that morning to change the location of their regularly scheduled appointments, citing some excuse about HVAC issues in her wing. This whole process still unnerved him after a month of appointments…it represented a major change in his life and career. It was no secret he’d never been a fan of change and he was finding it no easier to accept now.

Not for the first time he felt a wave of resentment at Vance for forcing him into this therapy and making his continued employment contingent on undergoing treatment for PTSD. He just wanted his life to get back to normal, instead of this aimless, purposeless existence of the last several weeks. He was impatient to get through therapy and back to work, whatever that was going to be, so he’d been checking the blocks and telling them what he thought they wanted to hear. He’d been allowed to select his own therapist and chosen Grace. He knew her and felt by seeing her he could retain a measure of control over how this process went. He had no idea how wrong he was going to be.

Gibbs reached the room number Grace gave him and tapped lightly on the door with his cane. He paused then smiled as he heard her husky voice call out in greeting.

“Come on in, Gibbs.”
Gibbs opened the door and entered a small outer office; frowning at the sight of Grace seated at what seemed to be the receptionist’s desk. He took the chair opposite, settled himself, and then raised an inquiring brow. “You wanna tell me the real reason behind the change of venue, Grace? Or should I just guess?” he asked drily.

“Sure, Gibbs…we’ll get to that,” she agreed easily. “Let me ask you something first. It’s been a month; what do you think we’ve accomplished here?” she asked.

Gibbs just stared a moment, nonplussed at the question. “What do you want me to say, Grace? That this has been fun for me?”

“I hardly think it’s been fun for you, Gibbs. On the contrary…I think it’s been quite difficult, and therein lies the problem.”

“Problem? What problem?” Gibbs asked, not liking where this was going. “I’ve done what’s been asked of me…or required of me, if you want to be more specific about it.”

Grace shook her head and smiled ruefully. “Let me clarify my question a bit, Gibbs. Do you think we’ve made progress?”

“Progress? What does that even mean, and how the hell am I supposed to know? You're the doc, Doc.”

“Do you think you’ve gained any understanding into your PTSD? Have you even reached the point where you’re willing to accept that you have PTSD?”

“That’s for you to say,” he deflected.

“No Gibbs, that’s not how this works,” Grace countered. “You're showing up, Gibbs but that’s not all that’s required of you. You’re supposed to be an active participant in the process,” Grace said, looking at Gibbs meaningfully.

“I have been,” Gibbs insisted.
“Really?” she asked. “I’ve been doing this a long time Gibbs; do you think I’m not aware when a patient isn't being fully cooperative?”

Gibbs grimaced at being referred to as a patient.

“I know exactly what you’re thinking right now, Gibbs. In here, you *are* a patient, not a friend. If you don’t see the difference, that’s one problem. You’re going through the motions and I’ve been letting you; hoping you’d start taking this seriously. I’m not helping you, Gibbs and you need someone who can.”

“Of course you’re helping.”

“You know better. I think you need to see someone else Gibbs.”

“I picked you because I thought you could help me, like you did before.”

“Did I really help you, Gibbs? Would you be here now if I had? No Gibbs,” Grace said, disappointment in her gravelly tones. “You picked me because you’re comfortable with me. You’re too comfortable, and that’s not what you need. I’m turning your case over to another doctor; someone more objective and better suited to help you.”

“What? No, I didn't agree to that!”

Grace’s voice hardened, knowing she needed to out-stubborn her surly patient. “Remember this treatment plan is agency directed, Gibbs. I’m required to brief Director Vance on your status periodically.”

“You’ve been talking to Vance about me? Isn't that some kind of violation of doctor-patient confidentiality?” Gibbs demanded.

“You know better than that, Gibbs and don’t change the subject. I’ve kept him apprised of your progress and suitability for duty, nothing more; or more specifically, your lack of progress. At this point, you don’t get to agree or disagree with the terms of the treatment program; merely whether or not you choose to continue with it.” Grace pushed a call button on the phone, and a moment later a tall man with dark eyes and graying hair stepped through the door from the inner office.
Grace gestured at the newcomer and stood. “This is Doctor David Silva. He’ll be taking over your care should you decide to continue the program.”

Gibbs rose as Grace stepped around the desk and stood next to his chair. Gesturing again at Gibbs this time, she completed the introductions. “David…Jethro Gibbs, NCIS.” Grace looked up at Gibbs and touched his arm gently. “Give him a chance, Gibbs. He’s one of the best here at Walter Reed, or anywhere in DC for that matter, at helping people with PTSD. I’ll see you around, Gibbs.”

With that, Grace turned and left the office, leaving them two men staring at each other inscrutably, until finally Doctor Silva broke the ice.

“Agent Gibbs…I realize our introduction wasn’t ideal and you may be angry right now. Grace assured me if you’d known about the change ahead of time, you wouldn’t have come.”

“Grace was right.” Gibbs replied shortly.

“Well, you are here and I hope we can get past the rocky start and get to know one another. Would you come in?” Doctor Silva asked, indicating the inner office. “Or shall I inform Director Vance you’ve declined to continue?”

Gibbs didn’t appreciate being backed into a corner again, and he’d be having words with Grace about that later. Still, this was mandatory if he wanted to stay with NCIS and he was beginning to wonder if it was going to be worth it. Maybe he should just take his retirement and tell them all to get bent. That part in all this was something he could control. No…that wasn’t really what he wanted. Vance’s ‘carrot’ of a new position was compelling and it surprised him how much he wanted it. Not only that, he had fences to mend with the important people in his life. As Ellis so eloquently pointed out, he couldn’t do any of that until he got his head on straight. Grace was right; he’d fallen back on his old ways and hadn’t taken her attempts to help seriously.

Doctor Silva waited patiently as Gibbs considered his options, not wanting to push the man any more than he already had been. As he watched he could see indefinable emotions flitting across Gibbs’ features then he appeared to come to a decision. Gibbs gave a grudging nod then turned toward the inner office, walking around him and going inside. He helped himself to a chair; sat and crossed his legs appearing outwardly nonchalant about the unexpected change forced on him. Silva stifled a grin of amusement at the man’s unsubtle attempt to wrest back some power over the situation. Oh, there were definitely control issues there, just as Grace indicated…and that was only the tip of the iceberg. Silva took his seat; it was time to peel back the onion that was Leroy Jethro Gibbs.
“Now that the introductions are out of the way, where would you like to start, Agent Gibbs?” Silva asked, wondering how Gibbs would respond to the ball being immediately in his court.

“It’s just Gibbs, Doc…and I don’t know. You’re the expert; where do you want to start? My childhood, or should we just skip straight to the incident that landed me here?” he asked sarcastically.

Silva observed Gibbs closely. Clearly he was still attempting to deflect the conversation toward topics he was willing to discuss and avoiding those he didn’t. Silva could see the kid gloves handling Grace had employed wasn’t the correct approach with this patient and she’d known it too.

“While I’m a fan of sarcasm in casual conversation, Gibbs, I don’t think it’s going to accomplish anything here, do you?”

“I don’t know what you expect me to say any more than I knew what Grace wanted to hear.”

“Gibbs, it’s not about what we want to hear and somewhere in there,” Silva said, waving a hand at his head, “you are well aware of that. It’s about you and the topics that you continue to subconsciously avoid facing. Grace was in no way fooled by your reluctance to discuss these topics and your attempts to cover it up with misdirection and half-truths. What are you so afraid of?”

“Not a damn thing!”

“That’s not entirely true, is it?”

“For someone in your line of work, you’re not very compassionate and understanding, are you?”

Oh yes, Grace wasn’t kidding about the misdirection part of the equation. He was going to have his work cut out for him, peeling back the layers found in this man.

“I’m no less compassionate about your circumstances than Grace, but my understanding is reserved for those who want to help themselves. We’ll let it rest for now. You should know I’ve access to your NCIS personnel file and there’s a hell of a lot of ground between your childhood and
the incident that landed you here. You have been adept at avoiding that ground and the significant number of traumatic events that took place in that time.”

Gibbs shifted uncomfortably at the allusion to his past.

“Just one of these events and injuries in the field could have been enough to trigger post-traumatic stress and you have a whole series of them. It’s also apparent you know your way around a routine psych eval or have bullied and intimidated your way through them, around them, and back into the field. That’s not going to work with me.”

Gibbs surged to his feet, radiating anger and defensiveness.

Silva held up a hand to stop the building tirade.

“Hear me out Gibbs, and if you still want to walk out that door when I’m done, I won’t stop you.” He paused, waiting to see what Gibbs would do. After a long moment during which he was stared at stonily, Gibbs took his seat again.

“Cause and effect, Gibbs; in simple terms that is what we need to talk about. Your director says you’ve become a loose cannon. You’re a liability in the field and in your current state of mind, anywhere on the job for that matter. The incident that landed you here, as you so superficially stated it; is an effect. Everything you told Grace about your symptoms, the nightmares, anger, resentment, the need for isolation and control; all those are effects. The cause is what we need to delve into if you’re going to learn to cope with PTSD and get back to work.”

Gibbs sighed wearily. “I don’t even know and you think you’re going to be able to help me figure this out?”

“I’m good at what I do Gibbs. If you’re willing to be open and honest, I’ll be able to help you do exactly that. The fact that you’re here is a good start, but that alone isn’t going to solve anything. I don’t give participation trophies and I’m not going to walk on eggshells around you and your issues. I want to help you and I think I can. You have to meet me halfway, though. If you aren’t willing or able to work with me instead of against me, you might as well put in your papers and retire, because I’m not just signing you off to get rid of you and neither will anyone else. I am your last stop, Gibbs.”

Gibbs straightened in the chair, not liking the feeling of being cornered. “Are ultimatums a part of
your treatment plan, Doctor?"

“Not ultimatums, Gibbs. Those are the facts of the situation. The choice is all yours. Are you going to choose to accept help and the conditions that come with it?”

Gibbs met the dark eyes and studied the man intently for a moment.

“Gibbs, I need an answer from you. No more screwing around. You know you need to do something, right?”

Gibbs slumped in the chair and shook his head, still holding on to denial…still looking for an easier out than facing his demons. “You won’t…no one will understand,” he gritted out.

“Maybe I won’t. Maybe I don’t need to; but I can still listen and I can still help,” Silva said in a level, soothing voice. He leaned forward; held his breath and watched intently as Gibbs froze, his gaze distant, and body tense as if he were going through some internal battle.

Silva watched Gibbs with increasing concern. Just when the fugue moment felt like it was going on for too long, and Silva was about to interrupt, Gibbs blinked and focused on him again.

Gibbs rolled his neck and shoulders to break the tension in his body, and then sat back and tried to come to grips with the situation. “OK,” he said simply. “I still don’t know how to do this…but I’m willing to try.”

“Thank you for giving me a chance, Gibbs.”

Gibbs simply nodded and leaned back in the chair, his posture relaxed and face showing no sign of the earlier tension.

Silva smiled, the first small battle won, he thought as he prepared to take notes during their first session.

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Next up: Tony and his team catch a break with the encrypted flash drive and start digging for answers. Meanwhile, The Calling is digging for answers of their own.
Tony's team cracks the encryption on the mysterious flash drive and he charts the way forward for their investigation. In Shanghai, The Calling learn more about the traitor that had been in their midst, his motivations, and the potential damage he may have done before being eliminated.

Chapter Notes

Still a bit ahead in the writing game and planning updates every other week or so. I hope you'll stay tuned :) 

Beta'd with the usual "I can't leave things alone" disclaimer. Any remaining mistakes are mine.

~Seattle~

Tony was pulled from the necessary evil of processing requisitions and reviewing intelligence reports by a whoop of triumph from Lena's desk. He looked across his team's work area to see Lena and Melanie high-fiving each other. Lena had been working with the NSA on decrypting the files from the copy of the flash drive Joanna recovered in Shanghai. She'd been using the work as an opportunity to provide some advanced computer forensics on-the-job training to Melanie, the intel analyst liaison embedded with their team.

Hoping for some good news on the computer forensics front and certainly ready for a break from his paperwork, he stood and stretched. Waving Matt and Gary along with him, they made their way across the room to see what the celebration was all about.

"Ladies…something you'd care to share with the rest of the class?" he asked, amused at their excitement.

Lena and Melanie both looked up them grinning. "Hey guys, good news! Lena and I just broke the file encryption and there's a ton of information here," Mel replied.
"It looks like we have a quite a lot of information here, but bear in mind the file dates indicate most of it is two to four years old," Lena added. "Our first guess is this information pertains mainly to The Calling's original network."

Melanie continued to explain their findings. "There appears to be names, information on funding trails, arms shipments, cell locations and operations, agencies targeted for network intrusion, and more…a little of it even appears to be current."

"Great work, ladies!" Nick praised, smiling at the two women.

"This could be the break we needed," Matt added.

"Absolutely," Nick replied. "Right now, The Calling is a nameless, faceless threat. We need to change that."

"Taking into account the CIA and NCIS case files provided to us and this flash drive," Gary said, "we've got to be looking for someone with inside knowledge of the group under Daniel Budd's leadership."

Matt nodded in agreement. "Even the outdated information may prove useful. It could give us some insight into who might be running the show now and where they fit into the old network."

"Exactly," Nick said, pleased with his team's focus. "We need to cross reference this information with the CIA and especially the NCIS case files. We concentrate on any new names, even those noted in the case files as being dead or in prison. Then we identify all their known associates," he said, mapping out their approach as he spoke. "With help from the intel side of the house, we build in-depth backgrounds on all of them."

Nick's expression had turned stony and his green eyes blazed. He went on in a voice that was suddenly low and intense. "We need to know everything about them…where they came from, family, political affiliations, what they liked, and what they hated. We need to look at everything about them, even if you think some of the details aren't important. We find and follow the money trails. Somewhere buried in all that is something that will tell us who slipped through the cracks last time and who's leading the group now. We need to know what that something is."

Matt stood blinking in surprise, a little enthralled by Nick's impassioned outline of their investigative priorities…as if this was personal to him in some way. What possible reason could
there be for that, though? He looked at the rest of the team, finding he wasn't the only one staring and that they all appeared to be taken aback by the change in Nick's demeanor. Nick was a terrific agent and damn likeable, but he was still a bit of a mystery to them all and he couldn't help but wonder about this little glimpse into another aspect of their team lead's character. It might be interesting to compare notes with Gary and Lena at some point later, but for now they had work to do.

"We'll get copies of everything to the linguists to get started on translating the files that are in Mandarin. As soon as that's done, we'll bring in Joanna's intel analysts," Matt said. "Nick…I'm assuming you'll want to brief Joanna yourself?" he asked.

Nick nodded. "Yes. I know I'm stating the obvious here, but make sure the linguists and analysts know we need everything they can get us as quickly as possible. There's no doubt in my mind the group know by now we have this information but hopefully, they haven't counted on us decrypting the contents so quickly. Either way, it's going to be a race against time for us to make good use of this information before they can cover their tracks."

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~Shanghai~

Rousseau silently sighed and mentally prepared himself for the coming conversation with LaPointe. After his initial cursory searches, he'd continued a more thorough investigation into Chan's activities and communications over the last year. The breadth of information about their rebuilt network that the man had accessed and copied was more extensive than he'd initially uncovered, as was the extent of his deception. Chan had also been better at covering his tracks than he'd given him credit for. There had been a hidden partition on his laptop hard drive and they'd finally been able to access what remained of the files he'd been concealing there.

Aside from that, the man had also apparently communicated using a series of untraceable cell phones provided by his various CIA contacts in Shanghai. He'd only been able to find the one Chan had used in the most recent few weeks, but gained access to and analyzed those call records. Between the laptop and cell phone records, surprising information about Chan and the CIA came to light. He'd relayed some of this information already and now he was very unsettled and wary of what LaPointe's reaction might be to the rest of it.

Some days it was just better to stay off LaPointe's radar, but today it was unavoidable. LaPointe was already waiting for him when he entered the back room of the cell's base of operations. He stared coolly at his right-hand man for a moment, and then greeted him simply.
Rousseau nodded in return, noting an odd quality to his leader's voice that suggested a tightly controlled anger. LaPointe inclined his head toward a table and chairs on the other side of the room, and then turned away, clearly expecting Rousseau to follow him to the seating area.

"I'm the messenger, not the cause of these leaks, LaPointe."

LaPointe just managed to keep his temper in check. "I'm well aware of that," he said in a clipped tone. "While you've been looking into Chan more deeply, I've strengthened our monitoring of the other key people within our network. If there's cause to doubt their loyalty, we will find it. Now… you said there are further developments on the matter of our late accountant; I doubt its favorable news, so just get on with it."

Rousseau released a long breath and explained his findings patiently.

"As I've explained, in digging deeper I've uncovered some unexpected information about Chan. He's been gathering information on us for some time, but unlike other informants he wasn't being paid for the information he passed on. It made no sense. I enlisted Officer Wei's assistance in using police resources to investigate Chan's background a little more deeply. He has a familial connection to one of the CIA informants we killed in retaliation for giving them information about us two years ago. In addition to his moral objection to violent terrorist acts in general, it seems he was motivated in part by good old fashioned revenge and family honor."

"And how did he plan to carry out this revenge?" he ground out.

LaPointe was clearly furious, and lately that made him increasingly unpredictable. "His files indicate he'd compiled a separate, offline cache of data and evidence against us," Rousseau ventured hesitantly. "He referred to it as his protection; an insurance policy."

"Well, we would have been raided or arrested by now if he'd had a chance to use it, so where is this 'insurance policy' now?"

"Neither the files or his communications indicate where; nor what format he's stored the information in. He did make his CIA contact aware of its existence though."
Rousseau tensed as LaPointe's expression darkened and spoke to repercussions. Hoping to head off his leader's building fury, he added quickly. "It's not all bad news. In fact, if we can locate and recover this information, it could help us complete some unfinished business."

LaPointe looked up sharply at that. "How so?"

"We know who his local CIA contact is. We're not sure how, but it also seems clear Chan had already completed his task to identify the agent we are looking for."

A stunned look was followed by a flash of fury lighting LaPointe's eyes, but his voice was disturbingly calm as he spoke. "Chan had a name…?"

"Yes," Rousseau confirmed, "the name of the American federal agent who killed Daniel. He was deliberately hiding this information from us and intended to warn the agent by passing the information to Teague and the others."

"How did he manage to do that? More importantly…did he manage to pass this information to them?"

"We don't know the answer to either question…yet."

"It's imperative we find this insurance policy that Chan was hiding," LaPointe growled. "The answers could be in there."

Rousseau nodded, suspecting what was coming. "What are your orders?"

"First, I want you to find and bring me Chan's CIA contact," he demanded. "We will find out what he knows then kill him. I want his body left in the city landfill; right next to Chan's. We'll alert the police about the bodies," he continued with a sinister smile. "Eventually Teague and her operatives here will receive our little message."

Rousseau almost pitied the CIA contact, who was now living on borrowed time and wouldn't be enjoying what was left of it at all. "And second?"
"Yes, back to that other matter. It seems Chan represented quite a missed opportunity. What progress have you made in finding Teague and identifying the other agent?" he challenged.

Rousseau wasn't going to be put on the defensive over LaPointe's error in judgment and replied in a critical tone, "He was a missed opportunity to say the least. Perhaps you shouldn't be so hasty in indulging your temper next time, hmm?"

LaPointe's eyes narrowed at the implied criticism. He said nothing, merely stared pointedly and waited for Rousseau to continue.

"I suspect Chan had the benefit of prior knowledge of the old network and how it was dismantled...knowledge I don't have since I was working operations in Iraq at the time. As such, I've gone back to the beginning in manner of speaking."

"Meaning?"

"Now that we have a cell established in the Washington DC area, I've tapped them to do some old fashioned detective work."

"Why the Washington cell, exactly?" LaPointe asked, "Why not start here?"

"Washington is where we lost track of Teague and the NCIS-led investigative team was based there," Rousseau explained. "It seems a logical place to start tracking them both. I have people working here as well and I'm certain we'll pick up a trail in one place or the other."

LaPointe's brow furrowed as he questioned this approach. "How do you propose to track down someone you haven't identified yet?"

"Our DC cell employs a member who is highly skilled at network intrusion, or hacking, if you will. I believe an attempt to hack the CIA or even NCIS at this early stage might draw too much attention to our specific goals if detected. I have something different in mind. Our 'hacker' has gained access to the AFIS database." Rousseau smiled in satisfaction as he relayed his plan.

"Law enforcement officers and Federal agents are almost always private gun owners and as such, will have an AFIS record, often with pictures. The photos generated from our warehouse security footage is two years old, but should still be clear enough for identification. We will run facial
recognition software against the AFIS photo files to find the man's name."

"Brilliant, Emile," LaPointe praised. "I'm pleased with this plan."

Rousseau nodded in acknowledgment. "If that's all, I'll be leaving now. The sooner I locate our CIA friend, the sooner you can...question him.

LaPointe's eyes lit at the prospect and he waved a hand distractedly. "Yes, by all means; contact me when you have him."

Rousseau rose and took his leave, worried about LaPointe's increasingly erratic behavior. Killing Chan to satisfy his anger before finding out what he knew, and the obsession with locating and eliminating the two American Federal agents was problematic. It was not the kind of attention The Calling needed in this critical stage of rebuilding their network and credibility. The situation bore watching.

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Author's Note: AFIS - Automated Fingerprint Identification System

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Next: Doctor Silva tackles Gibbs' case and he has a bone to pick with Director Vance while he's at it.
Leon Vance picked up the phone receiver and then replaced it with a sigh, putting off calling Cynthia to rearrange his afternoon schedule. He leaned away from the desk and rested his head back against the chair. Closing his eyes, he took a moment to indulge in frustration at the situation he now found himself in. The Secretary of the Navy forewarned him weeks ago that the consequences of Gibbs’ excessive force incident might have far-reaching consequences. His own conversation with the surly lead agent at the hospital when Gibbs and Bishop were being treated for injuries incurred during the incident came back with startling clarity.

"Dammit, Gibbs! You beat an unarmed suspect so badly he’s in ICU and two agents are injured! What did you think was going to happen?" Vance shouted. "Not only will you be investigated, your entire team is under scrutiny and I am too! This isn’t going to go like the Bodnar situation did." Vance asserted. "I have no idea how this will play out, but I do know one thing. This time there will be ramifications for your actions…possibly not just yours."

The ass-chewing he’d given Gibbs at the time turned out to be prophetic. Last week, Secretary Porter informed him of changes she would be mandating as a result of the incident and subsequent lawsuit. All of this happened on his watch, she’d said. After several years, his career had only just begun to recover from the fallout of pursuing Ilan Bodnar. The outright defiance of orders and the man’s death as result of his inability to control another agent…or unwillingness to do so, as he’d been accused of in various circles, had been costly. Now he felt lucky to retain his directorship after this latest fiasco, and knew any chance he ever had of moving higher was shot all to hell.

Secretary Porter also ordered an agency review to include his own performance; citing his delay in acting on Doctor Mallard’s report questioning Gibbs’ fitness for duty. In addition to the agency review, she’d appointed a board of physicians from Bethesda to conduct an internal review of the fitness for duty evaluation process and the quality of work of the evaluators themselves. She was
also seeking a non-Navy doctor for the board to provide an objective outside opinion on the process, and told him he’d be informed when that last position was filled.

Much to his annoyance, it seemed that Secretary Porter had also taken a personal interest in Gibbs’ progress toward reinstatement. She would be receiving copies of the status reports Doctor Silva provided him. Vance smiled at the thought of Gibbs ‘enjoying’ his time with the docs. A fleeting wave of vindictive glee swept over him as he imagined his troublesome agent in therapy. Yes, anything that annoyed Gibbs was fine by him after the chaos and goddamn paperwork nightmare he’d caused.

Porter had forced him to own up to his own role in all this. He’d let his subordinate, a stubborn and willful agent have his own way in order to keep things civil and running smoothly; and he’d been too slow to act when that stopped working. Not for the first time, he wondered about the mystery of DiNozzo’s role in all this. Gibbs’ marked and noticeable decline started after DiNozzo resigned suddenly, and he knew there was more to that than met the eye. He wondered if Silva would get that out of Gibbs eventually and resolved to bring it up when they spoke. That conversation would be happening soon.

Silva’s office had called him earlier, requesting an appointment to discuss Gibbs’ treatment and the issue of his progress reports to NCIS and to SecNav. He saw no reason to meet in person but the doctor was rather insistent. Damn Gibbs anyway; indirectly still being a pain in the ass and he wasn’t even anywhere near NCIS. Vance sighed in annoyance; reaching for the phone to call Cynthia and arrange to clear his schedule for the rest of the day.

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Doctor Silva navigated the quiet halls of Walter Reed hospital on auto pilot. He was preoccupied by thoughts of his second meeting with Director Vance at NCIS headquarters and Agent Gibbs, the subject of their discussion. He stopped briefly to grab a cup of coffee in the Doctor’s Lounge, and then headed to his office. Once inside, he leaned against the window and stared outside into the courtyard directly below his window. He enjoyed the serene view and sipped his coffee absentmindedly as he pondered the enigma that was Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

He’d been intrigued by the details when Grace, one of his colleagues at Reed had come to him, asking him to take over one of her cases. Before he’d agreed to take over Gibbs’ care, Silva spoke to Director Vance and spent time doing some homework on his potential patient. He’d met with Grace to review Gibbs’ work and medical history. The number of serious injuries and traumatic events the man incurred in the last twenty-plus years was staggering. The injury history alone was particularly concerning. Even more concerning were the contents of every mandatory psych eval conducted since he joined NCIS, and there weren’t as many as there should have been.
Once he’d reviewed Gibbs’ medical records and agreed to take the case, he’d met the almost legendary agent and gotten a few initial impressions. His early observations, as well as some revealing tidbits hidden within those records prompted him to meet with Vance again to discuss Gibbs and how his recommendations and progress reports would be handled. Truth be told, he had a bone to pick with the man and his agency. He smiled as he recalled Vance’s discomfort at being put on the defensive and surprise at hearing Silva had been approached by SecNav.

“I have some concerns about your role in Agent Gibbs’ treatment and return to duty,” Silva opened bluntly.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Doctor…my role?” Vance asked; confusion plain in his expression.

Silva was candid in his answer. “I want to be sure you are equally as concerned with what is in Agent Gibbs’ best interest, as you are with NCIS’ interest.”

“What makes you think I would want to impede Agent Gibbs’ full recovery and return to duty in any way?” Vance questioned.

“Past history, Director. I see a pattern of placing a priority on expediency in case work and accommodation of an agent with a forceful personality at the expense of that agent’s health and well-being. This same agent who you were well aware seemed unable to act in his own best interest of late.”

“I don’t like what you’re implying, Doctor Silva,” Vance replied, an edge of annoyance in his tone.

“I couldn’t care less about your ruffled feathers, Director Vance, nor do I care about the black eye NCIS is taking over this excessive force incident. My job and primary concern is doing what’s best for Agent Gibbs. The man’s a mess Director, and he didn’t have to get that way. The fact that he reached that breaking point is not just on him,” he asserted.

“You shoot from the hip, don’t you Doctor? Explain to me how exactly Agent Gibbs’ condition and actions are this agency’s fault?” Vance asked, fuming silently.

“Let me clarify. I recognize the risk inherent with work as a field agent, and that injuries and stress are possible, if not somewhat commonplace. I am not saying NCIS is at fault for that, nor am I saying he shouldn’t be held accountable for his actions. He damn well should, but he isn’t the only
one by any means. I’m saying your agency played a role in the situation going on longer than it should have, and had something been done earlier, the incident may well not have happened.”

“In our defense,” Vance began dismissively, “Gibbs’ erratic behavior wasn’t all that different or distinguishable from the everyday demeanor we’ve been accustomed to from him for years.”

“Tell me Director, is that how you’re going to rationalize your decision to keep Agent Gibbs in the field when he clearly didn’t belong there?”

“Hey, I’m not a physician!” Vance argued. “Agent Gibbs was medically cleared for field status!”

“That behavior you are referring to is just an indication he’s had underlying issues for a while, and that whoever did his psych evaluations after some of these events needs to have their license pulled.”

“I don’t believe it’s appropriate for you to make that judgement in this situation…or to insert yourself in the internal procedures of this agency, Doctor,” Vance challenged.

“I didn’t insert myself. I’m here formally at the request of SecNav as part of the medical review board. If you’ve got an issue with it, I suggest you take it up with her. In the meantime, I have a job to do.”

“You’re the non-Navy member of the medical board? I can’t wait to hear why SecNav gave Gibbs’ Army therapist a formal role in my agency.” Vance said, glowering.

“At SecNav’s request, I’ve been asked to assist in providing an objective outside assessment of your procedures and guidelines for fitness for duty evaluations. She feels, as I do, that there’s a culture of rubber stamping agents as cleared for field duty, rather than an honest and objective evaluation of their condition and suitability.” He continued, looking at Vance meaningfully, “Of particular concern are those who have been exposed to undue emotional stress or serious injury.”

“Gibbs is an anomaly.” Vance insisted. “Our procedures have never been deemed inadequate before. Why would she have done that now?”

“The splintering of your MCRT in the last year has not escaped her attention and in light of past events, Gibbs may not just be an anomaly as you suggest. The incident with Gibbs and the suit
against the agency forced her hand.”

Vance just stared noncommittally. “Doctor, could you kindly make your point?”

“My point is this should have been caught previously. You had warnings going back years ago; or did you just discount Doctor Cranston’s unofficial comments on the MCRT’s psych evaluations out of hand?”

“All Gibbs’ records and previous evaluations have been made available to you, including Doctor Cranston’s. I’m not sure what comments you’re referring to,” Vance stated evasively.

I’m referring to Doctor Cranston’s personal notes at the end of the report copy she hand delivered to you. It didn’t escape my attention that they weren’t in the official report I was given. “Clinically they’re a disaster”, was how she worded it, I believe…along with a not-so-subtle warning.”

Vance bristled. “You read that? There’s a reason those notes weren’t in the official report. They were intended for me.”

“Yes, I read her copy,” Silva confirmed. “I’ve known Doctor Cranston for years and I’m aware of her…past connection to members of Agent Gibbs’ former team. I don’t believe she was entirely objective and neither does she, considering she wanted to be the one to interview Gibbs’ team for personal reasons.”

Vance shifted uncomfortably, thinking about SecNav’s agency review. Doctor Cranston’s notes would be one more thing that would reflect unfavorably on him in light of recent events.

Silva continued, pulling Vance from thoughts of his own situation.

“She felt those comments were relevant and I need to know everything possible about what I’m dealing with if I’m going to help Gibbs,” he explained. “I have consulted with her in depth. You do realize that he never actually talked to her outside of their interactions during that case?”

“I guessed as much,” Vance acknowledged.
“As for my findings so far in Gibbs’ case, I am convinced his PTS is not a result of one traumatic event, but cumulative untreated stress from a number of separate events both after and predating the timeframe of Doctor Cranston’s team evaluation. Perhaps much further back,” Silva asserted.

“Such as?”

“You want a list? It’s a long one. The bombing of NCIS headquarters the following year ring a bell? It should.”

Vance fumed as he continued.

“That one stands out because no one on the team was properly evaluated after that happened. Again; NCIS was putting cases before agents.

“Harper Dearing was a madman responsible for dozens of deaths; many right here in this building,” Vance countered heatedly. “Every resource of the U.S. Government was dedicated to stopping him at all costs. Our orders came directly from the President.”

“And every agency in the alphabet soup was pursuing him,” Silva retorted. “Yet it was primarily your agency and its personnel he targeted and attacked. When was a good time to assess how your field agents were handling what happened? “What about after?”

Silva went on. “It was right to the next case for the MCRT; no breather or time to come to grips with what happened here. The list goes on; the sudden death of Gibbs’ father, and how about the murder of his ex-wife, right in front of him? Are you even aware of the significance of the manner of Diane Sterling’s death? Doctor Cranston made me aware of the graphic details and connection to her sister.

Silva paused to reign in his emotions before continuing. NCIS and its director had failed their agents more than once; they had a lot to a answer for.

"It didn't occur to anyone to have Gibbs evaluated. How long can a man even as strong-willed and self-assured as Gibbs take blow after blow? And the tipping point…Gibbs’ shooting. It still took nearly a year after the sudden and unexplained departure of a longtime partner, and Gibbs’ increasingly erratic behavior before anyone began to be truly concerned. Still no action was taken."
“Then there’s Doctor Mallard’s recent report questioning Gibbs’ physical and mental fitness for duty. A report that you delayed acting on, instead of immediately pulling him from the field for evaluation. If you’d done so, Agent Gibbs might have gotten the treatment he needed before he snapped and nearly killed a suspect.”

“You’re remarkably well-informed about me, Doctor.”

Silva had been professional and detached up until this point, but was unable to resist one barb aimed at the arrogant man who’d contributed to this mess.

“Yes; I am precisely that, Director,” he replied emphatically. “I get that I’m an outsider and an outsider being involved has your hackles up. You’re going to have to accept it, because it isn’t going to change.”

“So I gathered,” Vance replied somewhat icily, then changed the subject. “SecNav has advised me that I will be required to work with the medical board on the larger issue of improving how we assess the readiness of our agents for field work. If you’re done giving me a piece of your mind, I’d like to hear your early findings and recommendations now.”

“Post-traumatic stress evaluation in every case where it was indicated was woefully inadequate to say the least,” Silva explained. “Each psychological evaluation spoke to Gibbs’ ability to either bully his way through them, to charm, deflect or outright stonewall his way to getting cleared for field duty. The shooting that nearly killed Gibbs two years ago is only the most recent case in point.”

Vance simply nodded, knowing full well Silva was right on point there, even if he didn’t necessarily agree with the rest of it.

Silva continued. “I’m recommending that your procedures for clearing agents include an assessment and sign off by two qualified physicians, not just one. One must be a physician from outside this agency, specifically from Bethesda or Walter Reed. That’s the most significant change; the others pertain to more minor procedural changes that will be detailed in the medical board’s reports to you and SecNav.”

“That’s going to be a cumbersome process,” Vance objected.

“Only if you and your agents make it one. That mindset is part of the problem, Director Vance.”
Frankly, you are part of the problem and change has to come from the top. View it as an investment in your people, not a process where boxes need to be checked. They deserve it and your agents need to be functioning at their peak if they’re going to keep up with the demands of investigative field work.”

Vance saw the logic and although his instincts were to try and retain some control over how this process evolved, it wasn’t going to work that way. Vance had little choice but to capitulate in light of SecNav’s directive.

He nodded in resignation. “I’ll ensure any changes you recommend are implemented once SecNav signs off on them officially,” he replied. “What about Gibbs? Now that you’ve sprung your little surprise, can we get back to the scheduled subject of this meeting?”

“Yes, Gibbs’ treatment and progress. Family counseling is one standard treatment approach,” Silva answered, “but as you know, Gibbs has no family. At least not in the traditional sense. So I’m proposing some non-traditional approaches. He’s made a family after a fashion, out of the members of his team.”

“That’s true,” Vance agreed. “Since before I became Director, it’s been clear Gibbs and his team have always had a strong connection; at least until recently…”

“Exactly my point. Something has changed there. They have been insular, highly protective of one another, and intensely loyal. To their detriment at times, but no longer. That’s part of what I need to address with Gibbs.”

“How so?”

“Whether or not it’s healthy or appropriate, Gibbs’ relationship with his coworkers does resemble a familial one and families are the first level in a support network.”

“So you’re saying since being suspended and on medical leave, he has had very little access to his support network,” Vance reasoned.

Yes; it’s a non-traditional one to be sure, but still support.” Silva agreed. “Even when his condition drove him to behave erratically, Gibbs still had a sense of normalcy. He’s completely withdrawn and feeling a little bereft now, even if he’s in denial about it. He needs to start getting that sense of normalcy back.”
“What are you asking for, exactly?”

“I’ve viewed the depositions they gave to IA after the incident. Now, I’d like permission to speak to Gibbs’ former team directly. I’d like to speak to them individually and as a group.”

“Oh, he’s going to love that,” Vance said sarcastically. “The suspension may have prevented him from interacting with them at NCIS, but shutting them out on his own time was entirely his choice, Doctor. How will talking to them help?” he asked, honestly interested.

Silva gave a wry smile as he replied. “I’m well aware Gibbs will view this negatively. It’s my job to change his mind. He does understand he’s done some damage to important relationships. He doesn’t know how to undo it.”

“He knows about the transfer requests from McGee and Bishop,” Vance ventured.

“He knows. Thanks to Agent Ellis, who by the way, deserves some credit for convincing Gibbs to accept he needed help. I believe they will provide more insight into Gibbs’ state of mind and recent behavior. It could be invaluable in developing a treatment approach that will help get him back on an even keel. It can also help them reconnect, if that’s what they want.”

Vance nodded as he indicated his support. “I’ll speak to them all and if they agree, I’ll approve it,” Vance affirmed. “Is that all, Doctor?”

“I think it’s a start, Director,” he said with wry, satisfied smile as he rose to leave.

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Chapter Summary

The Calling strikes first in the game of cat and mouse, sending a message that ensures an inevitable confrontation with the task force.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd but I keep changing stuff, so remaining mistakes are mine.

Warnings: Descriptions of off-screen torture.

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~Shanghai~

Rousseau exited the dimly lit basement behind LaPointe, noting that even from behind, the man was covered head to toe in gore. He looked down at himself, grimacing in distaste at the blood coating his shoes and splashed on his trousers. They would all have to go, he supposed.

They left behind a room strewn with blood-stained tools and blades, puddles of blood on the floor and spattered on walls. The red pools on the floor were centered under a heavy chain hanging from a beam above, a body suspended by bound wrists dangled at its end.

Rousseau considered that their lives were inherently filled with blood and violence as a matter of choice and he'd become desensitized to it long ago. The acts of terrorism they'd committed were largely split second acts of violence that left blood and broken bodies in their wake. An aftermath they were rarely present to see up close and personal. This...torturing someone to death was a different matter.

LaPointe had inflicted cuts and burns with the controlled precision of a surgeon, at first. Over the course of several days, using a combination of drugs and methodical torture, they extracted information from the CIA officer. After they'd satisfied themselves that they'd learned everything he knew of Chan, Teague, and her local field office, LaPointe changed.
It wasn't enough to simply execute the no longer useful prisoner. Deprived of his true target, LaPointe took out all his suppressed rage and frustration over Chan's betrayal on this man. There had been a maniacal gleam in his eyes while he'd taken his torture to a new level; savagely mutilating the man until he was barely recognizable as human. It had gone on for hours on end; most of the day until their victim finally expired from a combination of pain, shock, and blood loss. LaPointe had compelled him and a few others to stay throughout; sending a clear message to anyone considering turning traitor.

Looking back briefly at the macabre scene they left behind, Rousseau felt a flicker of unease; not only because of the new level of barbarity his leader exhibited, but at the enjoyment he took in it. In those final hours of the unfortunate man's life, LaPointe seemed quite unhinged and it had gone far beyond anything he'd ever seen him do before. He was so absorbed in slicing into the man's flesh; Rousseau had to tell him the man had been dead for some time. At that, he'd leaned over the man's head and inflicted a final few more small cuts. It was only then that LaPointe pointed and indicated he was finished his gruesome work. "That will get Teague's attention, I should think… hmm, Emile?" He'd just nodded wordlessly, and then followed LaPointe from the room and away from the copper smell of blood flooding his nostrils.

At dinner that evening, LaPointe had eaten with gusto, oblivious to Rousseau's distaste and that he'd been toying unenthusiastically with the food on his plate. Even though he'd scrubbed himself thoroughly and wore fresh clothes, he imagined he could still smell blood…to the extent that it affected his appetite. LaPointe seemed to have no such difficulty.

Later, Rousseau confirmed the body had been left with Chan's according to LaPointe's instructions. "What's left of our unfortunate 'friend' has been left at the landfill. The police will receive an 'anonymous tip' and the location," he reported.

LaPointe nodded in satisfaction. "Now we wait. Wherever she is, it's only a matter of time before Teague will get the message we left for her. She will come."

"You're certain?"

A cold smile crept across his features. "Oh, she will," LaPointe answered. "Don't you see? It's personal for her; perhaps as much as or even more so than it is for us, yes?"

Rousseau's thoughts turned to his older brother Matthew, murdered in prison nearly two years ago. A prison he'd been in thanks in part to Teague, and the other American agents who'd dismantled their old network and sent the rest of them into hiding. "Yes," he agreed solemnly. "It's personal."
One month later, Sacramento, CA

The pervasive smell of mold in the warehouse caused Tony to sneeze as he helped his team gather and pack their gear after this latest dead-end raid. The decrypted flash drive Joanna recovered had revealed the locations of several warehouses, offices, and isolated homes out of which The Calling once operated sleeper cells. Since the locations were spread out across the western half of the US, the other teams on the task force had joined the searches in order to cover them all as quickly as possible.

They'd halfway suspected the older data wouldn't yield much in the way of new leads, knowing they had to investigate anyway. Every time, they were frustrated to find each of the locations had been abandoned, with nothing left behind but dust and debris strewn about. The silence was heavy as they worked, and he knew it was a reflection of his team's disappointment that these searches hadn't turned up any new leads.

Matt entered the room with the last of the gear. "OK, that's it, Nick."

Tony looked around at the long faces. "Come on everyone, chin up. We knew there was good chance this would happen," he encouraged.

"We know, Nick," Gary agreed. "Still it's annoying as hell to come all this way and go back empty-handed again."

Nick nodded. "It is that," he said agreeably. "Maybe one of the other teams had better luck."

"True," Lena allowed. "Even if they didn't, the money trail back to France looks like it is going to be promising. Who's going to be following up on that, Nick?"

"When I checked in with Joanna earlier, she mentioned some promising new evidence turning up in a raid outside Shanghai a few days ago. We'll compare notes with Joanna and the other teams when we get back to Seattle tomorrow," Nick said. Then we'll decide where to put our resources."

Tony was glad to see his team's demeanor improve at the prospect of following evidence more likely to lead them to The Calling. He put on his sunglasses in anticipation of the late afternoon sunlight and picked up two bags of gear. "Ok, let's head back to the hotel and get some rest; we've got an early flight tomorrow," he reminded.
There were nods of assent and his team grabbed the remaining bags and boxes. They left the dim, dusty warehouse and loaded the SUV parked outside quickly and efficiently.

As they loaded up and then pulled away, none of them caught the glints of sun reflecting on glass from the rooftop of the building across the street. Two men crouched along the low roof wall. One observed the task force team through binoculars, while the other had been using a long-lens camera to snap photos of the people and activities taking place below.

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~Seattle~

Tony left the group debriefing, noting Joanna had been conspicuously absent; maybe she was working with the intel analysts. They seemed excited about a new batch of evidence brought in earlier from Shanghai. He wanted to check in with Mel and the others to see what that was all about and see if Joanna was there doing the same.

Aside from whatever this new evidence might be, there was promising information coming to light about the group's origins in Europe and sources of funding. Old bookkeeping records on the decrypted flash drive documented transaction records and some funding sources for the original network, all leading back to France. They'd traced the account holder's financials and found most accounts closed, but some were still active. If they could show the French government that the accounts were being used to fund terrorist activities, they could get them frozen. Without funding, The Calling would be cut off at the knees.

Tony reached the intel analyst's work area and frowned; Joanna wasn't here either.

Mel looked up from her work and grinned. "Hey Nick," she greeted brightly. "Joanna's been waiting for you to get out of the debriefing. She's over in the conference room."

"Did she say why she's looking for me?"

Mel shrugged, her expression taking on a slightly worried look. "No, but she didn't look very happy."

"That's never a good sign. I'd better check in and see what's going on," he answered.

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Tony made his way to the conference room and opened the door quietly. Joanna looked up as he entered the room and closed the door behind him. He turned and stopped short; her face was a frozen mask and her jaw was clenched. Something was terribly wrong.

"What is it?" he asked, concerned. Joanna was characteristically unflappable but something serious had to have happened to change that. Whether upset or angry, he couldn't say for certain, but she looked as though she was just barely maintaining her composure. Much like Gibbs, Joanna tended toward stoicism and this change made him very uneasy. "Joanna?" he asked again.

Joanna placed her hand on a thick folder in front of her on the table, and began to speak in a strange, emotionless monotone.

"We received a shipment of evidence to process from the Shanghai field office the night before last, while you and your team were gone," Joanna paused, seemingly unsure how to continue.

"Yes…you told me that yesterday when I checked in. And?" he prompted with a worried frown, perplexed at where this was leading.

"They included a copy of a report from the Shanghai police force. The police received an anonymous letter which reported two dead bodies and gave a set of GPS coordinates. The coordinates led to the city landfill; the bodies were there.

"You knew them?" Tony guessed, the only answer he could think of for her out of character behavior.

"One of them," Joanna nodded slowly. "Officer Lee was one of our operatives in Shanghai. The other victim was a key informant who's been feeding us information on The Calling."

She paused again and he urged gently, "Joanna…just tell me what it is you're trying so hard not to say."

Joanna took a breath and continued, giving him a grim look. "It was the Calling, Nick."

"You're sure?" Tony's voice sharpened at Joanna's assertion.
"Oh, yes," Joanna chuckled harshly, then pushed the folder she'd been covering across the table to him. "Look," she said simply.

He turned the folder around and started to open it, glancing briefly at Joanna as he did so. Her face was devoid of expression again.

Tony sucked in a shocked breath as he opened the file and took in the photos of a hideously mutilated body.

"Jesus! He's…" Tony stopped, unable to find the words to continue.

"Yes," Joanna confirmed, finding the words he couldn't. "He's been skinned. Alive, according to the initial autopsy results," she went on in that strange monotone. "It seems this was supposed to be a message to me."

"How do you know that?" Tony asked in a hoarse voice.

Joanna's reply was steady and cold. "You'll understand when you see the message, Nick."

"What message?"

Joanna didn't answer right away. Instead, she reached over to the autopsy photos and pushed several aside, revealing the last one that Tony hadn't seen yet.

"This. You see now?"

Tony started at the sight of the photo, then nodded somberly. This last picture was different than all the rest; it was indeed a message. Whoever had done this wanted Officer Lee to be immediately identifiable and for the message carried by the body to be clear. Unlike the rest of the victim's body, where every inch of skin had either been methodically sliced off or burned, the man's face was almost pristine. Yes, almost pristine; except for the shallow cuts in Lee's forehead. Cuts inflicted in a pattern that formed Joanna's initials.

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Later, Tony brought his team up to speed on the evidence shipment from Shanghai, which included a laptop recovered from a terror cell suspected of being associated with The Calling. Lena and Mel were already hard at work on cracking the laptop's password. He'd also briefed them on the death of the operative on Joanna's Shanghai team, along with his informant; sparing Joanna from going over it again.

Now he was back to reviewing the Lee file again. For as many answers as it provided, it also raised some questions. Officer Lee had kept a detailed private log of his activities, including his meetings with the informant, Chan. He suspected his informant had been compromised when Chan missed a scheduled rendezvous. Unfortunately, he hadn't seen the danger to himself in time, Tony thought. At least the man's personal logs were recovered and the field office in Shanghai shipped them to Seattle along with the rest of the evidence. With both men dead, there was no longer a reason to protect their identities.

The logs contained a wealth of potentially useful information, but one thing that stood out to Tony was a reference to an 'insurance policy' the informant Chan had disclosed to the CIA. It supposedly contained very damaging information to The Calling and Lee had tried unsuccessfully to get Chan to turn it over to them. Chan refused, not completely trusting the CIA to keep it and him safe.

He'd supposedly made arrangements to use the information as leverage to protect himself in the event someone in the network became suspicious of him. Lee also suspected Chan arranged to send it to someone in the event of his death, but had no idea who. Tony shook his head in chagrin as he read the file. Clearly something had happened that prevented Chan from using it as leverage. That was just one of many unanswered questions. Such as what damaging information did this insurance policy hold…and where exactly was it now?

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Nearly 3,000 miles away, forgotten and shelved with mail to be forwarded, a small package addressed to Anthony DiNozzo sat unnoticed in the NCIS mailroom.

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Responses

Chapter Summary

Doctor Silva gains some new insights into Gibbs' handling of past traumas after a rather unorthodox therapy session.

Chapter Notes

Well, real life presented me with some challenges and the muse also went silent for a bit, which means my intended update for last week wasn't ready until this week (insert excuse of choice here). To my reviewers for the last chapter, thank you so much.

I struggled with this chapter and not sure if its quite 'right', but here it is anyway. Hopefully life stays back on track and I can start updating as planned and replying again. Thanks for reading and I hope everyone hangs in there with me; lots more to come! :)

Author’s Notes: UnBeta’d.

Spoilers for ‘A Man Walks Into a Bar…’

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It’s all about responses, Gibbs. You…Vance…your agents. We keep things piled up inside… even the harshest response seems appropriate. – Rachel Cranston, “A Man Walks into a Bar”

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Doctor Silva pulled several folders from his file cabinet and settled in at his desk. He was meeting Gibbs later and wanted to spend the next few hours going back over all the information he had on the case, both the old and new. He hadn't been working with Gibbs all that long but they’d made some baby steps toward progress.

He’d confused Gibbs in those first sessions. After their rocky start, he’d elected to try some non-traditional approaches in his short-term treatment plan. Gibbs seemed to respond more favorably to people he had common ground with. The last thing he wanted was to add to Gibbs’ unfavorable, often adversarial view of ‘head-shrinkers.” In those first few appointments where he was getting to know Gibbs, he’d successfully put him at ease by discussing everything but his actual reasons for being there. They talked about their respective time in the service, their post-military careers, football, and so on. Silva wanted some insight into this intensely private man, what things he was
so desperately trying to avoid facing, why he hid them, and how he successfully hid them for literally decades. The approach seemed to be working.

The interviews with Gibbs’ former team had been rather enlightening too, and now his plan to dig a little deeper into that with him was derailed. Gibbs had a bit of a physical setback recently with his knee and couldn't drive to make his usual appointments. Silva had no intention of allowing the hard earned ground he’d gained with Gibbs to be lost. Not only that, he saw a golden opportunity for a rather unorthodox session or two at Gibbs’ home. He’d heard a lot about Gibbs’ home and the basement boat building from both Director Vance and Rachel Cranston. Vance viewed the home as more a sign of Gibbs’ eccentricity. Vance probably didn't have a clue, if that initial meeting at NCIS was anything to go by.

Rachel on the other hand, looked at it with the eyes of a doctor and she’d convinced him that seeing Gibbs’ home would give him insight into some underlying issues. Surprisingly, Gibbs had agreed to allow it. He wondered what he was going to see there that made Rachel so sure it would be worthwhile.

His mind kept going back to her report on Gibbs and his team; that partial report piqued his interest like nothing else he’d learned of the man. Gibbs and his team were so proficient at avoiding agency directed counseling that even when it had reached SecNav’s attention, they still managed to keep any indication of problems under the radar.

The report was somewhat incomplete to protect the privacy of the other agents. Although it didn’t go into a great deal of detail on Gibbs himself, after Rachel filled in some blanks, it was enlightening nonetheless. It offered more than ample evidence that the possibility of problems developing with Gibbs and the other members of the MCRT had been noted long before Gibbs’ subsequent breakdown. Silva’s mind kept drifting back to Rachel’s telling, handwritten footnote to Vance at the end:

“Director Vance, spending time with your team has been enlightening, to say the least. In clinical terms, they’re a disaster. But their selfless dysfunction is ultimately why it works. It’s clear to me we all react to life’s challenges in different ways. Your people are no exception. Some fight death, and some embrace its solace. Some recognize their fate... and others do whatever is necessary to alter it. Sometimes we defy others' expectations, and, occasionally, we rise to meet them. But the constant, is being true to ourselves. We do what we have to, when we have to. We react, for better or worse. It's why your team succeeds. But be careful. Eventually, it might catch up to you.”

Clinical disasters offset by selfless dysfunction. He was familiar with, and respected Rachel’s work. He found it intriguing she chose to describe Gibbs and his team that way. A precarious balance but one that had worked for a long time, judging by the case closure rate of NCIS’ premiere investigative unit. He wondered why and how that balance shifted, ultimately resulting in Gibbs’ core team splintering a year ago. He recalled bringing it up with Vance and wondered what
the big mystery was.

“One more question, Director. Doctor Cranston spoke of an Agent DiNozzo when I consulted with her, she mentioned he was Gibbs longest tenured agent. I understand he’s no longer with the team but I’d like to speak to him as well if he is available.”

Vance shook his head. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Doctor. Agent DiNozzo resigned suddenly almost a year ago. As I understand it, he’s no longer in Washington. I doubt he’d tell you any more about Gibbs than he told me.”

“Why would you say that?”

"His sudden resignation was…odd,” Vance had admitted. “At one time, DiNozzo was closer to him than anyone. Gibbs fought me more than once to keep DiNozzo on his team; and I know DiNozzo turned down more than one promotion to stay with Gibbs.”

“So why did he leave finally?” Silva asked.

“Unknown, exactly. While it was a perfectly acceptable reason, he was rather cagey about his explanation and careful to avoid any details. I think it was at least in part related to Gibbs.”

Vance had also been adamant that event played a role in Gibbs’ deterioration and after consulting with Rachel, they agreed it could have at least been a factor.

Even so, no one at NCIS seemed willing to question, much less discuss the sudden departure of Gibbs’ long-time SFA. He had no such reservations himself. There had to be something to it, and eventually he’d put the question to Gibbs.

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Gibbs scowled to himself as he waited for Doctor Silva to arrive. Silva challenged him twice every week and tested his commitment to the therapy every session. He was having none of Gibbs’ usual tactics of misdirection or just plain stonewalling. Every week Gibbs struggled with his long held, almost subconscious instinct to keep his deepest thoughts to himself…as well as his pain. Oh, the frustration and anger he had no problem sharing, as his team could attest. But this….it was altogether different and still extremely uncomfortable.
After each session Gibbs felt thoroughly interrogated, but Silva gradually eased him into unpleasant topics in such a way that it allowed him to relax. This man was a keen observer and knew how to use what he learned. They were a lot alike in that way...he built a grudging respect for Silva and his straight shooting manner. That he could appreciate.

Silva had actually surprised a laugh out of him at the end of their last meeting when he said, “I figure every day you show up and don't end up telling me to go screw myself is a small victory and progress in its own way.” In spite of himself, he was beginning to like the guy. Maybe that’s what made it easier to talk to him.

Now, Gibbs was unnerved and off balance all over again at the thought of working with the doctor here at home. Silva had an objective, a reason he wanted to do this...not that he was sharing whatever it was. A knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts; he’d be finding out Silva’s motivations soon enough.

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Silva was glad Rachel didn’t tell him what to expect when he visited Gibbs’ home. He found it incredibly sad really, although he was careful to keep his face blank and free of anything that could be construed as judgmental or negative as they’d gone from room to room. From the partially built boat in the basement to the unused bedrooms, and overall sparse, spartan appearance...it all spoke volumes. What little was present that could be remotely considered as ‘decor’ was dated and the only thing that could be considered at all homey were the many books stacked on the fireplace mantle. What lay behind the locked door at the end of the upstairs hall left him speechless. Now the out-of-place pink bicycle downstairs made sense...a little girls’ room lay behind that door, frozen in time like the rest of the house. Indeed like Gibbs himself, and it brought clarity to so many things about this man’s hidden depths.

Tour complete, Silva followed as Gibbs hobbled back to the couch and sat with a sigh. Whether it was relief or resignation, Silva wasn’t sure. Gibbs propped his leg on the table, set his cane aside, and stared distantly into the cold fireplace.

After a few awkward moments of heavy silence, Silva realized Gibbs wasn’t going to speak without prompting. “I know talking isn't your favorite thing to do, but let’s start off with how you feel about me being here.”

Gibbs scrubbed a hand over his face. “Uncomfortable. It’s a waste of time,” came the terse reply.
“Well that’s honest anyway; thank you,” Silva offered.

Gibbs finally pulled his gaze from the fireplace, and looked at him, a flicker of concern in his eyes.

Silva held up his hands. “No need for concern Gibbs, I'm not offended. It’s perfectly understandable that you would be uncomfortable having me here. I appreciate that you were willing to do it and it has most certainly not been a waste of time.” Silva paused. “I’d like to ask you a question, Gibbs.”

Gibbs just shrugged, and he took that as assent. “Why did you show me your daughter’s room?”

Gibbs jaw clenched against the pain that could still feel so raw after all this time and his eyes became bright, against his will. Damn Silva. He used a firm hand and kept him in the game; as he'd promised in their first meeting, he didn't walk on eggshells around Gibbs. He was different than any head shrinker he'd ever known before. Glowering and stony looks didn't work and he didn't feel the need to fill Gibbs’ resistant silence with unnecessary talk. He simply returned a mirror version of Gibbs’ own impervious stare and waited him out. Silva had none of Grace’s tendency to coddle and mother hen nor Rachel’s well-intentioned but sneaky attempts to manipulate information from him. He did possess his own version of both women’s calm understanding and dry sarcastic wit, but was able to coax and coerce his deepest held fears and secrets out in the open like no one ever had before.

Yet again, Silva waited him out. Patiently accepting that Gibbs would answer when he was ready. “You know about them already. No reason to hide it,” he said closing his eyes against the memories whirling about in his head.

Silva nodded, accepting the answer and recognizing it wasn’t the whole truth. “Mmm, Shannon and Kelly,” he said, intentionally giving voice to the source of Gibbs’ pain. “Yes, I know. Gibbs, let me ask you something else. You told me one reason you wanted to continue with this therapy was to get back to normal. What’s normal to you?”

Gibbs’ eyes snapped open, then he seemed to get his thoughts in order. “Kind of an obvious question, Doc. You know; going back to work, doing all the things people ordinarily do.”

“People or you, Gibbs?”

“I don’t follow.”
“Catch up, Gibbs. You know what I’m asking. You want things to go back to the way they were before. Will that solve all your problems?”

Gibbs made a face.

“You know very well it won’t,” Silva pushed. “Your life has once again been irrevocably changed. You’re here, Gibbs, because some part of you understands it’s time for you to try something different to deal with it.

“Like what?” Gibbs challenged.

“Specifically? I don’t know, but I can help you get it figured out. I can tell you one thing. Whatever it is, it’s something that looks a lot less like obsessive behavior and a lot more like acceptance. Add in more healthy coping mechanisms than boats, bourbon, and basements for a change, along with something that doesn’t involve locked bedroom doors and a house frozen in time as an ode to dead people.”

Gibbs’ face flushed in anger and his chest heaved. He could tell if the knee didn’t prevent it, Gibbs would have risen and looked for a way to vent his anger and pain. Silva waited again; allowed him time to choose how he would handle being called on something no one had ever dared to before.

Gibbs answered with a deadly calm voice, in spite of his anger. “That is my wife and child you’re talking about, Doc. Anyone ever tell you what an asshole you are?”

“Probably about as many people as you’ve heard it from,” Silva replied just as calmly. “It was your wife and child. They’ve been dead a long time. Nothing I say can hurt them or your memory of them.”

Gibbs shot him a withering glare. Silva just watched him serenely a moment then ignoring the glare, he spoke again.

“Which brings me back to the original question of what’s normal for you. Not much about the way you’ve been living here is healthy. Because of guilt and grief, you haven’t allowed yourself a normal life for decades. It’s impacted every corner of your life and career, surely you see it now?”
Gibbs still wanted to hold on to his anger; to deny what Silva was saying. He sighed heavily, his heart just wasn’t in the old denial any more.

Silva read the sigh as acceptance. “I think you are finally seeing it,” he said empathetically. Gibbs looked a bit shattered and Silva decided he’d shredded the man enough this session. “We’ve done enough today.”

Gibbs frowned, expecting the doc to continue that line of discussion and press him about his feelings.

Silva again read him perfectly. “We’ll talk about your feelings more next time Gibbs,” he promised with a grin.

Gibbs huffed and the corner of his mouth twitched upward in a half-smile.

Silva was pleased to see the tension was broken as he intended.

“I want to leave you with some things to think about between now and our next session. Think about this thing you’ve built around yourself that you believe is a refuge. After you’ve thought about it, I want you to look around this house that isn't a home. Honestly think about why it’s frozen in time and you along with it,” Silva instructed as he rose to leave. “Ask yourself if going back to what you thought of as normal before is what they would have wanted for you.”

Gibbs wasn’t sure he was ready to do what Silva was asking; to deal with the room behind that locked door. Bringing that, and other things out in the open; making changes here. Changing things here was going beyond anything he’d expected out of therapy. There wasn’t anything that represented Shannon and Kelly as strongly as this house; he knew it and now Silva knew it too.

Seeing the doubt and hesitation on Gibbs face, Silva pressed. “Gibbs, I can tell you something without ever having met them. If they loved you as much as you love them, then this,” he said waving a hand at their surroundings, “is not what they would have wanted for you. I think if you can be honest with yourself, you’ll know it too. When you do, contemplating change won't be so threatening.”
Coming soon: Answers about that mysterious package addressed to Tony in the NCIS mailroom...
Chapter Summary

Tony and Joanna head to France to pursue a lead but first, Tony makes a stealthy side trip to DC to see about that package.

Chapter Notes

AN: Brief reference to events in ep 11.23 'The Admiral's Daughter'

~Washington DC~

McGee looked up, absently noting the late hour and nearly empty bullpen as a shadow fell across his desk. "Hey Harry. What brings you up from the mailroom this time of day?"

"A bit of a mystery, I guess," the mail clerk answered. "We found a package for Tony down there. I was wondering if you or Bishop might know how to get in touch with him."

"A package for Tony? Huh," McGee mused. "Didn't you check with HR?"

"Sure," Harry said. "They don't have a forwarding address or phone number. Weird, but hey, as suddenly as he left maybe he didn't have a place yet. I figured if anyone would know how to reach him, it would be you, Bishop, or Gibbs."

McGee shrugged. "No, Bishop and I don't have one either. We have a phone number. I haven't talked to him in a while and he changes it so often, I'm not sure if it's current."

"How about Gibbs?"

McGee stifled a sarcastic laugh. "No, definitely not Gibbs either."
"Oh. Huh," Harry frowned. "Well, normally we'd just return to sender but there's no return address and it seems to be from overseas."

"Really? Weird. Ducky might know how to reach him," McGee replied. "I'll check with Ducky if you've got a minute to wait Harry."

"Sure thing, thanks, McGee."

Strange, McGee thought as Harry wandered a few steps away and waited. Why would Tony be receiving overseas mail here, a year after his departure? Obviously, someone who didn't know he'd resigned sent the package. Interesting...he wondered if the package had anything to do with those overseas trips that Tony was so tight-lipped about on the few occasions they did manage to talk.

Oh well; Ducky would probably know how to reach Tony. Though he had mysteriously distanced himself from the rest of his friends at NCIS, he'd long suspected Tony and Ducky were in fairly regular contact, especially since learning he stayed with Ducky during his visit last Christmas.

Out of curiosity, McGee pulled out his cellphone and called the last number he had for Tony, only to hear a robotic monotone inform him the 'cellular customer was not available'. He sighed and dialed Ducky's extension and their exchange made the circumstances even more odd. "Uh, Harry," he called out. Once he had the mail clerk's attention he continued. "Apparently Ducky has access to a post office box Tony uses and takes care of forwarding any local mail for him. You can either run it down to Ducky or he'll come collect the package and take it off your hands."

"Well, I shouldn't," Harry began doubtfully. "But I guess it'll be ok to give it to Ducky," he said, looking to McGee for reassurance.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," McGee affirmed. "Tony must have agreed to it, after all."

As Harry nodded, and then turned to head toward autopsy, the investigator in McGee contemplated Tony's new penchant for mystery surrounding his career and movements. If he were being honest, he was taken aback and a little hurt that Ducky had a forwarding address and no one else did; apparently not even Senior. There must be a reason and not for the first time in the last year he wondered, what is up with you, Tony?

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The next round of overseas travel was looming and Joanna was spending the afternoon before their departure reviewing case update reports Lena provided. Files and pictures of various individuals lay neatly alongside her laptop. Nick had met with her on their game plan earlier, before he headed home to pack for their trip and now she skimmed and committed those details to memory. While the hard drive she'd recovered in Shanghai weeks ago had thus far provided little in the way of real progress, the consensus among Nick's team was that the tide was beginning to turn now. As the last of the individual files on the drive were decrypted, they'd revealed the names of The Calling's founding members and their roots in Marseille, France.

They'd already uncovered some evidence of financial backing and bank accounts used by past members of the group, but now they had solid leads on accounts currently in use, names of account owners, and known associates to go along with it all. The money trails showed compelling proof that these accounts were being used to fund terrorist activity but their attempt to work with the French National police, to share information and get the accounts frozen was meeting with little success until recently.

Fortunately her fellow CIA officer, Lena, had contacts in France. These would hopefully prove useful as they'd run into a number of roadblocks gaining cooperation in their investigation from here. The plan was to go onsite and conduct an investigation on the ground in France; hopefully in collaboration with law enforcement arranged in advance by Lena's contacts. Once there, they would be expected to share their findings thus far. She acknowledged that was a calculated risk if The Calling still had a presence there, but it could pay off in a big way if the temporary asset freezes they'd negotiated were rendered permanent. The group couldn't operate effectively without access to their funds.

Joanna's optimistic mood turned dark as she contemplated their return to Shanghai once they concluded their work in Marseille. She hoped to reassure her remaining operatives in Shanghai, who were quite understandably skittish after the vicious torture and murder of their colleague. She looked forward to identifying the people behind that barbaric act; one intended as a message to her. She supposed they meant to instill fear...to make her and the others think twice about their pursuit of The Calling. They'd learn that the inhuman act of torture they committed only deepened her resolve to bring them to justice; by any means necessary.

There was also the matter of the informant Chan's 'insurance policy' mentioned in Officer Lee's logs. They needed to follow up and try to locate it, if they could...preferably before The Calling recovered it. She'd been dwelling on the death of Officer Lee and Tony knew it, from the speculative glances he'd tossed her way periodically.

Hurried steps from the hall outside her office pulled her from those dark thoughts. She looked up expectantly as Tony walked in and closed the door.
"Nick? I thought you went home to pack," she asked as he paced agitatedly.

Nick sat and scrubbed a hand over his face. "I did. But I think we have a problem," he began.

"What's wrong?"

"I got a call from Ducky as I was finishing up. A package was mailed to me at NCIS."

Confused, Joanna asked, "What am I missing?"

"It's an overseas package; no return address with Asian post marks," Nick explained, looking at her meaningfully.

"The insurance policy. Oh my god. Could it be that easy?" Joanna asked in astonishment.

"Joanna!" Nick hissed in frustration. "And if it is? This thing that The Calling is looking for and willing to kill for passed through NCIS! Ducky carried this damn package around, for God's sake and if it's what we think it is, my friends have been placed in danger! This is exactly what I have been trying so hard to avoid!"

Now Joanna understood, and she kicked herself for not seeing the reason for his pale and shaken look before he pointed it out.

"I'm sorry, you shouldn't have had to explain that. I should have seen it," she appeased. "Please tell me he isn't holding onto it and it's in a safe place," she asked, now sharing the concern for his friends in DC.

"No, I didn't want it in his hands any longer than necessary. He's placed it in a post office box I opened under the alias last year," Nick disclosed. "I use it to communicate with him, and the property management company for my old apartment. Ducky forwards any mail on the rare occasion I need to see something."
"I thought you sold the apartment?"

"The sale fell through shortly after I came out here. I got sentimental and kept it as a rental. Ducky has power of attorney to work with the property office if needed and my name is kept out of it," Nick explained.

"Ah, Joanna nodded. "Well we can't just leave the package there, not knowing for certain what it is and we're flying to Marseille in the morning."

"I know," Nick replied curtly. "I've already changed my flight. Instead of stopping over in New York, I'm flying to DC tonight and I'll pick it up. I'll take the redeye out in time to meet you and Lena in Marseille tomorrow night."

Joanna nodded in agreement. "Be careful, Nick. Its best you don't spend any appreciable time in DC, but in this case it's unavoidable."

"Well, it's not exactly advisable for me to show my face in Marseille either. The last time I was there I was framed for murder and my face was plastered all over the television," he snarked.

"Yes, and we've confirmed we won't be working with anyone directly involved in that case," Joanna replied calmly.

Nick tipped his head, mollified. "Still; the sooner we meet Lena's contacts, deal with the banks, and get out of there, the better I will feel."

"Agreed." Joanna stood and gathered her files. "Come on, let's go. I'll give you a ride to the airport."

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~Marseille~

Tony rose early, dressed, and started the coffee pot in his hotel room. He'd given up on sleep; his body clock was too off kilter after jetting from Seattle to DC, and then to Europe without so much as a day to recover. It had been worth it though. The small package he'd retrieved in DC was in fact; from Chan. It was an SD card, but they'd yet to view it. Joanna's mistrust and paranoia drove
her to insist they wait until the return to Seattle to try and access the card's contents in a secure environment and on a non-networked machine. It was sound logic, but he was on edge not knowing what he had.

Yesterday's efforts had also been fruitful. Lena's contacts in the General Directorate for Internal Security, or DGSI as they were known, had reviewed their evidence, and shared some of their own. One of several French intelligence services, the DGSI was tasked with counter-terrorism and the assessment of potential threats to French territory, among other things. It took some convincing to prove that the once defunct terrorist group had reformed and was very much a threat to both countries' interests. Some of the evidence they'd presented had raised eyebrows.

Tony and his team produced proof that an old aristocratic family name was linked to one of the French bank accounts used for laundering money taken in by The Calling. That explained why the French were so hesitant to act on their information and request to freeze family assets. The family patriarch and heir to shipping fortune, Arnaud Despins, resided at the family estate outside the port city. Bedridden, he'd retired from public life due to poor health and his affairs were largely managed by an executor. His only heir, an illegitimate son named Aziz Despins founded The Calling originally, and recruited its prior leadership circle, including Daniel Budd and the Rousseau brothers.

Aziz Despins would be a prime candidate for the group's current leader, but had been ruled out. DGSI reported that he was killed in the warehouse explosion and fire that destroyed The Calling's first headquarters in Shanghai two years ago; the same explosion that he and Joanna narrowly escaped from. Matthew Rousseau died in a U.S. prison, murdered on orders of someone high up in The Calling's hierarchy because he'd talked to Gibbs. That moved up the younger Rousseau brother, Emile, up to the top of the likely candidates list. Little was known of him except he escaped the round up when the terrorist group was originally dismantled and he remained at large.

They still needed an explanation of how Despins' accounts were being used by The Calling. Their police liaison would be arriving soon to drive them to the bank, where they were scheduled to meet with Despins' executor.

His phone buzzed, and he glanced down to see a text from Joanna. It was time to head downstairs.

The police officer parked the car and Tony stepped out into the bright sunshine, absently noting Lena and Joanna in his peripheral vision exiting the opposite side of the car behind him. He turned toward the bank building and just after he stepped into the street to cross, all hell broke loose.
There was a blinding flash behind the bank windows, followed a split second later by a deafening, overwhelming roar. The ground trembled and a wave of heat and flying glass broke over him; there was a feeling of falling, then nothing.

Tony sat in the back of an ambulance, submitting to an exam but refusing to be transported. Joanna and Lena were unhurt, having been further away and still behind the car. They looked on worriedly from the vehicle door as small cuts on his face, neck, and arms were tended to by the EMTs.

"Are you sure you're all right Nick?" Lena asked, her voice heavy with concern. "You were out of it for a minute."

"Trust me Lena; I know what a concussion feels like. I'm fine but for the cuts and bruises."

Lena bit her lip doubtfully and glanced at Joanna, who just looked grim.

"I don't suppose the timing of this could be a coincidence, could it Nick?" Joanna asked drily.

"There's no such thing," he replied, feeling a fleeting moment of sadness as the fact that he'd paraphrased a Gibbs rule occurred to him. Shrugging off the ministrations and protests of the EMTs, he jumped down out of the ambulance, turning back to thank them sincerely, "Merci."

Meeting Joanna's eyes pointedly he asserted, "We're done here. It's time to head back."

Rousseau smiled, printed a few pages and placed the sheaf of papers carefully in a folder. The information within should improve LaPointe's mood considerably.

His leader had been in a fury for days after learning their assets in France had been temporarily frozen at the request of the U.S. government. To make matters worse, their informants revealed the
CIA woman, Teague, had been spotted in Marseille and they'd been told she, along with the DGSI planned to interview Despins' executor.

The executor couldn't be allowed to reveal his involvement with them and had become expendable. An ill-conceived and sloppy plan to kill two birds with one stone had been carried out.

LaPointe ordered the bank bombed in revenge for capitulating to U.S. demands. The timing was off and although the executor had been caught in the explosion, they'd missed the CIA woman and her police escort.

Now he had something worthwhile to report, and hopefully it would offset LaPointe's stormy mood. He walked down the hall and knocked lightly on LaPointe's door. "It's Emile," he announced. After hearing a muffled acknowledgment, he opened the door and went inside.

LaPointe looked up as Rousseau entered, a folder in hand. He raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I have news from our cell in Washington," he offered with a wide, toothy grin that contrasted with his dark skin.

"Some good news for a change would be welcome, Emile."

"Oh yes," Rousseau said conspiratorially, still smiling. He laid down the folder and deliberately left his hand in place on top of it. "They got a hit in their searches of the AFIS database."

With a dramatic flair, Rousseau opened the folder, revealing an AFIS photo of a handsome green-eyed man. LaPointe's eyes narrowed in recognition and his cheeks flushed in anger. "We have a name."
Lynchpin

Chapter Summary

After Silva's visit to his house and the unorthodox therapy session that followed, Gibbs gains new perspectives on his life choices.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: With apologies for the long, long wait, I humbly offer a two-chapter update for those still following this story. I sure hope there are some of you out there. My absence from writing and replying to comments was definitely unplanned, but also unavoidable (because real life just sucks out loud sometimes.) My mother became very ill this summer. Her health continued to decline rapidly through the fall and she didn't recover. As you might imagine, her illness and passing sent me into a creative tailspin for awhile, and I'm just recently finding the time, energy, and inclination to take up writing again. I'd never leave a story unfinished and so I'm pleased I feel able to take up this story again and see where it goes.

Enough about me; now on to the story. I hope it's worth the wait.

This chapter takes up where chapter 6 ended; immediately after Silva leaves Gibbs' house. References to 'A Man Walks Into a Bar', and other canon events sprinkled throughout.

Beta'd - any goofs remaining belong to me.

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~Gibbs' House~

After the doctor left, Gibbs clumsily lurched to his feet and retraced their steps around the spartan house. He hobbled unsteadily favoring his rebuilt knee, and tightened his grip on the damn cane he still relied on to get around. He winced at the ache as he descended the basement stairs and the unfinished boat came into view, an ache that was as much emotional as physical. He looked around, eyes settling on his workbench where the model version of the 'Chickadee' sat on its stand, lovingly polished and gleaming in the even in the dim light.

There had been many boats, all in one way or another, representing a lifetime of loss. Shannon, Kelly, and now his mother had her boat nearing completion now. Then there were the boats for the ones who'd given up on him and left of their own accord. He'd used the ex-wives' boats to act out his anger and feelings of abandonment; first lovingly building them here. Then vindictively breaking them all up and burning them in the backyard. He began to see the basement for what it had become. It wasn't always the refuge he'd thought it to be. In some ways, it was a prison of his
own making and he was a hostage inside it; a hostage to his guilt, grief, and resentment of cruel fate.

He considered his new insights about the basement as he lumbered up the stairs to the sparsely furnished, impersonal ground floor, trying to see it all with Silva's eyes. He'd been watching carefully for signs of judgment from the doctor at the stark and mostly empty rooms, but there hadn't been any. As always, the doctor kept his personal feelings in check. Still, he caught brief glimpses of emotion on the stalwart physician's face; not judgment or condescension, but something he wasn't used to seeing on his behalf...compassion. Silva seemed disturbed, even saddened by what he'd seen in the house. His usual excuse of being taken to the cleaners in each of the three divorces rang hollow. It was crap and he knew it. So did Silva, by the expression on his face.

Gibbs limped upstairs, resolving to keep trying to see not just what Silva had seen, but what it meant. He passed the dusty, unused master bedroom and then hesitantly ventured into the frozen-in-time little girl's room at the end of the hall. Gibbs gulped in air as he took in the pink walls and frilly canopy bed; the room that memorialized his deepest loss. His breathing becoming erratic and hands clenching into fists as he'd tried like hell to hang on to the last vestiges of control, to reign in his emotions and not to break down in that room. It didn't work.

Years of suppressed grief and anger came on like a tidal wave; unstoppable and undeniable in its intensity. He'd dropped his cane and then stumbled back against the pink wall and slid down, his backside hitting the floor with a solid thump as he sobbed uncontrollably. For the first time he could ever remember, instead of defaulting to anger and guilt, he permitted himself a natural outpouring of grief previously denied as something he didn't want or need.

Emotions finally spent, Gibbs sat on the floor of his long-dead daughter's pink room, limp and exhausted in the aftermath of his latest meltdown. He thought back to the meltdown that first set him on this path; that day in the alley when Bishop had been injured and he'd attacked their suspect. Until then, he'd kept all those tragedies and near-tragedies that he was helpless to prevent and their impact brutally suppressed through sheer iron will. His mother, Shannon, Kelly, everything; all his past traumas then and since and their effect on him were kept behind a carefully constructed dam. That, he could control. Or so he'd thought for years.

That control faltered completely when he'd seen Bishop bloodied and unconscious; and the dam had begun to well and truly break then. He felt a jolt in his chest as he flashed back to that incident. He suddenly remembered the visions that filled his mind when he saw Bishop down; Kate on the rooftop, Tony dying from the plague and skirting death so many other times, Jenny and Mike's deaths, and more. If he were honest, the cracks had been appearing for years, going all the way back before Kate. Maybe the cracks had always been there and he'd lost his ability to keep shoring them up, to hold out the 'water'. That started with The Calling, his shooting, and the fallout from Tony's departure; all of it causing more and more cracks in the façade of that dam in his mind until now, in this moment, it seemed as though the dam was no longer there at all.
Not since Shannon and Kelly died had he felt this unsure of himself and lost. Before Doctor Silva, he'd never given any therapist or anyone this intimate of a glimpse into the origin of his pain. Seeing his home through someone else's eyes had never really happened before, not even with the exes. They just demanded he change and scripted out their expectations, while he dug in deeper and resisted, not consciously understanding why. He might have kept Shannon and Kelly out of sight behind those two closed doors; hidden from his team, his exes, and even from himself but their presence still lingered.

In spite of his refusal and at times, inability to even discuss Shannon and Kelly, or those two closed rooms, their presence here never diminished. Through their damned women's intuition, or something else equally intangible to him, all three ex-wives eventually came to understand they were competing with ghosts for his attentions. He'd loved all three as best as he could but those subsequent marriages, the attempts to recapture what he'd had with Shannon were doomed before they'd finished saying their vows.

He stayed there on the floor long after the wave of emotion crested and broke; surprised at the relief catharsis brought. With everything out in the open, and was beginning to get a sense that there would be no more hiding from it. He felt laid bare, vulnerable as he'd never been before, and now he wondered where to go from here.

The emotional upheaval brought bone-deep exhaustion, but also emerging clarity and perspective as he considered the frozen-in-time house, honestly as Silva had challenged him to do. He realized the simple truth. Silva was right. The doc was objective where he himself wasn't able to be, until now. There was no judgment; no demands, such as he'd encountered in the past after revealing far less. Silva had helped open Gibbs’ eyes to the possibility that he'd deluded himself into believing the life he'd been living was the life he deserved. What he said had struck home, and hard.

What's normal to you? Silva had asked, and then challenged Gibbs to consider if going back to how things were before would solve his problems.

He considered the house, the house Shannon chose of all the ones they'd toured. She'd loved the craftsman style bungalow immediately and turned it into a cozy, comfortable home for their small family. After their deaths, Shannon and Kelly's presence remained visible in almost every room. That was no less true when he'd packed all their things away in those two bedrooms; their ghosts lingered everywhere...except the basement.

Shannon and Kelly avoided the dim, musty basement and so he made it his refuge after their deaths. The only room where he didn't feel them was the room where, when remembering became too much, he'd felt free to dull his grief and cloud their memories with bourbon. There he'd nurtured all the guilt he felt over not being there to prevent the loss of his family and for all his
failures that would come after. He realized he'd listened to his subconscious and made this house nothing more than a place to do penance; each empty room devoid of personality and every boat had been an act of contrition. The house had become a monument to guilt and Silva had called him on it.

"Think about this thing you've built around yourself that you believe is a refuge. After you've thought about it, I want you to look around this house that isn't a home. Honestly think about why it's frozen in time and you along with it...ask yourself if going back to what you thought of as normal before is what they would have wanted for you."

Gibbs inhaled sharply as the two visions he'd had of Shannon and Kelly while hovering between life and death came back with startling clarity. The two visions had been years apart, but the message was the same.

No, he'd thought as the epiphany finally dawned. Silva was spot on; this life wasn't what they would have wanted for him. Traumas and guilt he'd kept dammed up, locked behind closed doors had kept him from having a normal life for decades and caused him to distance himself from anyone who got too close.

Gibbs picked up his cane, braced himself against the pink wall and rose. Feeling inexplicably drawn, he slowly made his way back across the hall to the unused master bedroom and carefully lowered himself to the floor next to the bed. He reached underneath and pulled out a small tin box, placing it on his lap. Opening it, he smiled to see the scraps of paper inspired by Shannon's own 'rules'. His eyes stung and a lump rose in his throat as he recalled that sweet moment during that first meeting with his then-future wife.

"Everyone needs a code to live by."

Blinking to clear his vision, he focused on the scraps of paper again. There it was; the last rule he'd added to the box. He lifted out the top piece of paper and read his own precise, block print.

#51

Sometimes - you're wrong

Maybe Shannon was trying to tell him something again. He was beginning to accept he might have been wrong about a great many things. As that realization hit home, he thought that maybe something inside him shifted enough to allow him to move forward. If he could just work out how to let go of his guilt and set things right; not just with himself but people in his life that meant
something to him, even as he'd done his best to alienate them. He'd gotten this far with Silva's help. It seemed they were going to have a lot to talk about in their next session.

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~Later that week~

Gibbs walked into Doctor Silva's office, cane in one hand and nearly empty coffee cup in the other. He looked longingly at the nearly full coffee pot on a side table.

"Hello, Gibbs," Silva greeted with a knowing grin. "Go ahead and grab a refill while I clear this up," he invited as he gathered up some file folders and began putting them away. "Just give me a minute; my last appointment ran over," he explained as he cleared his desk in preparation for his final appointment of the day; and the one he'd been anticipating with the greatest interest from the perspective of his patient's progress.

Gibbs gratefully refilled his cup and took a seat; hooking his cane over the arm of the chair.

Silva wasted no time in prompting him to talk. "So, how are you feeling, Gibbs? I left you with some things to think about; did you come to any conclusions after our last meeting?" Something happened after that unorthodox session at Gibbs' home; something that had him calling Silva's secretary and asking to move up his next appointment. Whatever happened, now that he was here, Gibbs seemed in no hurry to begin.

Silva observed as Gibbs avoided meeting his eyes, and instead engaged in a mute study of his coffee cup. The brooding silence was a delaying tactic he'd fallen back on so often in the beginning, before Silva earned his trust. Gibbs used it either when there was something on his mind he wasn't sure how to articulate, or something he wanted to avoid altogether. Gibbs remained silent, apparently lost in thought.

Whatever was weighing on Gibbs' mind about their last session, it was something that made the contrary man attempt to withdraw back into his shell. The question was whether it was something good or something that would represent a setback, or even something that would make Gibbs stop their sessions rather than work through it. After the progress they'd already made, Silva wasn't going to let that happen.

He sensed Gibbs had been pushed ever closer to finally coming to terms with the deaths of his wife
and daughter. Gibbs knew it too and was fighting it. Silva could see he'd held on to that grief and loss for so long, he didn't know how not to. Gibbs was still stubbornly trying to cling to the past, to a place in life and in his head that had given him at the very least, the ability to get through each day if not a semblance of comfort and control.

He got straight to the point. "Talk to me about what happened after I left your house, Gibbs." His patience was rewarded.

Gibbs sighed heavily. After a moment, he began to speak haltingly, explaining how he'd retraced their steps while considering Silva's questions about going back to normal and what he'd been doing to himself in that house. Gibbs hesitated and then, almost with a sense of shame, told him about his breakdown in Kelly's room and the why.

"Believe it or not that's significant progress," Silva offered. "There's no shame in how you feel. What conclusion did you come to?"

"How is another meltdown progress?" Gibbs asked scathingly, ignoring the question.

"What you call a meltdown, Gibbs, I call a breakthrough."

Gibbs snorted in derision.

"Gibbs, don't minimize what happened the other day…it's an important step in your progress. You've spent over 25 years letting that tragedy define your life and dictate your actions for better or worse; and more often than not, worse," Silva asserted. "The grief I get. We talked about your grief after your mother's death and how it had a profound impact on you going forward. What was different about Shannon and Kelly?"

"Nothing was different," Gibbs disputed. "They died and I moved on as best I could."

"But you didn't actually move on, Gibbs, and you've been in denial about that," Silva argued. "Not then and not now. Rachel told me about the day in your basement."

Gibbs had been staring down into his coffee in subconscious avoidance, but looked up sharply at that. "What are you talking about?" he asked with narrowed eyes.
"When you led her to a spot there and told her it was exactly where the man who murdered her sister died…and that was closure. Do you really believe that?" Silva asked as he watched Gibbs shift uncomfortably in his seat.

Gibbs hadn't expected Silva's tactic of connecting the two events and in light of what he'd done in Mexico, was considering how best to answer.

"That week Rachel shadowed my team…" Gibbs began haltingly, "the formal reason we were given was she would conduct an evaluation of me and my team. She asked for that assignment and did so for her own reasons. She was looking for something…a connection to Kate by gaining insight into the people who worked with her every day."

Silva nodded at Gibbs' perception. Rachel had admitted as much to him as well.

"How much more profound of a connection could she have made," Gibbs continued. "How much more closure could she have gotten from something other than standing in the very spot where the man who murdered her sister met justice? Yeah; I believe in that being closure," Gibbs finished decisively.

"What did you do for closure?"

"I did what I thought I had to in order to get closure; justice," Gibbs offered somewhat evasively. "Best you don't ask for details, doc."

Well, that was a revelation he hadn't expected, Silva thought. The implication of vigilantism shed a wholly new and different light on Gibbs' guilt complex. "So if that's the case then why the guilt; the need to punish yourself over a tragedy you had no role in?"

"No role? How do ya figure?" Gibbs asked, becoming visibly angry.

"How do you figure, Gibbs? You weren't even there."

"I should have been!" Gibbs raged, trembling as repressed emotion boiled over. "They were my responsibility; I should have been there to keep them safe!"
Empathy filled him at Gibbs' revelation. There it was finally, the original lynchpin around which all Gibbs' traumatic stress symptoms spun. Oh, there was more to it...those near-death experiences and visions Gibbs mentioned previously were triggers for changes in his behavior. Even so, *everything* went back to that one moment in time...*he wasn't there to stop it*. He couldn't alter the fact that his mother would be ravaged by illness, so there was no reason to feel guilt. That was the difference. Gibbs thought Shannon and Kelly died because he wasn't there to alter the outcome; to protect his family from harm.

"Oh, Gibbs...is that it?' Silva asked sadly. "You weren't there; maybe if you had been you could have saved them? What convinced you that it was your fault?"

Gibbs was still shaking in reaction to the breakthrough as he spoke. "They did in every nightmare I had for months after. And every time I saw or spoke to them, her family blamed me. It felt right...*they* were right," Gibbs shrugged helplessly.

"Your guilt issues have guilt issues, Gibbs." Silva shook his head.

Gibbs glared. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"No, it isn't. I'm just saying it's a lot for you to sort out," the doctor elaborated. "It's human nature to look for a reason; to place blame in the face of tragedy. It doesn't mean they were right to place it on you, Gibbs. It doesn't mean *you* were right," Silva said.

"What *does* it mean then?"

"Think about it, Gibbs. From what you've told me of them, it doesn't sound to me like they'd have wanted you to punish yourself. Do you *really* think if you'd been there you could have prevented it? Wouldn't it have been more likely you'd have died with them...or even *before* them?"

"Is that what you think I've been doing, punishing myself?" Gibbs challenged.

"Isn't it? And don't avoid the question. Be honest; can you accept the possibility that even if you'd been there, it wouldn't necessarily have changed anything?"
"I can't help but feel I'd have made a difference," Gibbs answered stubbornly.

"If you're serious about picking up the pieces, getting back to work, and rebuilding a life outside of work, you have to stop living based on all the 'what could have beens'. That helplessness you felt about not being there is your trigger. Every time something traumatic happened, you felt it again and you fell into a pattern of self-blame, going all the way back to your family. You never got your closure; you never moved on," Silva concluded. "If you had, we wouldn't be here."

"I did." Gibbs insisted.

"Then why does it haunt you so much? You might have gotten justice and called it closure, but you simply earned yourself a whole new level of guilt," Silva disputed. "You joined NIS and threw yourself into your work wholeheartedly. You went at Mach 10 for years and there was no room in your life for anything else; not a home, not another chance at love and family…nothing. Just you and every incident after where you lost someone or people got hurt. It only amplified your guilt until it reached the point where the coping mechanisms you developed no longer worked. Are you seeing that now?"

Gibbs jaw clenched and his eyes were stormy as he fought the admission that would change everything. After a long moment of internal struggle, he answered. "Yes," he admitted softly.

"Gibbs, I can tell you it wasn't your fault; you've been told that before. You have to believe it and you never really did. That, in a nutshell, is why we're here Gibbs."

Gibbs looked up with brimming eyes. "It wasn't my fault?"

"Of course it wasn't your fault; it never was. You have to know it, believe it in here," Silva emphasized tapping his temple and chest over his heart. "Don't ask me…say it, Gibbs. Accept that justice isn't always closure and running isn't moving on. I think you're closer now than ever before to doing exactly that."

Gibbs eyes cleared as he said it. "It wasn't my fault." He thought maybe, just maybe…he could start to believe it now.
Chapter Summary

After their close call in Marseille, Joanna heads back to Shanghai, while Tony and his team follow a new lead with an unexpected result.

Beta'd - any goofs remaining belong to me.

AN: Takes place immediately after events in chapter 7, after Tony's covert side trip to DC, then meets Joanna to follow leads in Marseille.

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~Shanghai~

"We have a name."

LaPointe looked up from the AFIS photo print out and stared hard at Rousseau. "You're certain the Washington cell has made no errors, Emile? There's no doubt about the identification?"

Rousseau's white teeth flashed as he gave another pleased smile. "I've verified the identification myself. It's the same man seen with Teague in the old warehouse video footage and he matches the description of the man that shot and killed Daniel.

LaPointe nodded in anticipation. "Who is he?"

"Anthony DiNozzo,"

"What else do we know about him, Emile? Is he CIA also?"

"We don't know much at this point; we've only just confirmed his identity from AFIS. We only know that he worked for NCIS and was based at their office in Washington at the time. I have the cell there working on tracking him down. Don't worry; we will find him, LaPointe."
A fanatical light grew in LaPointe's eyes as he contemplated the positive identification of the man who killed Daniel and helped bring down their operation two years before.

"I want to know everything about him...who he is and where he's from; work, family, all of it. Most importantly, I want to know where he is now.

Rousseau nodded. "We have a name to go with the face...it's only a matter of time now, LaPointe."

"And what do we know about Teague's appearance in France?"

"We had no way to know she would turn up in Marseille, so we were unprepared to have her followed or identify her colleagues. We know they met with the DGSI, but we have no people on the inside there. According to the executor's staff and our contacts in the police department, our assets were frozen because they presented evidence of money laundering and the funneling of funds to accounts here," Rousseau explained.

"How did they know all this?" LaPointe asked angrily. "Chan?"

"Presumably; I believe this information must have been present on the flash drive he dropped for Teague's people to find. It's fortunate we were able to stop the executor from talking to her. Not only could he have connected us to those accounts, he can identify me and knows your true identity."

"Yes, he was an acceptable loss and the Bank of France has learned there is a price for working with the Americans. His death is unfortunate from a perspective of timing," LaPointe mused. "We might have been able to use him to gather information on Teague and her colleagues." LaPointe's eyes narrowed. "I'm more concerned with our assets in France being frozen," he said sourly. "The Despins accounts are a major source of income and now we have to step up other operations to manage the shortfall. Now as for other matters; have our false trails turned up any results?"

"Oh yes," Rousseau affirmed. "You were right, the CIA has taken the bait and our planted evidence is being investigated."

LaPointe smiled in satisfaction. "Teague has been located?"

"Not yet; their approach seems quite cautious and methodical. We've never observed the exact same group at any of the locations we've staged."
As LaPointe's expression darkened in anger, Rousseau rushed to explain further. "We've spread ourselves thin trying to cover sites here and in the States. We can't keep them all under surveillance 24/7 but even so, we have made some progress. Our surveillance teams have managed to identify several of the federal agents who've investigated our decoy sites and confiscated the planted weapons and explosive stockpiles. We're attempting to determine if they're working with her and where their base of operations is."

"Well, that's something. The unfortunate Officer Lee provided us quite a bit of new information about Teague herself and the CIA's covert operations here in Shanghai before his demise. We've gathered enough information; it's time we started taking advantage of what we know. Officer Teague seems to turn up here in Shanghai with some regularity." LaPointe gave a chilling smile as he spoke again. "Perhaps it's time we were a bit more proactive locally in pursuing her. That will be all for now, Emile," he said, dismissing his second in command.

Demise…that was one way to put it, Rousseau said to himself as he thought back to LaPointe's barbaric torture and murder of the captured CIA officer. Rousseau barely managed to conceal his shudder at the fleeting images of flayed and burned skin in his head. He turned to leave as the uneasiness he felt more and more often in the presence of the group's leader returned. He could plainly see that LaPointe's obsession with finding Teague, and now DiNozzo would only grow stronger. The sooner the agents were found and eliminated, the better.

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~Seattle~

Tony breathed a sigh of satisfaction as they'd finally arrived at the airport in Seattle, to be greeted by an unusually sunny, warm day. 'Nick' sent Lena home to her family for what was left of the weekend, while Joanna called S3 to alert them that they'd arrived safely and would be bringing in evidence to be logged. His team was there working the weekend, so something must have come up while they were in Marseille.

Joanna was headed back to Shanghai soon, and wanted to check in and brief the others first. Their findings and the information shared by the French authorities was a crucial key to the task force tracking down The Calling's money trails.

Nick and Joanna arrived at S3 to find Gary, Matt, and Melanie working at their desks in the team's area; completely absorbed in what they were doing. Melanie's desk was facing the doorway and she looked up, smiling in greeting as they entered. The smile quickly faded to worry as she caught sight of him, taking in the cuts on Nick's face and neck.

"Nick! Are you alright? They said none of you were hurt in the bank bombing!"
Matt and Gary looked up in concern at Melanie's startled exclamation and all three rose to meet Nick and Joanna as they entered the open area between the desks.

"I'm fine, Mel," Nick answered, waving a hand dismissively and nodding a greeting to the other two members of his team. "It's just some cuts from flying glass. I was still pretty much across the street when the explosion happened."

Matt looked Nick over with a critical eye; seeing only superficial injuries. His team lead was clearly unconcerned, but it could easily have been worse if they'd been a few minutes earlier arriving at the bank. "Still, it was a close call for everyone," he pointed out.

Gary nodded in agreement. "So, where's Lena…she OK?" he asked Nick, noting their team mate's absence.

"She's fine; not a scratch. I sent her home for some family time. Joanna and I will debrief you on our trip," Nick answered as he pulled a thick stack of files from his back pack. "Present for ya, Mel," he said with an impish grin. "Copies of new intel on The Calling courtesy of the French government, as well as the financial records we able to procure before the bank went up."

Melanie couldn't help but return Nick's infectious grin as she accepted the files. "I'll get these down to the other intel analysts and start getting it sorted; see what exactly we have here as far as filling in the larger picture. We're also still working with the laptop Joanna's team in Shanghai recovered. Gary and Matt can tell you both more about what we've found so far, but we still have a number of encrypted files we're dealing with." Mel turned to Elena's CIA counterpart. "I could use Lena's help with those, Joanna. I've learned a lot but she's the best we have with encryption keys and computer forensics."

"She'll be in tomorrow," Joanna assured as Melanie shifted her grip on the stack of files and turned toward the stairs.

"OK guys," Nick said turning to Gary and Matt. "Let's head to the conference room. I'll brief you from the notes I kept for my report and Joanna can tell you about what we learned from Lena's contacts in the DGSI," Nick explained. "Then you can tell us what you've been working on while we were gone."

After he and Joanna briefed Matt and Gary on all that happened in Marseille, Tony wanted to find out what work brought his team in on a Sunday. "So what's everyone doing here today? I didn't
expect to see you all until tomorrow."

"Gary and I have been augmenting the other task force teams while you and Lena were in Europe. There have been a number of raids and searches conducted based on intelligence and data on the laptop confiscated in Shanghai," Matt explained. "We just got back from San Diego, where we recovered a cache of weapons and information that indicated the Navy base there was a likely target for an attack in the near future. The cache was a mixed bag of assault rifles, explosives, older large caliber projectiles, and grenades."

Joanna glanced at Tony briefly to gauge his reaction to a Navy base being targeted. If NCIS were brought into that part of the investigation, things could get complicated in a hurry. Tony just looked grim as Gary continued, frustration coming through in his voice. "Before that, we searched three warehouses in three different cities and found exactly nothing."

Gary paused, appearing to be mulling something over.

"Gary? Something else on your mind?" Nick queried.

"Yeah…" Gary began hesitantly, his gaze unfocused, as if still putting pieces of a puzzle together in his head. "I need to look at the evidence photos taken by the other teams," he explained as he moved to the conference room computer and logged in.

Nick straightened, leaning forward in interest. Representing the ATF on the joint task force, Gary was their weapons expert. If something was setting off Gary's radar, he wanted to know what it was. He shared a look with Matt, who shrugged. Nick pressed his lips together and waited; Matt didn't have a clue where Gary was going with this.

Gary quickly browsed case files on the network and located the photos he was looking for.

"Gary?" Joanna prompted.

Gary didn't answer. He just kept working, intent and scanning through photos lightning fast while Joanna, Nick, and Matt watched, bemused.

Nick grabbed a notepad off the conference table and tore off a sheet of paper while Gary continued to scan photos, mumbling and nodding to himself the whole time.
Joanna raised an eyebrow and Matt smirked at him as he wadded up the paper tightly. Mimicking a basketball jump shot, he took aim and lobbed the paper ball across the room. "He shoots; he scores!" Nick gave a celebratory fist pump as the paper ball bounced off the center of the monitor and into Gary's lap.

"Hey!" Gary scowled as he looked up.

Nick grinned unrepentantly. "You going to share with the rest of the class sometime soon, Gary?"

Gary huffed a laugh and turned back to the monitor. "OK, hang on." He selected a few photos and set them to display on the large wall mounted monitor in the front of the room.

"You catch anything peculiar here?" Gary asked, indicating the photos he selected.

Nick, Matt, and Joanna rose in unison and made their way over to the display, each scrutinizing the photos carefully and wondering what caught Gary's attention.

"The Calling has somehow gotten their hands on a lot of our stuff. It's all US-made," Matt offered.

Gary inclined his head as he agreed. "Yes…what else?"

"I'm no expert, but it all looks old," Nick added as Joanna nodded at his assessment.

"Exactly," Gary affirmed. "None of this stuff is state of the art. It's all 30 years old. In some cases, the material is older than that. It's not just the ordnance that appears dated. The explosives have been sitting around awhile and are possibly unusable…and even highly unstable."

"You can tell it's unstable just by looking?" Joanna asked.

Nick pointed at one picture. "Look at the staining on the boxes of dynamite. Old; or improperly stored dynamite can weep, or sweat nitroglycerin over time. This is damn tricky stuff."
"Nick's right. Also, there's some plastic explosives; this variation is Semtex," he continued, indicating another picture. "Even though it has a rather long shelf life, Semtex can lose its elasticity and moldability over time, making it less desirable. Terror groups use it because it's malleable and easy to hide. This batch could be particularly easy to hide."

"Why," Joanna asked, frowning.

"The lot numbers stamped on the Semtex tell me it's been around awhile," Gary clarified. "If they have more of a similar age and it's still usable, it predates the international law that mandated the addition of detection taggants during the manufacturing process. That means modern explosives detection equipment may not be able to detect it."

Nick's expression was somber as he considered that little tidbit. "Doesn't the DOD destroy old and outdated ordnance, explosive material, and ammunition?" he asked.

"Oh, it absolutely does," Gary affirmed. "It's done by a process called demilitarization, or 'demil' for short. Each service branch is required to keep its' stockpiles of ordnance and ammunition at or below certain levels. They also use the demil process to collect and safely dispose of old materials, usually by incineration or controlled detonation. This stuff shouldn't still be out there."

"So where did it all come from," Nick asked. "Stolen?"

"Possibly stolen or a third party overseas purchase," Gary nodded. "I'd have to cross reference with US foreign military sales data. There's no way The Calling or anyone in China got this cache legally. Either way we have some concrete information to start tracking down how it came to be in those warehouses."

"Black market?" Nick speculated.

"Most likely," Gary agreed.

"The thing I don't get is why are they stockpiling old material?" Matt chimed in. "There's got to be a reason they're hanging on to material with limited use."

"Out of every place we've investigated based on information pulled off that laptop, only one of every four of five has amounted to anything...and those were abandoned stores of materials like
this," Gary added in a disgruntled tone.

"They're either really smart or really stupid," Joanna mused aloud. "Either the laptop held old intelligence, or they've pulled up stakes and relocated. Could be they knew we were coming and left low priority staging locations for last.

"That could be," Nick surmised. "Still; there's something not right about these caches being left unguarded, especially if they knew we were coming."

"We're also putting a lot of resources on this with little return." Matt added.

Nick shook his head in an attempt to dispel his uneasy feeling about this development. He resolved to set aside his own unease and rally his team. "I get the frustration," he began. "In my years in law enforcement, I spent more time than I care to remember investigating dead ends. This task force is about taking the fight to them. We can't do that by sitting here in S3. We have to investigate every lead no matter how thin. We never know which one will provide the breakthrough we need," he encouraged, thinking of the small package he carried. Chan's 'insurance policy' was an unknown.

"Case in point; the old flash drive my team recovered in Shanghai," Joanna said. "There was virtually nothing usable until we found the lead to France. Being able to freeze one principal source of The Calling's funding? That lead alone made all the dead ends worthwhile."

"True," Matt agreed. "Speaking of leads, we're headed to Sacramento tomorrow to run down another tidbit of information from the laptop. You two coming?" he asked, inclining his head at Nick and Joanna.

Joanna shook her head. "I'm headed back to Shanghai tomorrow to follow the financial trail from France and check in with my people there. Hopefully, we've gathered enough information to convince the Chinese government to freeze accounts on the receiving end. What about you, Nick?"

"I'm in," Nick answered, nodding at Gary and Matt. "What are we looking for in Sacramento?"

"Another weapons stockpile and evidence of a planned attack on the state capital building," Gary explained.

"When do we leave?"
"Early," Matt smirked. "Two teams are going; we're all meeting here at six AM."

"Ouch," Nick responded wryly.

"I'm not leaving until later in the morning," Joanna said. "I'll make sure Lena gets word to check in with Mel and give her a hand with the laptop."

"OK, let's break it up then," Nick directed. "Everyone head home and get some rest."

~Sacramento~

"Looks like this one is another bust, Nick," Gary groused as Matt finished photographing the scene and they all began to work on bagging and tagging evidence.

"Seems so," Nick replied. "Agent Dayton's team is canvassing the apartment building across the street. Maybe they'll find someone who can give us an idea about the activity over here, and how long it's been empty."

Nick looked around the dingy garage where apparent bomb making supplies were scattered on various tables and worktops. No one had been here for some time, and all they'd found were wire cuttings, circuit boards, timers, some small tools, and soldering irons. Still, there was something about this scene. "Matt, can I see your camera?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Matt lifted the strap from around his neck and handed over the camera with a confused frown.

Nick used the small screen on the back of the camera to scan back through the scene photos. "Hmm." Before he could fully make sense of what he saw, Agent Dayton entered the garage and called out breathlessly.

"Nick, we've got a situation."
Nick handed the camera back to Matt. "What's going on, Dayton?"

"Either we have a harmless, but very nosy neighbor in the building across the street, or we're being watched," the agent explained. "I'm pretty sure I spotted a camera in the window, so I'm leaning toward the latter."

Nick nodded. "Well, let's go find out what they think is so interesting about us, shall we? Your team?"

"I've moved them to cover the back exits. We need your help to cover the front and sides in case our friend bolts when he sees we're onto him."

Nick nodded. "And likely he will as soon as he sees us all cross the street. Which apartment?"

"Third floor, south corner," Dayton replied. "There's a center stairwell inside and an outside fire escape one each end."

"Matt, Gary; each of you cover a fire escape," Nick ordered. "Dayton and I will take the center stairwell."

At their confirmation of his orders, Nick started toward the door. "Ok, let's head to the truck first. It might give us a few extra seconds before he becomes suspicious."

The group left the garage and headed toward their truck. Tony covertly glanced up to the window Dayton specified. He picked out the reflection from a camera lens right away. "Move in," he said on the open radio channel and the men began to sprint in unison to their positions. Immediately, the curtain in the window was thrown aside and the figure disappeared.

Dayton spoke into the radio as he ran, warning his team. "He's running, heads up people!"

Nick watched, stony faced, as the coroner's van drove away carrying the body of their suspect. He'd been cornered on one of the fire escapes after Nick and Dayton chased him up the stairs and
across the roof. The suspect tried to use the fire escape to get away, only to find more agents waiting for him below. He refused their order to surrender and there had been a furious exchange of gunfire in which he'd been wounded. Then, in a shocking move, their suspect did the unthinkable. The stunned agents watched helplessly as the suspect turned the handgun on himself and fired. A spray of red burst out and the body crumpled against the landing, while the gun clattered noisily down the stairs coming to rest on the asphalt below.

After they turned over the outdoor scene to the local LEO's, Matt joined Dayton's team and headed up to clear and secure the apartment so they could begin to process that scene.

Nick and Gary headed to the truck for their gear. The agents were grim and silent, both perturbed by their suspect's actions.

"Why?" Gary pondered aloud. "Why wouldn't he have just given himself up?"

"That's certainly not the only mystery to solve. What was he looking for? Clearly we stumbled onto something." And I don't like it one bit, he thought.

Nick's expression hardened as he continued. "I want to know what it is. Let's go." With bags in hand, Nick led the way to the third floor apartment. He hoped it would provide clues as to what the man was doing there, and why he would resort to such a desperate act to avoid capture.

As soon as they entered the apartment, Dayton gestured them over to where he and his team were huddled around a pair of video monitors. "Nick," Dayton began, "that garage is under video surveillance. He saw us as soon as we arrived. A simple but effective setup; a camera at the entrance, and one inside, both tied to motion detectors. The video footage was being saved too," Dayton indicated the CPU under the table.

"To what end?" Nick asked, brows drawn together in confusion. "There's nothing left inside to monitor or protect. I could see keeping the weapons caches under surveillance, but this makes no sense. Unless they planned to come back and use the garage again?"

"Unknown," Dayton answered.

"I think I can shed some light on that," Matt called from across the room where he was seated at an open laptop. His expression was grave as he waved Nick over.
The agents were again stunned into silence as Matt opened picture after picture while they watched.

Finally Gary gave voice to what they were all thinking. "Holy shit."

Tony's body stiffened with anger as he viewed the photos. They showed members of the task force on site at various locations they were led to by information from Joanna's flash drive and the laptop recovered in Shanghai.

"They've been watching us for weeks…maybe months, Nick," Matt said.

He nodded in agreement. "Dammit. They've been luring us to all these sites."

"What for?" Gary asked.

"Decoys…to keep us busy chasing our tails," Matt suggested.

"Yes; maybe to divert us from their true target and purpose behind establishing a footprint in the US again," Nick added. His eyes narrowed as he considered several zoomed-in images of task force team members, and another possibility came to mind…something he knew from bitter experience that The Calling had done before. "Maybe for another reason entirely. Something more…personal."

The four men shared an apprehensive glance as they considered the greater implications of what they'd found, and the potential danger.
Vance hung up the phone and glared balefully at the offending device for a moment before returning to the paperwork he’d just been discussing. He sighed and put the final touches on the offer letter for Gibbs’ new position now that SecNav Porter had given him the go ahead to extend it to him. Vance wondered how much longer she was going to feel it necessary to keep tabs on him and the day to day business of running the agency. It felt more than a little like being on probation. Considering recent events, he supposed he had some work to do to earn her full confidence again.

He’d had a letter of reprimand placed in his record where it would remain for three years, per HR policy. It had been made clear that another serious event within that time would almost certainly result in his removal. As he’d suspected, any chance of moving higher up the food chain after the Bodnar fiasco had been shot in the ass. That had happened on Secretary Jarvis’ watch, not Porter’s, but Vance was pretty sure that had been factored in to some extent. Now, thanks to his mishandling of Gibbs and his team, it was a foregone conclusion. It was a hard pill to swallow, but he recognized that from the top down, Gibbs wasn’t the only one that had to be held accountable for what happened. A lot of people should be, and that included him.

While the lawsuit that resulted from Gibbs’ attack on a suspect had already been settled out of court, the ripple effect of what happened was far-reaching and not just for the lead agent. The internal review SecNav ordered found he had some culpability in the event due to his inaction on Doctor Mallard’s recommendation that Gibbs’ suitability for field duty be assessed. The office culture he fostered also contributed to it. Physicians and psychiatrists had been replaced. A myriad of changes had been implemented to improve the way NCIS evaluated its agents’ physical and mental conditions post-injury or trauma.
changes, as well as Gibbs’ progress. Much to his annoyance, Gibbs’ doctor still served as the non-
Navy member of the board, and so he and Silva, along with the Bethesda-based members of the 
med board met regularly. Today, he’d be meeting with the annoyingly straightforward physician 
for a different reason. With Gibbs himself getting antsy and SecNav agreeing to his proposal for 
new duties for Gibbs, he just needed to get an idea when the man might finally be allowed back. 
Doctor Silva agreed to stop by to discuss Gibbs’ progress since the last report, which had given 
little indication of his readiness to return to work, one way or the other.

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Vance replayed everything he’d just heard and made his frustration plain. “Doctor Silva, are you 
telling me after seeing Gibbs for months now, you still aren’t prepared to even hazard a guess as to 
when he might be able to return to work?” Vance asked incredulously.

Silva smiled thinly. Apparently, Vance was feeling adversarial again, but he sensed honest 
confusion as well. “That’s not exactly the case. What’s the rush?”

“What **is** the case then? I was under the impression from your reports that Gibbs was making good 
progress. He had quite a bit of medical leave on the books, but it won’t last forever.”

“He **is** making progress, but I don’t deal in finite schedules and deadlines, Director,” Silva 
answered placidly. "Not when it comes to a patient’s mental health and well-being. Every case is 
different, and it takes how long it takes. Rushing things, or taking short cuts for the sake of 
expedience is what brought us to this point,” Silva reminded. “What is the sudden need to move 
things along all about?”

The astute doctor yet again showed Vance why he was more than a match for the obstinate agent 
he was counseling. The man seemed to read **him** pretty damn well too, and knew there was 
something behind his request for an update. “Gibbs contacted me to discuss work recently.”

“Oh?” Silva leaned forward, interest piqued. “In what context?” He wondered if Gibbs had enough 
of him and was reverting to the old tactic of trying to do an end run-around the mandated 
counseling.

“He didn’t ask about being reinstated, although I did confirm that he will be once he’s medically 
cleared. He wanted to know specifics about what his new duties would entail,” Vance explained. “I 
couldn’t tell him anything specific because it hadn’t been approved yet. He also spoke briefly to 
Bishop and McGee. It’s the first time he’s reached out to me or any of his former teammates, for 
that matter. I’m not the doctor here, but it felt like a favorable development.”
“Hmm. I’d tend to agree,” Silva said, reassured somewhat about Gibbs’ motives. “Physically, he’s recovering as well as can be expected. As I said, his mobility is much improved even though he still uses a cane, especially when fatigued. His psychological issues however, are complex.”

“And that means…?”

“It means I’m not sure he’s ready,” Silva said bluntly. “Without going into detail that would breach patient confidentiality, I can tell you that Gibbs has had a significant breakthrough recently regarding his PTSD. He’s cooperative and doing his part in therapy, but it’s a tipping point. I need to make sure he’s handling it okay; monitor how he’s reacting to his new perspective.”

Silva stopped and rubbed his chin a moment, while gathering his thoughts. “Physically, I’d say he can work, but with some limitations because of his knee. I’m not to prepared to say that about his mental and emotional state. I need to determine if him being back in this environment would adversely affect his recovery. Would he be welcomed back here?” Silva asked curiously.

“Well, he still has fences to mend with his former team, particularly Doctor Mallard. If he elects to accept the job offer rather than retire, that’s important since he’d be working with all of them from time to time.”

Silva tilted his head thoughtfully. “We’ve barely begun to cover the impact of his PTSD on his working relationships and friendships. Now that Gibbs has a better understanding of the root causes of his PTSD, and his triggers, that’s something we’re tackling. I’m recommending he continue therapy after he returns to work, and whatever the job entails will have some bearing on his suitability,” Silva concluded, looking at Vance expectantly.

Vance nodded. “I think I have a solution, one which means he can come back part time once he’s signed off. The offer is for a position as a Range Officer and Senior Firearms Instructor.”

“I get the sense there’s more.”

“There is,” Vance said. “I’d be a fool not to tap Gibbs’ investigative skills, not to mention I think he’d enjoy helping with active cases, even if he can no longer work in the field. To that end, the offer also includes a requirement to work as a consultant on cases as needed. He’d have an office here in the building near the bullpen, so he’s accessible to teams working there. He can start part time at the range and then later, when you think he's ready, bring him here as a consultant. Is that enough information to help you make your assessment?” Vance asked.
Silva nodded. “It may be a little irregular, but with your permission, I’d like to discuss the offer with him to gauge his reaction.”

“I have no objection, doctor. As a matter of fact, you can deliver the letter if you’re agreeable.”

As Silva held out his hand to take the thick envelope, Vance added, “I’d appreciate hearing from you afterward, one way or the other.”

With a nod, Silva rose to leave. “I’ll talk to him and get back to you, Director.”

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~Gibbs House~

Gibbs woke with a start; fleeting images of dreams floating away and fading like mist before he could grasp and remember them. He had a vague impression of Shannon and Kelly, but instead of guilt and loss there was something that felt a little like peace. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt it, so wasn’t entirely sure. As the last of the images drifted out of his reach, he became more aware of his surroundings. Once again, he felt briefly disoriented and waited for it to dissipate; that feeling coming from waking in an unfamiliar place. Maybe unfamiliar wasn’t quite the right word, but it was the best one he could come up with to describe the feeling, considering the circumstances.

Since his latest sessions with Doctor Silva, he’d been trying this experiment, to see if he could sleep in a bed again like a normal person; to sleep in their bedroom again. Unable to go so far as to use their bed, he’d had a new one delivered and started using the room. It was strange. This room along with Kelly’s had been sacrosanct, even when he’d remarried. All three exes had complained about the smaller guest room being used as a master bedroom when there was a perfectly good master suite down the hall; yet he’d refused to allow the room to be used. It was just one more way Shannon’s presence had loomed large in his life and subsequent marriages; one more reason of many why they resented him and eventually left him.

He reached across to the other side of the bed and felt the cold, empty place. This was partly why he slept on the couch for so long. So he couldn’t reach over and feel cold sheets where a wife should be; where Shannon used to be. And wasn’t that a metaphor for his life right now; a cold, empty place.
He was a damn mess. He thought he’d been holding Shannon and Kelly close; cherishing them, when in fact he’d been dishonoring them and what they would have wanted for him. They would have wanted him to be happy, not selfishly steep himself in bourbon and obsess over building boats that represented his complex feelings of guilt and abandonment.

In those sessions after what Silva called a breakthrough, the doctor gently but persistently had him explore his motivations he and realized the doc had helped him see the truth about so many things. What he’d done after Shannon and Kelly’s deaths had been against everything he’d ever stood for, everything he’d ever been taught by Jackson. He might have gotten justice, but the act had left him even emptier than before. He’d turned to NIS to fill that gaping hole in his life. His whole early career had been about atonement. For not protecting his family, for destroying another in the name of justice.

They talked about all the situations that came after, and how he strayed from the straight and narrow to close cases and get justice. And finally, about how he’d turned on those closest to him… every death or incident turning him more and more into a man he didn’t recognize, that his family would have been ashamed of. He wanted to change that.

Silva encouraged him to start by dealing with those rooms behind the locked doors, to bring the things he been hiding there into the open. He’d never stop grieving his lost family, but he thought it was about time to break the cycle of self-blame. It was time to find ways to honor them instead; to acknowledge and deal with his PTSD and then make positive changes in both the personal and professional aspects of his life. Maybe then he would be in a better place to begin repairing his broken relationships with the living. To find happiness or at least equilibrium, and return to being a man his family would have been proud of.

Feeling none of the pain and stiffness in his neck and back that he used to after waking up on the old couch, he swung his legs out of the bed and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. Sleeping in this room again might take some getting used to, but his back certainly appreciated the new arrangement.

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Doctor Silva pulled into Gibbs’ driveway behind the old pickup, absently noting the open garage door. He was happy to see an indication Gibbs had gotten out of the house for a change. With the envelope containing Gibbs’ job offer in hand, he jogged up the steps and into the house without knocking. It felt strange to do so, but Gibbs assured him everyone did it and it was perfectly fine. He was so preoccupied with thoughts of Gibbs’ potential reaction to the job offer, the state of the house didn’t register right away.

The living room was empty…completely. What was going on here? He dropped the envelope on
the mantle and glanced in the kitchen to see that it was empty too; the old table and chairs were gone. “Gibbs… you here?” He called toward the open basement door. There was no reply and with a sinking feeling in his stomach he moved up the stairs, calling out as he went. The guest bedroom was locked and now he was officially getting worried. “Gibbs?” he called again as he continued down the hall. The master bedroom was empty, except for a bed on a basic metal frame. He backed out of the room and went to the pink room at the end of the hall, fearing what he would find there. It was also completely emptied.

This was not a good sign. Paranoia was beginning to get the best of him. He went back to the guest room, pondering whether to break the door down and hoping there wouldn’t be a body on the other side of it. Just as he was about to attempt it, a voice called out from downstairs.

“Doc?”

A relieved breath gusted out of him on recognizing Gibbs’ voice. He felt a little light headed. Jesus. Trembling a bit in reaction to the scare, he jogged down the stairs as Gibbs rounded the corner from the kitchen.

“Hey,” Gibbs greeted. “Thought I heard you calling out. What brings you by?”

Gibbs seemed fine; in good spirits even. His demeanor was totally at odds with the disturbing picture presented by the house. As if it hadn’t been disturbing enough before. “Where were you, Gibbs? What’s going on here?” Silva asked, gesturing around at the house.

“I was working out back; didn’t hear you at first,” Gibbs answered, thumb pointing over his shoulder toward the back door.

“The furniture, Gibbs. Where is everything?”

“Oh… that.” Gibbs flushed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I got rid of it all.”

Silva’s mind whirled with possibilities; reasons why Gibbs might’ve emptied his house. None of them were good. He’d told Vance Gibbs had reached tipping point in his recovery, and now he was very much afraid his patient had come down on the wrong side of it.

“Tell me I don’t have a reason to be worried about you, Gibbs.”
“Worried…why would you be? I miss an appointment?”

Silva was exasperated and wondered if Gibbs were yanking his chain, or if he truly didn’t see the picture the house presented to others.

Gibbs must have read something in his expression. He blinked and started. “Oh hell, Doc. I get it. Don’t worry, I haven’t gone off the deep end on you,” he said with a wry smile. “I wasn’t expecting company and the house is kind of a work in progress.”

*Well, that cleared things right up,* Silva thought to himself sarcastically.

“So?”

“There’s a young family not far from here; they lost everything in a house fire,” Gibbs began. “They have a little girl and…” his voice cracked, and he paused to collect himself. “Anyway, I gave most of the furniture to them. It’s not much, but it’s something until they get on their feet again.” Gibbs kept to himself the poignant ache he felt at how charmed the little girl had been by the white canopy bed and matching pieces.

“It’s an incredibly kind thing to do, Gibbs. I'm not taking away from the generosity, but that’s the surface motivation. What’s beneath all that? Why do this; why *now*?”

Everything he’d learned of the man indicated Gibbs was going to be a tough nut to crack. After guiding Gibbs through the revelations of late, his instincts were telling him something was different, that something fundamental had changed.

“What am I supposed to say, Doc? You got what you wanted, I’m making changes.”

"Cop-out, Gibbs. It’s not about what I want, it’s about what you want and need. Tell me what’s going on in your head." *Come on Gibbs, open up,* he thought. *Clue me in, here.*

Gibbs looked down and shifted awkwardly, still struggling with the long held, almost hardwired need to keep these thoughts...these *feelings* inside. He could sense Silva's shrewd gaze on him; waiting him out. He falteringly explained some of the thoughts and realizations that came out of
For so long, he’d held on to the irrational belief that moving on meant letting go of Shannon and forgetting he loved her; that honoring someone else meant dishonoring her. He finally accepted that the solitary life he'd forced on himself, and the 'time in a bottle' place he'd turned their home into wasn't what they would have wanted for him. In fact, he could imagine Shannon giving him complete hell over it. Now, he was seeing it was possible to move forward without losing or dishonoring the memory of them.

He gutted his way through telling Silva about the shame he felt, over what he'd done to himself and to people he cared about through the years. He wanted to try and get back to being the man they knew, before he lost himself. He wanted to honor them by making changes for the better, doing them proud. He figured working on the house was a good place to start. If he could do that while helping another family find their normal again, then it was doubly meaningful.

"That's a pretty insightful self-assessment, Gibbs. I don't think I could have done better myself." Silva was pleased almost beyond words at the apparent leap in progress, but there were still some unanswered questions and lingering fears. "So...what's with the empty house?"

Gibbs chuckled a bit at the doctor's persistence. "Simple explanation, Doc. Let's take this outside and I'll tell you. We can have a seat and you can tell me what brought you by, before you got sidetracked by the idea that I've flipped out," he finished in an amused tone.

Silva snatched the letter he'd left on the mantle and followed Gibbs through the kitchen and out the back door. They walked a short brick pathway along the side of the house which led to a large patio, surrounded by shrubs and flowers. He saw Gibbs' cane leaning against a folding chair but he seemed to be having a good day, and walked with only a slight limp. Out on the lawn there was a tarp, where Gibbs had been staining various small pieces of furniture.

"You've been busy," Silva said as Gibbs leaned down over a tub of ice and pulled out two bottles of water.

"Yep," he answered, handing over a bottle with a half-smile. He pointed to two Adirondack chairs and a table on one side of the patio. "These are dry; finished them yesterday. Have a seat, Doc."

"It's nice back here," Silva said, looking around the neatly manicured yard. "You're not overdoing it, are you?" He asked, looking at the garden and woodworking projects.
"Nah. To answer your question about the house...I'm having it painted and doing some updating," he explained. "Figured that would be easier to do that first; then bring in the new furniture. There's no big secret in the guest room. The things I decided to keep are stored in there out of the way, that's all. I can't work yet; now that I'm mobile I need to do something. I'm going stir-crazy here," Gibbs finished with a rueful smile.

Silva scrutinized Gibbs carefully at that. He didn’t think he was being played, but knew Gibbs was more than capable. "Is that why you really did all this? To convince me to let you go back to work?"

Gibbs' face fell. "No," he answered seriously.

"Gibbs?" Silva prompted.

Gibbs heaved a sigh. "I did it because this house represents every wall I’ve thrown up since I lost my family. I’ve put up walls to distance myself and keep people from getting too close. Walls to keep from getting hurt again, to hide ugly, painful things from people in my life and from myself. I made this house one big wall and I finally got exactly what I thought I wanted. A place to lick my wounds and be completely alone."

“And now?” Silva asked, impressed with Gibbs’ honesty and new-found openness.

“You were right before when you said I never moved on. The walls were in the way,” Gibbs shrugged, not sure how else to put it. “The empty house is about walls coming down. It’s a clean slate, Doc…a new start.”

“You don’t do anything by halves, do you Gibbs? I was thinking of change happening more along the lines of baby steps.”

Gibbs snorted.

“So, you’re done hiding from the world, then?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”
Silva pulled the envelope with Vance’s job offer from his pocket and handed it over with a pleased smile. “I think there's hope for you yet, Gibbs.”

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Tony and his team discuss the surveillance activity they discovered, and what it means. The Calling make discoveries and plans of their own.

Beta'd. Any remaining errors belong to me.

~Seattle~

Tony was still suppressing a simmering anger over their discoveries in Sacramento as Matt pulled their SUV into the S3 garage and parked. He grabbed a few of their bags as his team silently loaded the boxes of evidence they’d collected onto a hand truck. A few spaces over, Dayton’s team was gathered around their company SUV doing the same thing.

As they all walked through the breezeway that connected the garage to the main S3 building, Gary paused as his phone chimed. “Hang on, Nick,” he said. “That’s probably Lena texting me back.” Tony and Matt stopped and waited expectantly, waving Dayton and his team on ahead. Gary read the brief message and began walking again while replacing the phone in his pocket. “Lena and Mel have pulled all the files you asked for, Nick. They’re getting the conference room ready while we get the evidence checked in.”

“Good, thanks,” Nick replied absently as he shifted his grip on the bags he was carrying. “Let’s drop our bags off and get this stuff logged in. We need to tackle the issue of this recovered laptop right away and I want everyone’s input. Matt, bring the camera card you used at the scene with you.”

Matt gave Nick a confused glance, but nodded. “Will do.”

Lena and Melanie sat in grim silence as Nick and the others filled them in on the developments in
the investigation and what they’d discovered in Sacramento. The possible ramifications of discovering the laptop might be a decoy weren’t lost on them. “So, where do we start, Nick?” Mel asked.

Nick turned to Matt. “First, let’s take a look at the scene photos on your camera card. There was something bothering me about the scene at the time, but then Dayton came in to alert us to the surveillance.”

Matt switched on the large plasma monitor mounted on the wall, then moved to the conference room computer and inserted his camera card. He browsed to the correct folder and set them to display on the wall monitor.

Nick picked up the remote and began scanning the photos, trying to recall what had set off that feeling in his gut that something wasn’t right about the scene.

“There’s not much to see,” Gary said thoughtfully. “I mean, until we have the FBI lab here test the items we collected for trace explosives, we won’t know for sure how recently the site was used.”

“Or if it ever was,” Matt added.

“The scene was staged” Nick began confidently. “Not just that; it looks like it was done by someone not familiar with bomb making. We’ll send the evidence for testing anyway, but I’m pretty certain.”

“What makes you so sure, Nick?” Lena asked.

“Look at where the tools and materials are placed, and then think about how you’d use them,” he prompted.

“Oh, hell,” Matt said. “I see what you mean.”

“Yeah,” Gary agreed, scrutinizing the photos closer.

“You guys want to share with the intel corner of the room?” Mel asked with a smile as she elbowed
“True; we aren’t the seasoned investigators,” Lena teased.

“Or bomb-makers,” Mel added.

“Ha-ha,” Matt quipped with a smile as he rose and walked to the monitor to point out what originally caught Nick’s attention. “See all the wire cuttings here on this table and on the floor underneath?” The women nodded and he pointed at another photo. “The wire stripper and wire cutters are on a worktop on the other side of the room.”

Nick took up the explanation. “Same with the electronics parts and soldering irons you would use on them. They’re here on the table but not together, and the rolls of soldering wire for the irons are on another table. It looks like everything was just placed haphazardly.”

“What about the other scenes?” Lena asked.

“I think we need to review all the evidence and photos collected from sites we were led to investigate based on information from that laptop,” Gary suggested.

“Agreed,” Nick said. “The development with this latest site, along with our late friend keeping watch does shed new light on the sites where we confiscated stockpiles of old weapons and materials. There were enough sites where we actually found something to convince us to keep looking,” Nick reflected. “If those sites were also staged with low value items solely to surveil anyone showed up to investigate, as the one in Sacramento was, then we have a larger problem.”

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It was late in the evening by the time Nick and his team finished reviewing the laptop-related case files. They’d all agreed the laptop was probably a plant to distract them. But how did the surveillance fit in, exactly?

“OK. So we all concur that any information pulled from this laptop should be considered suspect, right?” Nick asked.
Matt was the first to offer an opinion. “I think it’s pretty clear based on our second look at the evidence, that we shouldn’t send teams to any further sites. At least not without another independent intelligence source to corroborate there’s some value in it.”

Nick scrubbed a hand through his hair and exhaled sharply in frustration. “I want to know more about the circumstances under which the laptop was recovered; where, when, and by who.” He wondered what Joanna’s take on all this was going to be, since it was her people that recovered and forwarded the laptop to them.

“I pulled that file too,” Lena passed it across the table.

Nick scanned the file and photos while Lena summarized for the group. “Joanna’s team based in Shanghai traced a series of network intrusion attempts on various US military installations’ intranets back to a local apartment. The Shanghai police led the raid, during which several suspects were able to escape. It appeared they were warned with moments to spare, but this laptop was left behind.”

“Uh-huh.” Nick picked two photos and passed them around. “Look at the apartment photos. There are several unplugged network cables at this table, along with our laptop. It doesn’t make sense that they’d yank all but one before running, so I think this supports our assertion that it was a plant.” Nick concluded. “This should have thrown up a flag.”

“Joanna needs to know about what we’ve found,” Lena said.

“She does,” Nick agreed. “We also need to point out this isn’t the first time we’ve collected bad information or had suspects tipped off while working with the Shanghai police. I’m inclined to think we’re going to find The Calling has people on the inside there. Her team in Shanghai needs to be operating under that assumption going forward.”

“Well, it’s late here, but with the time difference, right now is probably a good time to go down to the comm center and call her on the secure line,” Lena suggested. “I can fill her in. About the laptop Nick, do you want Mel and me to keep working on it? There are still some encrypted data files we haven’t gotten into yet.”

“Well, I don’t know about all of you, but I’m getting more than a little annoyed about being two steps behind.” Nick said thoughtfully. “Odds are pretty damn good they don’t know we’ve figured this out yet. We need to press the advantage if we can. I’ve got an idea about what to do about The Calling’s little decoy, and maybe put it to good use.”
“We’re all ears,” Gary prompted. “What do you have in mind?”

Nick smiled slyly. “A little game of turn the tables.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Matt asked.

“Something I learned from an old friend,” Nick said, ignoring the pang in his chest that bordered on pain as he verbalized this particular thought; Gibbs’ rule 35.

“Always watch the watchers.”

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Tony put the finishing flourishes on his reports and other paper work related to the trips to DC, France, and Sacramento. He could hit the ground running in the morning, and start coordinating with FBI Field Offices and LEOs in other cities on their ‘watcher’ hunt. After briefing the FBI Director, he agreed on FBI resources being assigned to assist the task force by investigating the remaining sites and determining if they were under remote or direct surveillance. If so, the goal would be drawing out and apprehending anyone who might be waiting for an investigative team to show up.

If they could capture and question any remaining ‘watchers’, it could well produce new leads. The photos and videos were being saved for transmission back to someone. Perhaps they already had been. His team needed to find out who and why. He suspected The Calling were not just interested in finding out more about the task force pursuing them, but this might indicate further attempts to locate him and Joanna. Fortunately, there weren’t any of Joanna on the computer they recovered in Sacramento. They managed to get a few of him, but he was wearing a ball cap and sunglasses in all of them, so he wasn’t going to be easily identifiable, if that was the aim.

He rubbed his tired eyes furiously. His team headed home hours ago, with Lena being the last one to go and doing a fair impression of a mother hen on her way out. He assured her he was leaving soon, and once she was gone, he settled in for a few hours’ more work. Just like old times, he thought wistfully.

Tony was exhausted; he’d been working nonstop for weeks; since before the trip to France and side trip to DC. Speaking of which, Tony unlocked the top drawer of his desk and pulled out the small
package that scared the hell out of him when he found it passed through the hands of his friends at NCIS. Tony had no intention of sleeping until he’d seen what was on the SD card that the informant Chan sent him, and that he’d probably died for.

Going to Washington to retrieve the package had been a calculated risk, and now they would find out if it paid off.

There had been no time to view it on returning from France and now, in spite of the long travel day back from Sacramento, and 14 more hours of work later, he navigated the darkened hallways, not stopping until he reached the secure conference room. He went inside and locked the door, just in case there were any other night owls in this part of the building, and sat down at the computer.

Some hours later, his vision blurred and wavered from a combination of eyestrain and physical fatigue. As Tony stood and stretched, he became aware of the time. The conference room had begun to brighten, as light from the rising sun crept in through the small, glass block windows lining one wall. One he’d started reading, he couldn’t stop. This information had just become a priority. Chan’s insurance policy had quite possibly blown their investigation and pursuit of The Calling wide open. Of course, there was the possibility this information was outdated, but he rather doubted it, not if the letter Chan included, addressed to him, was to be believed.

Chan had been killed before he could make use of the information he’d meticulously collected for several years. Officer Lee had likely been abducted and killed because they thought he knew more about it than just the fact it existed. That was the thing about such an insurance policy. If you’re going to use it as a bargaining chip, they have to know you have it and what’s in it. There was no reason to believe The Calling did; and they certainly didn’t know it was now in his possession.

He headed for his desk to lock up the package again. He had to figure out how to explain to his team where it came from. Checking his watch; he saw there was time enough to shower and change before the day shift started arriving. By then, Joanna should be in the office in Shanghai. She was going to love this.

~Shanghai~

Rousseau flinched slightly, but stood his ground as glass exploded against the wall nearby, close enough to shower him with liquid and shattered glass. He stayed out of the way and watched impassively as LaPointe paced the room agitatedly; his fists clenching and unclenching. Finally having reigned in his anger and frustration, he leaned against his desk, crossed his arms, and turned a hard stare on his second in command.
“Have you nothing to say?”

“That depends. Are you ready to listen now, LaPointe?” he asked, casually brushing glass from his shirt.

LaPointe’s eyes narrowed dangerously and he pointed a threatening finger. “Don’t test me, Emile. Now is not the time.”

“Now is as good time as any. You need to curb your more…impetuous actions,” Rousseau advised calmly. “It only complicates matters, my friend.”

“You disapprove?” LaPointe challenged.

Rousseau had returned from overseeing an arms shipment to a rebel group in Indonesia to find LaPointe had again let his anger drive him to act impulsively. Upon hearing that the members of their hacker network in Washington DC had not located Anthony DiNozzo yet, LaPointe ordered a local operative to cut off one of their hacker’s small fingers to demonstrate his displeasure. He then threatened to have the rest of their fingers cut off one by one until they found DiNozzo.

Rousseau had carefully recruited people with arguably the best computer skills available, and now many of them were either angry enough or frightened enough to consider taking their skills elsewhere. It wasn’t limited to the DC group; their local hackers were unnerved by what LaPointe had done as well. That was problematic, and not just because of the ongoing search for Teague and DiNozzo.

The cyberterrorism arm of their organization was verging on disarray and that endangered a number of corporate extortion schemes, as well as other information gathering efforts. With their French bank accounts frozen, they needed the liquidity these quickly turned around schemes would provide. He hoped to convince LaPointe to curb his zeal for violence, at least where the computer specialists were concerned.

“Do I disapprove of having peoples’ fingers cut off for circumstances beyond their control? Yes.”

“Go on.”
“These people aren’t soldiers; you can’t treat them as if they were.”

“And why not?”

“What these hackers do,” Rousseau explained, “they are inherently sheltered; solitary. They’re detached from violence. Threat of physical violence doesn’t motivate them, it frightens them.”

“Good. Fear is a strong motivator.”

“Not when they are frightened to the extent they would consider leaving rather than continue to be threatened,” Rousseau disputed. “It’s a delicate balance.”

“Then what do you propose will motivate them?”

“More money, of course,” Rousseau answered. They may have aligned themselves with our cause, but they aren’t dedicated to it; willing to suffer for it. They work for financial gain.”

“Fine; see to it then,” LaPointe said impatiently. He was done with this part of the conversation, and with being taken to task. “I’ll trust your judgement in this matter. For the time being. Now… explain the difficulty in finding a federal agent whose name we have.”

“There’s been an unexpected development and it’s going to take more time. It seems DiNozzo is no longer a NCIS agent. He resigned the year before last,” Rousseau explained.

LaPointe looked at him inquiringly. “We knew that already. So he’s changed jobs; why should that complicate locating him?”

“It’s not that simple, Rousseau said. “There’s no trace of him at all; no bank activity, no credit card activity, no mortgage, and no cellphone or utilities. There’s no record of him working or living anywhere in the US. For almost two years, there’s been no sign of him; he’s completely disappeared.”

“Two years…” LaPointe mused. “Around the time frame when we eliminated Teague’s colleagues in Shanghai, and Luke Harris. Clever. Very clever.”
Rousseau tilted his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

LaPointe leaned forward smiling, and spoke in a low voice, as if sharing a secret. “Someone seems quite determined to keep us from finding him. Now why would he have disappeared at that particular time?”

Rousseau guessed where his friend was going with this line of thought. “Teague. We lost track of her in DC about the same time period. She warned him.”

“I’d say so. Keep the group in DC digging deeper; on the circumstances of his departure and and friends or family he may still be in contact with.”

Rousseau nodded in assent. “If Teague warned him, she might know where he went,” he speculated.

LaPointe’s eyes darkened and his voice grew decidedly icy as he answered. “We’ll just have to find an opportunity to ask her, won’t we?”

Joanna checked her messages as she gathered her things. The field office had been trying to reach her, but she’d been meeting with informants for several hours. This hotel was the last meeting place and the informant who’d just left her last rendezvous of the day.

Yesterday she’d received an update from Lena about the disturbing news from the Sacramento trip. Nick and Dayton’s teams discovered the laptop they’d thought would lead them to The Calling was actually a lure the terror group was using to draw task force members out into the open. For what purpose, they didn’t yet know.

Once again, she had to chase down the source feeding them bad information or tipping off The Calling to their activities. This last informant worked in the police department and was well-placed to look for information on how and when the police got the intelligence for the raid where the decoy laptop was recovered.
Her phone rang just as she turned to leave. Expecting the field office, she was surprised and unnerved to see an unfamiliar number on the screen. Less than a dozen people had this number. “Yes,” she answered hesitantly.

“Hello, Officer Teague.”

Joanna froze, not recognizing the accented voice. “Who is this? How did you get this number?”

The caller ignored the questions. “You’re very persistent, you know,” the voice offered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“So I’ve been told,” Joanna answered, deciding to play along for now.

“Why is that, I wonder? No matter…at least not yet. There’s something I’d like you to see, Officer Teague.”

“Is that so?” Joanna answered, becoming increasingly uneasy but also intrigued.

“The window, if you please,” the polite voice requested.

Joanna moved to the other side of the room. Standing to one side of the window frame, she slowly moved the heavy curtain aside, scanning her limited field of view for something amiss.

The caller confirmed her suspicion that he was out there somewhere, watching the window to her room.

“Hmm. Caution is wise,” the accented voice advised helpfully. “Look down.”

Joanna’s gaze dropped to the street only three floors down, not sure what she was supposed to be looking for.

“Shanghai traffic can be dangerous…don’t you think?”
Suddenly she saw it. Her informant, who’d left moments before, was crossing the street below. A short distance down the street, a dark sedan screeched away from the curb, accelerating toward the oblivious pedestrian. Knowing what was coming and helpless to stop it, Joanna watched as the sedan struck the man. His body rolled up over the hood and into the windshield, shattering it. The car then turned sharply, sending the body flying. The victim crashed to the pavement and rolled a short distance, coming to rest in a mangled, bloody heap while the sedan sped away and disappeared around a corner.

“Who are you?” Joanna hissed angrily. Her eyes were riveted on the still form below lying in a growing pool of blood, now surrounded by onlookers.

The formerly polite, accented voice hardened unpleasantly. “Someone who is looking forward to making your acquaintance. Soon.”

“Oh…” Joanna stiffened at the implied threat. “Likewise,” she ground out.

A low, menacing chuckle came over the line. “Until then Officer Teague, know this. We are watching.”

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Revisiting Rules

Chapter Summary

Apprehensive about returning to work, Gibbs explores his motivations and actions toward his former team, and how undiagnosed post-traumatic stress led him to alienate people in his inner circle. One in particular...

Chapter Notes

I was really hoping to do another tandem two-chapter posting, but real life is interfering with my hobby again ;) Instead of making those following this story wait for me to finish chapter 13, I figured I would go ahead and post what I have. It's a longish chapter and I hope you like it. So Gibbs is up in the chapter rotation...but rest assured Tony, Joanna, and I are hashing out what's next in their corner of the world!

On to the story. References to Requiem, Hiatus 1, Neverland, and Personal Day. Also refers to events in previous stories in this series, “Turning the Page” and “Blank Pages”.

Beta'd - any goofs remaining belong to me.

~NCIS HQ~

Gibbs pulled the door to Vance’s office closed behind him, resisting the urge to slam it hard. He’d met with Vance and HR to formally accept the new position he’d been offered, pending the medical review board clearing the way for his reinstatement.

The meeting had been going well until the HR representative left. Once they had privacy, Vance expressed concern about his ability to work with his old team if the occasion called for it. He had some concerns about that himself, not that he was going to discuss them with the Director.

Vance had seemed to sense that, and had taken matters into his own hands.

“Gibbs, I’m not going to make the same mistakes I’ve made in the past, not with you or anyone else.” He’d explained. “This time, I want to be sure that not only are you healthy and ready to return to work, but also that no conflicts or issues will arise if you work with anyone on your old team,” he said, meeting Gibbs’ eyes meaningfully.
Gibbs eyes narrowed thoughtfully at the reference to what ultimately, was an all-around disastrous return to work after his shooting.

“Before I sign off on scheduling your medical review board, Doctor Silva and I agreed that some additional work is needed on your part.”

“What do you mean? Other than keeping our appointments weekly for the time being, he hasn’t mentioned anything like that.”

“After speaking with Bishop and McGee among others, about their interactions with you, the doctor feels that some dialogue with them is necessary, and I agree. He’s asked that you stop by to discuss it with him.”

“Dialogue?” he asked derisively. Although he kept his composure outwardly, Gibbs was seething inside, and feeling more than a little betrayed. What had Silva told them about him? “Why is my reinstatement suddenly contingent on talking to them? This isn’t about them,” he insisted, knowing it wasn’t entirely true even as he said it.

“Like it wasn’t about them last time, Gibbs? I don’t need to be a damn psychologist to know that it was.” Vance just held his gaze, a knowing look in the dark eyes. “In spite of your team’s idiosyncrasies, by all outward appearances, the MCRT was a well-oiled machine before you were shot. Afterward, it fell completely apart. From where I sit, your change in demeanor, behavior toward your team, and whatever happened between you and DiNozzo after you were hurt were the main reasons. Do you honestly believe your actions had no impact on the others? Think about it, Gibbs.”

Gibbs sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I have been,” he admitted. “I’ve had nothing but time to do exactly that.”

“Then act like it, Gibbs,” Vance advised. “Speaking as a friend, I’m not the only one here that needs to avoid repeating past mistakes.”

Now, standing outside Vance’s office, he shook off the disbelief and anger he felt at hearing Silva had talked to his team. He walked out onto the landing and looked down over the bullpen where
As he’d told Vance, he had been thinking about the breakup of his team for weeks now and come to accept some hard truths about it. For a long while Gibbs had managed to keep thoughts of DiNozzo shoved in a box in the back of his mind; going on almost as if he’d never existed. It was easier than facing the truth; that he’d intentionally driven the younger man away.

Lately, the more Silva guided him to explore the motivations behind his actions around work and his personal life, the more he thought of his old team. He occasionally heard DiNozzo’s voice in his head, supplanting Mike Franks as the voice of his conscience. It was pretty ironic when he thought about it. Franks had been such a powerful influence on him for such a long time, and he could see now he wasn’t always a good one.

After working with Agent Mitchell’s son Luis, he thought about his mentor a lot. He’d begun to suspect Franks had hidden reasons for helping him, mainly his anger over the death of his fellow NIS agent and the inability to pursue his killer across the border. Gibbs had been vulnerable in his grief and Franks came along at just the right time, seeing an opportunity for both of them to get justice. In his typically mercenary approach to justice, he’d used Gibbs as a tool to do just that.

He’d given Gibbs the information he’d needed to find Pedro Hernandez. Afterward, he’d recruited him into NIS and taken Gibbs under his wing. It gave him something to hold on to; a way to go on in the wake of Shannon and Kelly’s deaths. He’d always be grateful for that, but in no way did Franks ever have anything but a skewed moral compass. Tony had always been better than both of them in that regard.

Unbidden and catching him off guard, he heard Tony’s voice in his head…his parting words to Gibbs at once sad, regretful, and vaguely accusing.

*One of these days you’re going to get your head on straight, and for all that’s happened, I really hope so. When you do Gibbs, you’re going to realize it didn’t have to be this way.*

When it came to DiNozzo in particular, he’d been keeping the shame and regret he’d felt over his actions well-suppressed, but now it rose to the fore. Tony was long gone…who knew where, and though he wouldn’t be able to salvage their friendship, he could at least try to with those still here. He’d like to think Tony would appreciate the effort.

He missed them all and realized it mattered to him what they thought. Now that Silva was forcing the issue, he no idea what he was going to say to them. As he looked down from the landing, the visual impact of the changes he wrought hit home.
The first person he saw was Ellis, seated at his old desk. A fleeting sense of that old bitterness and resentment came and went. It left him feeling adrift and uncertain about what the future held, now that he wouldn’t have a team to come back to.

He looked across from Ellis and smiled as he saw that Bishop was seated Indian-style on her chair; legs crossed and case files spread across the surface of her desk.

He looked down frowning at McGee’s vacant desk, and then did a double take as he found McGee in DiNozzo’s old place. What did it say that for just a second, he expected to see Tony sitting there? He wasn’t ready to delve too deeply into the meaning of that yet, so he just watched the team at work until a ringing phone pulled him out of his reverie.

Ellis snatched up the receiver, speaking in clipped tones. Dispatch, Gibbs thought absently as Ellis hung up the phone and stood. Bishop and McGee looked up expectantly. “Gear up,” he said, heading for the elevator.

Bishop shoved the case files into a desk drawer, picked up her bag, and rushed after Ellis. McGee hefted a backpack onto one shoulder and followed Bishop to the elevator where Ellis was holding the doors for them. Such a small gesture; something he’d never done. They’d had to either keep up with him or take the stairs. It spoke to a different dynamic on the team now, one in which the current team leader was a lot less of an arrogant ass than he’d once been.

McGee turned and looked up as if he somehow knew he was being watched. He often wore his emotions on his sleeve, so it was disconcerting to see the younger man’s face go blank as he met Gibbs’ eyes. McGee stared back; thin-lipped and expressionless, holding the other man’s gaze until the doors closed. Yeah, Gibbs thought. Maybe they did need to talk after all.

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~Doctor Silva’s Office~

Gibbs settled in the chair opposite Silva, his posture tense and agitated. Silva tilted his head inquiringly. “Something wrong, Gibbs?”

“You tell me, Doc. Why am I here?” Gibbs began without preamble. “It’s not the right day for our usual date,” he joked, forcing a smile he didn’t feel.
“Ah. You must have spoken to Director Vance,” Silva began, “and now you’re brooding since you were told I’ve been working with your former team.”

“Got it in one, Doc. What gives you the right to discuss my case with my team? Were you planning on telling me at some point?”

Silva cursed himself for the misstep; he hadn’t expected Vance to reveal his sessions with Gibbs’ coworkers before he could bring it up. He should have been the one to tell Gibbs and anticipated he might feel betrayed or react poorly to hearing this from Vance. Gibbs’ trust had been hard-earned and now he had to assure the angry man that it hadn’t been misplaced.

“Your former team,” Silva emphasized. “To the first question; I didn’t discuss your case with them in the way that you are thinking. To the second; yes, I was planning on telling you when it became relevant.”

“Fine; my former team,” Gibbs growled. “Those aren’t exactly answers, Doc;”

“Would you like me to explain, or would you rather just sit there and be pissed at me and the world in general again?” he asked, trying to wrest back control of the conversation.

Gibbs sat back, relaxing minutely and releasing a long sigh. “Alright,” he relented. “I’m assuming its relevant now and I’d like an answer to that first question that makes sense.”

“I haven’t broken your confidence, Gibbs,” Silva assured. “I wasn’t talking to them about your sessions. I was talking to them about their own perceptions and experiences after your injury and the impact of your personality change on your team,” he explained. “They had a front row seat to your decline. Their insights were important, Gibbs.”

Gibbs grimaced at the reminder of his breakdown.

“What concerns you about that?” Silva asked.

Gibbs scrubbed a hand over his face. “Before they will clear me, I have to demonstrate to Vance and the med board that we can work together if I’m called on to consult on MCRT cases. I think
“Sure it is,” Silva agreed. Gibbs’ answering the question with a question and defensive posture spoke to something more than concern over the pending review board. He was certain Gibbs was avoiding the real issue by expressing a sudden concern over his reinstatement.

“You started out dead set against complying with the conditions of your reinstatement, including taking a non-field status position, to grudging cooperation,” he began. “You progressed to being not only cooperative, but getting you to talk isn’t like pulling teeth, and you were showing a proactive interest in the new work.”

“You say it like all that is a bad thing, Doc,” Gibbs said, shrugging nonchalantly.

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing, but when you’re working with someone so firmly set in their ways; so entrenched in specific patterns of behavior, it begs to be questioned,” Silva replied, hoping they weren’t looking at a setback. “Now you’ve swung back to being as unsettled as you were when we first started your therapy.”

Gibbs rolled his neck and shoulders, trying to alleviate the tension that was all too visible to the perceptive doctor.

“Talk to me Gibbs, have you changed your mind?” Gibbs had seemed quite happy at the thought of working again, so something else was on his mind. Mentions of his former team were conspicuously absent from Gibbs’ sessions and he suspected the issue lay there.

“No; it’s like I told you at the house, Doc. I’m going stir-crazy. I needed something to look forward to. I’ve come around to the idea of doing something different. I still have a lot to contribute.”

“It’s good to hear you’re agreeable to the changes however, I don’t entirely believe this change of heart came about because you’re bored, Gibbs. It also doesn’t explain why you’re suddenly worried about going back to NCIS when it was your goal all along. Is there anything you’re finding particularly difficult about the idea of going back to work?”

“Not especially.”

“So all’s well,” Silva said agreeably. “Do you think our work here is done then?”
Gibbs gave Silva a suspicious glance; sure this was leading up to what he’d been avoiding. “I’ve made progress. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be going back to work,” Gibbs countered.

“That isn’t what I asked, Gibbs,” Silva said, smiling at the diversion. “And you aren’t going back to work just yet.”

“Why not?” Gibbs questioned.

“Because we’ve covered a hell of a lot of territory in your sessions, and it’s been a bit of a rollercoaster. That rollercoaster got off track a bit after I made that first visit to your house and uncovered the original traumatic event that’s the root of all your problems. That just meant the beginning was a lot further back than I expected to find.”

“What about now?” Gibbs asked.

“That may have been the beginning but it isn’t what got us here Gibbs; not directly. The failure of the coping mechanisms you developed in response to that tragedy did. The cumulative effect from failure to diagnose PTS after multiple past traumatic events made you a ticking time bomb. Now we go back to talking about what got us here; why your coping mechanisms suddenly stopped working after so many years.”

“We covered all this ground, Doc, and I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“I think you do,” Silva countered. “But let’s review. When did you first start to notice the erosion of your ability to cope with stress?”

Gibbs answered immediately. “Bishop’s injury.”

“No,” Silva argued. “Think back to what we talked about in that very first appointment Gibbs… cause and effect. Your violent reaction to Bishop’s injury was an effect,” Silva said. “Remember, I’ve talked to your team, Ms. Scuito, and Doctor Mallard. They all indicate that the radical change in your demeanor started long before then; when you returned to work after the shooting. You are working hard to avoid discussing the reasons for that.”
Gibbs flinched at the memory of turning to face Luke in that dusty marketplace and how he’d frozen in place; shocked at seeing the boy aim a handgun at him. Then the twin explosions of pain came; first in his knee then his chest. Somehow, he’d been dimly aware of DiNozzo’s voice screaming his name as he fell and lay gasping in the dirt. Silva’s voice intruded on the memories replying in his head; pulling him out of the flashback.

“Let’s stop tap dancing around what it is you don’t want to admit to. This sudden hesitance is about the people, Gibbs; I’m guessing one or two more than the others,” he added knowingly. “Early on, one of your stated goals was to repair friendships and working relationships, yet you haven’t mentioned them once. Why is that?”

Gibbs was irritated at Silva’s unerring ability to see right through him. As he thought about how to answer, DiNozzo’s voice crept into his thoughts again, that basement confrontation…the last time they’d spoken.

*Listen...something around what happened in Iraq sent you off the rails, Gibbs. All this is about nothing more than your angst and inability to deal emotionally with what happened to you. Not only that, your refusal to accept you're not back to 100% physically. You marinate in it; deflect attention from it by being a bigger bastard than usual, at the same time pretending everything is fine. It's got you questioning yourself; drives you to prove you can still do the job.*

Tony’s assessment was dead on, but he hadn’t been ready to listen then.

“You’re right,” Gibbs admitted with a put-upon sigh. “It’s all about perspectives; or rather changing them. A different point of view can change everything and I’ve had more than ample time to mull over my new perspectives.”

“And what conclusions did you come to?” Silva asked.

“You were right about the house, Doc…about it being frozen in time and about my whole life and career being built on guilt and atonement. We’ve talked about all that already.” Gibbs paused, and then added, “I made a lot of mistakes and I’m beginning to get some clarity on just how badly I’ve screwed up with other people too.”

“Go on,” Silva prompted.

“Just below that surface picture everyone saw was something darker, something not normal,” he admitted. “I thought back to how this therapy started; when Ellis talked me around and convinced me to reach out for help. I’d been consumed with anger and resentment. I shut out everyone and
pretended there was no one who gave a damn about me or knew what I was going through. In retrospect, I can see that I was angry at everyone but the one person who truly deserved it; me.

The changes at the house are about trying to let go of guilt. As far as normal, it’s been so long since I’ve had it I don’t know what it is any more. I need to try and find it again. I’m tired of being a miserable, selfish bastard. In my arrogance, I never gave a minute’s thought to how my decisions and behavior impacted my team; my friends. I’m tired of not being honest with myself and allowing my choices to hurt people who didn’t earn it,” Gibbs explained.

“Your former team?” Silva guessed. Gibbs had clearly made another minor breakthrough and he suspected Gibbs wasn’t sure what to do with it, hence the tactic of distraction and diversion to avoid talking about them. “They are what has you unsettled about returning?”

Gibbs nodded slowly. “I’m worried about facing them again…I’m ashamed and I have good reason to be. I want to try to make things right with them but I’m afraid I’ve finally burned my bridges,” he admitted with a hitch in his voice.

Silva was impressed at how hard Gibbs was trying to make this work. It was still a struggle to get him to talk sometimes; years of internalizing his emotions instead of coming to terms with them had left their mark. Once he got going though, Gibbs often surprised him with stark and painful honesty. His friends had described Gibbs’ ambivalence and ignorance toward the impact of his actions on others, but now it was something his thoughts seemed to have turned to a great deal.

“You haven’t burned any bridges yet,” Silva assured him. “But I will tell you there’s some unresolved issues. You’ve got to talk to them, Gibbs.”

“And say what?” Gibbs retorted. “I could have gotten Bishop killed because I wasn’t fit to back her up in the field, and somewhere in my head I knew it. Once Ellis came onboard, I was so threatened by him I don’t know how the team managed to work well enough to close any cases.”

“You could try to apologize.” At Gibbs’ skeptical look, he added, “I know, I know. Believe me your team had a few things to say about your rules…and I say not offering an apology when it’s warranted is the sign of weakness.”

“You’ll be happy to know I’ve been feeling the need to revisit that one, Doc.”

“Glad to hear it. I sense you believe a lot of things are signs of weakness, and that’s part of your
problem. You don’t want to appear weak; out of control. You *despise* it. But you’ve been operating under some false notions of what makes you weak for a very long time.”

“Believe me, I’ve been revisiting those notions too,” Gibbs added ruefully.

“You want to make amends with people in your life? Stop repressing your emotions. Let people in a little... *give* a little. Try looking hard at those rules you seem to put so much stock in, and reassess which ones are useful. That asinine rule 6 is a good place to start. It’s true arrogance.”

“Tell me how you *really* feel, Doc,” Gibbs shot back.

“It speaks to your need for control. You believe any and every action you take is the correct one, so you’ve said or done nothing that needs an apology, right?”

“Maybe at one time,” he admitted, sighing heavily. “Not anymore. I’ve had people trying to tell me some home truths for a long while now. I was too entrenched in secrecy, stubbornness, and denial to be able to see what they were seeing in me. In so doing, I’ve nearly destroyed my life, my career and relationships with almost everyone who’s ever been important to me. Agent Ellis asked once if I’d given up on myself.”

“And what did you tell him.”

“I denied it at the time, but in a way I had. Over these last weeks, I realized I gave up on myself a long time ago. I see the truth now; that after I was shot, I changed again and not for the better. You and Ellis were right about me.”

“What were we right about?” Silva asked curiously. Gibbs eyes went unfocused as he spoke, seemingly lost in some past memory.

“That I made certain people the focus of my irrational anger. Someone I was once very close to tried to warn me. He tried to tell me if I kept on going like I was that I’d get hurt again...that I might take someone else with me next time if I didn’t get help. I didn't react well and my response was to throw away 15 years of loyalty, respect, and friendship as if they meant nothing; as if *he* meant nothing. It was the final break between us, and I did it *intentionally.*”

Tony’s voice sounded in his head again, and he flashed back to the prediction that turned out to be
all too accurate, the recollection leaving him a little winded as he shared it with Silva.

“You’re trying to keep an iron grip on control. Let me tell you something, your control is an illusion. Its wishful thinking that you’d bounce back with no effects after what you’d been through. There’s no shame in pulling back a bit...you can still do a world of good. If you keep on as you are you’re going to get yourself hurt again or worse. You might take someone else with you next time.”

“So you see, you and Ellis were right about me, but you weren’t the only ones. He saw it all coming and tried to help before it was too late. It wasn’t until the incident with Bishop, and a harsh conversation with someone outside my inner circle that I really began to open my eyes to what he was trying to tell me, and to the damage I’d done." Silva knew some of these snippets were references to Gibbs’ longtime partner and senior field agent, and also Doctor Mallard to a lesser extent. Interestingly, DiNozzo had come up in every single conversation with anyone remotely connected to Gibbs, and this was the first time Gibbs mentioned him. He’d long suspected there was something significant about Gibbs’ former partner, who resigned the year before last.

“Why, Gibbs? Why would you intentionally drive off someone who cared and by all accounts including your own, tried to help you?” Silva asked, suspecting an admission was coming that would signal another leap forward in Gibbs’ recovery.

Gibbs shrugged helplessly. “It’s complicated.”

“Let’s work though it Gibbs, because he was a big part of the problem. Tell me about him,” Silva prompted, sensing a more indirect approach would work better.

“He never stopped talking,” Gibbs began with a half-smile. “He was far smarter than he let on and funny...always goofing around. Loyal to a fault; never seemed to be phased much by what a bastard I was, until the end. He could be exasperating as hell but when the chips were down… when things got serious, there was no one I’d rather have at my back.”

“Was he a good agent?” Silva asked, pleased that his tactic to get Gibbs talking about DiNozzo was working. Gibbs’ smile melted away. “The best I ever trained.”
“So what happened?”

“He accused me of being threatened by him. I didn’t realize until much later when I took a hard look at my motivations that he’d been right. He had become a threat to me,” Gibbs said inexplicably. “So I did what I’ve always done when threatened. I lashed out, neutralized the threat.”

“You’ve lost me, Gibbs. How was he a threat to you?”

“We talked about the times I was injured, near death, and the visions I had three of those times…” Gibbs began hesitantly.

“Yes,” Silva answered, a bit taken aback by the apparent subject change. He’d found when Gibbs was leading somewhere, it was best to let him get there his own way. “Those experiences caused a marked change in your behavior. Do they relate to DiNozzo?” he prompted.

Gibbs flashed back to the first of those three times he’d seen his girls; when he’d been suspended somewhere between life and death. He closed his eyes, overcome with the memory of drowning. Tony had saved him, and Maddie too. He’d never forget Tony’s dark shape breaking the river surface, emerging from a cloud of froth and bubbles as he dove toward them. He’d gone to the docks alone, but miraculously Tony was there somehow, and he’d just known his partner was going to get them both out. He’d never doubted it even as he expelled the last remaining air in his lungs and couldn’t fight the involuntary inhalation of excruciatingly cold water. The last thing he’d seen before he lost consciousness was Tony diving toward him again.

Not only had it been an incredible feat physically, it had been an act no less driven by affection and loyalty than the one that put him in that position in the first place. To his shame, he never could bring himself to thank Tony for that. Because he was so overwhelmed by the ethereal vision of his girls, he wanted to stay…and he resented Tony for bringing him back at first. Once he sorted out his complex feelings, he realized if he resented Tony for bringing him back, then he’d have to resent Kelly too for wanting him to go.

*Go back daddy, go back.*

Gibbs flinched as a hazy, chaotic memory of an explosion and being carried off the Bakir Kamir came back to him; and another on the medivac helo as he was flown from Iraq to the carrier where Taft had saved his life. Both times, DiNozzo’s voice telling him to keep breathing; that he’d be ok, had been the only thing that made sense in a world filled with agony and confusion. Then both times, the voice had gone too soon and he’d lost himself, in more ways than one.
He’d realized there were a couple common themes among the three experiences. He’d made mistakes of some kind in those cases. Tony had been there each time to pull him out of the fire one way or the other, kept him hanging on through word and action, and then took charge of the team and investigation while he recovered.

Gibbs shivered a bit in reaction to the unwelcome memories. He spoke haltingly at first, trying to convey something he’d only just realized himself.

“Each of those cases where I was injured, I’d screwed up somehow. DiNozzo was there to pick up the pieces; run the team, solve the puzzles, and stop the bad guys.”

“Wasn’t that what someone in his position was supposed to do?” Silva asked. “Is this about your control issues?”

Gibbs considered that. “I don’t think it was about control as much as why I did the job.” He paused again. “Remember the idea of everything I’d done in my career being about guilt and atonement? My need to do this job was all tied up in Shannon and Kelly; everything I did was for them. I know it was irrational, but DiNozzo was keeping me from doing that.”

“Help me understand, Gibbs. How did he do that?”

“I had every intention of one day handing the reins over to him, and he knew it. I recruited him, trained him, and in many ways he’d become better than me.” Gibbs jaw clenched as he wrestled with the rest of it out in the open. “As that time got closer, the last couple years we worked together, I couldn’t accept the thought of losing my usefulness, of being so easily replaced. I wasn’t ready to face the idea of retiring from field duty and there he was every day, waiting in the wings and already doing half my job. Hell, he’d been doing my paperwork for years. I began to distance myself from him, treated him pretty coldly at times.”

“What about after the shooting? Did you blame him?”

“No,” Gibbs answered truthfully. “It could just as easily been him. I didn’t see DiNozzo for months. Once I was mobile, I bulldozed my way back to work and into the investigation. I learned that he and a small team were on the verge of not only apprehending those responsible for my shooting, but dismantling an entire global terrorist network.” Gibbs could swallow his pride now, even as he hadn’t been able to then. “He did what I couldn’t and I resented him for it. That drive to stay, to keep working because of Shannon and Kelly, became an obsession. It consumed me. I had
something to prove and he was in the way of that.”

“So he bore the brunt of the fallout from your obsession, more so than any other member of your team.”

Gibbs nodded.

“He’d become a threat. And then?” Silva prodded.

“Yes,” Gibbs said simply. “He knew me better than anyone, except Ducky, but it wasn’t Ducky I was in the field with every day. That was the problem. Because he knew me so well, DiNozzo was going to see that I had no business being back to work, much less in the field.”

“How did you manage to hide it for so long?” Silva asked.

“A lot of those changes you mentioned were intentional. The hair, the clothes, the personality changes…all that was designed to throw everyone off, to distract them from what was really going on. The only thing that was real was my jackass attitude and irrational anger toward DiNozzo.”

“How did he respond?”

“Confused at first, guilty. I let him think I blamed him for the shooting,” Gibbs mused regretfully. “He kept trying to get me to talk to him about it but I wouldn’t. Then I upped the ante.”

“How did you do that?” Silva frowned.

“Our first case after we were all back together had a personal connection for me. We worked with a DEA agent named Luis Mitchell. His father was the NIS agent killed in the car with Shannon and Kelly. I hid that, and other information from the team. It could have resulted in us blowing the entire investigation…DiNozzo figured it out and confronted me.”

“What happened?”
“I said he knew me better than just about any one, and it was true. I knew him just as well. To make a long story short, I spent the next eight months marginalizing him, minimizing his role in investigations so I could look like I was still getting it done.” Gibbs looked down; cheeks flushed a bit in shame. “It became more and more personal…I made it that way. I used my knowledge of his past and ruthlessly manipulated his insecurities for months to get the outcome I thought I wanted.”

“And what was that?”

“I wanted him to leave the team,” Gibbs said in a hoarse whisper. “What I did, the way I did it...was vicious, unforgiveable.”

“The outcome you thought you wanted?”

“Yes; except it wasn’t really. The day he walked up the basement stairs and out of our lives, it was like a knife in my chest…and I’d put it there myself. I was conflicted. I didn’t expect that, and it was one more thing I resented him for. He’s always had a steadying influence on me, even after we’d become so dysfunctional. With DiNozzo gone and Ellis in the picture, my control eroded and day by day, I was less able to cope. So now you have your answer, Doc. I don’t have any more secrets to tell you.”

Silva considered how the man who’d been such a perceptive, intuitive investigator had turned those skills around and looked inward. He’d come back with an assessment that was surprisingly accurate.

“According to your former team, Agent DiNozzo is a pretty forgiving person,” Silva pondered. “Maybe the break isn’t as irreparable as you think and you’ll get a chance to clear the air with him some day.”

“I don’t see how it’s possible. I’d like to think he’d be glad I’m ‘getting my head on straight’, as he once said. At least I can try to mend fences with the people who are still here. I made my choices a long time ago and was resigned to living with them; until you helped me see I don’t necessarily have to. I’d like to believe it’s not too late to change.”

“I think you’ll be surprised,” Silva said with an enigmatic smile. “They’ve already agreed to meet with you. Let’s get it set up.”

“Whatever you say, Doc,” Gibbs answered, feeling a faint stirring in his chest, something that felt a
lot like hope.

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Chapter Summary

As The Calling draws closer to its targets, Tony reveals the contents of Chan's package to his team and they put a plan of action in motion.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd. Any remaining errors belong to me.

~Seattle~

“So,” Gary began as he looked across the table at Lena and Matt. “Either of you know why Nick wanted to see us right away this morning?”

“No, but I think something new has come up,” Matt answered with a frown. “Security says he didn’t go home last night.”

“Where is he now?” Lena asked.

“He’s in the comm center and it’s in secure mode, so I couldn’t get in to find out what he’s working on.”

The team turned as a new voice sounded from the doorway. “All will be revealed, my friends,” Nick said with a conspiratorial wink as he walked in; a stack of files in one hand and cup of coffee in the other.

Nick freed one hand and locked the door before walking over to take a seat at the table, confirming his team’s suspicion that something serious was going on.

“Did you get any sleep at all last night, Nick?” Matt asked.
“Nope,” he replied truthfully, grinning as he yawned and stretched.

“You need sleep, Nick,” Lena chided gently. “You’ve been going nonstop since before Marseille.”

Tony winced. He’d long been able to function on very little sleep if the situation called for it, but she was right. The cop in him knew fatigue could be deadly in their line of work if the circumstances were right, and things were about to get very interesting for the task force.

“I know,” he sighed. “I will soon, Lena. You all need to know about some new developments first.” He passed around a set of files to each member of his team. “Officer Lee’s case file and personal logs are on top, followed by a summary of new evidence.”

His team quickly sobered at the mention of the CIA officer who’d been brutally tortured and murdered by The Calling in Shanghai. “Has there been a development in his murder case?” Gary asked.

“Oh yeah,” Nick drawled. “You could say that, indirectly anyway. Everyone recalls Officer Lee’s informant, Chan?” At their nods, he continued. “I’m sure you also remember Officer Lee’s logs indicated Chan was hiding what he called an ‘insurance policy’ and implied it contained evidence about The Calling’s activities.”

“A lot of good it did them,” Gary said acidly, recalling the grisly autopsy photos of both men in the case files.

“Yes,” Nick agreed somberly. He sensed his time living under an alias was coming to its conclusion in light of the new evidence, and didn’t want to lie to his team about this if he could avoid it. He decided to go with the truth. “The insurance policy has surfaced,” he said simply. “It’s the reason for my side trip to Washington before I flew to Marseille to meet Joanna and Lena.”

“I was wondering about that,” Lena said. “Why did it surface in DC of all places?”

“Chan mailed it to the NCIS agent that worked with Joanna to bring down The Calling last time.”

“I thought he resigned,” Gary pointed out.
“He did. The damn thing has been sitting in the NCIS mailroom for some time. It was finally forwarded to him and realizing what it was, he got someone at NCIS in touch with me,” Nick added. It was a creative explanation, but still essentially true.

“This is what you were working on all night?” Matt questioned.

“Yes. Between our trips to Marseille and Sacramento, I didn’t get a chance look it over before now. Once I saw what was in it, I entered it into evidence. What you have in those files,” Nick nodded at the folders each of them held, “is a high level summary I prepared detailing what was in the package.”

“What exactly is the ‘insurance policy’ itself?” Lena asked.

“The package contained a set of SD cards loaded with documentation of The Calling’s activities, financials, operations, and information on its members; even its leaders. One thing is certain, if accurate this is enough to break the case wide open…to bring them down once and for all.” Nick emphasized, tapping the files in front of him firmly.

Matt watched the team lead’s face as he described the contents of Chan’s insurance policy. Although the tone of his voice never changed, Nick’s eyes went fiery and his face had taken on that intense, focused look he’d seen a couple times when the other man spoke about their pursuit of The Calling. Not for the first time, he wondered if there was more to it than the man’s obvious, innate sense of justice. Perhaps even a personal connection. Nick’s voice pulled him from his musing.

“Alright, let’s go through everything. I want your thoughts on the information and input on the most efficient way to proceed.”

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It was the middle of the afternoon before they finished reviewing all the information Chan had sent them. “Alright,” Nick prompted with a tired sigh. “Now we have to move on this. Obviously, we need to focus first on information that suggests a danger to individuals, populations, or critical infrastructure in The Calling’s targeted locations. Aside from that, I’ve got my own ideas on priorities and how we should proceed, but I’d like to hear yours.”
Nick nodded across the table at Matt, indicating he should start first. “One team isn’t enough to handle this,” Matt began, as the others nodded in agreement. “If the information Chan sent to NCIS is remotely accurate, this is an all-hands on deck evolution. Hell, the task force isn’t even enough to handle all this. We need to bring in Homeland and the FBI.”

“And the State Department as well as the CIA for the overseas part of the picture,” Nick added. “The Calling has their tentacles all over east Asia. The CIA can handle intel sharing with their counterparts in countries where The Calling has an established presence. The State Department can help us with enforcing the international banking law part of the picture. Thanks to Chan, now we know the Despins accounts in France weren’t their only source of income.” Nick smiled in satisfaction at that thought. “Freezing their assets and choking off their access to remaining sources of income will be the first few nails in their coffin.”

Gary frowned. “According to Chan’s files, The Calling has quietly established a foothold in the US now too. That’ll be tough to tackle, jurisdiction-wise.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Nick answered. “Part of the reason I was in the comm center early this morning was to brief the FBI and CIA directors before it gets too late in the day, east coast time. Homeland’s director has also been briefed.” That had been a tricky bit of business, as he’d had to remind them that Tom Morrow knew him from his tenure as NCIS Director. If he were going to keep his alias intact for the time being, someone else would have to brief and coordinate with Morrow. “I’ve been assured that the task force has overall jurisdiction and our team has the investigative lead,” he told them.

Gary still looked distinctly unhappy.

“Gary?” Nick prompted, reading his skeptical expression. “Are you playing our devil’s advocate today?”

“I guess I am,” he replied. “How do we know this isn’t another lure; another way to keep us off their trail and stay two steps ahead of us? Maybe instead of walking into The Calling’s surveillance operations, we’ll be walking into traps this time.”

“It’s a valid concern after what happened with the laptop,” Nick answered seriously. “I think the fact that Chan and Officer Lee died partly because The Calling was looking for this insurance policy is pretty compelling. You’re right though; I’ve got intel working on validating as fast as they can.” Nick ran a hand through his hair nervously, unsure whether to reveal this next bit. He was convinced the information Chan sent him was entirely accurate, and he wanted his team to be just as confident as he was.
“There’s something else,” he began. “Along with the SD cards, Chan included a personal letter to the NCIS agent. It explained everything about how he came by the information and why he became an informant. Chan included information that only someone involved with the first investigation would know,” Nick explained. “He’s convinced, so I’m convinced.”

“You’ve talked to him?” Matt asked, somewhat surprised.

“In a manner of speaking; yes.” Changing the subject, Nick looked over at Lena, who was referring back to the files in front of her. “Lena, you’ve been quiet so far. Want to add anything?”

“We need to talk to Joanna about the CIA operations in Shanghai,” Lena added. “If Chan is right, our office there has been compromised; we may even need to relocate it. Chan also provided further confirmation that The Calling’s leaders are actively looking for Joanna and the former NCIS agent she worked with. They need to know they are definitely being targeted for assassination.”

“Oh, believe me, they know,” Nick said. “As to that first part, that’s why you and I will be heading to Shanghai tonight.”

“Why are we going?” Lena asked.

“We need to warn them in person. That office is compromised and we can’t take a chance on tipping The Calling off to Chan’s insurance policy. It’s our ace in the hole as long as they don’t know we have it.” Nick paused, worried about Joanna and hoping there was a damn good reason for her to go off grid. “I don’t know who to trust there. I’m not sending you, or anyone else into an unknown situation without back up.”

“Joanna can handle it. We just need to let her know what’s going on.”

“I’ve no doubt she can, there’s just one little problem. No one in the CIA field office has heard from Joanna. She hasn’t checked in and doesn’t answer her phone. She’s gone dark for some reason.”

Matt’s voice was somber as he said what they were all thinking. “Or something has happened to her.”
“Either way,” Nick said grimly. “Shanghai is ground zero for The Calling’s activities. We need to find out what’s happening with Joanna and that field office.”

~Shanghai~

Rousseau shook his head and listened to the exchange going on in the seat next to him as he drove. LaPointe called Teague again and again, leaving sinister messages when she didn’t answer, and tormenting her when she did. She’d answered this time, so he put the call on speaker.

He’d tried to divert LaPointe’s attention from this nonsense, but to no avail. Now that everything was in place to carry out their operation in Los Angeles, he wouldn’t be dissuaded from the vindictive desire to harass and intimidate the CIA woman with his goading phone calls.

LaPointe disconnected the call and smiled in satisfaction at the cell phone in this hand before pulling the battery and tossing it out of the car window. He’d use new one from their supply of untraceable pre-paid phones the next time he called Officer Teague.

“Yes, I am actually. What of it, Emile?”

“It’s risky, calling to taunt her like that,” he pointed out, “Perhaps unnecessarily so.”

LaPointe felt a malicious glee as he recalled taunting the CIA woman over the death of her son. In looking for Agent DiNozzo, they’d inadvertently stumbled across tidbits of information about Teague in NCIS case files. Now they understood her connection to them; how she’d become involved in pursuing them the first time and why she continued to do so now with such dogged determination. As he’d long suspected, her reasons for being a thorn in their side were personal, and deeply so.

“You heard her. It’s also making her angry, anxious, and off balance,” LaPointe said, confident in his approach. “People make mistakes under those conditions. When she does, we will position ourselves to take advantage of it.”
“We should eliminate her before she becomes even more problematic,” Rousseau urged him. “On the other matter, I seem to recall three years ago that you were quite furious with Daniel when you found out he’d been calling Agent DiNozzo to do the same foolish thing you are doing now. It only served to harden the man’s resolve and ultimately, it got Daniel killed.

LaPointe ignored the censure and thinly veiled warning. “Daniel was overconfident; that contributed to his death. And when we find DiNozzo, he’ll pay for killing him. Now tell me if the intrusion into the NCIS databases has produced anything else of use.”

“Nothing significant,” Rousseau answered. “DiNozzo resigned, leaving no forwarding address according to their HR files. While a scan of the NCIS email server shows no direct contact between him and any of his former coworkers, there are brief mentions of him. Apparently, there was some sort of falling out among some of them,” Rousseau explained.

“What about friends, family?” La Pointe asked.

“We’ve found little to go on in that aspect too. His only close living relative is his father, but all indications are that they aren’t in contact either, and may even be estranged. We’re still looking into that.”

LaPointe nodded, clenching his jaw in frustration. “He has covered his tracks well then, thanks to Teague. It’s all the more reason to keep her alive for now. I still have a feeling she knows how to find him and eventually, one way or another, she will tell us.”

Exhausted as he was, Tony laid awake pondering whether he should just give up on sleep for the time being. It was night time in Shanghai, but his body clock was still telling him it was afternoon, West coast time. Joanna still had not checked in by the time they arrived, so he and Lena decided to try and catch a few hours’ sleep before continuing their search.

The sudden chiming of his cell phone next to his ear startled him and put an end to thoughts of sleeping for the moment. He picked up the phone from the nightstand, frowned at the unfamiliar number and then answered without getting up. "Hello?"

“Nick.”
His eyes snapped open and he sat up quickly, heart racing on recognizing Joanna’s voice.

“Joanna? We’ve been trying to reach you for days!”

“I know. I’ve been keeping the phone off in case I’m being tracked somehow. I only turned the phone back on long enough to get your messages.”

“Tracked? What the hell is going on,” he hissed; worry making him angry at her. “Why were you out of touch without telling us first?”

“It’s a long story. I’ve got to keep moving.”

“Why? What’s happened…are you safe?”

“For now,” Joanna said. “I’ll tell you about it when I get back.”

“You can tell us now. Can you get to our hotel?”

There was long, uncomfortable pause before she spoke again.

“You’re here, Nick? Who’s with you?”

“Lena and I are here. She’s in the room next door hopefully sleeping. We have new evidence and in light of your disappearance, I thought it best to come unannounced.”

“Dammit! You shouldn’t be here at all, Tony!”

He sucked in a shocked breath. In the years he’d known her, he’d never seen Joanna lose her composure like this. Her control had slipped briefly when she’d seen what The Calling had done to her operative and friend, Officer Lee. That was anger, this was something different. Whatever happened, it must be damn serious if it rattled her enough to slip out of maintaining his alias. It
could be a costly mistake for both of them if the wrong person heard it.

He ignored her outburst and simply said “we need to talk…now.”

Tony had just enough time to shower, dress, and make a pot of coffee before there was a soft tap at this door. He looked through the peephole in the door to see a hunched figure in plain dark clothes, a scarf covering her head and hair. Joanna was dressed to blend in, be unobtrusive. She pulled down the pair of oversized sunglasses she was wearing so he could see her face.

He didn’t speak as he opened the door to let her in. He closed it and threw the deadbolt once she was inside, then gave her an assessing glance. He relaxed a bit on seeing she looked uninjured. “Sit,” he said while moving to pour them both a cup of coffee.

He slid the cup of strong, sweetened coffee in front of her and sat with his own. Her posture was tense as she drank and there was an ever-so-slight tremble in her hands. His impatience won out and he prompted her to talk. “So what’s happened, Joanna, and why did you go dark?”

Joanna sighed. “I’d met with an informant a few days ago, he’s a local LEO. He was killed right in front of me and I wasn’t sure if I was next. It was The Calling. I didn’t know at the time how our meeting was compromised or how they tracked down the meet location,” she explained. “I kept away from the field office, pulled the battery out of my company phone, and bought a pre-paid one to get me by until I get back to Seattle.”

“You kept a possibly compromised phone? Why?”

Joanna’s face twisted into a grimace, still a bit haunted by that last exchange with the mysterious caller. “If they did use it to follow my movements somehow, its a link to The Calling. We might turn the tables and draw them out into the open.”

Nick nodded at the explanation. “OK, I get all that. So what have you been doing? You said you didn’t know at the time how the meet was compromised.”
Joanna explained, omitting mention of the menacing messages and phone calls she’d been getting from someone associated with The Calling. “I’ve been doing a little legwork of my own, meeting with contacts not known to my operatives here. It seems The Calling also has someone working for them in the Shanghai police department. That's one possibility as to how the meet was compromised. I just haven’t found out who it is yet, and it’s all the more reason both their targets shouldn’t be in the same place,” she emphasized icily, making her frustration at Nick plain.

“I think I can help you with that one, Joanna,” he smirked back, ignoring her ire. “That and a whole lot more. Remember Chan’s insurance policy?” Nick’s smirk broadened into a full-on grin. “As it turns out, it’s a bombshell and it just so happens one of things it reveals is the name of The Calling’s man on the inside at the police department here.”

Joanna’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope; he gave us that and so much more. I think once we start unraveling everything we have, we’re going to find that Chan handed us The Calling on a silver platter.” He went on to summarize what they had on The Calling thanks to Chan.

Joanna’s eyes narrowed. “The first thing I want to do is talk to their mole in the police department.” Hearing Ned’s name being thrown at her by these people had her furious beyond reason. If Tony was right, they were in a position to topple The Calling’s network again, remove the personal threat to themselves and their team, and finally allow Tony to move on from a life lived undercover.

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Rule Six

Chapter Summary

Rule Six gets a makeover as McGee clears the air with a soon to be reinstated Gibbs. Senior visits Gibbs to ask a favor.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd. Any remaining errors belong to me.

Gibbs paced Silva’s office, working out the kinks that seemed to settle in his back and knee when he sat for too long.

“How are you doing, Gibbs?”

“Just peachy,” he said curtly.

“Put those old habits back in their box, Gibbs.”

Gibbs raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“You know…deflection, avoidance, and general snappishness?”

“OK, I'm fine. We're all fine, couldn’t you tell?”

“Gibbs, it went well, but I know that wasn't easy on you. Do you think it was easy on them…did it sound easy for McGee?”

Gibbs turned and shot him a glare, then slumped against the window and sighed heavily. "No," he said simply, thinking back on the day spent with his old team. Silva had been guiding him through
sessions with his former team members, ensuring there were no lingering issues that would cause conflict in the workplace.

Ellis, who’d once found himself in much the same situation; battling PTSD and picking up the pieces of a life in ruins, waved off his apology. Instead, he pressed Gibbs for a commitment to keep working on managing his own PTSD. They’d exchanged a knowing look and shook hands. Gibbs was short on friends these days, and was grateful he seemed to have found a new one in Ellis.

It was Ellis’ recognition of his symptoms and shared experiences that helped to set him on the path to recovery. He also had Ellis to thank for smoothing the way as far as putting things right with Bishop and McGee. He’d given them a sobering glimpse into the mind and life of someone with severe PTSD, and his own experiences helped them understand what Gibbs had been going through.

Bishop was reserved but also understanding, and he was relieved to know that she didn’t blame him for her injuries the day he lost it in the field. In her analytical mind, it still could have happened even if he’d been right behind her when she chased the suspect into that alley. She also reminded him that he did save her from being attacked a second time. Gibbs wasn’t so sure that he couldn’t have prevented her injury in the first place, but as Silva pointed out, it was his overactive guilt complex telling him that.

Everything had gone fine with Bishop and Ellis, but he suspected it wasn’t going to be that easy with McGee even before Silva had warned him to that effect. He could only imagine what the younger man had been holding inside. After DiNozzo, McGee was probably the most impacted by his actions and erratic behavior. He owed it to McGee to hear what he had to say. He stopped his pacing when McGee came in, nodded at Silva and took a seat at the table. He’d stayed silent, watching solemnly and waiting for Gibbs to join him.

McGee watched Gibbs expressionlessly; determined to give no outward sign of the emotional upheaval he was feeling. He didn’t know how to start, or where, for that matter. He had so much to say to this man who he’d admired and respected, but who he’d also always found a bit intimidating. Unlike himself, the man was enigmatic, legendary; all confidence and surety. He’d never had a doubt about anything he ever did or said, even when he should have. He certainly never apologized to any of them for the crappy things he’d said and done to them. According to Ellis and Bishop, today in this room, he’d done it twice, but that wasn’t what he wanted from Gibbs.

No, he wanted something entirely different. For the first time he didn’t see the legend in front of him, the man he’d blindly held on a pedestal for so long. He saw a flawed man, imperfect like everyone else; broken and trying to piece himself back together again. It was true that Gibbs had
lost more than the rest of them, though that didn’t make his treatment of Tony and the rest of the team any more excusable. He wanted to be empathetic, to be glad Gibbs was getting better. He also wanted to be angry. He was torn between regard that he still held for Gibbs and resentment for pulling apart their team. It was hard to reconcile the vastly different emotions, but he knew he couldn’t let go of them until he got all this out of his system.

Silva caught on pretty quickly to the younger man’s dilemma. “Agent McGee,” he prompted gently. “Are you ready to begin?”

“I…uh…I’m not sure where to start,” he answered, flicking his eyes uncertainly toward Gibbs.

Gibbs tried to put him at ease. “It’s alright, McGee. If there’s something you want to get off your chest, it’s why I’m here.”

Silva nodded in agreement. “Why don’t you start with some of the things you shared about yourself, and we’ll see where that leads you.”

McGee took a deep breath and released it, wondering if he were about to incur Gibbs’ infamous wrath, and decided he didn’t care either way. Some things had to be said. “I keep thinking back to something Agent Ellis said right after he was assigned to our team.”

Gibbs leaned forward in interest, curious about where McGee had chosen to start. Much as he’d tried to hide it, he could see McGee was angry and he knew he was the reason.

“He called us a dysfunctional work family,” McGee began. “It made us all defensive; especially you, Gibbs. We didn’t like it either, that this outsider thrown onto our team by Director Vance thought he knew us well enough after a couple days to describe us that way,” McGee mused. “You know, it’s ironic that it took an outsider to show us that’s exactly what we’d become.”

“How so, Agent McGee?” Silva asked.

“Ellis was there in the first place, because we’d become so dysfunctional. For the better part of a year, things were just… wrong.” McGee paused, lost in his recollections for a moment. “We chalked it up to the fact that you nearly died; again. We rationalized it over and over; made excuses for your behavior. And ours.”
Gibbs finally broke his silence at that. “Your behavior? You and Bishop didn’t do anything wrong McGee.”

“Didn’t we? Maybe not Bishop so much, she hadn’t been with us all that long. I don’t have that excuse for missing what was happening; what Tony and Ducky saw,” he said guiltily. “You’d always been a constant. We knew what to expect from you and what you expected from us. When you came back to work after you were shot, you were different with all of us, but especially with Tony. You were harder on him than you’d ever been, always angry, and even more inscrutable if that were possible.”

“We joked about it; speculated, and it never occurred to me that it might indicate a problem. We just kept our heads down and let Tony be the whipping boy like we always did when you were on a tear. You’d always instigated competition, especially between me and Tony. We stepped all over each other to meet your high expectations, to earn those little snippets of praise you so rarely offered to the male members of your little pseudo family. No, all the soft-pedaling was reserved for the replacement daughters, wasn’t it?” McGee said resentfully. “And when you were being a jackass to him, we were like the smug siblings whose big brother was in trouble with dad. It was just the way you did things and how we responded; always had been. It made it harder to see what was really going on. We acted like it was business as usual and it was anything but. I should have known better; like Tony did.”

Gibbs sat there listening; realizing he wasn’t the only one nurturing a guilt complex. It was also pretty clear by McGee’s out of character stream of consciousness litany that there was plenty of blame to go around, but the lion’s share of it was at his own feet.

McGee’s face crinkled in irritation at the silence and familiar Gibbs blank stare. “Don’t you have anything to say, Gibbs? Or am I going to be the only one talking today?”

“You mad, McGee?”

“What do you think, Gibbs?” McGee’s voice rose in volume as his upset became more evident. He wanted Gibbs to know; to understand it wasn’t just about him. “We watched what you were doing to yourself and to him but said nothing. Have you learned anything from all this? I’m glad you’re getting better, but I’m still pissed…and disappointed.

That hurt, Gibbs thought. “I don’t blame you, McGee. It’s ok.”

“I don’t need your permission to feel something, Gibbs. Not all of us are emotionally bankrupt.” McGee shot back, giving no quarter.
Gibbs shook his head sadly; he deserved that. “That isn’t what I meant. I’m trying to say none of what happened was your fault, McGee; and it certainly wasn’t Tony’s. I let things get out of control.”

“No kidding. You gonna offer me an apology too?”

Gibbs tilted his head and asked “Is that what you need to hear?”

“Rule 6,” McGee reminded.

“Yeah well, it’s a stupid rule.”

McGee blinked in shock. This Gibbs was definitely an unknown quantity.

“I regret a lot of things, McGee, and I’ve learned a lot of things too. Not the least of which is the many ways I’ve screwed up. Rule six kinda goes something like this now; apologizing when it’s warranted isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s just the right thing to do.”

McGee gave him a hard look. “I don’t want an apology from you, Gibbs. I want you to acknowledge what you did.”

“I do; what happened is all on me, you’re right. Tony was right too and I’ve come to terms with my actions, but won’t presume to know how you feel about it.”

“You know what you did?” McGee asked disbelievingly. “Do you really? How many times did you fight for your team, Gibbs? More than once you fought tooth and nail to protect us, to keep us together. Nobody messes with Team Gibbs. Nobody except you apparently, just like nobody breaks your rules but you,” McGee vented, his voice rising with emotion again. “We were like family and much more than that. We were part of something Gibbs; part of something larger than ourselves. We took pride in that. It was important to us.”

“You let your personal problems become more important than the job at hand. Maybe you thought you could handle it, or maybe you weren’t conscious of it, but you were a liability, Gibbs. Especially after Tony left. People got hurt Gibbs; could have gotten killed. Do you get that?”
“I do McGee, believe me.”

“I think you do,” McGee allowed. “You need to get something else. When things started falling apart, I was angry with Tony for leaving us, until I finally took a hard, objective look at his last few months at NCIS. It was poison for him here, and you made it that way, Gibbs. Tony could be a pain in the ass sometimes, but he was so much more than that. He also was a good friend and a mentor, no less than Mike Franks was for you. You took that away from me and from Bishop. Funny,” McGee mused. “I always thought you were the glue that held us together and all along it was really him.”

A lump rose in Gibbs’ throat at that. He couldn’t disagree.

McGee pounded a fist on the table. “What could he possibly have done to deserve you making his life hell? After the way you treated him, you realize you made it impossible for him to stay, don’t you? You did such a thorough job driving him away, that you drove a wedge between him and everyone else too. We barely hear from him anymore!” McGee shouted.

Gibbs was shocked and guilty anew at that idea that Tony had cut ties so completely. He’d had no idea and filed it away to ponder later, but for now he thought Tony would be pretty proud of his probie. “Tony has been gone the better part of two years and you’re a better friend to him than I was for a very long time when he was still here. I know what I did to him and why. It got personal for no other reason than I made it that way. I can’t tell you exactly why, all I can say is he didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

At McGee’s dark look, he added quickly, “Not because I want to keep it from you. That’s a conversation I need to have with him; I owe it to him to explain it to him first, if he’ll hear me. I hope someday I’ll get the chance to tell him why,” he said earnestly, “but until then it’s between us, McGee.”

“I understand,” McGee offered grudgingly.

It was important to him that McGee believed he bore Tony no ill will and he regretted the actions that drove Tony to resign. “The last time I spoke to Tony, before he left he came to see me…we talked in the basement.”

McGee perked up. Tony had been tight-lipped about that confrontation; sharing nothing except it had gone poorly. Months later, when McGee called Tony to tell him about Gibbs’ breakdown,
Tony admitted it was the last time they’d spoken. He remembered feeling unaccountably sad at the state of affairs between the two men. He listened with rapt attention as Gibbs shared Tony’s last words to him.

“He said he was there for answers, and if he couldn’t get them, then he was there to tell me some things I needed to hear,” Gibbs began. “They were hard truths and I wasn’t ready to hear those things, McGee, not from him or anyone else. He was right about every damn thing he said, but it wasn’t enough to pull me out of the dark place I was trapped in. I could only respond with anger, fear, and denial.” Gibbs’ voice hitched as he went on, switching to McGee’s first name as he shared his shameful part in that conversation. “He tried to the very end, Tim. I threw his every attempt at helping me and at making peace right back in his face. The last thing he said to me was that he hoped I would get my head on straight, and when I did, I would realize things didn’t have end that way. God knows he was right about that too, Tim,” Gibbs admitted. “I’m not sure I’ll ever stop regretting it got to that point.”

Gibbs swallowed heavily, knowing that McGee’s anger was as much on Tony’s behalf as his own, he added, “I miss him too, Tim.”

McGee was nearly undone at that heartfelt admission. He looked at his former boss searchingly and was surprised when it was Gibbs that broke eye contact first. Then he was really floored when Gibbs met his eyes again. There was no trace of the sullen, impatient, secretive man Gibbs had become that last year with them. He had a new openness to his expression that McGee had never seen, hadn’t thought possible. Oh yes, things had changed. Gibbs really was trying, and that made it easier to forgive him.

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~NCIS HQ, One week later~

Gibbs heaved a sigh of relief as he exited Vance’s office and pulled the door shut behind him. When Vance had called him in to NCIS to hear the final decision of the medical review board assessing his fitness for duty, he hadn’t been optimistic up until this moment that it was actually going to happen. Doctor Silva had disclosed his intent to recommend reinstatement and a return to part time work, but he didn’t have the final say.

In accordance with NCIS’ new procedures for fitness for duty evaluations, Gibbs needed a second doctor to sign him off. It wasn’t a certainty as it had been in years past. More than once, he’d exercised both his influence and standing at NCIS and outright intimidation to circumvent the process. He wasn’t the only one who’d had a paradigm shift thrust on him; so had Leon, and his old way of doing things wasn’t going to be tolerated any longer.
It was another exercise in learning to accept that there were things he wasn’t always going to be in control of, and so he’d felt an uncharacteristic bout of nerves at awaiting the final determination of his status. Fortunately, the board found his recent breakthrough and progress had been a rather large positive step forward and as a result, with Silva’s support, they’d recommended his reinstatement.

He looked down and rubbed a thumb over the shiny gold badge Vance had handed him. He clipped it to his belt, feeling another little piece of ‘normal’ slot back into place, and then pocketed his credentials. Now that he could wander the building without an escort, he decided to scope out the office Vance assigned him.

The hallways were busy as he made his way toward the offices located adjacent to the bullpen. He received a few polite greetings and ‘welcome backs’ from some of those he passed, and dark looks from others. Not everyone was going to welcome him back with open arms, and he supposed he deserved that, given his behavior recently…hell; for years.

He hadn’t been to NCIS since being placed on suspension and medical leave and he didn’t doubt there were some people at NCIS who’d hoped they’d seen the last of him. Strangely, as long as he’d been a part of this place, and it a part of him; he was vaguely unsettled about being back.

Deliberately choosing a route that would take him past the bullpen, he was disappointed to see no sign of Ellis and his old team. They were out in the field apparently. Somewhere he’d likely never be again, he mused to himself. He reached his new office noting Vance had given him the last one on the end, and silently thanked the man for giving him the quiet corner.

Gibbs unlocked the door and flipped on the lights. He stopped short; surprised to see the office already set up with his old computer and apparently ready to use. He looked around and saw that everything that had been hanging on his cubicle walls in the bullpen had found a home here. There was a small box on the floor under his desk and an envelope addressed to him taped on top. He picked up the envelope and opened the box, immediately recognizing all the personal items from inside his old desk packed neatly and with care.

Gibbs opened the envelope, finding a short note from McGee and Bishop urging him to call if he needed any more help getting settled in. He sat down heavily in the chair; humbled as he realized they’d been the ones to move all of his files, office supplies, and personal items. He resolved to find a chance to thank them for their thoughtfulness, and was grateful that at least two of the one-time members of his inner circle still seemed to be in his corner.

He was here; might as well unpack the rest of his things. He began pulling items from the box and
finding homes for them in the desk drawers. Once that was done, Gibbs made a dour face at the computer and then powered it on. He wasn’t looking forward to sorting email and catching up on weeks of office correspondence, but it had to be done eventually. Since he’d be at the range the rest of the week, he decided to go ahead and knock it out.

A while later he was still completely absorbed in the mundane task until a soft knock on the open door sounded. He looked up to see a grinning Ellis leaning on the doorframe. “Heard you were in the building…doing battle with a couple months of office email, Gibbs?”

There was a time when just the very sight of the man raised his blood pressure. Now he saw someone he shared common ground with; both of them having gotten lost in their own personal versions of hell, and each finding their way back out into the light again. He’d come to like and respect the man who’d taken over leading his former team.

“Gah! It’s endless!” he replied jokingly as he waved Ellis in. “I’m glad for the break. What brings you by?”

“The office grapevine is beside itself, Gibbs,” Ellis said with a smirk. “We get in from the field and between the garage and the bullpen, no less than eight people stopped us to share that you’d been reinstated and were here working already,” he explained. “I just stopped in to say welcome back.”

“Thanks; it’s good to be back,” Gibbs returned. “I’m not sure where I’d be now if you hadn’t sneaked into the house and given me that kick in the ass a while back.”

Ellis clutched his chest dramatically. “Sneaked? I’m hurt. I did have a key, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah…only because Ducky is sneaky too.”

“That he is,” Ellis replied with a knowing smile. The good humor faded and his expression turned serious. “So it looks like you’ve found your way back from the brink. Is it going to stick this time?” he asked quietly.

Gibbs smiled ruefully. “Well, it’s a work in progress,” he admitted. “But I think so, yes.”

“Good to hear.”
“Anyway,” Gibbs began, “I owe you one.”

“Nah, you don’t owe me anything,” Ellis disputed. “You did all the heavy lifting, Gibbs, and I know how hard it must have been. I just pointed out the path.” Ellis stood, pulling a card from his pocket and holding it out to Gibbs, who raised a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s my number,” he said as Gibbs reached for the card. “If you feel yourself sliding off the rails again, the doc’s not the only person you can call, OK?”

Gibbs pocketed the card and touched a finger to his forehead in a salute. “Thanks again, Ellis.”

“You got it. Now if you’re up to a couple more visitors, Bishop and McGee are outside the door eavesdropping,” he said matter-of-factly.

Gibbs chuckled and watched with amusement as Ellis turned, stuck an arm outside the door, and crooked a beckoning finger.

A moment later, Bishop, and McGee crowded in the doorway, matching sheepish expressions on their faces.

“I’ll leave you all to catch up a bit,” Ellis said, sidestepping McGee and Bishop. “I’m gonna need ’em back in about an hour, Gibbs.” With that, he walked away while Bishop and McGee watched him uncertainly.

He waved his former team members inside and stood to face them. “Hey McGee…Bishop,” he greeted each with a small smile.

“Hi Gibbs,” Bishop said.

“Hey Bo…uh, Gibbs,” McGee said, kicking himself for the almost-slip. “Bishop and I just wanted to see how you’re doing.” He noted Bishop shifting awkwardly next to him and he felt the same. Neither of them knew quite what to make of this new, relaxed and smiling Gibbs.
Gibbs hated that they were so hesitant and unsure around him now, but he supposed it was warranted. He had a lot of people to convince he’d changed, starting here and now. “I’m doing a lot better, thanks in part to you,” he said, hoping to put them at ease. “It looks like I also have you two to thank for all this,” he added, waving a hand around at the office.

“Well, it’s got to be an adjustment, coming back to a completely new job; not having a team anymore,” McGee said.

“We just wanted to do what we could to make it a little easier, and let you know we’re still here for you, uh…if you’ll let us be,” Bishop added.

“I appreciate that; and what you’ve done, both here and a while back before I was ready to accept help,” Gibbs told them sincerely. Trying to lighten the serious moment, he changed the subject. “Look, I could really use some coffee. Since Ellis can spare you for a bit, how about you join me?” he invited. “Maybe Abby can break free too, and you can fill me in on what’s been going on with all of you, and how things are going with your new team lead.”

McGee and Bishop shared a somewhat surprised glance at this new, more genial, softer side of Gibbs. He’d only rarely had more than a passing interest in their personal lives in the last couple years, so this change was unusual, but welcome. “Well, Abby and Ducky are out of town at a forensics conference, but we’d love to, Gibbs,” Bishop said with a pleased smile as McGee nodded. “I’ll just go grab my purse,” she added, darting out the door toward her desk.

As McGee turned to follow Gibbs and Bishop, he stopped. Now that they were alone briefly, it was a good time to broach the topic nagging at him. Gibbs, perceptive as ever, read his hesitation correctly.

“Something else on your mind, McGee?” he questioned mildly.

“Yeah, there is,” he began tentatively. “I’ve been keeping something that belongs to you. Now that you’re not our boss any more, I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about me having them.”

After a fleeting moment of confusion, it hit him. McGee could only be referring to one thing, his medals.

“DiNozzo,” he mused softly, becoming lost briefly in his thoughts and his regrets. He considered the one person, aside from Ducky, that he most needed to make things right with was also the one
that didn’t seem likely to ever happen.

“How did you know?”

Gibbs smiled patiently. “Well, they’re not here. It’s not hard to figure what you meant, or who he would have given them to.”

“And it’s ok with you?” McGee asked, eyes locked with Gibbs’.

“He entrusted them to you, McGee. It was important to Tony and he felt you were the right choice. Of course it’s ok,” he assured. “It had to be one of the last decisions he made before he left NCIS,” Gibbs continued, sadness tinging his voice. “I’d like to respect that, wouldn’t you?” Even if he never knows that I do, Gibbs’ inner voice taunted.

“I would,” McGee agreed simply.

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~Gibbs’ House~

Gibbs looked up from his sanding as the sound of the front door opening pulled him away from his latest home renovation project; sanding and staining the woodwork throughout the house. After the whole-house paint job he’d had done, the accent woodwork looked tired and dull in comparison so he’d set about restoring it to its former glory. Setting aside the sanding block, he used a damp rag to wipe the dust from his hands and headed down to the living room to meet his visitor.

“Gibbs?” a voice called out.

As he came down the stairs, he did a double take at the sight of DiNozzo Senior standing in the middle of his redecorated living room looking around with his mouth open in surprise.

“Hey Chief,” he greeted with a small smirk. “Yes, you’re in the right place, in case you were wondering.”
Senior looked toward the stairs and blew out a relieved breath. “I wasn’t sure,” he joked back, still surprised by the warm, cozy room; so different than the last time he’d been here. “How are you, Gibbs?” he asked.

“Doing much better, I guess,” Gibbs answered with a shrug. “Just been doing some updating around the house.” He noticed Senior seemed preoccupied, even a little nervous.

Senior nodded. “I heard you were back at work,”

“Yep, new job,” Gibbs said. “It’s…different to what I’m used to, but I like it.”

“Good,” Senior said absently.

“Is there something on your mind, Chief?” Gibbs asked. “You want some coffee? I’ve got a fresh pot on.”

“Sure,” he agreed as he followed Gibbs to the kitchen, which was also renovated. The fresh paint, new cabinets, appliances and gleaming woodwork spoke to more than a little updating. “So what brought all this on so suddenly?” Senior asked curiously, waving a hand around as Gibbs poured them both mugs of coffee.

“It was time for a change,” Gibbs answered, “In more ways than one.”

Senior gave him a shrewd look. “You slaying your demons, Gibbs?”

Gibbs looked up from his mug sharply. “Where did that come from?”

“Something Tony said to me when he was here last Christmas.”

Tony had been on his mind a lot lately, thanks to the sessions with Silva and with his old team. It seemed he wasn’t going to be able to avoid thinking about him today either. Gibbs thought back to that brief moment on Christmas Eve at Abby’s apartment, feeling shame as he remembered turning
his back on Tony and refusing to stay or even speak to him. He shoved down the remorse only to have it replaced with curiosity as to how that conversation came about.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing specific; he said that you were a man with demons and how you chose to deal with them was a problem. Was he right?”

“He was right about a lot of things,” Gibbs admitted. “I hope I get a chance to tell him that someday.”

“I hope you do too. He also said he couldn’t fix things between you because he wasn’t the problem, you were. I hope we both can tell him some things left unsaid for too long.” Senior said unhappily. There had been a time when he was jealous over the bond between this man and his son, but since moving here he had a better understanding of them both, and actually felt genuine regret at seeing the bond broken. Gibbs had been there for Tony when he couldn’t be bothered and he was glad his son had someone in his life back then who gave a damn about him.

Gibbs swallowed against the tightness in his throat, shame keeping him from responding.

Senior gave a dejected sigh.

“Chief,” he prompted, wanting to change the subject. “You wanna tell me why you’re here now?”

“Did you know Tony’s been back in DC recently?” Senior asked.

“No, but you know we’re not exactly speaking. Why?”

“None of his friends at NCIS mentioned him visiting?”

Gibbs shook his head, confused at where this was going.

“He didn’t tell me he was here,” Senior said sadly. “I only knew because I’ve made friends with
people in his old building. One of them happened to see him at the post office of all places.”

“Is that unusual?” Gibbs asked. “Maybe he was working, Chief.”

Senior’s voice rose in frustration. “I wouldn’t know, Gibbs! He’s so damn secretive. He never answers his phone and changes his number like I change shoes.” Senior vented. “He calls from unknown numbers. He never talks about work or life outside of work, refuses to let me visit him, and uses a PO Box for a mailing address.”

The investigator in Gibbs got a bad feeling about what Senior was describing. Tony’s affairs were none of his business though.

“What do you want from me, Chief?”

“Can’t you look into it, Gibbs? Find out what’s going on?” he asked plaintively.

Gibbs couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You want me to investigate Tony?”

“No! I don’t know…I just don’t understand what’s going on with him.”

“That may be exactly the way Tony wants it, you know. He won’t thank me one bit for prying into his business,” Gibbs said pointedly.

“I don’t need to know details, Gibbs,” he coaxed. “Why would he come here and not even call anyone? I just want to know he’s okay. Wouldn’t you?”

If he were being honest, Gibbs thought, there was more than met the eye going on here. And yeah, he really did want to know what it was. Still, it meant going behind Tony’s back, and that was not the way to get back into his good graces.

“You know I’m not a field agent any more, right? I don’t have a team; I work alone.”

“You still have access; contacts,” Senior cajoled. When he saw the hesitation on Gibbs’ face, he
went for the throat. “You and I both know you are part of the reason he’s gone, Gibbs. You drove my son away.”

Gibbs narrowed his eyes at the blatant attempt to guilt him into doing this.

“This isn’t a con game, Gibbs. I’m asking you for a favor and I think it’s the least you can do. I ask for no other reason than I’m worried about him,” he said solemnly. “Follow the evidence, Gibbs. Aren’t you?”

Gibbs gave a small nod. “No promises, but I’ll do some looking.”

Senior let out a shaky, relieved breath. “Thank you, Gibbs.”

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AN: I know, I know! You want to know what’s going on with Tony and Joanna too. I’m working on it, I promise! :)}
LaPointe tapped the desk, frowning in consternation. Some disturbing news was filtering its way back to him, and he was fairly certain it was related to Teague and the federal task force she had allied herself with. They were an unknown until recently. As a result of their intelligence gathering, several of her colleagues had been identified, but not where they were based in the US. That was something Rousseau seemed to have an answer for, but for now it would have to wait until they sorted out and dealt with the rumblings of new problems coming from seemingly every corner of their operations.

He made his way to Rousseau’s rooms, where his second in command was trying to assess reports of trouble coming in from far-flung corners of their network. LaPointe entered the room just as his second in command pushed away from his desk and rose.

“Emile,” he nodded in greeting. “You have some clarification on the reports I’ve been getting?”

Rousseau took a deep breath and began his report, knowing it would not be well-received. “Yes… one of our people keeping watch over the decoy site in Sacramento has been killed. Local news reports indicate he was spotted photographing activity around the site, panicked and ran. Unfortunately he did not get a chance to transmit his photos, so we don’t know if it was local law enforcement or Teague’s people who might have investigated the site.”

“Careless fool,” LaPointe said flatly, eyes narrowing a bit as his anger grew. “Did he reveal his purpose in being there?” LaPointe asked.
“No. Apparently, he committed suicide rather than allow himself to be apprehended.”

“A careless fool, but a loyal one,” LaPointe nodded in satisfaction. “At least we have the other sites still being watched.”

Rousseau grimaced. “There is a problem with three of the other sites as well. We have lost contact with our people…including Hasan.”

LaPointe cursed. In addition to surveilling one of the sites, Hasan Salah was a hacker. All of the photographs and intelligence collected on investigative activity at the decoy sites was routed to him. He was assigned to use the photographs to identify investigators and potential members of Teague’s task force spotted at the sites, compile profiles, and attempt to locate their base of operations.

If he’d been apprehended, then Teague and the others knew most of the sites referred to on the decoy laptop were ruses and that they were being tracked; hunted. He was certain his trusted old friend would reveal nothing else of his mission.

“That isn’t all,” Rousseau said. “A coordinated series of raids have shut down our cells in Indonesia and the Philippines. All of them. Our people have either been apprehended or scattered to the wind with no place to regroup.”

“How…” LaPointe ground out. “How did Teague and the others find them?” This was a blow that represented the loss of a majority of their operations in East Asia.

“Clearly Teague and her counterparts in other agencies have found well-placed informants, and foreign governments are cooperating with her people in order to shut us down.” He watched LaPointe warily, but the expected outburst of fury didn’t come. Instead, an icy veil dropped over his features and he became deadly calm. Somehow, that display of iron control was far more disconcerting than an outburst or show of temper would have been. “How do we counter them?” Rousseau asked, taking his seat again and gesturing at his leader to join him.

LaPointe sat and scratched his beard thoughtfully. He carefully considered their next move. Thanks to information gained via their infiltration of the local police department, they had identified most of the locations Teague’s people used to operate in Shanghai. They also knew Teague’s people were in the process of relocating their base of operations to the American embassy compound. Once inside the compound, they would be virtually untouchable. An attack on or near
the embassy would bring the wrong kind of attention to bear.

He was a patient man when he had to be. Years of operating in the shadows had taught him that; how to turn around misfortune, wait for opportunities, and capitalize on them. Living on the fringes of society also taught him that sometimes you didn’t wait; opportunity had to be made…or taken. Time had been his ally, now it seemed that was no longer the case. An opportunity was slipping away.

“Not new informants. Chan,” he spat venomously. “Chan and his insurance policy; it must have turned up and she has it.” Emile had been right; they should have eliminated Teague before now. Enough of this, he thought. She was still alive not just because of his desire to interrogate her about her link to DiNozzo, but because she was cautious, constantly moving, and difficult to track while in Shanghai. Just as he was about to give Emile new orders, the cell on his desk rang.

LaPointe waited impatiently, and after a brief exchange Emile ended the call and looked up sharply. “One of our contacts inside the police department says that Officer Wei did not report for his shift today. We may have to consider the possibility he’s been picked up by Teague’s people.

LaPointe glared silently, but considered how this could be turned to their advantage. They would find DiNozzo another way.

The time for patience was over.

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Nick exited the small secure communications room inside the American embassy looking distinctly unhappy, but smiled to see Lena waiting outside. “How goes it, Nick? You look like you just got bad news.”

“You could say that,” Nick began. “I was checking in with Matt and he relayed an update from the State Department side of the investigation. The Chinese government is dragging its feet on freezing bank accounts we’ve linked to The Calling.”

“Why,” Lena asked, exasperated. “There’s more than ample evidence and it’s easily verified.”

“Seems they’re hesitant to conduct raids or freeze some of the accounts because of the link to the
Despins family in France. They want to corroborate what we gave them before ‘inconveniencing’ the Despins shipping empire. I’m having limited success convincing them there’s a sense of urgency in all this.”

“What else is happening?”

“The governments of Indonesia and the Philippines have already moved on the information we gave the State Department. We’ve tipped our hand and the rest of The Calling’s network will be on alert now,” Nick explained

“I see. Maybe Joanna’s interview will produce something compelling.”

“Interview?” Nick frowned. “She didn’t say anything about another interview.” Joanna had been disappearing off and on to talk to her network of informants and he already butted heads with her more than once about going off alone. “One of us should be with her,” Nick said emphatically.

“She’s not alone; she’s going back to the field office,” Lena defended her colleague.

Nick shook his head in frustration; Joanna was using a potentially compromised location for her meet. She should be here; the embassy had given them a small outbuilding on the compound from which to work in safety. More importantly she was alone again; all of Joanna’s local operatives were currently here at the embassy.

“She sure as hell is alone, because everyone else is here.” Nick muttered. “What did she say to you?”

“Just that it was a quick meet. She said she didn’t need us there,” Lena answered.

“Did she now?” Joanna was definitely up to something. “Why?”

“Didn’t say; is there some problem Nick?” Lena asked; confusion in her voice.

“Nope. Let’s go catch up with her and see who she’s talking to.”
“Okay…but I got the impression she doesn’t want you there. You two argue or something? She’s been acting weird about you since we got here.”

Nick knew part of the problem was that Joanna was angry and worried he’d turned up in Shanghai after they’d agreed he’d keep his trips to an absolute minimum. She was more determined to keep him tied to the alias than he was; all to keep The Calling from easily finding him. Still, there was something about this disappearing act that had him on edge.

“Everything’s fine, Lena,” he assured her, even though he’d definitely be having words with Joanna later. “We’ve had a difference of opinion about her continuing to set up these meets without back up,” he said truthfully. “It may be the CIA way of doing things, but it isn’t mine and it isn’t what a member of this task force should be doing unnecessarily. In light of the fact that one of her informants was run down in the street in front of her and she’s on The Calling’s hit list, I don’t think it’s wise. Now let’s head over there.”

Once they’d arrived, Nick parked in the garage and they went inside, finding the building dark except the interrogation room. He and Lena slipped unnoticed into an observation room next door that was eerily similar to the one at NCIS. Nick uttered a startled curse as he looked through the one-way glass and realized who Joanna had cuffed to the chair in the other room. “Shit.” He turned to Lena. “Did you know about this?”

Lena shook her head, shocked at what Joanna had done. CIA operatives had to do some pretty shady things in the course of their work, but for a member of the task force, this was ill-advised; and Nick was obviously angry about it. Raised voices brought their focus back to what was happening on the opposite side of the glass.

Joanna was stalking around the table shouting questions in Chinese at a clearly terrified man wearing a police uniform. This had to be The Calling’s man on the inside at the police department, Officer Wei. Judging by the cuffs and discarded hood on the table, he hadn’t come willingly.

“Do you understand them?” Lena asked. Chinese wasn’t among the languages she was proficient in, but knew Nick was.

“Enough to follow along,” Nick confirmed, still watching Joanna closely.
“How long have you been feeding information to The Calling about my operatives and our work here?” she shouted, slapping a hand down hard on the table in front of the man.

Wei flinched hard and shook his head in denial.

Joanna leaned close, whispering menacingly in the man’s ear. “We know you are the leak in the police department.” On the other side of the glass, Nick stiffened as Joanna grabbed a handful of hair and pulled the man’s head back hard. “I want to know who you are working for…and I want to know now.”

“No!” he shouted. “Let me go!”

Joanna just smiled coldly. “Is it someone named LaPointe?” she asked, testing the name referenced in Chan’s insurance policy.

Wei just paled and shook his head again; fighting against Joanna’s grip on his hair.

“What do you know about Officer Lee and his informant, Chan?” she asked, giving Wei’s hair another yank and pulling his head back painfully far. Wei’s face lost its remaining color at that question.

“Nothing!” he answered through bloodless lips.

“You’re lying to me,” Joanna said flatly, “…and I’m running. Out. Of. Patience.”

Nick glared as Joanna punctuated each word with another painful jerk on the man’s head. Then she grabbed his throat and squeezed hard enough to cut off his air briefly before letting go.

Wei sputtered and coughed a moment, then shouted hoarsely, “He can’t know I’m talking to you! He will kill me!”

“Do you think I won’t?” Joanna hissed, “I’m CIA you know. The rules are different for us. I will
make you disappear and no one will ever know what happened.”

Nick could stand it no more. Joanna was on the razor’s edge of going too far. “Stay here unless I call you, Lena,” he directed, and went quickly to the other room.

He shoved down his anger at Joanna and opened the door calmly. Wei jerked and looked up, shaking in fear, not knowing the intentions of the new arrival.

Joanna jumped guiltily, and then met his eyes unapologetically, saying nothing. Nick walked to one corner, crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, giving her a pointed glance. He knew she would understand that he was there to stop her from carrying out her physical threats. He saw a flicker in her eyes, and took that as acceptance. He gave a slight nod toward Wei, indicating she should continue.

Wei looked back and forth between them uncertainly and jumped as Joanna turned to him again.

“I’ll ask again,” Joanna gritted out, leaning uncomfortably close. “What do you know about CIA Officer Lee and his informant, Chan? And who are you working for?”

“You don't understand; I have a family,” Wei said in a desperate appeal. “This man will kill me, but only after he’s tortured my wife to death and made me watch. That’s what he did to your Officer Lee…he made us all watch it,” Wei revealed, looking ill at the recollection.

Joanna went white with fury at the idea that this man had been present when Lee was being tortured. Nick stepped quickly forward, placing a hand on her shoulder to distract her. Joanna’s way was going nowhere with this man…perhaps a little ‘good cop, bad cop’ was in order now. He guided Joanna away from the table and took her place.

“Officer Wei, which family members has he threatened?” he asked gently, in counterpoint to Joanna’s threats of violence.

“Only my wife…she’s pregnant with our first child. They’re all I have left in this world and I can’t do anything to endanger them,” Wei cried out in anguish. “He has us watched from time to time…we never know when.” Wei’s voice rose in barely controlled panic and he jerked hard against the cuffs. “He may already know I’m here!”

“I understand,” Nick said sympathetically. “But you realize they were placed in danger as soon as you started working for him.” Joanna scowled in silent protest as he reached for the keys to the
cuffs. He was taking a chance and hoped it would pay off. Nick gently released Wei’s hands, hoping to earn a small measure of trust.

“You can change that,” Nick began. “The US has a program to help relocate informants who are endangered after helping our government fight terrorist organizations,” he explained. “You help us and we’ll get you and your wife to the American embassy. We’ll start the process and if you cooperate and agree to testify if needed, I promise I will put you and your wife on a plane to the US myself, if that’s what you want.”

Wei rubbed his sore wrists, glancing at Joanna resentfully, then back at Nick. “And if I don’t?”

Nick shrugged as if it didn’t matter to him one bit. “If you don’t, we’ll leave you where we found you and you can take your chances with LaPointe. That is who you’re so afraid of, isn’t it?”

Wei nodded miserably, feeling caught between the proverbial rock and hard place.

“Sounds like you have good reason to be afraid. I’m offering you a way out of this,” Nick urged.

After a long moment, Wei looked up and said a little breathlessly, “Once I know my wife is safe at the embassy, I will tell you everything I know.”

Wei had paced the small room like a caged animal until they’d received word his wife had been safely transported to the embassy. Now that he was settled and cooperative, they could head to the compound themselves.

“All right, let’s go,” Nick said. As they started to head toward the garage, the muffled ring of a cell phone sounded from the pack Joanna was carrying.

She froze uncertainly, knowing it was her old company phone; the one that The Calling had been using to torment her. It had to be them; everyone else knew she’d replaced the old phone. Joanna cursed the timing. Now she was going to have to explain to Nick and the others that she’d kept the harassment from them.
Nick and Lena looked at her questioningly. “Joanna…you gonna answer that?” Nick asked, thinking it was her new phone.

She didn’t reply; just stared at the phone screen in dread. *Unknown number.*

She pushed the answer button numbly and brought the phone to her ear without speaking.

“Officer Teague,” greeted the now familiar accented voice.

“What do you want?” she said tersely. Nick and Lena were watching her intently, realizing something was wrong.

“I couldn’t help but notice you seem to have collected one of my pawns.”

The caller chuckled at her silence. “I did warn you we would be watching.”

_Dammit,_ she thought, _I have really screwed up._ She covered the cell microphone and looked at Nick. “We need to move. Get to the car, _now._”

Nick didn’t hesitate; he grabbed Wei’s arm and started jogging toward the garage, Lena and Joanna fell in right behind him.

“It’s interesting you know…the nature of pawns,” the voice mused.

“And what is that?” Joanna asked, stalling as they reached the garage.

“To be a sacrifice, of course…” the voice answered ominously.

“No one’s going to be sacrificed today,” Joanna snapped as Lena climbed into the back seat of the embassy sedan and Nick shoved Wei in after her.
“Time will tell, Officer Teague,” the voice replied. “I commend your security. We couldn’t get into your building so we had to make do with the one next door. I’m afraid there might be collateral damage. How unfortunate,” the voice mocked.

Suddenly, the connection dropped just as there was the sound of a heavy explosion from close by. The blast filled the air with the noise of shattering glass and the rumbling, concussive boom shook the building, killing the electricity. It was powerful enough to knock her and Nick off their feet and it rocked the car, tumbling Lena and Wei about in the back seat. Glass, concrete, and other debris was falling everywhere in the dark, and smoke began to billow into the garage as the building around them burned.

“Is everyone alright?” Nick shouted above the noise as he regained his feet. He could just make out Lena in the gloom checking over Wei in the back seat.

“We’re fine,” Lena called out.

Joanna was slow to get up. Nick caught her by the shoulders and saw a streak of blood across her forehead. “It’s nothing, some debris hit me. Give me the keys and get in.”

“You’re hurt; I should drive,” Nick objected, coughing as the smoke thickened.

Flames began to appear in the hallway leading back into the main building.

“It’s not serious,” she insisted. “I’ll drive. I know the area better than you Nick, I can get us out of here faster.”

He nodded reluctantly and handed her the keys. He ran over to the garage door and pulled; unable to raise it. “The blast must have jammed the door! We’re going to have to go through it!” he shouted, running back to the car.

“Get in the back, Nick, and all of you stay down,” she ordered, thankful for the tinted windows of the borrowed embassy sedan. They would hide the passengers from view. “They’re most likely waiting outside.”

Joanna gunned the engine and the sedan crashed through the door with a rending screech of metal. Gunfire broke out almost immediately and Joanna yanked the wheel hard, swerving and weaving as
she hurtled down the road.

Tony could hear bullets punching into the sedan from where he was hunched over in the seat, covering their informant. He flinched as the back window was hit. The large window shattered, showering them all with tiny shards of glass.

For several tension-filled miles, Joanna furiously maneuvered the bullet-riddled sedan through the narrow streets and the sound of gunfire receded as their pursuers lost them in traffic. Finally they reached the gates of the embassy, and guards having been alerted they were coming, the gate opened to admit them.

As the gates closed behind them and they parked, the adrenaline that had been surging through him began to ebb; leaving him tired and disappointed in what he felt was a breach of trust by Joanna. He hung back as Lena led their informant-slash-witness inside.

“Joanna,” Nick began without meeting her eyes. “You and I are going to have a very long talk when we get back to Seattle.”

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Ripples

Chapter Summary

Gibbs has a question for Ducky, but first they have to clear the air.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd - any goofs remaining belong to me.

~Senior’s apartment~

“What do you mean you’ve done all you can do, Gibbs? You’ve barely done anything at all,” Senior complained. “After everything I told you, and now Junior’s apartment has been broken into?” He’d been certain this news from his friends in Tony’s old building would convince Gibbs to do more to learn what his son was being so secretive about.

“Chief, I told you I quietly checked into the mailboxes issued at the post office where Tony was seen. There’s nothing under his name,” Gibbs reminded him. “As for the apartment; it isn’t his and he hasn’t lived there for the better part of two years. A break-in there doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

“Maybe. Then again, maybe not,” Senior disputed. “He seemed awfully interested in hearing about it. You don’t think those things add up to something significant? I thought you didn’t believe in coincidences!”

Gibbs ignored Senior’s attempt to change his mind. “Did you ask him directly instead of evading or talking around your concerns?”

“I did manage to get him on the phone recently and tried asking him like you suggested. It got me nowhere. Whatever is going on with him, he’s pretty determined to keep hiding it from me,” Senior replied with a sulky, frustrated sigh.

Gibbs gave him a piercing look. “Are you really that self-absorbed, or just oblivious?”
Senior stuttered in shock a moment and finally managed a reply. “What the hell is that supposed mean, Gibbs?” he asked in an affronted tone.

Keeping his face a bland mask so as not to worry the older man even more than he already was, Gibbs went on, hoping his theory was right. “Look, as far as I know he’s still involved in law enforcement in some capacity. Everything you’ve told me indicates he may even be doing some sort of undercover work,” Gibbs explained.

“So?”

“Don’t you get it?” Gibbs asked, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “At best, looking into this any further could jeopardize any investigation he’s working on. At worst, it could also bring the kind of attention that might endanger his life,” Gibbs emphasized. “I’m not willing to do that. Are you?”

Senior hesitated and then gave a dejected sigh. “Of course not.”

“I understand that you’re worried about him. You need to stop pushing and get over this idea that you’re entitled to know what’s going on because you’re his father,” Gibbs cautioned him. “He’s obviously got his reasons for not wanting you to know. Respect them, whatever they are. He’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

“And if that time doesn’t come?”

“Then you need to let it go,” Gibbs said firmly.

Later, after Gibbs left Senior’s place, he stopped by the police precinct in the district where Tony’s old apartment was located. Unwilling to risk an electronic search that might raise a red flag somewhere; he decided to look into the break-in the old fashioned way and ask in person. He learned from the patrolmen who responded and filed the report that the apartment had been thoroughly tossed while the residents were out. Nothing at all had been taken though…it was strange.

His mind spun with possible implications and warred with the idea that it could be much ado about nothing. His gut roiled uneasily about whatever was going on with Tony, but damned if he knew
what it was trying to tell him. Senior was worried about his son and he hoped he’d made it clear that looking into Tony’s affairs could be disastrous if he were working undercover. Gibbs made a note to talk to Ellis and his old team. He wasn’t the only person Senior knew at NCIS and he wouldn’t put it past the man to try an end run around him to get information about Tony.

For his part, he’d feel better about his decision to back off if he could at least confirm somehow that Tony was, in fact, working in law enforcement. He was pretty certain who would know the answer to that question. He’d made several attempts to make things right with Ducky in the weeks since being reinstated, only to be met with cool detachment, if not outright avoidance. The last thing he wanted Ducky to think was that he had ulterior motives for seeking a thaw in the current state of their friendship. He could ask, but would he get an answer one way or the other?

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~NCIS HQ~

Gibbs shut down his computer and steeled himself for an attempt to seek out and talk to Ducky. It had been a long week and Ellis’ team had just wrapped a tough case. With Ducky and Palmer right in the thick of things, there was no opportunity to try and speak to his old friend. It was late in the day and he hoped with the case closed and Palmer gone, he’d have some success.

A shadow fell across his desk and he looked up to see the one person who never failed to make him smile. “Hi Gibbs,” Abby said.

“Abs,” he returned with a smile. “What brings you up here so late?”

“I was on my way out and saw your light on. Are you leaving now?” she asked. “We can walk out together.”

“Not just yet, Abs; I’ve got someone to see before I go.”

“Ducky,” she said knowingly.

“What makes you say that?”

“I heard you apologized to all the others,” Abby chewed a thumbnail thoughtfully; one of her
nervous habits. “It used to scare me when you broke your own rules, Gibbs,” she mused.

“Hell Abby, it shouldn’t. I’ve been breaking my own damn rules for years, even the most important ones.”

“You always had your reasons, Gibbs and did what you thought best,” she defended.

“Oh Abby, it doesn’t mean I was right.” Gibbs sighed. “You’ve always been my staunchest ally and defender, even when I didn’t deserve it…especially when I didn’t deserve it.”

Abby cringed internally at the self-disgust in his voice. “You’re Gibbs,” she shrugged, as if that explained everything.

“I’m not the model of perfection you’ve always held me up to be. It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything to earn that kind of admiration and loyalty from anyone.” Gibbs held up a hand as the protest formed on Abby’s lips almost before she realized it was happening. “There’s no defending some of the things I’ve said and done to people I called friends, so stop putting me on a pedestal,” Gibbs chided, his voice almost resentful.

“It’s a hard habit to break,” she smiled. “You’re not the only one who hasn’t been a very good friend, and not the only one who’s talked to Doctor Silva about things.”

Abby thought back to her childish initial reaction to Tony’s announcement he was leaving NCIS; and later how she irrationally blamed him for Gibbs falling apart afterward. Then she recalled Tony’s stunned and then angry reaction that Christmas; how she plotted to get both men in her apartment at the same time so they could ‘make up’…only to have her plan backfire spectacularly.

“I get that you had good intentions, but did you really think he was going to react well to being surprised like that? You can’t just throw us in a room together and think things will all work out just because you want it so badly.”

“I was trying to help.”

She remembered Tony clenching his jaw and struggling so hard not to lose his temper as he replied, letting her know he saw right through her.
“No, you were being selfish, Abby.”

And she had been selfish. She felt her skin flush with shame as she recalled Gibbs turning ice-cold when he realized Tony was there, and then the betrayal on Tony’s features, and his disappointment in her actions. Ducky had given her hell for that stunt as well, and between the two of them, she didn’t know whose disappointment cut more deeply.

Abby’s face took on a faraway look. Whatever she was remembering, Gibbs thought, it seemed she’d come to some realizations about her behavior too. Abby could be an incredibly empathetic person…except when she gave in to her stubborn, deeply ingrained tendency to run roughshod over everyone to get her way.

Gibbs considered the idea that he hadn’t been the only one to blame Tony for things that weren’t remotely his fault. “I think you mean well, but you can’t fix everything any more than I can, Abs.”

“So I’ve learned,” she admitted. “I was just thinking about Christmas. Remember?”

Gibbs snorted and nodded. Those well-meaning attempts to hammer her environment and the people in it into the perfect picture she wanted often caused more strife. Maybe she was seeing that now.

Abby suppressed her sorrow at the unpleasant memory and turned her attention back to Gibbs. “Anyway, this isn’t about me; it’s about you and Ducky. It’s not hard to see that you two are avoiding each other,” she replied unhappily. “You know I hate it when people I love are angry at one another.”

“I’m not angry at anyone now, Abby, except maybe myself. I suspect Ducky is more hurt than angry. It’s going to take some time.”

“You were angry then and he knows it. We all do; you shut us out for a long time, Gibbs, and all we were trying to do was help,” Abby reminded accusingly. “You owe him an explanation, you know. You’ve cleared the air with everyone here but him.”

“I know that. I was angry at Ducky for writing that report on me and sending it to Vance. He did the right thing and I had no right to be angry. I don’t just owe him an explanation. I’ve been trying to apologize, tell him I understand why he did what he did, but he’s not making it easy.”
“Can I do anything to help, Gibbs? Maybe talk to Ducky for you?”

Gibbs suspected the standoffishness was Ducky testing his resolve to make things right between them. He didn’t blame his old friend for being gun-shy, after all this wasn’t the first time Gibbs had let his own personal demons affect their friendship. Giving up would prove Ducky right, and it was important to Gibbs to demonstrate he’d learned something from hitting rock bottom and that he’d grown from the climb back up again.

“I know you want to help, Abby. I made this problem and I have to be the one to try and make amends, or it doesn’t mean anything. No matter how long it takes,” he said determinedly.

Giving in to the inevitable impulse, she threw her arms around Gibbs and hugged him tightly. After a moment Abby stepped back out of his arms, looking a little surprised.

There was a relaxed set to his shoulders and absence of tension in his bearing that she’d never realized was there until it was gone somehow. It must have always been a part of him, and they never knew, she thought sadly. This Gibbs was self-deprecating and oddly vulnerable, but at the same time contemplative; honest and open in a way she’d never seen. Abby felt the shift in her world view physically, and it was almost disorienting to her senses.

“You’re different, Gibbs.”

“How so?” He asked tilting his head at her. She was still gazing at him intently as if she were seeing into him. Maybe she was.

“It’s a good thing,” Abby answered enigmatically. “What are you waiting for?” she made a shooing motion with her hands. “Go see Ducky.”

Gibbs stepped hesitantly into Autopsy, unsure of his welcome since Ducky had been quite adept at avoiding him lately. Palmer was gone, he noted with relief. Ducky appeared to be finishing up for the night and was wiping down the tables.
“What can I do for you, Agent Gibbs?” he asked coolly, not looking up from his task.

Gibbs sighed at the formal address. “I was hoping we could talk,” he ventured.

Ducky stopped wiping and gave him an assessing glance. “About what?” he asked, then turned away to toss the cleaning cloth in a bin.

“Give me a break, Ducky. Do you think this distance and awkwardness between us is what I want?” he asked, suddenly feeling the tension thick between them.

Ducky kept his back turned as he said, “It certainly seemed so for quite some time. I’ve no cause to think differently now.”

Gibbs lost the tenuous grip on his frustration with Ducky’s persistently frosty attitude. “I’m trying to apologize, dammit!”

Ducky rounded on him with angry blue eyes. “For what? Being indifferent? Not asking for help when you needed it…not accepting it when freely offered?”

“Yes! All of it!” Gibbs answered, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “I let things get out of control and I’m trying to make it right.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re important to me!” Gibbs took a breath and got control of his emotions again. “I’ve been selfish and arrogant and it’s time I acknowledge that I’ve done wrong to people I care about. I’m trying to change; to be a better person and I’ve realized that I can’t do it alone. You’ve got good reason to be angry with me.”

“It’s your anger that is at issue here, more so than mine. Where does that stand?”

“I’m not angry at you, Ducky. I understand that I left you no choice. Bringing up my fitness for duty was the right thing to do. I can’t credibly hold others to standards of behavior if I’m not willing to hold myself to the same standards. I lost sight of that and a lot of other things.”
“You most certainly did,” Ducky agreed. “What about the rest of it? It wasn’t just your own self-
destructive behavior I take issue with; it’s the impact on others.”

Gibbs nodded in understanding. “The anger and other PTSD symptoms…I see now that I took things out on my team.”

“Some more than others…” Ducky said pointedly, “in spite of my best efforts.” Gibbs knew that they were talking about Tony now.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I know what I did to him. It was inexcusable, cruel even.”

Ducky shook his head. “You really have no idea what you’ve done to Anthony,” Ducky answered, displeasure clear in his voice. “Are you still angry at him?”

“No,” Gibbs answered honestly.

“What changed?”

Gibbs knew if there were any chance of making things right with Ducky, and Tony someday for that matter, he had to actually talk to them; and say something meaningful.

Time and again over the years, Tony had done whatever he felt was required to keep the team together and functioning well. And all too often he’d done so to his own detriment. Never had it been clearer than during his last nine months or so at NCIS.

“I was never truly angry at him,” Gibbs said remorsefully. “Doctor Silva helped me see that I was really angry at myself and I projected that on him. Tony was an easy target. He's always been an easy target for me to act out my anger and frustration on.” Gibbs hung his head a bit as he recalled many of the times he’d done just that.

He met Ducky’s expectant gaze again and continued. “I took it too far. I deliberately alienated him. When I came back to work after the shooting, I wanted to feel like I was needed; to contribute. I needed to help close that case and I couldn’t. Tony did an exemplary job, but all I could see was him showing everyone I wasn’t needed at all. It hurt, and then it made me angry and resentful,”
Gibbs admitted. “The team needed him; I needed him and I hated the feeling. He was the heart of the team, our moral compass…everything I thought I’d once been and I hated being replaced so easily,” Gibbs told him. “I know it’s irrational, but he became a threat, and I started treating him like one.”

Ducky seemed surprised that he revealed such personal and unflattering insights. “You have benefited from counseling,” he said simply, his voice pleased and slightly warmer.

Gibbs lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug and offered a tentative smile. “It’s a work in progress, but yeah…”

“I should be furious with you for all of that, but I find myself unable to hold onto anything like anger,” Ducky began. “If it hadn’t happened that way, you wouldn’t have gotten the help you needed. Apparently, you needed it from an objective outsider, not a longtime friend.”

“Will you accept my apology, Ducky? My friends are few and far between these days…I’d hate to lose one.”

Ducky considered his friend of many years, and felt in some ways like he was meeting him again for the first time. The stoic, secretive man was coming out of his shell and seemed willing to be as brutally honest with himself as he was everyone else. He could hardly turn his back on someone trying so hard to change for the better.

“I accept,” Ducky said, extending his hand. Gibbs grasped his hand and shook it gratefully.

Ducky sealed the handshake and reaffirmation of their friendship with a toast from the illicit bottle of scotch in his desk and they chatted well into the evening. As warmed as he was by being taken into Gibbs’ confidence once again, his old bones needed some rest. They agreed to call it a night and meet for dinner soon.

As they walked through the darkened building toward the car park, Gibbs finally remembered the question he’d wanted to ask.

“Ducky…can I ask you something about Tony? You’re the only one he communicates with regularly, according to McGee and the others.”
The older man stiffened and suspicion flitted briefly across his expression. “You can ask, but I reserve the right not to answer,” Ducky said noncommittally.

“Fair enough,” Gibbs agreed. “Is he still working in law enforcement?”

Ducky stopped and gave him a penetrating stare. “Why would you want to know such a thing?”

“Senior is worried about him, and pressing me to look into what Tony is doing because he’s being secretive about it,” Gibbs told him honestly. “My gut is telling me to back off and to make sure Senior does the same. The things Senior told me about Tony, they are all signs indicating he’s either undercover or in some sort of trouble.”

Ducky looked ahead and remained silent as they continued to walk toward their cars.

“Ducky? Please…I’m a little worried about him too.”

Ducky sighed. “Anthony is not in trouble as far as I know, and you should listen to your gut.”

“Thank you, Ducky.”

Ducky watched as Gibbs climbed into his car and drove away. He wondered what Tony would think of tonight’s revelations. Perhaps someday another friendship could be salvaged after all.

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Senior pulled into his building’s parking garage and waited a moment as the gate lowered behind him. He watched as a dark sedan passed the entry and drove off out of sight, then breathed a sigh of relief. He was getting paranoid in his old age. Either that or he really was being followed. For a couple weeks now he’d had seen the same couple vehicles from time to time. Sometimes it was a black sedan, and once in a while a dark SUV. Maybe he’d been involved in too many of Junior’s cases, or the “Sherlocks” overdeveloped exuberance for mystery and intrigue was influencing him to see something that wasn’t there. He huffed in laughter at himself.

He parked, and out of curiosity walked back to the entrance and peered carefully out in the
direction the sedan had traveled. At first he saw nothing in the dark, but then his heart lurched in
his chest as he saw the vehicle parked up the block and across from the main entrance to his
building.

He couldn’t help but note that anyone in the car could see who left the building, whether on foot or
by car. Why would anyone want to follow around an old retired businessman like him? It made no
sense…and it was unnerving. He wondered how Gibbs would feel about coincidences now.

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AN: back to Tony and Joanna soon, I promise!
Troubled Waters

Chapter Summary

Tony fends off Senior’s information gathering attempt. Tony and Joanna finally have ‘that talk’, and their team is becoming uneasy about whatever is going on between them.

Chapter Notes

Minor spoilers for S12 finale arc, also references to first story in this series "Turning the Page".

Beta'd; any boo boos left are mine.

~Shanghai~

Tony hung up the phone, feeling ill. Since their awkward visit the Christmas before last, he’d made an effort to call his father at least once or twice a month, though it never seemed to be enough. He’d even managed to make a clandestine visit to see his father once in the last few months. It had gone a long way toward smoothing the rough patch between them for a while, but now things seemed worse than ever.

As the task force investigation heated up recently, his ability to keep in touch with his dad had become a casualty. After a couple weeks of increasingly strident voice mail messages on one of his burn phones, he’d finally had the time and privacy away from Lena and Joanna to call back. Only to learn his father had found out about his recent detour through Washington, and was both hurt and angry that Tony hadn’t called or visited him.

“Dad, there was no time for a visit, and no point to a phone call,” he’d explained. Senior seemed slightly mollified on hearing Tony just passed through on his way to an assignment overseas, and used a brief layover to retrieve a package intended for his office, but Senior wasn’t done with the third degree.

“What kind of job keeps you from contacting your own family, Junior?” Tony frowned at the nickname as Senior pushed for more information about his job and again expressed frustration with his secrecy. His father was laying on the guilt pretty thick and it was starting to grate. “I told you, Dad, I’ve been overseas working, and I can’t talk about what I do.”
“We haven’t talked at all in weeks!”

“I can’t be at your beck and call, Dad, don’t you understand that?” he pressed the heel of his hand against his temple as a headache set in there. “Can we talk about something else now?” he asked, determined to change the subject.

Then Senior told him about a break in at his old apartment and demanded to know if it was related to his job. The break in concerned him if he were to be honest, but he couldn’t let Senior know that before he’d had a chance to look into it himself.

“Dad, why on earth would that have anything to do with me?” he deflected.

Finally, Senior became cool and aloof when persistence and even the blatant attempt to make him feel guilty didn’t give him the result he wanted. “Just remember I tried, son, and it’s you that won’t meet me in the middle this time.”

_Ouch_, he thought. _That hurt._

Tony couldn’t help but think how familiar this territory was, even as it saddened him. Once he got back to Seattle tomorrow, had have to come up with a plan to deal with this new wrinkle in his life. Things were going to have to change, and it probably wouldn’t help matters between him and his father.

~Seattle, Two Days Later~

Tony worked quietly at his desk answering emails and catching up with Matt and Gary’s end of the case while waiting for Joanna to arrive from the East coast. She’d departed Shanghai ahead of him and Lena. Joanna had been called back to the CIA headquarters at Langley, VA to explain the sequence of events leading to the attack on a civilian business next to their Shanghai field office.

He suspected Joanna had been called on the carpet by the CIA director to answer for her actions in Shanghai. She had yet to answer to _him_. They had no chance to talk privately before their return to Seattle. Not wanting Lena caught in the middle between him and her CIA colleague, he’d kept a lid on his simmering anger. Even so, the new tension between them was probably apparent.
He glanced down as his cell phone chirped, indicating an incoming text message. He read the message from Joanna, dashed off a quick reply letting her know it was time for their talk, and then shut down his computer. “Guys,” he said, looking across the room at Matt and Gary. “Joanna’s back from Langley. We need to go over some things. We’ll be in the second floor conference room if you need us.”

Matt nodded back in acknowledgment as Nick rose from his desk. Lena mentioned things seemed to be suddenly strained between their teammates, and Matt couldn’t help but wonder what Nick and Joanna needed to discuss privately. He could tell Gary was thinking the same thing and they eyed each other meaningfully as Nick headed toward the conference room.

Tony remained silent as he faced Joanna across the conference room table. They had a deal; one which he’d made very clear was a condition of him accepting a position on the task force. She’d broken her word; withheld information and gone lone wolf just like Gibbs had done so many times. Also just like Gibbs, the end result had made things worse in many ways, damaging the bond of respect and trust that allowed them to work so well together up until now. He thought Joanna would be different; that she’d keep her word. He was wrong and he needed to understand why before he made a potentially impulsive decision about his future.

Joanna fidgeted nervously under Nick’s disappointed gaze for long moments, and then began to speak. “I assure you, I’ve already been read the riot act about what happened over there, Nick.”

“Don’t deflect, Joanna; it’s not just about the explosion,” he said in a calm and determined voice. “This is about you and me. Are you really going to pretend not to know why I’m so angry with you?”

“Look, Nick,” Joanna began defensively. “I know I screwed up…”

“Screwed up?” Nick shot back. “For God’s sake, there were civilian casualties, Joanna!” He took a deep breath and continued. “We were lucky to get out of there, and none of it would have happened if you’d kept me in the loop,” he added in a furious voice. “We would have found another way; a safer plan to get Officer Wei in a place where we could convince him to talk.”

“Well, he’s sure singing like a canary now.”
“So not the point,” Nick retorted. “Don’t change the subject.”

Joanna paused, fumbling for a way to explain her terrible lapse in judgement to someone she respected, and considered a friend. She knew exactly why Tony was so upset with her. It all went back to that night in DC, when she’d showed up at his apartment determined to recruit him for the task force. He’d only begun to seriously consider it after she’d revealed The Calling’s involvement, and it was then that Tony had given her his conditions for accepting a place on the task force.

“If I’m even going to think about doing this, you need to understand some things up front. I won't tolerate information pertinent to my investigative work being withheld from me. I've been kept in the dark too many times and it has never come to any good.”

Tony’s eyes had darkened as he went on, and a hard, bitter edge had crept into his voice.

“I'm also not going to be part of any vigilante efforts. If that's what's going on here, count me out. I won't work outside the law. Is that perfectly clear?”

Tony had driven the point home and made his expectations very clear.

“Call it a deal-breaker if you like,” he’d said “And if it happens, I will walk away.”

She had wondered at the time what could have happened at NCIS to make Tony so adamant about setting those particular conditions, but knew the task force would lose him if she didn’t agree to them.

“I understand Tony, and accept your conditions,” she’d told him.

At the time, she’d never thought it would have become so difficult to do. Now it was time to be honest, and hope Tony would understand.

“I should have been up front with you.”

“Oh yeah. Why weren’t you?”
“It’s complicated,” Joanna replied hesitantly.

“Un-complicate it,” Nick insisted. He suspected that phone call she’d received right before all hell broke loose wasn’t the first one, as she previously implied. “Start with the phone call you got just before the explosion. That wasn’t the first time, was it?”

Joanna frowned and her head tilted and her eyes went distant as she recalled the taunting voice and their narrow escape. “No,” she admitted.

“Do you know how they got the number of a CIA encrypted phone?”

“Officer Lee,” Joanna replied simply, knowing he’d understand without rehashing details.

Nick grimaced at the memory of the photos he’d seen of the unfortunate CIA officer tortured to death.

He sighed heavily. “How many times, and when did it start?” he asked.

“It started the day I went off grid, when my informant in the police department was run down in the street,” she disclosed. “As for how many…” Joanna paused as she realized she didn’t know. “I lost count.”

Joanna jumped as Nick’s hand slapped the table forcefully. “What? Why would you keep that from the rest of us?”

“You don’t understand…” Joanna began.

“You’re right; I don’t,” Nick interrupted loudly as his frustration with her grew. “That wasn’t the only thing you kept from me. What the hell possessed you to abduct Officer Wei?”

“We needed answers about LaPointe and The Calling…and he had them!” Joanna shouted back.
“I told you from the beginning of all this, Joanna…none of your secret CIA bullshit,” Nick exploded. “Everything above board and legal. What would you have done to Wei if Lena and I hadn’t showed up there? You think I didn’t see where that little interrogation was heading?”

“You’re right Nick, I would have gone too far. I was emotionally compromised.”

He felt little satisfaction over her admission. It still didn’t explain why.

“You knew there was a chance you were being watched and you took Wei anyway. You let them manipulate you,” Nick hissed furiously.

“Yes.”

“Don’t you have any damn sense of self-preservation?” Nick demanded. “You made a target out of yourself.” He just didn’t get why she kept the phone calls from them. “What was it about the phone calls that threw you off balance so badly?”

“Ned,” Joanna mumbled, seemingly out of nowhere.

Nick frowned. “Did you say Ned?” he asked, recalling the affable agent he’d called friend and Joanna called son. Dorneget had been admittedly dorky, but quick-witted and intelligent; a young agent full of promise. That is until he’d lost his life going on four years ago in The Calling’s first high-profile terrorist attack abroad. An attack planned and carried out personally by Daniel Budd.

“What am I missing, Joanna? What’s Ned got to do with this?”

“The man who’s been contacting me claims to be the leader of The Calling. He knows about Ned and our connection somehow. You know I was very careful to hide the fact that we were mother and son, but they found out.”

“I don’t mean to sound insensitive, Joanna, but what difference does that make now?”

“It matters because he said Ned was targeted because of his connection to me.” Joanna’s voice rose again as her distress grew. “It matters because Daniel Budd may have set off the explosive devices
that killed Ned, but someone else was pulling his strings. Daniel Budd was the recruitment face of The Calling; its’ leader in name only. Someone else was in the shadows, directing his actions.

“How sure are you of all this,” Nick asked. This could potentially change the course of the investigation, or at least the part pertaining to verifying what they’d pieced together about The Calling’s new leadership circle.

Joanna looked grim as she pulled her old phone from her pocket and showed it to him. I mostly kept the phone off so didn’t always answer when he called. He left...” Joanna closed her eyes and paused briefly as her voice cracked and her composure slipped. “He left messages taunting me; a lot of them. They’re all still here,” she said, handing the phone over. “He didn’t just taunt me about Ned.”

Nick looked up from the phone sharply and raised an eyebrow.

Joanna nodded, affirming his suspicions. “He talks about you…and Gibbs’ shooting.” Joanna took a deep breath and looked at Nick meaningfully. “Do you see now what difference it makes?” she challenged. “I needed the connection to this man, whoever he is. To learn more about him and hope he might reveal too much! Maybe even draw him out and put an end to all this.”

“It wasn’t your call to make, Joanna! You don’t work alone!” Nick shot back.

“I made a mistake...but don’t you see? You have to ask what difference it makes? We didn’t get the one truly responsible for my son’s murder, or for orchestrating Gibbs’ shooting, and its most likely the same person who’s hunting us both now.”

Tony’s feelings were in conflict at Joanna’s revelation. He was empathetic, but he could see these people were using Ned to torment Joanna and get her off balance. They were waiting for her to make a mistake too, and she had. One that almost got them killed. He felt his anger at her grow again.

“All the more reason you should have told us instead of trying to protect me and handle it yourself. No personal crusades. It stops now, Joanna,” he told her in a hard tone that didn’t invite debate. “This is a joint federal task force conducting an investigation, not some CIA dark op. You need to step down if you can’t handle it because of Ned.”

Joanna slumped and nodded. “Agreed.”
“What else have you kept from me?”

Joanna gasped, realizing Tony didn’t trust her any more. “Nothing!”

“I’m supposed to believe that now?” He’d trusted her from the very beginning, perhaps not implicitly, but pretty damn close. After seeing so many years of absolute loyalty tossed aside; his almost blind faith and trust in Gibbs shattered, he wasn’t sure he could ever fully trust anyone else like that again. But he had come close with Joanna.

“I trusted you, Joanna. Once trust is broken, you might rebuild it, but the break will always show…it’s never quite the same again.”

Tony’s disillusionment weighed on her conscience. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” she said miserably.

He nodded in acceptance; he could almost understand her reasoning and how being taunted with Ned’s death impacted her judgment. He owed it to Joanna to try and be fair about this. “Hell, I’ve got some nerve laying into you about trust when there’s a group of good people out there that I’ve been lying to for nearly two years.”

Joanna shook her head emphatically. “That part was my call. It was necessary; it’s kept you safe and you know it, Nick. It’s not the same thing.”

“Maybe; maybe not,” he said skeptically. He wondered if his team would see it that way when they found out, and he sensed that moment was coming soon.

Joanna was beginning to get a bad feeling about the direction the conversation had taken, but before she could question it further, a sharp knock sounded at the door.

Lena stood outside the conference room door, shocked at the raised voices coming from within. While she couldn’t make out what exactly was being said, there was no doubt her team leader and Joanna were arguing heatedly.
She was transfixed for long moments; listening and trying to discern what they were saying on the other side of the door. While they’d worked as competently as ever, Lena wasn’t blind to the sub-current of strain that developed between Nick and Joanna while they were in Shanghai.

After the explosion next to their field office, Nick had been strangely quiet and intense, occasionally shooting Joanna angry glances. She could understand that part; Joanna’s actions had been foolish and they were fortunate the fallout wasn’t worse. On a positive note, thanks to Nick’s intervention, they had a key witness in Officer Wei.

Looking back, something had been off between them before the explosion. After interviewing Officer Wei, she was certain Nick and Joanna were keeping something from the rest of the team. She had doubts and questions, and wondered if the others felt the same way.

She shook her head ruefully at the realization she was eavesdropping on her team mates, and raised her hand, knocking sharply on the door. A moment later, a smiling Nick opened the door, showing no sign that a contentious conversation had just been going on.

“What’s up, Lena?”

“Big news from the State Department and the FBI. Matt and Gary need you and Joanna to meet them in the comm center in fifteen for a secure conference.”

“Thanks, Lena. We’re just wrapping up and will be right there.”

Lena frowned as Nick closed the door once again, and then she turned to head back to her desk to finish her report on their Shanghai trip.

Joanna met his eyes as Tony turned to face her again; remembering his promise to walk away from the task force if anyone pulled a stunt like she’d done recently. “Are you leaving?” she asked hesitantly, breaking the awkward silence between them.

“Not now, he assured her. “We’ve come too far and we’re too close to bringing them down again.”
His gut was telling him they were close to dismantling The Calling’s network for the second, and final time if he had his way.

“Not now?” she repeated. “What does that mean?”

Some fleeting emotion she couldn’t decipher moved across his features, only to be hidden again; replaced by the façade he so skillfully wielded when he didn’t want people to know what he was really thinking.

“It means the only assurance I’m willing to give at this point is that I’ll see this case through, Joanna. When it’s over, I’m going to take a hard look at where things stand and reassess my options.”

One by one, the screens went dark in the S3 comm center as the conference call connections were terminated. They’d just won their first major victories against The Calling’s global terror network.

Nick was fairly vibrating with excess energy and when the last screen went dark, he let out an elated whoop. “Yes!” Nick grinned as Matt and Gary exchanged high fives, while Joanna looked on in amusement.

“Let’s go tell Lena and Mel the news.”

Lena and Melanie looked up from their work as the rest of the team bounded down the stairs toward them.

“Good news, I take it?”

“On several fronts,” Nick confirmed. “Overseas, The Calling’s network is in disarray. Cells are being taken down and weapons caches are being recovered from the Middle East to Southeast Asia,” he began. “Intelligence gathered in those raids has given us new leads on The Calling’s
sleeper cells here in the US; *real ones*, not the decoys."

“Speaking of decoys,” Matt inserted, “As you recall, the FBI and Homeland Security took over surveillance of the decoy sites listed on the laptop planted in Shanghai for Joanna’s people to find. With the help of local law enforcement, we now have three of The Calling’s watchers in custody...including one they suspect is very highly placed in The Calling’s organization.”

“That might be the lead we needed to identify this LaPointe character mentioned in Chan’s insurance policy files. Officer Wei also confirms he seems to be the one in charge along with an Emile Rousseau,” Lena ventured. “All we know is that LaPointe is an assumed name.”

“You said on several fronts?” Melanie prompted. “Is there more?”

“Oh yeah; the big one,” Nick replied with a smug smile. “The State Department confirms they’ve successfully negotiated freezing of all remaining bank accounts we’ve proven as connected to The Calling.”

“Even the Chinese government?” Lena asked.

Nick’s eyes flicked to Joanna briefly and then back to Lena. “It seems this LaPointe, whoever he is, has made his first big miscalculation. The Chinese aren’t looking the other way now about their presence in Shanghai.” Nick’s voice was somber and quiet now. “They’re taking our evidence seriously, but it took that explosion, and the fire that followed destroying an entire block and killing three people. They are cracking down hard in an attempt to save face.”

Joanna grimaced at her indirect role in the incident, knowing that for Tony, because civilians died needlessly, the end didn’t justify the means. The positive turn for the investigation was pure dumb luck, and they both knew it.

She took over speaking when Nick paused, “The Chinese government has done a complete 180 on their original refusal to freeze the bank accounts linked to The Calling’s operations in their country. Including the ones linked to the Despins family in France,” she clarified.

It was time to reveal to the others what she’d kept from them; it might even be the first step to rebuilding Tony’s trust in her. “Now that we’ve choked off access to the majority of The Calling’s funding and limited their ability to generate new sources of revenue, we need to concentrate on identifying and locating their leaders. I’ve kept you all in the dark on something,” she said, pulling
Gary was distracted by Joanna’s earlier revelations. He and Matt were coordinating last minute details for their trips to interview two of the captured watchers. Nick and Joanna had already left S3; they were presumably home packing for their trip to Phoenix. Nick had wanted to do this interview personally, since the FBI felt this particular suspect was a more highly-placed member of The Calling.

“I’m not sure what to think about all that,” he mused quietly. Nick had listened expressionlessly, but the rest of them had been shocked as Joanna explained her connection to the original terror group, and why, as a CIA officer, she’d worked the case jointly with NCIS.

“Me either,” Matt agreed. They’d all suspected there was something Nick and Joanna weren’t telling them and their suspicions had been confirmed. Anger and disappointment at being kept in the dark conflicted with sympathy that Joanna’s son had been the agent killed by The Calling’s terror attack in Cairo.

“So Lena, you’re awfully quiet on this.” Matt prompted. “You’re CIA. Do you think Joanna told us everything?”

“I’d like to think so,” she replied. “I trust Nick and Nick trusts Joanna. They haven’t given us an overt reason not to, although I do get the feeling there’s still things we don’t know...especially now."

Matt regarded her with interest. ‘What do you mean by that?’

“Nick and Joanna were having a pretty strong disagreement before the conference calls this morning,” she said.

“Yeah, he was probably laying into her for not telling us about the phone calls,” Gary guessed.

“You’d think so,” Lena said distractedly, remembering the tension between Nick and Joanna in Shanghai, even before the explosion and that last, damning phone call. “But I’ve never heard them say a cross word to one another. Really, something was off with them before…and it made me
wonder what else Joanna might have held back.”

“No offense Lena, but the CIA isn’t exactly known for playing well with others. And she did wait nearly a year to tell us she worked the previous case, and still held back the connection to her son” Matt said. “Actually, there’s more than a few things not adding up.”

“Such as?” Gary prompted.

“Nick seems to have known about the case all along and seems particularly driven; like there’s a personal connection for him too. Not just that; they seem to have known each other for some time and work together like people who have been long-time partners. If they only brought Nick onto the task force last year, how could he have known about the first case and where did they cross paths before?” Matt speculated. “Whenever I talk about getting in touch with the NCIS agents who worked the first case to see if they can give us any more, Joanna and Nick both shoot the idea down.”

“Maybe they didn’t get the case files through official channels.” Gary surmised. “It could be awkward if we contacted NCIS looking for un-redacted case files.”

“I’m not familiar with the previous case outside of the files we’ve been given; I was working in South America at the time,” Lena added. “The reasoning for the redacted files makes sense on the NCIS side. The CIA reports…who knows? Unless we do an end run around Nick and Joanna, there’s no way to confirm what’s in the original case files.”

“Then there’s Chan’s insurance policy and Nick’s stealthy stopover in DC to pick it up. That didn’t strike any one as strange?” Matt asked. “Joanna said the former NCIS agent Chan mailed the package to was in hiding; how did Nick know where to get it?”

“What are we talking about, here?” Gary asked. “Aside from weird behavior that there might be a perfectly reasonable explanation for, why would we suspect Joanna and Nick of not telling us everything?”

“I think I might be able to answer that.”

They all looked up, startled as Mel entered the room. After exchanging uneasy glances with the others, Lena spoke first, getting right to the point.
“What did you find?”

“I’ve been cross referencing the latest intel and evidence against older data. I just found a discrepancy with some of the evidence Joanna has logged in,” Mel explained. “I pulled all the voice mails off her phone, hoping voice recognition software might help identify her crazy caller. I found she’d deleted several before turning the phone over to me. Also, the flash drive Joanna recovered in Shanghai last year has been altered and data removed.”

“And most of what we investigated was outdated info,” Gary added, troubled now. “In fact, Nick was pretty insistent on checking every bit of it out.”

“Maybe he was just being thorough?” Matt countered. “We did get the leads to France from that flash drive, and they proved pretty useful to the investigation.”

“Except everyone nearly got blown up there,” Gary reminded.

“Come on, what are we saying? That Joanna might be compromised? That we don’t trust Nick?” Lena asked.

“All I know is I’m not going to be able to get rid of this nagging sense of doubt until I know what they’re keeping from us,” Gary said, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“Unless you’re planning to ask ‘em, I doubt we’re going to find out.” Matt rubbed his chin thoughtfully. There were ways to find out about Nick’s connection to Joanna…and the original NCIS case files. His connections at Homeland and the FBI would come in useful if it became necessary to dig deeper. From the sound of things, it just had.
Gibbs’ Rule 39: "There is no such thing as coincidence."

Gibbs startled awake, slapping the snooze button on his alarm instinctively, only to realize it was his cell phone ringing. His gut gave a little twinge; he wasn’t a field agent anymore, so a call in the middle of the night could only be bad news. Still disoriented and half awake, he pressed the answer button and held the phone to his ear without sitting up, or even opening his eyes.

“Yeah, Gibbs,” he answered sleepily. He winced as a too-loud voice sounded in his ear.

“Chief, is that you?” He sat up; wide awake now as the distress in the older man’s voice registered.

“Yes, it’s me. I need your help, Gibbs,” he said in a voice bordering on panic. “I’m being followed.”

Gibbs looked at the digital display on his clock and sighed with frustration. Senior was probably overreacting to something innocuous. He rolled his eyes and flopped back down on the bed.

“You realize it’s 2:30 in the morning, right? Have you been drinking, or what?”
“No,” Senior insisted. “Well, just a couple glasses of wine at dinner,” he admitted.

“Uh huh,” he replied doubtfully. Senior had been spending too much time with The Sherlocks again and now, after a couple glasses of wine, his imagination was running away with him.

“I know what you’re thinking and I don’t blame you. I’m not drunk, and I’m not imagining things!”

Gibbs couldn’t help it; he snorted.

“I’m serious, Gibbs!”

Gibbs sat up and swung his legs out of bed, resigning himself to losing sleep for what remained of the night. “Are you sure about this?”

“This isn’t the first time; it’s been happening for a while now,” Senior insisted. “Please, Gibbs. I don’t know what to do about this.”

Whatever was happening, Senior really did sound upset and it was beginning to set his own nerves on edge.

“All right,” he soothed. Even if it turned out to be nothing as he suspected, he supposed it would do no harm to at least meet with Senior and try to put his mind at ease. “Where are you now?”

Senior blew out a relieved breath, satisfied Gibbs was willing to listen. “I’m back at my apartment.”

“I’m on my way,” Gibbs said. “Tell the building doorman to buzz me in and don’t open your door for anyone but me.”
Gibbs listened, hands wrapped around a cup of coffee, as Senior relayed all the recent instances where he felt like he was being followed or watched. He was beginning to get a niggling suspicion there might be something to this after all.

“So why didn’t you say something sooner, Chief?” he asked.

“Honestly? The reaction you had on the phone. I thought I was imagining things, so why wouldn’t you? And that’s exactly what you thought at first too, so I was right,” he explained, mild accusation in his tone.

“What changed tonight?” Gibbs asked.

“My date noticed,” Senior frowned. “I shrugged it off as a coincidence and drove her home, but I’m not sure she believed it. She seemed uncomfortable afterward.”

That was concerning, Gibbs thought, as an idea occurred to him. “I’m going to need your car keys, Chief.”

“Where are we going?” Senior asked as he retrieved the key ring from a dish on a table by the door.

“You’re staying right here. I’m going fishing,” he said mysteriously, holding his hand out for the keys. “I’ll be back soon.”

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Gibbs pulled out of the garage in Senior’s car, making the turn to pass in front of his friend’s building. Sure enough, the darkened sedan Senior described was there, parked on the street opposite the building, half a block from the main entrance.

He couldn’t make out anything through the tinted windows as he passed, proceeding toward the traffic light on the next block. The car remained parked as he stopped at the light. The light changed and before he got to the next block, he watched in the rear view mirror as the car’s lights came on. It pulled a U-turn in the street and moved in the same direction he was traveling.
It could still be a coincidence. He quickly ran through his options. He knew this area well; it was near Tony’s old neighborhood. Yes, he thought. There was a spot nearby that would do quite well for what he had in mind.

The car was still behind him but not too close. If they were following him; they were trying not to stand out as obvious in the light traffic this time of night. He turned right down a lightly traveled side street; the alley he was looking for just ahead. He quickly backed into the alley, turning his lights off but keeping the engine running.

He waited, and just as he thought this might be a wild goose chase after all, the sedan passed by the alley entrance.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

He waited a few seconds then turned back out onto the street behind the sedan. The car ahead sped up a bit, apparently realizing they’d lost sight of their quarry. He did the same; gaining, and getting close enough to see the plate on the car. He committed the number to memory, then backed off a bit, losing sight of the sedan as he turned to circle back to Senior’s building.

~The next day~

Ellis looked up from his desk as Gibbs entered the bullpen.

“Hey Gibbs,” he greeted. “I thought you were working at the range today.”

“We wrapped up the weapons qualifications class early,” Gibbs answered. “I’ve got to get all the scores recorded and do some reports. I was hoping to get McGee’s help with something first, if you’re alright with it. He around?” Gibbs asked, glancing around at the three empty desks.

“He’s down in Cyber,” Ellis answered. “We don’t have an active case right now and Vance asked for his help investigating and hardening the network against hacking attempts. Bishop and the probie are out following a cold case lead.”
“Ah,” Gibbs nodded in disappointment.

“What did you want McGee’s help with?”

“Well, first you should know it’s not exactly work-related, but I was hoping he could run a plate for me.” Gibbs answered.

Ellis frowned. “So, what’s this about?”

“A friend of mine seems to have picked up a stalker. He hasn’t reported it because they haven’t confronted or harassed him, or broken any laws for that matter as far as I can tell, but he’s definitely being followed. I want to know who it is. That might answer the why,” Gibbs explained.

Ellis turned to his computer and browsed to the motor vehicles databases. “I’ll run it for you, Gibbs. Don’t make me regret it by doing something questionable, okay?”

Gibbs laughed and held up his hands as he answered.

“No violence or intimidation. I just want to see if I need to convince him to go to the police about it or not.” He handed over the slip of paper he’d written the license plate number on.

Gibbs waited, sipping on his coffee distractedly as Ellis deftly typed, and screen after screen whizzed across the monitor display.

After a few moments, Ellis’ hands left the keyboard and he became very still as he looked up warily at Gibbs.

“Gibbs, are you sure about this plate number?” he asked, his expression turning serious.

“Yeah; I got it myself after circling behind the car that had been doing the following. Why?”

Ellis shook his head. He’d checked and double checked the number, and it came back the same both times.
“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Ellis ventured uneasily, “but I suspect your friend has bigger problems than a garden variety stalker.”

“Why…what did you find?”

“Gibbs, this plate number belongs to a vehicle registered to the FBI.”


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~Gibbs’ basement, later that evening~

“Come on, Tobias,” Gibbs sipped his beer and prodded his old friend. “You know how I feel about coincidences. Are you trying to tell me you don’t know anything about this?”

Fornell took a healthy swallow of his own beer and answered in typical dry, snarky fashion. “In spite of what you may believe, I have better things to do than keep tabs on DiNozzo’s old man.”

“Well someone in the FBI seems to have more than a passing interest. You gonna help me out and look into why he’s being tailed?” Gibbs asked.

“You sure you want to get involved, Jethro?” Fornell asked. “Who knows what that old con man has got himself in the middle of.”

Gibbs shook his head at what Fornell was implying. “I’d be surprised if it’s anything like that, Tobias.”

“If you say so,” Fornell said doubtfully. “What’s DiNozzo Junior have to say about all this?”

“You know damn well he’s not in DC any more, Tobias, and probably wouldn’t speak to me if he
“Yeah, and I know why too,” Fornell shot back, looking at Gibbs pointedly. He was aware that many months of being subjected to Gibbs’ increasingly erratic and abusive behavior played a part in DiNozzo’s sudden resignation the year before last; Gibbs had admitted as much to him. After Gibbs’ suspension, he’d been subjected to it himself, although to a far lesser extent. “Presumably the old man’s talked to him though, right?”

Gibbs ignored the jab. “Look; he hasn’t told Tony about this and he’s honestly shook up. If Senior is in some kind of trouble, I want to help him…and not just for his sake. Tony’s not around to look after his dad. I can do this for him.”

Fornell considered his old friend for a long moment. Gibbs had been working hard on managing his PTSD and repairing relationships with the friends and coworkers impacted by his behavior before he sought help. It seemed he hoped to add his former SFA to that group at some point. “You trying to make amends, Jethro?” he asked.

“Something like that,” Gibbs admitted.

“All right,” Fornell agreed. He could appreciate Gibbs wanting to do something for Tony by helping his father, and for his part, he’d always liked and respected DiNozzo in spite of surface appearances. It was important to Gibbs to do this for Tony, and he wanted to help. “I’ll stop by tomorrow and let you know what I find.”

Fornell pulled his car into Gibbs driveway, feeling equal parts angry and disappointed. He’d known Gibbs a long damn time and past experience proved out that the man could be a manipulative bastard when he wanted to be. He’d thought Gibbs had changed, and hoped that falling back on old habits wasn’t what was going on here.

Fornell had no idea what he was going to turn up while looking into this situation for Gibbs, but it sure as hell wasn’t what he ended up finding. Nor did he expect the repercussions for even looking into it. They had inadvertently stumbled onto something big. Big enough that the FBI Director himself had severely reprimanded him earlier for trying to access sealed FBI files. He needed to know if his friend was aware this might happen and convinced him to help anyway, or if he’d been kept in the dark.
Fornell walked in through the unlocked front door and paused. The redecorated living room still caught him by surprise when he visited. It was full of comfortable new furniture; even a modestly sized flat screen television. The room was attractive, if simple and understated, like the man himself. It was a testament to just how much Gibbs had changed. Fornell tamped down his anger as he headed for the basement stairs, deciding to give Gibbs the benefit of the doubt.

“Gibbs?” he called out as he opened the basement door.

“Yeah, come on down Tobias,” Gibbs greeted from his seat at the workbench where he was looking over plans for a new woodworking project. “You want a beer?” he asked as Fornell reached the bottom of the stairs.

“I have a feeling I’m gonna need something a little stronger than beer. Actually, we both might,” he said glumly, settling heavily on the stool opposite Gibbs.

Gibbs looked up sharply at that. “You find something?” he asked.

“Yeah, but damned if I know what,” Fornell mumbled while Gibbs’ expression shifted to confusion. “Anything you forget to tell me about this little favor you asked me to do?” he asked, cutting right to the chase.

Gibbs tilted his head questioningly. “What are you talking about? I asked you to look into why the FBI is following Senior. What else was I supposed to have known about it?” he asked patiently.

Fornell gave him a piercing look. “So you had no idea DiNozzo has a sealed FBI file?”

“You’re kidding. What could Senior possibly have done to get that kind of attention from the FBI?”

Fornell took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Gibbs really didn’t know.

“No...not Senior. Tony.”

“Don’t get pushy with me,” Fornell snapped. "I shouldn’t even be telling you this much. I’m going to tell you what I know anyway, and then we’re both going to drop it.”

“Is that so?” Gibbs asked, crossing his arms and glaring stubbornly.

“Yes, that’s so,” Fornell asserted. “Listen Jethro, I don’t know what your boy has got himself into, but it is some high-order shit.”

“He’s not my boy, Tobias,” Gibbs said with an edge of defensiveness.

“Force of habit,” Fornell shrugged. "You still care about him in any case or we wouldn’t be here, right?’”

Gibbs’ eyes narrowed, he wasn’t going there right now. He waited for Fornell to continue.

“Alright.” Fornell held up a hand in surrender. “Anyway, it took some fairly deep digging around to find that record as it was. I automatically assumed it was a file on DiNozzo Senior. When I couldn’t access the file I looked closer and that’s when I noticed it was actually a sealed file on Tony.”

“What about Senior?” Gibbs asked.

“This is where it starts getting odd. There’s nothing on Senior at all. Whoever ordered surveillance on him, it is completely below board. There’s no record of the assignment; official or unofficial.”

“Why would the file on Tony be sealed? Maybe the answer is in there.”

“Could be any one of a number of reasons,” Fornell began. “But here’s where odd moves straight to downright disturbing. That file is red-flagged, Gibbs. If anyone so much as looks cross-eyed at it, the person that sealed the file gets notified and it takes that person along with one other to unseal it.”
“So, who sealed it and when?” Gibbs prompted. “That sounds really…irregular.”

“That’s one word for it,” Fornell said sarcastically. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. That file was sealed by Director of the FBI himself and he’s one of only two people with the clearance to access it. It can only be unsealed by him…and the Director of the CIA.”

“CIA,” Gibbs breathed. CIA involvement couldn’t mean anything good.

“As for the when; it was sealed within a week or two of DiNozzo resigning from NCIS.”

“That long…” Gibbs mumbled softly as his mind spun with the possibilities of what might be going on. “Tobias, is there any chance Tony is actually working for the FBI or CIA?”

“Weirdly enough, before I got called on the carpet, I checked that because otherwise, a sealed file is generally not a good sign that things are on the up and up.”

“And?” Gibbs prodded.

“He’s not on the list of active FBI agents or consultants,” Fornell replied somberly. “The CIA…who knows. They’re an intelligence agency; you can’t exactly search their personnel assets.”

Gibbs scrubbed a hand over his face and his shoulders slumped. Coincidences were lining up and they were all pointing to Tony being involved in something serious and quite possibly dangerous. That would at least partially explain the burn phones and why he almost never contacted any of his friends in DC and at NCIS, with the apparent exception of Ducky. It would also explain why he kept his father at arms’ length and in the dark about his work and personal life.

Gibbs shook off his worry for the moment and directed his concern to Fornell. “You said something about being called on the carpet?”

“Yeah, this is where we get to the part of the program where we both forget everything I just told you. I spent the better part of the afternoon sitting in front of the director while he tore me a new one for trying to access a restricted sealed file.”
Fornell grimaced at the memory. “I’ve not only been ordered to drop it, I’ve been ordered to forget I ever saw it and threatened with termination if word one is spoken of it again.”

Gibbs nodded grimly. “I get the picture, Tobias. Thanks for what you did. If I’d had any idea it might get you in trouble, I wouldn’t have asked for your help. Consider it dropped.”

Later, long after Fornell had gone, he still found himself dwelling on all he’d been told. There were more questions than answers and he had no idea what he was going to tell Senior about his FBI shadow.

His thoughts inevitably turned to Tony. Not for the first time recently, he wondered what the hell DiNozzo had got himself mixed up in. Especially now that he knew whatever it was, it justified a sealed FBI file and a tail on Senior. He refused to believe Tony was involved in anything illegal. No one was ever going to convince him of that, no matter what the circumstantial evidence pointed to. There just had to be a logical explanation for what was going on.

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McGee was working well into the evening, helping the cyber team investigate a recent uptick in attempts to breach NCIS databases. Federal networks were constantly targeted and IT personnel were always fighting off attempts to hack and gain access to sensitive data and systems and NCIS was no exception.

A recent uptick in activity and several successful intrusions prompted Vance to temporarily detail him part time to NCIS’ Cyber team. He was back tracing the hackers, while the rest of the team had been working on what specific information had been accessed.

“This is weird,” one of the technicians muttered out loud.

McGee look up from his scans. “You have something, Chris?”

“Yeah, there’s something unusual going on here. I think you should see this,” Chris answered.

“Okay,” McGee frowned as he walked over to Chris’ desk.
“I’ve been working on this group of strangely targeted inquiries and I isolated the search strings they were using.”

“What’s strange about them?” McGee asked.

“As you know, it’s pretty common for hackers to try to penetrate personnel databases. Typically, the goal is to steal personally identifiable information in bulk to sell on the dark web to identity thieves.”

“Right…” McGee agreed. “So that’s not what’s going on here?”

“No,” Chris answered. “There’s a very specific search pattern, and it’s repeated on a successful intrusion into our email servers. These hackers weren’t looking for intel or to steal personnel records. They didn’t download anything.”

“What were they looking for?” McGee asked.

“Not what,” Chris said soberly. “Who. Once they got inside our network, they searched our email server for a name and they accessed exactly one personnel record in human resources.”

McGee looked over his shoulder as Chris pointed at the screen. Now he understood why the other man wanted him to see what he’d found.

He felt a chill as he read the name. “Send me copies of everything you have on this particular set of intrusions.”

The technician nodded an acknowledgement and went back to work. A sense of foreboding settled over McGee as he went back to his own desk. Whoever these people were, they wanted none of the huge stores of potentially valuable information they’d gained access to before being detected.

No…these hackers seemed focused solely on information about a single, former NCIS agent. One Anthony D. DiNozzo.

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The dominos begin to fall for The Calling and LaPointe decides to change the game.

AN: This series diverged from canon prior to the senseless sacrifice of the character we know as Tom Morrow (aka: character death serving no purpose other than shock value). In short, he’s not dead in this ‘verse and makes an appearance in this story.

~Shanghai~

Rousseau entered the dimly lit room with ominously stained floors and walls, remembering that it was the same room LaPointe used to torture and murder the CIA officer who’d been Chan’s contact. Judging by the terrified demeanor of the people tied to chairs, they also knew the significance of this room. In spite of the example made of Officer Lee, through his tendency to spy on their recruits, LaPointe discovered some had poised themselves to help the Chinese government in exchange for leniency.

Rousseau watched impatiently as LaPointe questioned the frightened prisoners, his questions emphasized with random applications of a cattle prod. He guessed that LaPointe, having failed in the attempt to eliminate Teague and make an example out of Officer Wei, was just venting his anger. They didn’t have time for such indulgences, but he’d lost that battle with their determined leader. Against his advice, LaPointe recalled all their principal informants. Some had come willingly and those who hadn’t were ‘collected’, an amused LaPointe had informed him before sending him away to arrange to have their private charter plane readied for departure.

“LaPointe,” he cut in boldly. “Time is short. Our transportation is ready.”

LaPointe glared at the interruption, but Rousseau was right. He’d been intent on rooting out anyone else who might think to turn on them after learning that the Chinese government froze their Shanghai bank accounts. The Americans had Wei in custody, so it was a safe guess that they also knew about most of the locations the group used for their activities in Shanghai.
At his leader’s hesitation, Rousseau urged again, “There’s no time for this. You know we must relocate until the situation calms. Preferably before government forces track us here,” he finished pointedly.

LaPointe nodded curtly, still quietly furious about being forced to abandon their operations and adopted home again. For the second time in two years, the network that he, Rousseau, and others worked so hard to rebuild was in disarray.

He was barely able to process how things had gone so drastically wrong in such a short time; how Teague and her people managed to gain the advantage. Every communication update from their far-flung network brought worse news than the one before. The series of raids initiated by Teague’s people and the American State Department had resulted in most of their operations shut down; their members either scattered or apprehended.

He desperately wanted to vent his frustration, but Rousseau was right. Now was not the time and this was not the place. These people were no more than pawns who’d outlived their usefulness. No; a confrontation with his true targets was what he wanted now. That would come soon enough.

For now, they had to slip away before one of the impending raids by Chinese government forces caught up with them. As for their prisoners, the situation would resolve itself soon enough, he thought with a satisfied smile.

“Fine, Emile. I am ready.” LaPointe gathered their new passports and other falsified documents that would allow a chosen few to travel with them.

Rousseau frowned in confusion and followed as LaPointe left the room; pausing to lock the door behind them and fumble with something in his pocket. “You are choosing to allow them to live; to just leave them all here for the police or government to rescue?” He asked as they made their way out of the building.

“No exactly,” LaPointe said with a somewhat demented smile. “As you so helpfully pointed out; there’s no time to deal with them personally. I’ve arranged a little surprise for any police or government forces who might come to rescue our friends.”

“What have you done?” Rousseau asked uneasily. LaPointe just smiled as they climbed into the car and headed to the airport.
Earlier, when LaPointe had his second in command preoccupied with arranging for their private charter flight out of Shanghai, he’d prepared his little surprise. He’d run concealed wires across the building and planted C-4 at doors and load bearing beams; finally tying all the wires to a single pressure plate in the doorway of the room holding the prisoners. He’d surreptitiously armed it as he’d locked the door behind them. Once the police and government’s tactical teams reached the interior of the building and attempted to access the room where the prisoners were, the C-4 would be detonated.

“LaPointe,” Rousseau prompted again. “What did you mean by that?”

The other man leaned over and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. “When the police and government forces come, they will be walking into a trap. The building is wired to explode.”

“Are you mad?” Rousseau hissed. Such an attack on government and law enforcement in communist China was unwise and would only serve to have more resources put toward pursuing them.

“Those men can identify us and can name others in our network. We must protect what is left of our presence here and abroad,” LaPointe argued, waving away his companion’s concern. He only wished they could stay and watch the show.

Rousseau turned a troubled gaze to his leader, who was now focused on scrolling through the encrypted messages on his phone. LaPointe had become increasingly secretive; not discussing or sharing details of the changes in plans brought about by Teague’s determined pursuit.

“Are we going back to France now?” he asked.

LaPointe scowled briefly, then replied. “Our old haunts in France would not welcome us now, not with our accounts there frozen and the Despins family connection under scrutiny.”

“Where are we going, then?” There were few options left to them and Rousseau suspected the other man was planning to move them from the frying pan and into the fire.

LaPointe carefully considered his answer, not yet wanting to share what he’d arranged in the encrypted messages exchanged with Hasan Salah via his lawyer. Salah, like Rousseau, was an old friend and headed their intelligence gathering efforts in the US.
Salah was one of three of his people recently captured, and was currently being held in Phoenix, presumably awaiting questioning by federal authorities. It was most likely Teague’s people who’d turned the tables on their surveillance, and with the help of Salah’s lawyer, they would ensure his friend’s capture worked to their advantage. The other two men were expendable and he’d already set a plan in motion to ensure they wouldn’t live long enough to be questioned any further.

Rousseau’s suspicions were confirmed with the other man’s answer.

“Our choices are limited to those cells and operations established after we discovered Chan had been feeding information to the CIA. With most of our assets frozen or inaccessible, now it’s about having the right resources in the right places.”

Rousseau nodded reluctantly, recognizing a lost cause when he saw one. “So, where is the right place?”

“We have a ship to meet in Los Angeles. One of our arms shipments is about to arrive at the port there. It’s time to begin activating our sleeper cells in the US.”

Hours later, as LaPointe and Rousseau’s flight was nearing its’ destination, back at their abandoned compound in Shanghai, a series of massive explosions shattered the quiet night.

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Matt and Gary were grim as they unpacked the evidence collected on their unexpectedly brief trip. The counter surveillance of the ‘watchers’ that Nick implemented had yielded what first seemed like several promising arrests. Matt and Gary’s assignment to question two of The Calling’s low ranking ‘watchers’ was mostly a bust.

“At least it’s not a total loss,” Gary muttered as he filled out the evidence log. “We have their phones and computers.”

Matt nodded in agreement. Once again, The Calling seemed to be a step ahead of them. They’d arrived only to find that both men were found dead just before steps could be taken to get them transferred to federal custody.

“Yes, and we know both men were in phone contact with the one Nick and Joanna will be
questioning in Phoenix,” Matt added. They need to know what’s happened before they question their guy. You want to call and update them?” Matt asked. “I’ll finish up the evidence logs.”

“Sure,” Gary agreed. “Speaking of Nick and Joanna; when they get back, are we going to talk to them about the issues with the evidence, and what Joanna seems to have decided the rest of us don’t need to know?

“Yes,” Matt confirmed. “We’ll talk to them as a team, but first I am going to do a little checking of my own.” After this latest setback in their investigation, he had a phone call of his own to make and there was no time like the present.

“On what?” Gary asked.

“I know someone who might be able to unofficially verify what’s in the redacted parts of the NCIS case files Nick gave us.”

“Yeah,” Gary nodded. “It’s weird how Joanna is so dead set against us contacting anyone at NCIS who worked that case. Nick too, for that matter. So you’re thinking if what we were told pans out, it’s a point in their favor?”

Matt nodded. “I think we owe them the benefit of the doubt, but I do want to know what it is we aren’t being told.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” Gary said. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

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~Homeland Security HQ~

Tom Morrow picked up the secure phone and wondered what prompted this call out of the blue.

“Matt; it’s always a pleasure to talk to you again,” he greeted his former agent. “Are you looking to transfer back to Homeland Security full time? We don’t need a secure line for that, so I admit to some curiosity about the reason for your call.”
“No,” Matt replied. “That’s just what I told your secretary. I’m glad the door’s still open but we’re doing good work here, you know?”

“Yes, I’ve heard about your team, and the work your task force is doing. So, the reason for your call is…?”

“I’d like to ask for your help, Tom. I’m trying to confirm information in restricted NCIS case files from about two years ago,” Matt said. “I need to keep the request on the down low for now. Do you still have a contact there you can trust? Someone with access?”

“If it’s related to a case, why don’t you just call them directly?” Morrow asked.

“It’s a little more complicated than that. I think there’s a possibility the case files we were given weren’t obtained through official channels. Our team leads provided a redacted copy of the files relevant to our current case but since then, we’ve been discouraged from contacting NCIS directly about them. The files have helped some, but the task force has all too often been two steps behind the terrorist group and we’ve had some close calls,” he explained.

“We’re definitely not being told everything and I have reason to suspect one member of our team is withholding information crucial to our investigation. Maybe even both our leads,” Matt admitted reluctantly. “I think the answer might be in those files, or at least some insight into why we haven’t been given the complete non-redacted copies.”

Morrow narrowed his eyes at his former agent’s assertion. “Are you certain? Those are serious accusations, Matt. I know most of your team members; they’ve never given me cause to doubt their integrity. Well, all but your FBI counterpart,” Morrow mused. “His name doesn’t even ring a bell.”

“You mean Nick?”

“Yes,” Morrow affirmed. “He’s the only one on your task force that I’ve never met. I see Director Vance regularly, so it shouldn’t be a problem to contact him. What evidence do you have to support your suspicions?” Morrow asked. “It’s not typically NCIS practice to redact files but still, if I’m going to meet with Director Vance, then I’ll need a little more than that and some vague suspicions.”

“Well, we have a bit of concrete evidence, just not sure what it means. We weren’t making much
headway in the case until recently and there’s also the appearance our targets are being fed information.

“Go on,” Morrow prompted.

“There’s some suspect behavior with Nick and especially with Joanna. Nick is a great guy and a terrific agent, but he’s secretive; more so lately. He’s evasive about his background. I like him a hell of a lot, and I admit his reluctance to let us get to know him better might be coincidence.”

“Circumstantial,” Morrow chided. “What else do you have?”

“Joanna’s behavior is more problematic. Her team in Shanghai recovered an encrypted flash drive.”

Matt heard a sharp inhale from Morrow at that, and Matt wondered what prompted it before he continued.

“Our computer forensic experts were provided copies of the files so they could work on cracking the encryption,” Matt went on. “I did a little digging and found the original drive was never entered into evidence. When I questioned our team leads, I was told the original was turned over to the CIA to protect both their operations in Shanghai and the identity of one of the NCIS agents involved in the takedown of a terrorist organization. Our copies of that, and other evidence were tampered with and information deleted.”

Morrow’s frown deepened at that. “Did you say Shanghai?”

“Yes, why?”

“And the case files in question?” Morrow asked.

“Anything involving a terrorist group known as The Calling; especially anything Joanna Teague may have worked on with NCIS.”

Morrow’s expression turned grave as he recalled hearing about the case that hit colleagues at his
former agency so hard. “I know the team involved in that investigation. They were once the premiere investigative unit at NCIS. That case involving The Calling took a heavy toll. One agent was killed, the lead agent was severely injured and has been forced to retire from field duty, and his second in command resigned suddenly the year before last at least in part due to the fallout from that case.”

“What you’ve said matches the basics of what we were told.”

“Are you saying The Calling is back?” Morrow asked worriedly.

“Oh yes,” Matt drawled. “In a big way. Activities of their terror network aside, we have proof they are actively targeting Joanna Teague for assassination, along with the unidentified NCIS agent that killed the group’s former leader.”

That could only be DiNozzo, Morrow thought; though he’d be keeping the name to himself until he had a better idea what was going on here. “And how do you expect the original non-redacted case files help you?” Morrow asked.

“I’d like to confirm that what Nick and Joanna have told us about the previous case is accurate and complete. I’d also like to be able to verify the former agent being targeted is aware of the threat to his life,” Matt elaborated. “I’ve got a scanned copy of the redacted file I was given for comparison,” he said, “I’m forwarding it to you via encrypted email. If you can tell me all that’s missing is the agent’s name, then I’ll feel a lot better that there’s a reasonable explanation about the rest of it. If not, then it’ll be a problem for the task force to handle internally.”

“Alright,” Morrow agreed. “I’ll speak to Director Vance and see if he is willing to discuss the case with me.

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~Phoenix, AZ~

Hasan Salah waited patiently in his isolated cell, anticipating another visit from his lawyer carrying instructions from LaPointe. The man sent to represent him was in communication with his old friend and had no reservations about helping them as long as he was well paid. He’d already helped arrange the deaths of the other two men arrested while surveilling their decoy sites.
The police had already connected the three of them and the lawyer had quite convincingly made the case to the Phoenix police that Salah’s life was in danger as well. He’d been moved to isolation and knew he’d be given over to federal custody soon as LaPointe intended. Ironic…the dishonor of his capture would now be used to their advantage. He wondered what LaPointe knew, that he did not.

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Nick and Joanna were escorted through the halls of the Phoenix FBI building to an observation room. They chatted quietly while they waited for the prisoner to be brought into the room on the other side of the two-way glass.

“This guy is someone important, Joanna,” Nick began, as he flipped through the file that the FBI started on their mystery man. They’d just watched a video of his initial questioning after being arrested. Even after hours of interrogation, he was cool and entirely unconcerned. He almost seemed amused as he denied owning the phones and computers found nearby when he was arrested, and claimed never to have heard of The Calling.

“Agreed,” Joanna replied. “He almost seemed to be enjoying stringing them along too, until he finally lawyered up.”

“Well, let’s see how amused he is when he’s looking at a one-way trip to Gitmo,” Nick said wryly. “Abu Nassir is not his name. The forged passport and identification documents are a good place to start the questioning. Leave The Calling out of it for now.”

Joanna looked over Nick’s shoulder at the file and enclosed photos. “Does he look familiar to you?”

“Yes, he does,” Nick nodded. “I’ve emailed some pics back to Lena. The original arrest report says he has no prints on file, so I want them running facial recognition against photos in the evidence we got from Chan.”

They both looked up as the door to the adjoining room opened and an aged figure in an orange jumpsuit secured with wrist and ankle shackles was assisted into the chair.

“You’re up, Joanna,” Nick said as he stood and moved next to the glass window. “Let’s see what he has to say for himself.”
Salah looked down at the table to hide his face from those likely watching on the other side the mirrored window. He closed his eyes and waited patiently for whatever would come next. Part of LaPointe’s instruction was to ‘break down’ and allow himself to be convinced that cooperation with the federal agents, at least to a point, was in his best interest. The directive confused and agitated him.

He’d mentally prepared himself to die for their cause, if that were LaPointe’s will. The other two men assigned to watch their decoy sites had already been killed. That was not to be his role; at least not yet. He didn’t understand it, but he trusted his old friend had a plan.

Salah look up in feigned apprehension as someone new entered the room; a slender, middle-aged woman with dark hair and blue eyes. In that instant, he suddenly had a very good idea what LaPointe was up to, and looked down again, suppressing the urge to smile broadly. This development required a small change in plan.

Salah looked up again, and met the woman’s eyes steadily as she sat down across from him.

“How interesting you’ve turned up here and now. Someone has been looking for you.”

“Oh really?” Joanna countered, intrigued by the attitude shift from his earlier denials.

“Yes, indeed. For quite some time now…Officer Teague.”

In the observation room, Nick stiffened at the confirmation that this man recognized Joanna. He had to be involved in The Calling’s efforts to identify and locate members of the task force team. Perhaps even he and Joanna specifically.

Joanna’s eyes narrowed. “Good, Mr. Nassir,” she began icily. “We can dispense with the pleasantries now that you’ve been so kind as to confirm you are associated with The Calling.” She glared. “Who are you really and what exactly is your mission here?”

The old man made an infuriating ‘tisking’ noise and shook his head, unfazed by her open hostility.
“That is not how these matters work, Officer Teague. You want something; I want something.”

“What I want is for you to tell me everything you know about LaPointe, including where he’s gone to ground.”

“And why should I help you?”

“A fair question,” Joanna answered, looking thoughtful. Then she leaned forward and spoke again, her voice low and threatening.

“Because we’ve connected you to the other two prisoners who died under suspicious circumstances, and we’ve connected them to The Calling. Because it’s only a matter of time before we learn your real name. We’ll break the encryption on your phone and computer and I’m certain that will incriminate you further. Because we already have enough to ship you to Guantanamo and there’s nothing your high dollar lawyer can do to prevent it. If you’re of no use to me, that is exactly where you’ll go...sooner rather than later.” She leaned closer still and asked menacingly, “Is all that reason enough?”

After the thinly veiled threat, Nick watched and listened as Joanna and Abu Nassir danced around each other for going on two hours. He was a sly old coot, that was for sure. He’d tease some deeper knowledge and connection, then back away, offering insights and information they already had. It was about time to put this guy on ice for a while, but before the session ended, he had a hunch he wanted to play out.

He walked out of the observation room and paused outside the interrogation room, hand on the doorknob. If what he suspected was right, there would be no going back from what he was about to do, and Joanna was not going to be happy about it. He took a deep breath, opened the door and leaned inside. He watched the occupants carefully while silently crooking a finger at Joanna, as if calling her outside.

Her eyes blazed at him for just a moment, then returned to cool indifference. She rose calmly and joined him in the hallway. As soon as the door was shut, she rounded on him angrily.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she whispered furiously.

“He’s toying with us, Joanna. He’s not telling us much we don’t already know. He’s in communication with his handler somehow; probably via the lawyer.”
“He recognized you!”

“I know,” Nick grinned widely. “Did you see his face? It was like he just found the holy grail for a second there, before he got it under control. He definitely recognized me.”

“Why? Why did you do that?”

“He knew you immediately. They were watching those sites for a reason, and it wasn’t just to lead us on a wild goose chase. I had a hunch and we had the chance to find out if they’ve identified me,” Nick said unapologetically. “Seems pretty clear they have, but they don’t know how to find me, at least not yet. Now we can plan accordingly; maybe even do more luring of our own.” Nick sobered. “It’s time to tell the others about me now, Joanna. It’s past time.”

Joanna sighed heavily, then nodded. This could put Tony in the crosshairs right along with her, but he was right. The need for the ruse was coming to an end and it was past time for the team to know who he really was.

“When we get back,” she agreed reluctantly. “What about him?” she asked, pointing back over her shoulder.

“Oh, we’re not done with our friend in there. I want him moved to the FBI holding facility in Seattle, but we’re not telling him that until he’s actually there.” Nick scowled briefly. “In the meantime, I want someone watching that damn lawyer.

“Nick; Joanna,” a voice called from the end of the hall. They turned to see the agent who’d escorted them to the observation room walking toward them hurriedly.

“Are you done here?” the agent asked, inclining his head toward the interrogation room.

“Yes; he can go back to holding while we do the paperwork for a custody transfer,” Joanna informed him. “Is there something else?” she asked as the young agent just stood there and fidgeted.

He looked over at Nick, a little awed. “You’ve got a secure line phone call; it’s the FBI director
himself,” the wide-eyed agent said. “You in some kind of trouble?” he asked half-jokingly.

“Not that I’m aware,” he drawled, frowning as past memories of troubles with the FBI surfaced briefly, before he shoved them back down into their box in his mind. Smiling to put the earnest young agent at ease, he waved toward the end of the hall. “Lead the way.”

Joanna was intensely curious why the FBI director would go through the trouble to locate Nick while in the field, and insist on talking to him over a secure line. She wasn’t just curious; she was unsettled. Something must have happened, but what?

Nick was all business after the phone call, helping her finish the paperwork for the evidence and prisoner transfers. She made no mention of it until they were alone in the rental car, heading back to the Phoenix airport.

“So…are you going to share what that was all about?” she asked.

Nick gave a strange little chuckle as he drove. “You’re going to love this,” he answered sarcastically.

“What’s happened?”

Nick pounded the wheel in frustration. “The protective detail for my father has been made...and get this. By Gibbs.”

Joanna inhaled sharply. “Damn.”

“That’s not all,” Nick said, as Joanna looked at him expectantly. “Someone attempted to access my sealed FBI personnel file.”

“What one; the real one or the alias?”
“The real one,” Nick replied. “They didn’t get in.”

Joanna huffed a relieved breath.

“I have an idea who tried to get into my file,” Nick continued. “The director said he handled it, but I’m not going to assume there’s no cause for concern. If The Calling has put a name to my face and it seems they have; they’ll start tracking me from my last known locations in DC. Any online activity around my name is a problem. I’ve no doubt they are already looking back there,” Nick surmised.

“What are you going to do?”

“It’s only a matter of time before they come across my father, which is why I wanted surveillance and protection for him in the first place. The break in at my old place was too much of a coincidence; now this,” Nick shook his head in frustration. “Dad’s talked about taking an overseas vacation. I think it’s time he took one and I’ll feel better with him out of the way. I’ll have to cut contact for a while,” he said regretfully. “Dad won’t like it, but he won’t question it either, especially with me paying.”

Joanna didn’t comment, sensing that Tony’s father was a prickly subject.

Speaking of prickly subjects, she thought. “What about Gibbs?”

Nick tensed in the seat and his hands tightened on the wheel.

“What about him?” Nick asked angrily. Gibbs had to have enlisted Fornell’s help to look into his affairs, damn him anyway. He was furious at his old boss. Only Gibbs could manage to piss someone off he hadn’t spoken to in two years.

“Do you think Gibbs needs a detail now too?”

“No. He’s not my favorite person right now, but I wouldn’t want to see him endangered. If I thought he needed one, he’d have had a detail long ago.”
“You’re sure?” Joanna asked.

Nick nodded. “you were there; you know Gibbs didn’t really have much of an impact on the original investigation before he was hurt. Now, he’s retired from field duty according to Ducky. He’s not a threat to The Calling as an investigator,” Nick explained. “No…if they wanted Gibbs, he’s not hard to find and they would have gone for him before now.”

Joanna nodded, accepting Nick’s logic.

“Really though,” he mused, giving Joanna a sideways glance as he drove. “Gibbs isn’t the one who’s pissed them off, now is he? No, that would pretty much just be us,“ Nick reminded, sounding as grim as he looked.
Matters of Truth

Chapter Summary

As truths come to light, Gibbs and others find that Tony is at the heart of a series of what seemed to be unrelated events.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd, any remaining errors are mine.

~NCIS HQ~

Vance eyed the older man sitting across from him with interest. He crossed paths with Tom Morrow from time to time at interagency meetings and events, and they socialized in some of the same circles. Still; since the Bodnar case and its fallout inadvertently pitted them, and their agencies against one another, the Homeland Director’s demeanor toward him had been decidedly cooler.

“Thank you for seeing me, Leon.”

“I admit to being intrigued by your request for a meeting. What can NCIS do for Homeland?” Vance asked politely.

“This is an unofficial visit, Leon,” Morrow began. “Not exactly routine agency business. Even so, I think SCIF mode is an appropriate measure before I discuss my reasons for being here.”

Vance raised an eyebrow in concern, then reached under his desk top and depressed the button to place the room in secure mode. After the audible tone and indicator sign showed the room was secure, he asked, “What’s this about, Tom?”

Morrow said nothing, instead pulling a thick folder from the briefcase he’d brought with him. He laid the folder on Vance’s desk and pushed it toward the other man.
Vance opened the folder and frowned. He thumbed through the first few pages and the frown deepened.

“How did you get this?” Vance asked. “I should have signed off any release of restricted reports, and I would certainly remember if I’d signed off on this one. And why has it been redacted?”

“So, NCIS wouldn’t have done that?”

“Not without damn good reason, and not without my knowing,” Vance said, becoming agitated with his fellow director. “I’ll ask again…how did you come by this report, Tom?”

“Don’t get your hackles up, Leon. I have every intention of explaining where I got it from, so there’s no need for an inter-agency pissing contest.”

“I’m listening,” Vance replied curtly.

“I gather you are aware of the new joint Federal task force for counter-terrorism established a little over two years ago? And its mission?”

“I’ve only heard of it peripherally,” Vance replied. “All I know is that they operate in secret from somewhere out west, I’m not even sure who runs it. The word is they were created specifically to combat the rise in terrorist activity coming out of the east Asia and west Pacific regions.” Vance shrugged. “There’s no direct Navy involvement, so I don’t know details and NCIS has no representation on the task force.”

Morrow nodded. “Correct. Several Homeland agents were recruited for the task force; including one I worked quite closely with. This report came from him via encrypted email.”

“And how did the task force get it?”

Morrow hesitated a moment before answering. “I have my suspicions, but this is a situation that requires careful handling; and discretion,” he emphasized.

Vance rubbed his temples as his frustration mounted. “Tom, you’re going to give me a headache.
Stop spoon feeding me information. Even redacted, I can tell that this is DiNozzo’s final case report on The Calling. Just explain what you know about the task force having this report and why you’ve brought it to my attention.”

“Alright, Leon,” Morrow agreed. “What I’m about to tell you stays in this room. As you know, after Gibbs’ shooting, the NCIS investigation led by Agent DiNozzo and Officer Teague was ultimately successful in eliminating Daniel Budd and dismantling The Calling’s network.”

Vance nodded impatiently, indicating Morrow should continue.

“What you don’t know is a few members of The Calling managed to evade capture overseas during the CIA’s cleanup operation. They have re-established their network and grown their presence in the last 3 years, so much so that they are the primary focus of the new task force,” Morrow explained. “The report was given to the task force main team by their FBI lead. The Homeland agent on that team asked me to use my contacts here to verify what they were told about the content of the redacted portions of the file.”

“The Calling is back.” Vance exhaled a long breath as he absorbed this unwelcome news. Much of the upheaval at NCIS in the last three years could be traced directly or indirectly to that case. The fact that they’d made a resurgence was worrisome. “How they got the report aside, why verify and why is it redacted in the first place?” he asked.

“This report provided part of the foundation from which the lead team on the task force launched their investigation into The Calling’s resurgence,” Morrow began. “Lately, aspects of their investigation have raised issues of trust, and this redacted file is a sticking point among them. They’ve been discouraged from contacting NCIS directly, and so some of them believe the team co-leads may be withholding information that will aid the investigation,” Morrow explained vaguely. Some of the investigation details Matt shared with him were sensitive intelligence and not pertinent to what he needed from Vance.

“Are you willing to compare this report to the original and confirm what information is redacted?” Morrow inquired.

Vance turned to his computer and browsed to the NCIS case file database. “I’ll go along with your request for now, Tom,” he warned. “I assume you’ll be sharing your suspicions with me at some point. For now, have some coffee,” he said, indicating the coffee bar along one wall. “This will take a few minutes.”

Morrow walked over to the bar and poured a cup of coffee, then wandered to the window next to
Vance’s desk. He sipped the strong, flavorful brew and absently watched the activity in the courtyard below while he waited. He could hear the rustle of pages being turned as Vance went through the report he’d printed; comparing it to the original report in the database. He wondered how Vance would react to hearing the rest of the situation.

“Tom,” Vance called after a while, “I’m finished.”

Morrow moved back to the chair in front of Vance’s desk and sat. “Well?”

“I’ve checked each redacted section. The only information missing from the file copy you brought are any references to Agent DiNozzo’s name and photos he appeared in,” Vance confirmed. “A couple references mentioning the relationship between Officer Teague and Agent Dorneget were also redacted.”

Vance watched as Morrow sat back in his chair, a look of relief on his features. “Tom? Is that what you were expecting to hear?”

“It’s what I was hoping to hear, anyway. It means the task force wasn’t misled about the redacted part of the file,” Morrow said, and then paused.

“The agent also wanted to verify something else,” Morrow went on. “The task force has also confirmed The Calling is actively targeting two people named in this report for murder. They were told the file was redacted to protect CIA operations and the identity of a NCIS agent involved in the original group’s takedown,” Morrow said, looking at Vance meaningfully.

Vance inhaled sharply in concern, guessing instantly who Morrow meant. “You said two people. Teague and DiNozzo?”

Morrow nodded. “The agent who brought this file to me wants to confirm the NCIS agent in question is aware of the threat to his life. Given the mysterious circumstances surrounding this report, and other recent events, he’s looking for confirmation from a source outside the task force.”

“I don’t know how we’re going to do that,” Vance said grimly. “When DiNozzo resigned, he left no forwarding address or contact number.”

“Actually, I think he may already know,” Morrow surmised.
“How do you figure that?” Vance asked disbelievingly.

“Consider the scenario we have, Leon. Who could access the original file without anyone being the wiser? How could a FBI agent get this report without going through official channels, and look at how long they’ve had it. How did the agent know there was a need to protect DiNozzo’s identity at that point?”

Vance’s eyes narrowed. “Are you saying DiNozzo took a copy when he left and gave it to them?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Morrow answered, and then watched as the pieces came together in Vance’s mind.

“You’re saying DiNozzo is working with the task force.”

“Given what I’ve been told by the Homeland agent on the task force, I suspect he is in some capacity, yes. If so, he must not be using his given name, or there would have been no need for the file to be redacted to remove it.”

Vance considered McGee’s recent discoveries while working with cyber division. Morrow’s guess made a lot of sense. If you were putting together a task force to pursue a terror group, recruiting someone familiar with them was a no-brainer. He shook his head at the possibilities, wondering how much to tell Morrow, knowing he’d be talking to his agent again.

“DiNozzo might be aware of a threat to his life, but there are some things happening here that he doesn’t know. With help from Agent McGee, our cyber security division back traced a series of network intrusions into our human resources database. Our investigation revealed similar search patterns in other Federal databases. The hackers were looking for information on DiNozzo,” Vance revealed. “In light of what we’ve discussed, there’s obviously significant cause for concern.”

“Are you going to try to find a way to warn DiNozzo somehow?”

Vance nodded. “All I can do is check to see if any of the MCRT know how to reach him.”

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Gibbs leaned against the partition next to Ellis’ desk, taking advantage of rare down time in their routines to chat with his former team. Just as Bishop finished relaying an amusing story about a recent date, Ellis’ phone rang. Gibbs straightened in preparation to return to his office, expecting dispatch was calling to tell Ellis they had a new case. Instead, the lead agent frowned and looked over at McGee, then gave a brief acknowledgment to the caller and replaced the handset.

“McGee, the director is asking for you. Anything I should know?” Ellis asked with a raised eyebrow.

McGee held up his hands. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

Gibbs grinned. “You sure you didn’t lose your creds again? Maybe hack someone you shouldn’t have?” he asked jokingly.

McGee blinked; still getting used to this new, less cantankerous Gibbs, who laughed and joked so much more readily. “You channeling Tony now, Gibbs?” he smiled and snarked back good-naturedly.

Gibbs just smirked as one shoulder lifted in a shrug.

“Go on,” Ellis told McGee, suppressing a smile and inclining his head toward the stairs.

“I’m never gonna live that down,” McGee muttered, turning away from the group and starting toward the stairs.

Gibbs and Ellis’ smiles faded and they exchanged a look of concern as McGee hurried up the steps.

Gibbs finished his paperwork and decided to break for lunch before starting something new. He turned the lights off and headed out. As he neared the bullpen area, he noticed McGee alone, looking vaguely upset and he diverted to the younger man’s desk.
“Hey McGee, where did everyone go?” he asked.

“Hi Gibbs,” McGee greeted, holding up a note from Ellis. “They left for lunch while I was upstairs. I was just going to try and catch up with them.”


“I’m fine,” McGee replied. “But there’s something strange going on.”

“How so?”

McGee hesitated. Nothing said at the meeting with Vance and Morrow was classified, but that didn’t mean Vance thought Gibbs should know about it. Still, this was about Tony and some inner instinct was telling him that Gibbs would want to know.

“You knew that I was temporarily assigned to cyber division for a short time to help firm up network security and investigate a series of hacks into our HR databases?” At Gibbs’ answering nod, he went on. “Vance wanted me to give him a verbal update on the investigation and our progress backtracking the hackers to their point of origin.”

“What’s strange about that?” Gibbs asked.

“Director Morrow was there; Vance wanted him to hear my report for some reason. He seemed especially interested in what we found.”

“What did you find?” Gibbs asked. It had to be something serious if McGee was anxious about it.

“After we discovered the hacks, cyber division issued an all-federal agency bulletin about a pattern of intrusions and intrusion attempts into various agency’s personnel records,” McGee explained. “Afterward, we learned that in addition to NCIS, the AFIS database was also successfully hacked. The intrusions all originated somewhere in east Asia. We’re still working to narrow it down. We know they were related not just because of the region of origin, but because the hackers were looking for the same thing,” McGee paused and grimaced. “Or rather the same person.”
“Who,” Gibbs asked, a little afraid he already knew the answer.

“Whoever was responsible for both intrusions was looking for information on Tony,” McGee answered, looking up at him worriedly.

“I was afraid of that,” Gibbs sighed. So many disturbing things happening and Tony seemed to be at the center of it all. Even when he considered this new discovery and all the other circumstantial evidence together, he wasn’t quite sure what was going on. One thing was certain; the incomplete picture it painted set his gut to churning uneasily.

Good God, Gibbs thought. What the hell is he mixed up in?

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Senior jumped at the sharp knock on his door. He walked over and leaned close to the peephole. He sighed and opened the door on recognizing his visitor.

“Hello, Gibbs.” Senior waved the other man inside and locked the door. “I don’t have much time; I have a car coming soon. What brings you by?” he asked as he waved to indicate Gibbs should follow him.

Gibbs’ jaw dropped in amazement at the amount of luggage stacked in the bedroom. “You going somewhere, Chief?”

“I think it’s obvious that I am, Gibbs,” the older man responded dryly and he packed a case with the toiletries strewn out on the bed. “I’m taking a little extended vacation.”

“With everything that’s going on, why now? I thought you were worried about Tony?” Gibbs pressed.

“I’ve given up on trying to get answers for any of this madness out of him.” Senior gave him a side eye glance. “You too, for that matter.”

“I told you there was a reasonable explanation.” Gibbs said.
Senior just shrugged and continued packing. “Not good enough.”

“So things get tough with Tony and you just leave. Back to old habits then?” Gibbs goaded, suddenly angry at the attitude.

Senior looked up sharply, his face flushing with anger. “Don’t you dare judge me!” he shot back, “Not after the way you treated him. Besides, this was his idea!”

“His idea…” Gibbs breathed. He shook his head. It might have been accurate, but it wasn’t his place to take Senior to task. “You’re right; that was uncalled for.”

Senior nodded, mollified.

“So…it was Tony’s idea for you to take a vacation?” he asked.

“Yes; he called me for a change,” Senior confirmed. “In fact, he felt so strongly about it, he’s paid for a nice long stay in Monte Carlo in advance. Maybe it’s his way of making up for his behavior toward me.”

Gibbs barely suppressed the eye roll. Of course, the often self-centered old man had to make this about him, but there was more to it than that. What Gibbs saw was another piece of the larger puzzle. Tony was getting his father out of DC; putting a stop to his father’s questions, and using something he knew would appeal to do it. Very sly, Tony, he thought.

“When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. I do know I’m tired of the mystery and intrigue, Gibbs.” Senior said in a weary voice. “When whatever is going on with my son is resolved; perhaps then.”

Gibbs nodded sadly. I hope you know what you’re doing, Tony, he thought.
Gibbs pulled into his usual parking spot in the NCIS lot, noticing Ducky’s Morgan nearby as he climbed out of the car and headed inside. It was still early; far earlier than Ducky would usually come to work, unless there was a case. Maybe the early hour presented a good opportunity to talk to his old friend privately. After the unsettling news McGee and Senior had relayed earlier in the week, he was hoping for some reassurance that his former SFA knew he was being tracked by some unidentified entity for unknown reasons.

Gibbs exited the elevator outside autopsy and stopped short; surprised to hear that Ducky was talking to someone this early in the work day. Surprise turned to shock as he sidled closer to the door, and heard a muffled, but familiar voice coming from the video conference phone on Ducky’s desk.

He impulsively rushed in and asked, “Is that DiNozzo?”

Ducky turned his monitor away from Gibbs. “This is a private conversation,” he said, eyeing the door pointedly.

Ducky sighed in irritation when Gibbs ignored him and circled around behind his chair.

In an instant, Gibbs’ sharp eyes cataloged what he saw on the small screen. Tony’s face looked pinched and tired, but he otherwise appeared healthy and whole. The window behind him was dark, indicating it was still night wherever he was. “Where are you?” Gibbs blurted.

“None of your business, Gibbs.”

“Do you realize your father is being followed by the FBI?” Gibbs asked, carefully watching Tony’s face for any reaction, but the younger man didn’t even flinch.

“And that concerns you how?”

“Doesn’t it concern you that he is under surveillance?” Gibbs’ voice rose in exasperation. “Hell, your father came to me of all people because you aren’t around and he can’t reach you when he needs you!”
Some emotion flickered in Tony’s eyes at the accusation, but he wasn’t giving an inch in his reply.

“I'll say it again, Gibbs. whatever is going on with Senior is not your business. Stay out of it.”

Gibbs let his frustration and worry get the better of him, and kept pushing in spite of Ducky elbowing him sharply from his seat.

“DiNozzo, your father is under surveillance. You have a sealed FBI file. He's understandably scared and confused. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t want to overreact, but seeing Gibbs again was unexpectedly jarring. “You've been investigating me?” he demanded in a voice full of fire and fury, “What the hell gives you any right to do that?”

I looked into the fact that your father was being followed,” Gibbs defended. “I did it because he asked me to and I’m concerned about him...why aren’t you?”

Tony lost the tenuous grip on his temper. “Who the hell do you think you are?” he exploded, glaring fiercely.

“DiNozzo…Tony,” Gibbs emphasized softly, trying to defuse Tony’s anger. “I’m concerned about you too. What the hell is going on?”

Tony closed his eyes and sighed; when he opened them he looked conflicted; uncertain. “It's far too late for that, Gibbs.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Gibbs asked uncomfortably.

Tony’s eyes grew hard again. “Your concern would have been welcome a couple years ago, when I got back from risking my life trying to bring the people who damn near killed you to justice,” he reminded harshly. “It might be touching now, if I hadn't spent the better part of my last year at NCIS feeling like gum under your shoe. And that was on the good days. As things stand, you are the last person on Earth I owe any explanations to,” he said with a note of finality.
Gibbs flinched guiltily at the anger and betrayal coming though in the younger man’s voice, even after all this time. “Tony, things have changed. I’ve changed. I want to help if I can.”

Tony burst into a harsh, sarcastic laugh. “Right; you've changed. I'm supposed to believe that after you…” Tony’s voice cracked and trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid…turned your back on me the last time we saw each other.

“You know what? I don't care Agent Gibbs,” deliberately distancing himself by using Gibbs’ title. “I don't need your help, nor do I want it. Let me tell you something else; if you don’t stop investigating me, I'll have your damn badge.”

“Tony, I wasn’t…” Gibbs began, shaking his head.

Tony ignored Gibbs and turned his attention to Ducky.

“Ducky, I'm sorry about all this. We can talk later when you don’t have company.” Then the screen suddenly went dark as the call was disconnected on the other end.

“I do hope you’re pleased with yourself, Jethro,” Ducky said unhappily.

Gibbs shook off the shock and hurt at having his own damning words thrown back at him. He supposed he deserved that angry parting shot from Tony. After his cold, callous behavior the Christmas before last when he’d gone to Abby's place and found DiNozzo there, he deserved that and a lot more.

Gibbs sighed and looked down at Ducky. “Well, that didn’t go as well as I hoped.”

“What did you expect, Jethro?” Ducky chided. “Nothing about your end of that conversation showed you've changed in the least. If you truly want to make amends with that young man, you've gone about it in entirely the wrong way.”

“What am I supposed to do if I can’t get him to talk to me?”

“You're supposed to leave him alone as he asked,” Ducky advised. “This sudden drive to interfere
in his affairs and exert your need for control will only drive him further away.”

“Duck, you want to concentrate on my failings, or the fact that I'm concerned about Tony? I don’t know if I can let it be.”

“You can, and you will.” Ducky ordered. “As Anthony rightfully pointed out, the time to worry about him would have been long before he left. That time is long gone and now you have to live with the consequences of your actions.”

“I can’t change any of what I did, but I can acknowledge it and try to make it up to him,” Gibbs said earnestly.

Ducky sighed. “Jethro, don’t let the guilt you feel over your role in Anthony’s departure be the driving force behind your actions. Guilt is no foundation from which to repair a friendship.”

“I get it Ducky,” he began. “But after that little exchange, my gut is telling me I've got even more cause to be worried than before.”

“Whether you have cause is neither here nor there. Anthony asked you to leave it alone,” Ducky reminded him forcefully. “Do you really wish to alienate him further?”

“No, that's the last thing I want. But I think he's in some kind of trouble. He's dropped almost completely off the radar for almost two years. His father was under surveillance.”

“He’s obviously aware and unconcerned by it so perhaps there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for it, hmm? One which again, does not concern you.”

“Someone has been hacking federal databases looking for him, Ducky,” Gibbs challenged. “Is he aware of that?”

“For some time, actually.”

Gibbs blinked at the older man in surprise. “What else do you know, Ducky?”
“I know that he doesn’t want your help. I know that investigating him is a complication he doesn't need.”

“We weren’t investigating him, believe me,” Gibbs disputed. “McGee was investigating NCIS being hacked. I was just trying to find out who was following Senior. As soon as I found out who was following him, I took your advice and backed off. Fornell found the sealed file, I didn’t ask him to look for it. None of this seemed related at first and no one went looking for anything about Tony, but he’s somehow the common denominator for everything that turned up. You know how I feel about coincidences. Can’t you tell me what you know about all this?” Gibbs said almost pleadingly.

“Why?” Ducky asked. “Really…you try my patience, Jethro. Anthony was right about you. It was made very clear before he left you'd lost all respect and regard for him. I should indulge your curiosity because you know your treatment of him was a reflection of your own problems, and not anything he'd done?”

Gibbs started to protest and Ducky held up a hand to stop him. “You understand your behavior better now, thank God, but he does not. Anthony should just welcome being interrogated and your attempts to interfere in his new life? No... I won't betray his trust. Not as you did. Anthony has great capacity for forgiveness, but if you pursue this Jethro, you may find you have gone too far.”

Gibbs sighed. “Ducky, I don't know any other way.”

“Yes, you do. *Show* him you've changed. Respect his wishes and leave it alone.” Ducky went on, giving Gibbs a look that was both grave and heavy with meaning. “Before you do the kind of damage that cannot be undone.”

Gibbs’ eyes widened at the implication. He had no choice but to defer to Ducky’s advice, given he had greater knowledge of Tony’s situation. He also had to accept that none of this was within his ability to influence. Tony was right; he didn’t owe him a damn thing after the way he’d been treated. Gibbs gave a resigned nod, “Alright Ducky. I’ll let it go.”

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If real life cooperates, Chapter 21: Matters of Trust coming soon :)
Matters of Trust

Chapter Summary

Joanna, Nick, and their team talk through trust issues after he reveals his true identity, while a confrontation with LaPointe and The Calling draws closer.

Chapter Notes

It's been longer than intended between updates. My schedule this summer has been completely ridiculous. This is a longish chapter, so hopefully it makes up for the long wait just a little bit. Thanks to all who are sticking with me on this story; I hope you enjoy this update :)

Unbeta'd

~Seattle~

Tony closed his laptop and leaned back against his sofa, sighing in frustration. He returned home from Phoenix to find he’d received an urgent message from Ducky. Even if he hadn’t already decided to reveal his identity to the team, it would be foolhardy to keep it from them now. The Calling was apparently desperate and getting sloppy in their attempts to find him; having resorted to hacking NCIS and being discovered in the attempt. That desperation would make them even more dangerous and unpredictable. Fortunately, it seemed NCIS hadn’t backtracked the intrusion far enough to discover the connection to The Calling. He did not want Gibbs to get wind of that.

Damn Gibbs, anyway. He’d just gotten his father headed somewhere safe from the inevitable fallout from this case, and now Gibbs, true to form, was poking his nose in where it didn’t belong. His second video call with Ducky had gone better than the first, without Gibbs’ thinly veiled demands for information and contentious attitude sidetracking them.

When he’d called Ducky back, the older man assured him Gibbs would back off, but he couldn’t help but feel that Gibbs would keep digging anyway, and just conceal the fact that he was doing it from Ducky. The doubt showed on his face and his old friend noted it instantly.

“We’ve never really talked about this before and I understand why you don’t want to discuss it, but you should know, Anthony,” Ducky began, “Jethro is not the same person he was when you left us.”
Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow and huffed in disbelief as Ducky continued.

“It’s true. Jethro may have been forced into therapy as a condition of employment, but he finally stopped resisting it; stopped fighting everyone who tried to help, and it has done him a world of good,” Ducky explained. He didn’t want to share personal details or seem like he was defending Gibbs to Anthony of all people, but neither did he want Anthony to misunderstand Gibbs’ actions and intentions.

“He has changed and it’s something he continues to work on. He’s much more apt to listen these days, and not let the emotion of a moment lead him to charge headlong into a situation he knows nothing about. He understands this situation is not something he can influence in any way.”

Gibbs in therapy, Tony mused in wonder. And actually cooperating. That was a miraculous change in itself.

“I hope you’re right, Ducky,” he’d answered in a voice still tinged with doubt. “It’s pretty obvious that not knowing what’s going on has gotten under his skin and bulldozing his way into the situation would be classic Gibbs behavior.”

“Not exactly classic as you remember it. He’s more driven by guilt and regret over the state of affairs between you and sincere concern, rather than his need for control,” Ducky explained earnestly. “I am certain that he won’t involve himself any further. He’s guessed enough about what is going on and knows that to do otherwise could endanger you. He doesn’t want that.”

Tony had given Ducky another skeptical look and ignored the assertion that Gibbs had regrets over their falling out. In any case, he trusted Ducky and had been inclined to take him at his word that Gibbs wouldn’t dig further, even if Gibbs’ brief side of that conversation hadn’t inspired confidence that he’d changed much. If Gibbs had managed to turn his uncanny perception inward for a change and actually get something positive out of it, that could only be a good thing. Still; it hadn’t been the time or place to dredge up his own conflicted feelings on the matter, so he’d ignored Ducky’s assessment about Gibbs and directed the conversation back to the issue at hand.

“It’s not just me that would be endangered,” he’d told Ducky pointedly. “Our investigation is getting to a critical point and this is a distraction. I also don’t need to worry that someone in DC digging around in this is going to draw the wrong kind of attention,” he explained. “So, I hope you’re right.” He might just have to take steps to make doubly sure NCIS’ investigation wouldn’t attract The Calling’s attention.

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Gary, Matt, and Lena were putting the final touches on an update outlining their new findings for Nick and Joanna, who’d just arrived back in the S3 offices. The team leads had flown in from Phoenix late the night before and were downstairs logging evidence collected from the man in FBI custody, who they now knew as Hasan Salah. Lena and Mel had used information in Chan’s insurance policy to establish the true identity of the prisoner being transferred in from Phoenix today and as a result, the case was about to make another leap forward.

Matt’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket, and he dug for it absently and glanced at the display before answering. He froze for a moment, earning quizzical looks from the others, then rose quickly and moved away from the table to the far corner of the room.

“Matt?” Gary asked, as Lena and Mel looked on in concern. “Everything ok?”

“It’s a DC number,” Matt answered simply.

“Ah,” Gary nodded as he and the others turned back to work. They knew Matt had reached out to his friend and former supervisor at Homeland Security, and that now-director Morrow agreed to use his connections at NCIS on their behalf to solve the mystery of the redacted case file.

They were all half-listening as Matt took the call, and then looked up expectantly as he hung up and replaced the phone in his pocket.

“Well?” Gary inquired. “Was that Morrow?”

“Yes,” Matt confirmed. “While he wouldn’t go so far as to disclose the identity of the NCIS agent at the center of this little puzzle, he did attest that the only information missing from the case files is the agent’s name. Also a couple references to the familial relationship between Joanna and the agent who was killed in The Calling’s Cairo terror attack.”

Lena frowned at that, recalling a very uncomfortable Joanna disclosing the taunting phone calls about the death of her son. “He’s sure about his source?” Lena asked.

“The case file was authenticated by the NCIS Director himself,” Matt answered. “It means Nick and Joanna weren’t holding back critical information about the first case.” he said with a relieved smile.
“OK, they didn’t lie about what was in the case file, so why deter us from going back to NCIS about it? And how did they get it in the first place,” Gary reminded.

“There’s also still the matter of Joanna’s secrecy, how Nick came by Chan’s insurance policy, and the discrepancies with the evidence Joanna handled,” Lena reminded. “What was deleted and why?”

“And whether or not Nick knew about it,” Gary added. “Lena’s right; something happened between them in Shanghai and there is definitely some new source of tension that wasn’t there before.”

Matt agreed. “Case file aside, I think there’s more they aren’t sharing with us and it’s time we called them on it.”

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Matt paused in the doorway of evidence lockup, where Joanna and Nick were huddled together logging in the items confiscated from their suspect in Phoenix. As the senior member of the team after Nick, he took on the task of informing their leads the team wanted to meet. He knocked on the doorframe and waited until they glanced up.


“Good; we’re almost done here. I need Lena and Mel concentrating on accessing the encrypted files on Salah’s computer and external data drives,” he replied. “Ideally, I’d like to know what’s there before we question him again.”

Matt nodded in agreement and took a deep breath. “Before we get into that, team and I would like to talk to you both about some serious concerns we have regarding the investigation.”

Nick and Joanna exchanged an inscrutable look, and then Nick nodded.

“That’s fine, Matt.” His eyes flicked briefly to Joanna, who remained uncharacteristically silent. “It’s good timing…Joanna and I have some things to tell everyone too.”
Matt raised a questioning eyebrow, processing that unexpected development. “Really…when?”

“The sooner, the better, because I’ve got a sense for what is on everyone’s mind. We’ll get it all hashed out,” Nick assured him.

Matt acknowledged him with a curt nod and turned to go tell the others, feeling both perplexed and curious at the same time.

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Joanna scanned her badge and entered the code to enter the S3 comm center; surprised to find Nick already there waiting and the room cleared. He murmured a distracted greeting without looking up from what he was doing at the video conference control board. “What’s going on, Nick? Why are you so early?” Joanna asked as she dropped a briefcase into a nearby chair.

Nick turned toward her, an indecipherable look on his face. “I thought it would be prudent to have someone they know on standby that could corroborate my identity,” he said, shoving down a flash of self-loathing. “I wouldn’t expect them to just take our word for it after hearing we’ve kept something like this from them for two years.”

Joanna nodded; Nick was understandably anxious about how this meeting would go. “Who’s on standby?” she asked, gesturing at the large screens along one wall.

“FBI Director Whitman and Homeland Director Tom Morrow.”

“Well, that should do it,” Joanna replied dryly. “So, what’s with the look?” she asked, waving vaguely at his face.

Nick sighed. It was ironic; he’d just recently raked Joanna over the coals for breaking her word to him, and now he was about to admit to the team that he’d been lying to them for two years.

“I’ve always known this moment was going to come, but that doesn’t make it any easier to tell them about this,” he admitted reluctantly. “That we’ve been hiding who I am.”
Joanna sensed what he was thinking and tried to reassure him. “I was wrong to do what I did in Shanghai, keeping information from all of you. What we did with the alias…it’s not the same thing, Nick. It was the right thing to do, for the right reasons…I think they’ll understand.”

Nick shrugged. “All the deceit; the cloak and dagger stuff may be just an ordinary day at the office for the CIA but we’re supposed to be pulling one over on the bad guys, not each other. They may understand but will they still want to work with me after hearing the truth?”

“Do you really think they won’t?”

“It’s a valid concern, in light of what I’ve just been told.” Nick chuckled ruefully. “Imagine my surprise to find out from Morrow that the team has been doing a little digging into us…well, me in particular.”

“What?”

“Are you really all that surprised, given recent events?” Nick asked. “Like I told you some time ago, they’re sharp. Seems clear we’ve given them cause to question our behavior.”

An irritated expression flitted across Joanna’s features but before he could explain further, they were interrupted by the soft alert tones indicating the comm center door was being accessed. Joanna stood and watched, tight-lipped as the others entered. It seemed she and Nick were about to be held accountable for what the others saw as their secrecy and odd, suspicious behavior even as they were preparing to reveal the truth.

Joanna watched as Tony turned and faced the others with no sign of the nerves and angst that had been obvious just moments before. It was as if a switch had been thrown. She’d known Tony for nearly four years now, but was once again struck by how easily he could ‘become’ someone else and conceal signs of the inner turmoil he’d allowed her to see earlier. It reminded her of the nightmarish day Gibbs had been shot by Luke Harris.

Tony had been consumed with guilt and fear for his mentor, then Vance ordered them off the hospital ship and back to Iraq to continue working leads on The Calling. After a brief, futile protest, he’d suddenly switched gears just like this; becoming intent, focused and all business. Tony managed to suppress all that emotion and she only saw his control slip once when, days later, they’d received word Gibbs had survived and would recover. Tony had slumped in his chair, closed his eyes, and mumbled a short, relieved prayer of thanks. Then the mask was back; just like
Not for the first time, she wondered at the personal cost of that preternatural ability to adopt a mask and become someone else so completely for so long.

Nick waited for his team to file in and take their seats in the comm center, smiling a bit at their confusion over his chosen location for the meeting. The phone conferences he’d just arranged would address that, or so he hoped. His smile faded as he recalled why they were there, and as he sensed the awkward tension in the air. He couldn’t help but be a little pleased at the same time; they’d been looking into him instead of taking him at his word in the face of the picture painted by circumstantial evidence. He didn’t blame them and would have done the same thing in their shoes.

“Well,” Nick began, taking a seat facing the team and looking at each of them in turn. “What’s on your minds?” he asked, giving them the floor first.

Matt glanced at the others and received minute nods in return, indicating he would continue to speak for the group. “For starters, why are we meeting here, and why have the techs been cleared from the room?” Matt asked.

“As I said, there are some things Joanna and I need to brief you on. I’d like it kept to a limited audience for the time being,” Nick answered simply.

“Fair enough,” Matt replied. “Anyway, it’s best we keep our own concerns internal to the team, at least for now.”

“And those are…?” Nick prompted.

“I’ll just lay it all straight out,” Matt began matter-of-factly. “In short, evidence handled by Joanna has been tampered with and data removed. We’d like to know exactly how Nick got Chan’s insurance policy from a former NCIS agent that’s supposedly in hiding, and how he got the NCIS case file on The Calling. There’s the fact that the case file is redacted, which is something NCIS says they wouldn’t have done. That means one of you did it,” he said pausing to look at Nick and Joanna pointedly.

Matt continued “Then there’s you two suddenly at odds. Why you’re so dead set on keeping us out of the loop about whatever is going on between you, and why no one I’ve talked to at the FBI has ever heard of or worked with Nick. All of these things taken in context over time paint a rather
unflattering picture,” Matt concluded, watching Nick and Joanna intently for any signs of agitation at having their actions called into question, but seeing none. It was as if they weren’t surprised at all.

“Let’s start with the evidence tampering,” Lena said. “Would either of you care to explain why Mel and I were given incomplete copies of Chan’s data to work with? What was removed and why?”

Joanna cast a concerned glance at Nick, who just gave a small, resigned smile, causing the others to exchange uneasy glances. Neither seemed particularly phased by the serious accusations being leveled by their team.

“Actually,” Nick began, “I think it’s best to start with the redacted case file. Once you understand the story behind that, I think it will address most of your other concerns.”

Nick’s stomach churned as he looked over at Joanna, who gave a supportive nod and half-smile in return. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. For better or worse, there was no turning back now.

Turning back to his team, Nick spoke in a calm, level voice. “I can see why some of our behavior looked suspicious, and why some of the problems we’ve had with the case were so troubling.” Directing the questions to Matt, he asked, “I believe you confirmed that the only information missing from the case file was the name of the agent that wrote it? The one who worked with Joanna and killed The Calling’s first leader?

Matt shifted uncomfortably, wondering how Nick knew he’d talked to Morrow. It seemed he wasn’t the only one with high level inter-agency connections. Interesting. “Yes,” he answered.

“It seems we have some friends in common,” Nick grinned briefly, then sobered. “I can understand the desire to corroborate the reason we gave you for the case files being redacted, and to make sure the agent in question knew his life was in danger.” Nick gave a strange, sarcastic little chuckle at that. “I appreciate it more than you know, really.”

The group watched curiously as Nick stepped back to the control board and pressed a few buttons, then faced them again. “The NCIS agent named in the redacted files is Anthony DiNozzo.”

“Why tell us his name now?” Gary asked. “After all the effort to conceal it?”
“Because it’s time for you to know. Past time, actually,” he said, giving Joanna a quick glance. He reached up and nervously scrubbed a hand through his hair.

“This isn’t exactly easy, so I’ll just be blunt. I am that agent,” he admitted. Though he was worried about their reactions, he felt some of the burden he’d been carrying lift as he spoke the truth. “I didn’t have to do anything underhanded to get the NCIS case files because I’m the one who wrote them.” Looking at Matt, he added “You couldn’t find anyone at FBI HQ who’s worked with me because they know me as Tony DiNozzo.”

A long moment of stunned silence followed. They all looked to Joanna, whonodded in affirmation, then back to Tony.

Tony watched as the others exchanged looks that quickly morphed from shock and surprise to anger.

“An alias…you have been lying to us,” Gary stated a bit acidly.

He was afraid of just that sort of reaction. The years-old memory rose unbidden in Tony’s mind, along with the old pain…Jeanne.

*Who are you? Who are you, really?*

Joanna could see that Tony looked stricken for a fleeting moment, then his features were composed once again. His voice was level as he met Gary’s eyes and replied with simple, unexpected candor. “Yes.”

Then he turned to the control board and opened the video conference channel. “In anticipation of any reluctance to take this information at face value,” he continued in a monotone. “I’ve arranged to have two people you all know vouch for my identity.” He turned away from the still angry expressions on his team’s faces and watched as the test pattern on the monitors flickered then changed into a split screen with Whitman on one side and Morrow on the other.

Nick gestured at the screen. “I believe you all know FBI Director Whitman and former NCIS Director, now Homeland Security Director Tom Morrow.”
Nick was thankful for Joanna’s foresight in bringing the original copies of Chan’s flash drive and ‘insurance policy’ for the team to view for themselves. Once his true identity had been established and corroborated, it took nearly two more hours to delve into and work through everything the team wanted answers and explanations for. At the end of the day, they were satisfied that every discrepancy with the evidence; every instance of suspicious behavior had its roots in depriving The Calling of their target by concealing Tony’s identity. That didn’t mean they were happy about it, judging by the looks on their faces.

“You’ve known all along.” Lena stated, staring hard at Joanna.

“Yes. I recruited Tony for the task force personally, and the alias was my idea.” Joanna affirmed. “We’ve kept you in the dark on some things, but only things that were absolutely necessary to maintain the cover.”

Matt studied Nick, trying to set aside his disappointment in someone he genuinely liked and respected. Glancing at Gary and Lena, he sensed they were feeling much the same way. So much about Nick made sense now. Their suspicion that the pursuit of The Calling was personal to him, as well as to Joanna had proven out. Nick was an intensely private, but likeable man who never let his guard down, never let deeper emotions rise up. Until today, he’d never revealed anything about his life before the task force. The distance and unwillingness to let the team get to know him beyond a surface level seemed suspicious. Now, seen in the light of protecting an alias, he felt some stirrings of empathy in addition to the anger.

Tony could see the it all click together in the faces before him; connections being made. He was being reassessed in the new context of what they’d been told. And for better or worse, they’d judge him accordingly.

“So, back to the earlier question; why the reveal now, timing-wise?” Gary asked.

“Yes…what changed to make now the right time? Why not let us in on it from the beginning?” Matt wondered, echoing the foremost question on all their minds.

Tony sighed wearily at the disappointed expressions directed at him. “Because I have trust issues that are far too ingrained and complex to get into here. Which I know seems pretty ironic, considering I’ve been keeping this from you all for two years.” Tony paused and rubbed at the back of his neck, trying the relieve the tension headache trying to set in.
“As to the question of why now; because I’m still a target and it could be detrimental to the investigation to keep my identity from you going forward. The Calling’s leadership knows the circle is closing around them, and our new friend in lockup downtown has most certainly gotten word back to them that I’ve been sighted with Joanna in Phoenix,” Tony asserted. “Things are about to get down and dirty now that Intel indicates LaPointe and a small group of followers have relocated to the US. We needed to clear the air before proceeding, and I need to know if I’ve lost your faith in my leadership. I hope not.”

“And if you have?” Matt queried.

“If so, now’s the time to say something, because the investigation is hitting fever pitch,” Tony answered. “Ultimately, it comes down to this. I did what I thought best to protect myself and people I care about. I count all of you among them. I’d do it again. If that makes me a hypocrite, so be it.”

Tony struggled to keep his composure. Things would undoubtedly be different going forward. He hoped Joanna was right, and once they had time to digest everything they’d been told, the others would understand.

Paradoxically, Joanna’s deep-rooted acceptance of secrecy and suspicion as part of being a longtime CIA operative, and his own trust issues were at the root of this alias, and the actions that put them at odds with their team. Trust was a precious commodity in the law enforcement community; he knew that better than most. He only hoped the trust and camaraderie he’d developed with this team wouldn’t be irreparably damaged by what they revealed today. Had it been?

Tony frowned and bit his lip as he took in the distrustful looks being directed at him. “If it helps at all, I’ve been where you are now. Feeling betrayed, uncertain, even suspicious. I’m not going to even try to tell you I don’t deserve it.” Tony rose, wanting to give them time to consider where things stood.

“Alright everyone, I’m going to go over the case update you prepared while Joanna and I were in Phoenix. I want you all to know I’d like to see this case through to the end, but I’m going to leave that choice up to you,” he said solemnly. “You need to talk amongst yourselves and if you aren’t able to keep working with me, I’ll step back from leading this team.”

Joanna sucked in a sharp breath, and watched as Tony left the room, shoulders slumped and looking a little haunted. Suddenly a feeling of guilt washed over her she considered how much he’d changed as a result of maintaining this alias for so long, at her insistence. He wasn’t the same
person she’d worked so closely with for all those months after Tony took over from Gibbs.

Even as they tracked The Calling across the globe back then, finally landing in Shanghai where they’d rescued Luke and ended The Calling’s first reign of terror, Tony still kept his charm, engaging banter, and easy laughter. Everything that had been so uniquely Tony seemed gone and she missed it. He was distant, increasingly grim and much like her, focused on the pursuit of The Calling to the exclusion of all else.

Tony wasn’t going to be stepping down if she had anything to say about it. He’d sacrificed enough and deserved his life back and chance at closure as much as she did.

“Well,” Joanna began, giving them all a stern look. “Are you all actually going to force him to step down? Because he’s a man of integrity and he will if you ask him to.”

Matt frowned. “I’m still taking it all in. That little confession wasn’t exactly what I was expecting…from either of you.”

“I knew you were keeping something from us,” Lena added as Gary huffed angrily. “I’m torn between being relieved that one or both of you isn’t a mole, and furious that this was kept from us for so long.”

“While you were assuming the worst about us, we were trying to keep him from being targeted by ruthless killers,” Joanna reminded. “Think about it, and how close we are to bringing them down again. It’s taken over two years for them to just to put a name to his face, much less find him. Two years without targets on our backs where we could investigate without looking over our shoulders.”

Joanna let that sink in for moment, then continued. “What Tony didn’t tell you was that he agreed to the alias more to protect others rather than himself. He didn’t want any one he cared about in The Calling’s line of fire. He also knew it would protect all you as well. We kept it from you as long as it wasn’t relevant to the investigation; when they didn’t have a name to go with the face.”

“We should have been told sooner,” Gary insisted angrily. “Why didn’t he trust us with it? Why didn’t you?”

“What are you all really angry about? That we misled you or that you took so long to figure it out?” Joanna shot back. “You would have eventually and he knew it…knew it all along. It was never his intention to keep the ruse up for this long and he shouldn’t apologize for it. It’s kept him safe; his
friends, and former coworkers safe. By extension, it’s kept this team safer too.”

“Look,” she began, “Maybe you’re all feeling angry, or even betrayed. The blame lies mainly with me, so I’ll try to explain why I was so adamant that no one else knew. You’re all aware before Tony came to the task force, I lost almost my entire field office and many of my friends in Shanghai; all to a series of suspicious deaths when The Calling started to rebuild their network in Asia,” Joanna explained. “I was also still having difficulty coming to terms with my son’s death. I wanted to do everything in my power to bring down The Calling again, once and for all, but I couldn’t do it alone. I knew after working with Tony the first time, the task force needed him. I recruited him because I knew how good he was. He’s so good that even knowing him for four years, I forget that he’s Tony DiNozzo. I knew I could trust him and that he had reasons of his own to want to bring down The Calling again. I took advantage of that,” Joanna admitted.

“I wanted him here, but wanted to protect him too after losing my son and so many friends and colleagues; hence the alias. It was my call, and when Tony realized his friends could become collateral damage if The Calling targeted him, he was convinced it was the right thing to do at the time.”

The others listened with rapt attention at this heartfelt admission. It was out of character for the normally stoic woman and gave them a rare peek inside the enigmas that were their team leads.

“How do you think this was easy on him?” Joanna asked with a serious look. “A life lived in limbo for two years? He should have been spending the last two years rebuilding his life, after leaving behind his father, a job and friends at NCIS who after 15 years, had become like family to him.”

Joanna paused, hoping her argument was compelling enough that the others would feel empathy, rather than anger and disappointment at being misled for so long.

“How’s the difference between then and now?” Matt asked, beginning to be swayed by the sincerity and power of Joanna’s loyalty to Nick, or rather to Tony. He could see the others were too.

“The Calling is no longer a vague threat to us off in the distance,” Joanna answered. “They’re here in the US now. They’ll come for us soon and we have to be ready. You all need to cut him some slack,” Joanna insisted. “The name is new but he’s still the same fine agent you’ve worked with for
two years. He doesn't deserve your anger and he doesn't deserve to struggle with guilt over this. And believe me, he will be, because that’s the kind of man Tony is.”

Joanna reached into her briefcase and pulled out a thick file. “This is a copy of Tony’s real personnel file; the one that got him recruited to a lead spot on this task force. I hope when you read it, you’ll decide for yourselves he deserves the chance to stay and see this through to the end. Feel free to check it, if you like,” she said pointedly, reminding them of their own lack of trust.

Joanna rose and dropped the file on the table in front of Matt. She hoped she’d done enough to convince them to let go of their anger and resentment. As she turned to leave, she drove her point home. “I trust him with my life and so can you.”

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LaPointe kept watch at the large window, waiting for Rousseau’s return from the port. On arriving from Shanghai, they holed up in a small, rented house nestled in the dry, brown hills above Los Angeles. It was from there they would coordinate operations that would pay enough to restore some much needed liquidity for the group.

Then there was the matter of Teague and DiNozzo. His long held suspicion that if he found Teague he would find DiNozzo, turned out to be more accurate that he could have hoped. A red haze of fury had fallen over his vision at hearing the news from Hasan, via the lawyer. DiNozzo had apparently come out of hiding and been present when Teague questioned Hasan in Phoenix. How had she managed to hide him from them for so long? He really would have to ask them before he killed them.

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Next: A confrontation looms ever closer…
Collision Course

Chapter Summary

Summary: In DC, NCIS is suddenly ordered to stop their hacking investigation, but not before McGee makes a disturbing connection to a previous case. In Seattle, Tony and Joanna question The Calling’s recently captured “watcher”, who offers information in exchange for protection from LaPointe.

Chapter Notes

Notes: Beta'd. In this story, and the previous installment, chapters to date have alternated back and forth between events in DC and those events revolving around Tony and his team. From this point forward, those shifts will occur within the chapters. Some minor spoilers for S12 finale arc.

This chapter is shorter than I intended, felt a bit rushed, and didn't quite turn out how I expected. But between work & travel, I'm not going to be able to work on it further for a week or so. I hit a logical point to close out a chapter and wanted to give everyone reading a short update before I have to set it aside for a few days. Thanks to those following along, commenting, and leaving kudos. I hope you enjoy this chapter :)

~Washington DC, NCIS HQ~

Gibbs absentmindedly picked up his coffee cup; sighed on realizing it was empty and tossed it into the trashcan. He could do with stretching his legs anyway and decided to take a quick walk to visit the nearby coffee shop for a refill. He headed out, pulling the office door shut behind him and as was his habit, walked past the bullpen on his way to the stairwell.

Ellis was on the phone, looking distinctly annoyed. Bishop and McGee were quietly packing files into boxes. Both wore serious expressions, but long experience working with the younger man told him McGee was either upset or angry; possibly both.

He was about to pass by without interrupting, when Ellis finished his phone call, caught sight of Gibbs, and waved him over. “You could have warned me your friend was such a pain in the ass, Gibbs,” Ellis said shortly.

“Huh?” Gibbs frowned as McGee looked up from what he was doing and startled on catching sight
of him...looking guilty, if he didn’t know any better. Turning back to Ellis, he asked “What are you talking about?”

“Your FBI friend, Fornell. He’s upstairs with Vance in the process of taking our case,” Ellis answered sourly.

“Ah,” Gibbs nodded knowingly. “He gets a sadistic enjoyment out of it, too,” Gibbs offered sympathetically. Heaven knew, Tobias had done it to him enough times. “So, which case is it?”

A crash sounded from behind them before Ellis could answer. They turned to see a red-faced McGee cleaning up the shattered remains of a coffee mug. “Uh, sorry,” he said sheepishly. When Gibbs turned away again, McGee shook his head vigorously at Ellis.

“Well, we weren’t getting anywhere anyway, so they’re welcome to it,” Ellis answered. Before he could say anything more, they looked up to see Fornell and his partners descending the stairs, accompanied by a stone-faced Vance.

“You have everything ready Agent McGee? Vance inquired.

“Yes, Director, we’re just finishing now,” he answered, gesturing at Bishop, who was sealing the last box.

“Still up to your old tricks, Tobias?” Gibbs snarked.

Fornell shook his head ruefully, “I’m just the messenger, Gibbs. This case is being turned over to a joint federal counter-terrorism unit,” he explained. “Director Whitman sent me to transfer the case, figuring I’d be more likely to get out of here intact,” he joked, trying to lighten the tension.

“Intact? That remains to be seen,” Ellis shot back as he stood, using a tone of voice that left Vance pretty sure the newest leader of the MCRT wasn’t finding any humor in the situation.

Ellis turned to his team. “Bishop, McGee...hand it all over so they can get out of here,” he said sarcastically. “Before the FBI decides it has an interest in any of our other cases.”
“That’ll be enough, Agent Ellis,” Vance said, intervening before the situation got more unfriendly.

Gibbs hid a smirk, amused at the fact that Ellis looked more than willing to take his place as a NCIS thorn in Fornell’s side.

As Bishop and McGee shoved boxes at his men, Fornell spoke to Ellis. “I’m sorry Ellis, this wasn’t my call. These orders come from way above my head, for what it’s worth.”

Fornell inclined his head at Gibbs as he turned to leave. “See you around, Gibbs.”

Gibbs nodded back, and as he walked to the stairwell to resume his quest for fresh coffee, he wondered if Fornell was hinting at stopping by the house later.

Once Gibbs was gone and the director back in his office, Ellis turned to McGee.

“You want to explain the diversion with the cup and why I shouldn’t talk to Gibbs about the case we gave up?”

McGee shifted uncomfortably, staring in the direction Gibbs had gone.

“McGee?” Bishop prompted.

McGee shook himself and turned back to Ellis and Bishop. “Before the director ordered us off the case and had us pack everything up, I made a discovery I didn’t get a chance to tell either of you about,” he began.

“Something to explain what drew the FBI’s interest, I presume?”

McGee shook his head. “Not exactly. In fact, I’m not sure where they fit at all.”

“Really?” Bishop asked, brows drawn together in confusion. “So, what did you find?”
"It has to do with the fact that the hackers that infiltrated NCIS and AFIS appear to have been looking for information about Tony. Uh, former Agent DiNozzo,” McGee clarified for Ellis.

“And why wouldn’t you want Gibbs to know that?”

“Because of where I traced the source of origin for the intrusions back to,” McGee continued hesitantly, his eyes flicking briefly toward the direction Gibbs had gone.

“I believe I found who’s looking for Tony, and possibly why, but that’s not all I found. Gibbs is back on an even keel. I think what I found might adversely affect him and maybe even compromise his recovery.”

Ellis crossed his arms. That was clear as mud. “Explain, McGee,” Ellis directed, wondering where McGee was going with this.

“You know I back traced the source of the hacking to East Asia?” Ellis and Bishop nodded. “I was able to narrow down the source to a location on the outskirts of Shanghai, China.”

“Shanghai…” Bishop mumbled, her gaze becoming distant.

McGee nodded; Bishop was starting to put pieces together in that analytical mind of hers. Focusing on Ellis, he continued to explain. “When I checked with our intel desk for East Asia, they told me there’s been a spike of activity in the last couple weeks, especially in Shanghai. The Chinese and other governments in the region have been conducting counter terrorism activities focusing on a rising threat from a specific group,” he elaborated.

“As near as I can figure, I traced the hackers back to the same compound outside Shanghai that was the target of a recent raid by Chinese tactical forces.”

“What did they find that’s got you so spun up?” Ellis asked.

McGee grimaced. “The compound was booby trapped; wired to explode. Most of the tactical team was killed, along with a number of civilian captives left behind. The Chinese government is so ticked, they’re actually cooperating with our State Department and a US based counter-terrorism unit to go after those responsible.”
“How does DiNozzo fit into this?” Ellis asked.

“Intelligence chatter indicates the Chinese government named the group responsible. The group refers to themselves as The Calling.”

Bishop gasped. “It’s the same group? That’s not good.”

Ellis’ expression was guarded. He’d read the case file once briefly, some time back when he first joined the team and was trying to understand the source of Gibbs’ erratic behavior and PTSD.

“Apparently, some key members of the first group escaped capture and managed to rebuild their network to an extent,” McGee confirmed. “It gets worse. Tony wasn’t the only one they were trying to find. I searched for signs they were looking for others key to the first investigation. I ran across Luke Harris’ name.”

“That name is ringing a bell,” Ellis noted. “Why?”

McGee would never forget it. “Luke Harris is one of the kids recruited and half-brainwashed by The Calling. He was rescued by Tony and Officer Teague in Shanghai. He also happens to be the one that shot, and nearly killed Gibbs in Iraq. When he learned that Gibbs survived, he turned on The Calling and helped the investigation.”

“How did you run across his name? Is The Calling looking for him too?” Bishop asked.

“It seems they found him,” McGee said gravely. “He and his family were killed in an auto accident after the brakes on their car were tampered with.”

“Well, hell,” Ellis muttered. “When did that happen?”

“Here’s the strange thing about that. It happened over two years ago. Right about the time Tony resigned, took a mysterious new job, and virtually cut off contact with everyone he knows here,” McGee said meaningfully. “Now, suddenly, this case is pulled out from under us after Tony’s name turns up.”
“Oh,” Bishop breathed in shock. She sunk into a chair. “Tony knew about The Calling. All those overseas trips…the mysterious package from Asia sent here to Tony by mistake. He must be on the task force. Gibbs wasn’t the reason he left.”

McGee snorted. “Well, not the only reason,” he added, recalling the talk with Tony right before he left. Tony’s evasiveness and glossing over how serious the confrontation with Gibbs in the basement had been was telling. “But I think only Tony can say for sure.”

“I hate not being able to do anything to help,” Bishop sighed.

“Imagine how Gibbs would feel about it.” McGee said.

Ellis could see McGee’s concern for Gibbs, but wasn’t sure if keeping this news from him was the right move. “Gibbs is going to find out about this at some point,” Ellis warned.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. In any case, he doesn’t need to know now. Not when there isn’t anything that we can do about it.”

Ellis inclined his head. “Point. So The Calling is looking for DiNozzo, presumably to target him as well.”

“That’s what it looks like,” McGee replied somberly.

~Seattle, FBI Office~

Salah hid his unease and glanced placidly around the interrogation room, wondering if his request to discuss a deal was about to be granted. They’d moved him days ago; the suits and lack of uniformed law enforcement presence indicating it was another FBI office as he’d expected. He hadn’t known what city until the lawyer caught up the day after he’d been moved. He wondered what was significant about the city of Seattle, that they’d moved him here, and what would come next.
He’d been confined alone and not been subjected to any further questioning; at least not yet. He was interested to see if Teague would be back now that he’d been moved to another city. The CIA woman had threatened him with imprisonment at Guantanamo if he had no useful information to provide, so he expected she would speak to him again. The Americans were playing their little chess match...he knew the game too. It was time to follow LaPointe’s instructions; put Teague’s threat to the test.

A blinking light in his peripheral vision caught his attention. He looked up to see the camera now apparently active. He gave it, and whoever might be watching a benevolent smile. Teague made her opening gambit in their chess match and it seemed she had the advantage. Now it was his turn, and time would tell if it remained so.

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Tony watched their enigmatic prisoner through the two-way glass and narrowed his eyes as the man in the other room smiled at the camera.

He spoke quietly to Matt, who’d joined him to watch the interrogation. “He’s up to something. His body language is different than it was in Phoenix. He was confident; talking in circles to throw us off. Even a bit arrogant.” Tony elaborated. “Now he’s trying to appear calm and sure, but it’s an act. He’s on edge and trying to hide it. Something has changed.”

Matt simply nodded; agreeing with the assessment. He’d watched the recording of Joanna’s first session with the prisoner. Nick was right. Tony, he corrected himself internally. That was going to take some getting used to, when the time came. Everyone agreed to stay with using ‘Nick’ until the case was over, one way or the other.

The matter of his name had come up when the team had given Tony their decision about whether they wanted him to continue as their leader. Joanna had provided Tony’s real personnel file, and they’d all taken turns examining it. It was impressive, he recalled. Six years as a police officer and fifteen as a NCIS agent; with numerous commendations throughout his career. The original case and investigation of The Calling wasn’t the first time he’d been instrumental in bringing down a dangerous terrorist organization.

By all accounts, he was a damn fine investigator and undercover operative, and had the service record to prove it. After discussing it in depth, he and the others decided they’d be shooting themselves and their investigation in the ass by forcing Tony to step down at that point.
Recovered from their initial reactions of anger and disappointment at being kept out of the loop, they’d gone to him as a group to show their continued support. Although by the look on his face, he wasn’t at all sure what their decision would be. It bothered him a bit that Tony didn’t seem to think he was worthy of their loyalty, but he had it just the same. As they approached, he’d looked up from reviewing the transcripts of Officer Wei’s statements. His expression looked pained for a fleeting moment, then changed to carefully neutral as he’d ventured, “So, what’s the verdict?”

They were all willing to continue to work with him, and they’d told him so. That was when his name came up.

“So what do we call you? Tony?” Lena had asked.

“It’s probably easier to stay with Nick for the time being, and will be less confusing for the rest of the task force.” Trying to inject some levity, he added with a hesitant smile, “But if you want to call me Tony in private, I’ll try to remember to answer to it.”

If anyone still had any misgivings, they seemed to have set them aside. Tony asking him to come along when they interrogated the new prisoner went a long way toward reassuring everyone that Tony and Joanna were done keeping secrets from them.

The sound of the door opening in the next room pulled Matt’s attention back to the present. The man they now knew to be Hasan Salah turned to the door as Joanna entered and took her seat opposite him. Salah remained quiet; watching her expectantly.

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“We’ve got an interesting picture when it comes to you, Mr. Nassir,” Joanna began. She hoped to keep the cunning old man overconfident by using the name from his falsified passport, and implying they hadn’t learned his real name yet.

Salah smiled, secretly pleased. “Oh yes? What picture would that be?”

“You asked to see me,” Joanna countered. “Perhaps you should begin.”

Joanna sat back in the chair; relaxed and almost nonchalant, but maintaining eye contact. After a brief staring contest, Salah realized she would say nothing more until he explained the reason for
his request to see her. “I have information which you may find useful.”

“Information you’re willing to share with us now?” Joanna asked.

“Yes, in return for certain assurances.”

“Why should we trust your information when up to this point, you’ve deflected and evaded our questions while providing a wealth of information we already have?” Joanna asked, waving a hand dismissively. “What could you possibly tell us, that we don’t already know, Mr. Salah?” she asked, emphasizing his real name.

Uncertainty flickered in the old man’s dark eyes for a moment at that revelation, then he smiled. “Many things, I suspect,” he answered, keeping the game going.

“It wasn’t too difficult to learn your identity and it’s a little late to bargain. We’ve learned a great deal more about you,” Joanna smiled coolly. “For instance, you’re a French citizen with ties to the Despins and Rousseau families going back decades. You’re a longtime friend of LaPointe, you’ve been a member of The Calling since its inception, and your role is intelligence and information.”

“All true,” Salah admitted. “As such, I have a great deal of information you’ll find enlightening.”

“Like the locations of your sleeper cells in the Western US?” Joanna asked. “Or perhaps the fact that The Calling uses the Despins Company’s commercial shipping fleet to transport its illegal arms?” Joanna gave a toothy, shark-like smile. “Your cells are falling one by one as we speak. The Coast Guard will be waiting for every Despins ship that docks at a US port.”

The woman and her colleagues were indeed worthy adversaries. But how much did they know, really? “You are well-informed,” he allowed.

“How do you think you’re our only source of information?”

“Ah yes. My phone?” Salah guessed. “Or Chan’s scribblings, perhaps? But he’s no longer a source,” Salah continued, giving a toothy, satisfied smile of his own, as he recalled Chan’s execution by LaPointe. “Perhaps it’s Officer Wei now,” he ventured, nodding to himself while stroking his beard thoughtfully. “I do hope you’re as successful hiding him as you have been at hiding Agent DiNozzo,” he taunted threateningly.
In the observation room, Tony stiffened at the implied threat to their star witness, a man whose safety he felt personally responsible for. He was the one that talked Wei into turning on LaPointe and The Calling. He moved to go next door.

“Wait,” Matt said, shaking his head and holding Tony back. “Shouldn’t we keep him in the dark on your presence here?”

Tony shrugged and headed for the door. “Pretty sure he already knows about me after the fiasco with the lawyer. Let’s just see how unflappable our friend in there is.”

Matt nodded stiffly and settled in to watch Joanna and Tony work.

Salah started slightly as the door opened, then smiled as Tony walked in. The old man’s eyes took on a predatory gleam as Tony leaned against the glass behind Joanna and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“Agent DiNozzo, I presume? We’ve been looking for you,” Salah offered with a mocking smile.

“So I keep hearing.”

Joanna hid a grin; this was a glimpse of the Tony she remembered from that first case. She turned to watch the show as Tony slouched against the wall, unconcerned.

Salah was ignoring Joanna now. “I commend you on your ability to evade LaPointe for so long. He’s quite perturbed by it.”

Tony broke out his most annoying grin. “I’m good at that. It’s a gift.”

“Hiding, like a coward?”

“Perturbing people,” Tony shot back. “Speaking of cowards, LaPointe is some piece of work.”
Salah frowned at the insult to his old friend. “What do you mean?”

Tony huffed and rolled his eyes, further angering the man. “Where do I start? The targeting of innocent civilians, indiscriminate attacks resulting in collateral damage, the *lame* moniker he came up with to hide his identity.”

Tony paused for effect. “LaPointe…point of a lance; from the old French, and nickname for a soldier,” he intoned. “It *can’t* be a real name. Pretty pretentious choice though, if you ask me.”

Salah’s face was set in stone. “You should be sure to tell him that when you meet.”

Joanna tensed as Tony’s intentionally irritating demeanor changed and all humor melted away in an instant.

Tony stepped up to the table and stood next to Joanna. “Will we be meeting?” he asked.

“I have no doubt. I can give you what your sources cannot.”

“And that is…?” Joanna chimed in.

Salah smiled confidently “I can give you LaPointe.”

“Why would you do that?” Tony asked.

“I’m an old man,” Salah began. “But I value what time I have left. If I am to live out my days in prison, I would like it to be one where LaPointe cannot reach, such as your Guantanamo.”

“You think he plans to have you killed in prison?” Joanna asked.

“He’s done it before,” Salah reasoned, “a number of times, as I believe you know; from the watchers that were recently apprehended with me, going all the way back to Matthew Rousseau. So, yes…that protection is the assurance I ask for first.”
“You want us to believe you’d turn traitor on your longtime friend, because you’re suddenly afraid for your life? I don’t buy it,” Tony asserted. “LaPointe’s inner circle is said to be fiercely loyal.”

“LaPointe rules by fear and intimidation,” Salah disputed. “Because of my intimate knowledge of the group and its’ leadership circle, he is sure to be displeased that I allowed myself to be arrested. I am expendable now. If you wait too long, we both lose.”

“I wonder how truly displeased he is about that,” Tony mused, as he eyed Salah steadily. “Exactly why is LaPointe so determined to find me in particular,” he asked curiously.

“Daniel,” Salah said simply.

“Daniel Budd?” Joanna asked.

Salah gave a slight nod. He looked at Tony pointedly. “He believes you murdered Daniel.”

“I didn’t murder Daniel Budd. I wounded him non-fatally, then shot him in self-defense when he went for a weapon.”

“That is irrelevant to LaPointe. Daniel was very important to him, and he is dead at your hands.”

“How important?” Joanna asked. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Do you? Why? You’ve been pursuing LaPointe for more than two years, because of his role in your son’s death. And you,” he said, looking up at Tony. “How did it feel standing there in that marketplace in Iraq, helpless and too far away to prevent your mentor and friend from being shot twice?” Tony’s jaw clenched at having the memory of that nightmarish day dredged up. The Calling’s new leader had done his homework.

Salah could see he scored a hit and continued, determined to make his point. "You both tracked Daniel and The Calling halfway across the world to get justice. Or was it retribution you sought? I assure you, LaPointe will do no less for someone he thought of as a son. Helping you is to my advantage. You want to find him. I can help you do that before he finds you. And he will."
“Just how exactly, do you propose to help us find him?” Joanna asked.

“I’ll give you the encryption key for my laptop. You’ll be able to use the information there to track him, and the small group that accompanied him out of Shanghai,” Salah proposed. “In return, I want a written guarantee that I won’t be sent to Cuba or placed in the general population of any other prison.”

Joanna laughed. “That’s your bargaining chip? What makes you so sure we haven’t already gotten into your computer?”

Salah could see they weren’t yet convinced. He had one last move to make, and it would have to be the most compelling one.

“Because if you had accessed it, you wouldn’t be here wasting your time with me.”

“Where would we be?” Tony asked, watching Salah intently.

“You would be somewhere else, acting to stop an imminent terrorist attack. One which will result in great loss of life. You may break the encryption eventually without my help, but will it be in time?”

He didn’t like it one damn bit, but knowing they couldn’t take a chance on whether Salah was bluffing, Tony agreed. “You’ll get your deal if the information proves to be accurate, but you’re going to give us the key first. Where is it?”

Salah tapped his temple.

“Memorized? Joanna queried doubtfully. At his nod, she shoved a notepad and pen across the table. “Write it down.”

Salah hesitated, then wrote out a long series of alphanumeric characters.
Tony turned to the glass and spoke, knowing Matt would be listening. Careful not to use any names or their location, he instructed, “Call the office and have them standing by with the laptop recovered in Phoenix.”

A few minutes later a soft series of knocks sounded from the other side of the glass. Tony picked up the notepad and joined Matt next door.

“Tell me you’re not taking this guy at his word,” Matt burst out.

“Of course not,” Tony reassured him. “I don’t trust that wily old man as far as I can throw him. Something about this isn’t adding up. He’s pretty determined to set us on a collision course with LaPointe, and that alone is suspicious. We can’t discount potential intel on a terrorist attack though, so let’s see what he has for us, and take it from there.”

Matt read the series of letters and numbers to Lena, who was on the other end of the open phone line. After a few minutes, he turned to Tony and reported, “She’s in.”

“Have Lena, Mel, and the intel analysts scour that laptop as fast as they can,” Tony instructed.

“On it, Nick,” Matt responded.

Salah feigned disinterest while Joanna looked up as Tony re-entered the interrogation room.

“Well?”

“They’ve accessed the laptop,” he confirmed, looking at Salah as he took a seat next to Joanna.

“So, summarize what we’re going to find, Mr. Salah.”

“There is a cell operating in the Los Angeles area. LaPointe is there; directing their work personally,” he revealed. “On the laptop, you will find information on arms shipments destined for the Port of Los Angeles and a list of potential targets for an attack. LaPointe had not yet selected one at the time of my capture. You’ll have to check them all.”

“What about timing,” Tony asked.
Salah shrugged. “Soon.”

“Uh huh,” Tony sat back and considered the other man. “That’s helpful,” he drawled sarcastically. “There’s going to be an attack somewhere in one of the largest cities in the country, sometime soon.”

The older man narrowed his eyes at the sarcasm, and indulged himself with a moment imagining the agent’s death at LaPointe’s hands. “It is more than you knew before,” Salah replied.

“Possibly,” Tony answered, refused to confirm it one way or the other. He rose and Joanna stood along with him, sensing they were done here.

“What about our arrangement? Will my lawyer be working on it?” Salah asked.

Tony held the door for Joanna to leave as he answered. He snapped his fingers as if he’d forgotten something and gave an infuriating smile as he answered. “He won’t be joining you any time soon, and since you agreed this meeting could happen without representation, we didn’t see it necessary to replace him with a public defender.”

“Why would he need to be replaced?” Salah asked, confused now.

Tony stepped back to the table and leaned down and placed his palms on the table. He spoke in a low voice, as if sharing a secret. “We know you’ve been in contact with LaPointe via your lawyer. If you were hoping to relay details of this meeting to LaPointe, I don’t think that’s going to be happening. They discovered the cell phone your lawyer attempted to smuggle in to you.”

He made a tisking noise. “He wasn’t very careful about hiding who he was communicating with.” Tony shook his head sadly. “We’ve linked him to The Calling and he’s in almost as much trouble as you are.” He leaned closer and stared icily into the older man’s dark eyes. “Almost,” Tony emphasized with a final sardonic smile before he left the room to join the others.

Salah closed his eyes and breathed; outwardly composed but inwardly attempting to calm his rising fury at the agent’s goading. No matter, he thought. LaPointe didn’t need to hear from him directly to know he was successful. The wheels were in motion and LaPointe would soon have his confirmation another way. The arrogant Americans didn’t know it yet, but they’d just sealed their fate.
Checkmate.

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AN: Oh dear. What's Salah got cooked up with LaPointe? Find out in the next chapter, "Deflect and Distract".
Deflect and Distract

Chapter Summary

Tony and the team foil The Calling's planned terror attacks in Los Angeles and intercept their arms shipment. Things aren't what they seem on the surface and elsewhere, LaPointe puts a darker, more personal plan in motion.

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I know it's been awhile since I've updated, so my apologies to those still following this story. Back in late September, my laptop was stolen. It took a while to replace it. When I did, I had to face the reality that I don't back up as often as I should. I lost a month's worth of work including two mostly finished chapters to this story, as well as drafts and outlines for several new stories.

It put an incredible damper on my ability to continue this story for some time. I struggled with this a lot, and finally managed to get the lost work rewritten, only to dwell on the differences between the originals and the rewrite versions. I think I'm finally done angsting over it. So as a reward for your patience, you get a two chapter update; one long chapter and one reeeaally long chapter. I hope it helps make up for the long wait.

Now, on to the story with my thanks to those still following and commenting. I really do appreciate it :)

Beta'd, with any leftover goofs belonging to me.

~Seattle, S3 Building~

Mel glanced at her watch as she entered the S3 conference room and closed the door behind her. She paused before taking her own chair, noting that Nick and Gary were absent.

“Where are Nick and Gary?” she asked. “I thought I’d be the last one here as usual,” she quipped.

“Gary is on the phone with agents at the FBI building,” Joanna answered with a smile. “Tony wants them to put a 24-hour watch on Hasan Salah.”
“Tony is taking a call from FBI Director Whitman,” Matt added. “It seems we’re getting a case transfer and the associated evidence from DC. Tony will be here to brief us shortly.”

The door opened again as Gary arrived, along with Tony.

“Alright everyone, here’s what’s going on,” Tony began as he closed the door and joined the group seated at the table. “First agenda item; Salah’s lawyer. He managed to post bail…not that he enjoyed his freedom for very long.”

“Why do you say that?” Joanna asked.

“He didn’t even make it inside his hotel, before being killed in what Seattle PD is calling a random mugging.”

“Aside from the suspicious timing, is there any reason to believe that’s not the case?” Matt asked.

“Surveillance video from just outside the building appears to show the attacker was waiting outside and targeted him specifically.” Tony explained.

“I think it’s entirely possible that The Calling is keeping close tabs on their chess pieces and this one outlived his usefulness,” Joanna asserted.

Tony nodded. “Hence the round the clock monitoring around our friend Salah. As for the attacker, there’s a brief second or two in the footage where his face is visible. The FBI has taken the case from the Seattle PD. Their lab is working to enhance the video and identify the suspect.”

“If there’s a chance The Calling has operatives in the area keeping tabs on Salah, it’s probably a good idea for the FBI to tighten physical security around the building as a whole,” Matt suggested.

“That’s what Gary was coordinating while I took the call from the Director,” Tony said. “We’ll make sure everything is tight here too. There’s no reason to believe they’ve connected S3 to our task force, but better safe than sorry.”

“Well that answers the first part of Mel’s question,” Lena chimed in. “So what was the call from
“At my request, the Director coordinated our taking over a NCIS case. He confirmed that a
shipment of files and evidence is headed our way via certified mail.”

“Why are we taking a case from them now?” Gary began. “When all our resources are focused on
The Calling, and we’re about to head to LA?”

“Because their case is directly linked to ours, and The Calling,” Tony answered. “NCIS has been
investigating a series of network intrusions, which led to The Calling’s hacking activities, and my
name popping up.”

Matt cringed at the idea that he might have inadvertently given The Calling an avenue to track
Tony when he contacted Morrow about the old NCIS case files. “If this is on me, I’m sorry, Tony.
If Morrow hadn’t brought Vance into this, there wouldn’t have been any scrutiny into your alias,
and nothing for anyone to find.”

Tony shook his head. “That’s not the case, according to Director Whitman,” he reassured. “It’s
clear The Calling was already scouring DC to pick up my trail. They’re getting careless in their
attempts to find me, and for some time, they’ve been hacking several federal databases looking for
leads on where I went. It’s coincidence that their intrusion was detected by NCIS and investigated,”
Tony explained.

“Eventually, NCIS discovered The Calling is back and responsible for the hacking in DC, and for
the sharp spike in terrorism in East Asia,” Tony continued. “They also know the group set a trap in
Shanghai for the Chinese tactical forces. In light of our own ongoing investigation, when The
Calling’s involvement and my name came up, I had the justification to have the case pulled from
them.”

“Did Whitman say if they managed to turn up anything about you in the NCIS data?” Lena asked.

Tony shook his head. “Only information that predates my resignation, and only Morrow and Vance
suspect I’m connected to our copy of the NCIS case file. Because of the alias, there’s no electronic
trail for The Calling to follow since I left DC. Now we just need to review the evidence NCIS
collected and see if they turned up anything that helps our investigation. There’s just one problem
with that.”
“Which brings us to the reason for a second mission briefing,” Joanna broke in. “The shipment will be here by tomorrow. We can’t all go to LA; some of us need to stay here and review the incoming evidence. Tony and I want your input on how the team will proceed.”

“Especially when you consider The Calling will most likely be expecting us to turn up in LA, thanks to Salah and his lawyer,” Tony added. “They could very well be setting a trap at any one of the locations we’re checking out.”

“Well” Gary began, scratching his chin thoughtfully, “In light of that, splitting Tony and Joanna up is a good strategy anyway. The California part of the team will have plenty of back up from the local LEOs and LA’s FBI office.”

Matt agreed. “Lena and Mel are still following the evidence trail from Salah’s computer and cell phone. They’re using that, and the information turned over by Chan and Officer Wei to identify and locate LaPointe. I suggest they continue and take on the new evidence when it arrives.”

“Don’t forget about Emile Rousseau,” Tony reminded. “Everything we have from Chan and Wei indicates he’s the number two man behind LaPointe.”

“I may need to help with the intel side of things,” Joanna added. “and Salah may need to be questioned again, depending on what we learn.”

Tony rubbed his palms together and gave a pleased grin. “Ok, it’s settled then,” he said as he rose from his seat at the table. “Matt and Gary; you’re with me. Let’s get this show on the road.”

~Los Angeles, two days earlier~

Rousseau cursed the LA traffic as he made his way back to the small house in the hills. While the privacy and seclusion served their needs as a base of operations, it was a fair distance to the port and downtown. To make matters worse, he had to make the drive frequently to ensure all was as it should be in various locations. He checked with their surveillance teams and ensured their staging locations at the port and elsewhere had not been compromised. LaPointe’s arrangements with Port Authority and Customs personnel on their payroll ensured their arms and cash shipments would arrive and be rerouted without interference or inspections. With a shipment critical to their plans arriving very soon, a last minute check was in order. Those tasks complete, he’d been ordered back
After Chan and Wei’s betrayals, LaPointe spied on everyone; even his inner circle. His old friend had probably discovered that he’d gone against his wishes and acted to eliminate the threat posed by Hasan’s lawyer. Well, he had his own sources. It was time one of them looked after their interests, he thought, because LaPointe seemed increasingly fanatical and unpredictable. His obsession with finding Teague and DiNozzo was becoming his sole concern, to the exclusion of all else, and Rousseau had no idea what LaPointe was planning.

Their network was crumbling around them as Teague and her people continued to draw closer; rooting out their cells operating in the US and shutting them down. Only LA had yet to see any activity and he sensed that was about to change, thanks to LaPointe’s questionable decisions. Something had to change. He had to convince his old friend he was on the wrong path; and if that didn’t work, more drastic measures might have to be taken.

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Rousseau entered LaPointe’s makeshift office. The other man was seated at his computer, presumably monitoring the activities of their far-flung operatives. LaPointe looked up as he entered and closed the laptop, reining in the temptation to slam it closed. He stared at his second in command for a long moment, and when he spoke his voice was even but his eyes were black with anger.

“Why have you countermanded my orders, Emile?” LaPointe asked without preamble.

Rousseau shrugged as he sat in the chair opposite LaPointe’s desk. “I am merely following through with the original plan. The lawyer outlived his usefulness.”

“I disagree,” LaPointe replied sharply. “It didn’t occur to you that Hasan being transferred to the Seattle-Tacoma FBI building might have altered the plan?”

“No, because of late, you haven’t seen fit to share any of your plans with me,” Rousseau shot back. “The careless lawyer you hired for Hasan became a liability as soon as he was arrested for trying to smuggle him a phone. He also could have identified us both, and so I dealt with the problem. Teague’s people had no idea of the extent of our plans. Now I find you’ve been using Hasan to feed the authorities clues about LA and us. Are you so determined to force a confrontation before we are ready?”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” LaPointe asked, his voice dangerously low.
“Yes! Whatever you had in mind to deal with all of them, the plan was poorly executed.”

LaPointe waved off his concern, and set aside his own anger at being challenged. He supposed his friend had a point, and chose to explain so that Emile wouldn’t feel it necessary to act on his own initiative again. It was time for Emile to realize he had a part to play in a larger scheme.

“I’m merely accelerating the timetable. The sooner we find them and deal with their task force, the sooner we’ll be free to operate freely and recover from their interference. I’ve had quite enough of it.”

“Accelerated the timetable?” Rousseau asked incredulously. “You have delayed it by underestimating our quarry again. Almost every cell in the US has been raided. Teague has been sighted at the FBI building in Seattle and they’ve tightened security there. We can’t get to Hasan. DiNozzo is here in LA now working out of the FBI building with two others.”

“Yes,” LaPointe allowed. “As I expected.”

“You expected this?” Rousseau asked, frustration making his tone harsher than he intended. “We bring them to us, you said. Draw them to us and deal with them all at once. They have divided their forces and will almost certainly anticipate that we might be leading them into a trap here in LA. They won’t entirely trust anything Hasan told them and will be cautious. You shouldn’t have had him feign cooperation, at least not so soon. It’s far too obvious.”

“Everything that has happened has been by my design,” LaPointe assured. “It is your actions that have put my plans in peril by taking the lawyer out of play personally. What if you’d been caught in Seattle? There will be no more such actions taken without consulting me first,” he warned, a note of threat in his tone.

“I might not have gone, or acted at all if you revealed your intentions to me,” Rousseau conceded. “We have unfinished business and because of your actions, they are on alert,” Rousseau countered. “I’m concerned that our operations are being neglected in favor of your preoccupation with locating and confronting Teague and DiNozzo. Now, it looks as though you are sabotaging that effort as well. This fixation with them is clouding your reason. What are you planning and what aren’t you telling me?”

LaPointe narrowed his eyes and ignored the question. “You forget your place, Emile. I’ll only be pushed so far.”

“My place? It is by your side as always, my friend,” he placated. “Remember, since the beginning,
we have always worked together to conceive and execute our plans. Have I given you cause to distrust me?”

“I trust you as much as I trust anyone.”

“That’s not really an answer, LaPointe. The vessel with our arms shipment arrives soon and I need to know how to proceed. We have a chance at eliminating DiNozzo, at least.”

LaPointe’s expression darkened. “No. I will meet him face to face and I will be there when he draws his last breath. He will know who is ending his life and why. Teague as well.”

“Then why set the traps for them, if you had no intention of killing either of them now? It was risky luring any of them here. We might not get a better chance at him.”

“Oh, we will. We have a new mission, Emile.”

“You said everything that has happened was by design. If you trust me, explain this.”

LaPointe agreed with a curt nod. “Hasan has played his part, and now it is time for yours. It was always my intention to share this with you at the right time, and the pieces are in place. Because of Matthew, you have as much cause to want them dead as I do,” he reminded.

Rousseau’s thoughts turned to his much-loved older brother, murdered in prison, thanks to Teague, DiNozzo, and NCIS putting him there. “Is now the right time?” he asked.

LaPointe nodded. “We’ve quite realistically staged scenes around LA for soft target terrorist attacks. The information on Hasan’s laptop forces them to investigate, even if they suspect a trap. The traps are illusions; delaying tactics that serve another purpose. They will pursue us here in LA, find and neutralize the threats while we prepare to attack them when they don’t expect it. It’s all part of the plan to give them a false sense of security. I want them to believe we were drawing them here, specifically to target them and to think we’ve disbanded and scattered when that fails,” LaPointe explained.

“But that’s not your plan now.” Rousseau guessed.
“No, the plan is for them to think that. It is a distraction; a diversion from what you and I will be doing.”

“And what is that? I still say you are passing up a perfectly good chance to eliminate some of them here in LA.”

“No matter. We will be hitting them somewhere else.”

“How will we attack them elsewhere, in such a way that you will get your face to face meeting? We don’t know where they live, where they are based, or how to find them.” Something significant must have come to light for LaPointe to be so confident he could stage the confrontation he so badly wanted. “What’s changed?”

“What’s changed?” LaPointe repeated, smiling in that chilling way of his. He tapped his computer. “Thanks to Hasan, I believe I do know how to find them.”

Rousseau made a leap and asked incredulously, “You aren’t planning to attack the FBI building itself? That is ill-advised, my friend. And what about Hasan?”

LaPointe rose without answering. “All your questions will be answered after we depart. I suggest you go pack.”

Rousseau sat up in his chair as LaPointe headed for the door, his cell phone in hand and preparing to make a call. “We are relocating again? Where are we going?”

“We’ll stop at the port first, pick up what we’ll need from the items stored there and to see to the backup plan. Then we leave LA. Kareem and the others have been in place for a few days,” he answered as he placed the phone to his ear and left the room without explaining further.

The others, Rousseau thought. More of LaPointe’s secrecy. He quickly moved to the desk and looked for a sign of LaPointe’s plan while the other man was in the other room making his phone call. He opened the lid of the laptop LaPointe had been using and waited as the screen flared to life. The last program used was still open, and he smiled broadly as he realized what he was seeing; the connection to Hasan forming in his mind.

Perhaps LaPointe knew what he was doing after all. In any case, he had no choice but to go along
with him for now, and hope this wasn’t a sign his obsession was making him even more unstable, rather than simply impetuous.

~LAX Airport, Los Angeles~

Tony shifted restlessly, the tactical gear he was wearing uncomfortable and hot on this unseasonably warm LA day. He stood next to Matt, in a cordoned off safe zone around a small private jet company hangar on the LAX grounds. Gary paced behind them, working off his agitation. Tension was high as they waited for the “all clear” from inside the hangar where the bomb squad technicians worked to disable the improvised explosive devices found there.

The radio frequency jammers they’d brought along with their tactical gear had been put to good use; preventing any attempt at remote detonation of the devices. Unfortunately, it also rendered their earwigs and radios useless so they couldn’t follow what was happening inside.

Gary stopped pacing and came to stand alongside them as the hangar door opened and one of the techs stepped out, waving and shouting an “all clear”.

Within minutes, the hangar was a hive of activity as Tony and the others converged to document the scene and collect evidence. While Matt and Gary got down to business, the captain of the bomb disposal team waved Tony over.

“Captain Bolling,” Tony began, “What did your team find?”

“Virtually the same as the other scenes,” the other man confirmed. “Explosive devices rigged to use cell phones as detonators. In the back office, there’s schematics of the main terminal and airport employee credentials, probably fake or stolen. Also keycards for access to employee restricted areas. It appears they originally planned to hit the terminal, then something changed. Given the intel you shared with us, I’d say they knew you were coming and decided to set a trap instead,” Bolling asserted.

Tony thanked him and when he turned to rejoin Matt and Gary, he absently noted the blinking blue light as a motion detector mounted on the wall caught his movements. There was something off about this scene, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He wondered if the others felt the same way.

Miles away, watchful eyes tapped into the video surveillance feed and monitored the activity in the hangar.
Ellis stepped away from his desk and closer to McGee’s as the monitor behind his SFA caught his attention.

“Hey McGee, turn that up, would you?”

McGee reflexively looked at the news report on the display behind him, then fumbled in his desk drawer for the remote. He turned up the volume and stood to watch with Ellis as the camera panned to a reporter standing by.

“Earlier today, flight schedules to and from the western US were thrown into disarray as one of the nations’ busiest airports, Los Angeles International, halted operations for several hours. The city’s bomb disposal unit was called to support their federal counterparts conducting sweeps of the terminal and airport property after a suspicious device was found in an outlying hangar. This incident comes just two days after a car bomb was found in the LA Convention Center complex’s parking garage. Both devices were safely deactivated, but no other information has been released at this time as to the nature of the devices, any possible motives for placing them, or if the incidents are related. Authorities continue to investigate, and we’ll update you as this situation develops.”

“Wow, I wonder what the story is there,” McGee mused.

“Yeah…what a mess. Hopefully they’re isolated incidents. Good thing the Director’s trip to LA isn’t until next week. Flight schedules should be back to normal well before then.” Ellis added as he turned to go back to his desk.

McGee nodded his agreement and turned the volume back down. He sat and resumed working; research on their current case quickly pushing the incidents in LA out of his mind.
Tony, Matt, and Gary sat at the conference table in the room provided for his team to work from while they were here. They huddled around Tony’s laptop, video conferencing to exchange updates with Joanna and the others in Seattle. Tony’s leg bounced under the conference room table; the nervous energy he felt inside finding an outlet.

“The raid at the house in the hills was a bust as far as finding LaPointe,” Tony reported. “It looks like whoever was there left in a big hurry. They knew we were coming, just like at the convention center and airport.”

“Damn,” Joanna’s tinny voice came over the laptop speaker. She and Lena had been elated at identifying a contender for the place LaPointe was using as a base for the LA operations. Phone logs and internet activity from the destroyed compound in Shanghai, The Calling’s hackers in DC, and most recently Salah’s lawyer, all had one thing in common. Communication with someone at a secluded house in the hills above LA.

“How did they know you were coming?” she asked. “It couldn’t have been the lawyer this time.”

Tony shook his head and then grinned at the monitor. “Well, we inadvertently created a bit of a panic in the course of setting up surveillance at the port where the Despins container vessel docks,” he said. “We investigated some suspicious behavior among port authority and customs officers, and found they are on the payroll of one of the shell companies linked to The Calling. We think it was one of them that warned LaPointe and the others we were here,” Tony explained.

“Did you find anything of use at the house?” Lena asked from behind Joanna.

“Oh yeah, a bit of a jackpot,” Tony replied. “We interrupted a clean-up crew at work. We apprehended several men that look to be unassociated with LaPointe and the others; just locals hired to remove remaining evidence and torch the house. LaPointe and Rousseau may have moved days ago, but they left some things behind. Among some of the things the locals were trying to burn, we recovered a list of potential targets for attacks. There’s also manifests listing everything shipped to the port so far, and its ultimate destination. There’s some pretty scary stuff in that warehouse.”

“But LaPointe himself has gone to ground now,” Joanna mused, with a frustrated sigh. “That’ll make it harder to pick him up again.”

“Maybe not,” Matt inserted, as he leaned in toward the laptop camera. “Either Salah lied to us
about the timing of the incoming arms shipment, or they’ve adjusted the schedule in reaction to his
capture. The ship docked early and they’re offloading now. LaPointe and Rousseau might even be
there.”

Tony continued from there. “We’ve got the port authority and customs guys dead to rights. Our
stakeout team confirms they’re diverting containers to a vacant warehouse on the edge of the
property before they can be inspected. We’re leaving soon to raid the warehouse, so here’s to
hoping for a big break,” Tony asserted.

“Thanks for the update, Tony.” Joanna said. “Good luck.”

“And be careful, all of you,” Lena added.

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~Port of Los Angeles~

Tony leaned cautiously around a stack of crates and glimpsed the buzz of activity centered in the
middle of the sprawling warehouse, where the newly arrived crates and containers were being
opened, sorted, and inventoried. He drew back and listened over the earwig radio as the other
teams of agents confirmed they were in position, he looked to his left and right in turn, finding
Gary and Matt similarly waiting, weapons at the ready. He tensed and adrenaline began to flow as
a countdown sounded in his ear, and then…

“Federal Agents! Hands in the air!” His voice joined the others echoing through the cavernous
space as his team moved forward, joining agents and police officers streaming in from all
directions. The suspected terrorists scattered, trying to avoid arrest. Some were apprehended and
cuffed immediately, while others disappeared into the maze of stacked crates.

“Dammit,” he muttered, as he and Gary broke off to follow one man into the labyrinth. “The
warehouse is surrounded,” he shouted as they followed the running figure. “Drop your weapon and
get down on the ground!”

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion reverberated through the warehouse and he staggered as the
floor shook beneath their feet. With the sound of the blast and flickering lights a brief distraction,
Tony regained his balance and looked up to see the suspect had turned, moved from behind a large
crate and taken aim at them.
“Gary, look out!” he shouted the warning to his partner just behind him. He and Gary leapt to opposite sides of the narrow aisle, flattening themselves against the crates and firing simultaneously. The sound of the shots, theirs and the suspect’s, added to the growing din around them as fire and smoke from the explosion on the far side of the warehouse spread rapidly.

The suspect dropped and Tony cautiously inched closer to the unmoving form, trusting Gary was covering them. He kicked the suspect’s weapon from a limp hand and went down to one knee to check the pulse. Dead. He turned back and started in shock.

Tony turned back toward Gary and his heart lurched on seeing the other man down.

“Gary!”

The other agent was on the floor, leaning against the crates. He still held his weapon on the downed suspect, blinking blearily as Tony rushed back toward him.

Tony knelt and gently uncurled Gary’s fingers from his gun, setting it aside. Gary flinched and his vision refocused as Tony quickly assessed his partner, hands finding a bullet wound in one thigh. “Sorry,” he grimaced. “You hurt anywhere else?”

“Banged my head on the crate when I went down, but it’s not bad,” Gary replied as he clumsily tried to replace the earwig that had become dislodged with the blow.

Tony cupped a hand over one ear to hear the transmission over his own set, as a series of smaller explosions made them both flinch. “The fire is getting out of control; they’re ordering everyone out. Can you walk?”

Gary glanced up at the growing glow of the fire over the stacks of crates and nodded. “Oh yeah, you bet,” he replied, snatching up his weapon and holstering it. “Help me up?” he asked, extending a hand toward Tony.

Tony stifled a cough as the spreading smoke began to reach them. He got Gary on his feet and
pressed his lips together grimly at the small gasp as the other man tried to stand on the injured leg. He looped one of Gary’s arms across his shoulders and wrapped an arm around his torso, taking some of the weight.

“Let’s move,” Tony said, and guided them back through the winding aisle the way they’d come.

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Matt watched the warehouse apprehensively from behind a cordoned off area as the more fire engines arrived and began to unroll hose, joining those already on scene. Boom after boom sounded from inside, as the heat of the fire and smaller blasts caused sympathetic detonations of the ordnance and ammunition stored there.

Before the first explosion, probably set off by some of the terrorists to aid their escape, he’d lost sight of Tony and Gary as they chased a fleeing suspect deeper into the jungle of stacked crates and boxes. The warehouse was becoming more engulfed in flames with every second, and only Tony and Gary were still unaccounted for.

Matt tensed as a group of EMT’s standing by grabbed up equipment boxes and took off running around one corner of the burning building. Moments later, he sagged in relief as two familiar figures came into view, soot smudged their faces and clothes, but they were moving under their own power.

Tony was coughing, and less than cooperative with an EMT who was trying to keep an oxygen mask in place, but otherwise he appeared uninjured. Gary also had a mask strapped on, one pants leg was bloody, and he was limping badly. He was supported on either side by EMTs as the group made their way toward a waiting ambulance. Matt ducked under the barricade and jogged over to join them.

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~NCIS HQ, Washington, DC~

Gibbs’ knee protested a bit as he jogged up the back stairwell carrying a small stack of reports and requisitions for Vance. He entered the outer office only to find Cynthia away from the desk. He leaned into Vance’s doorway to find the Director on a phone call. Vance glanced up at him questioningly, and he held up the hand holding the files. Vance waved him in and he stepped
toward the muted television while he waited for Vance to finish his call. On the screen, ZNN had looped back around to this morning’s big news story; the overnight explosion and fire at the Port of Los Angeles. He shook his head; LA seemed to be in the news for all the wrong reasons in the last few days.

“Gibbs,” Vance called, rising from his chair and holding out a hand for the files. “You didn’t have to bring those up yourself.”

“Needed to stretch my legs anyway,” Gibbs shrugged, handing over the stack. “You still headed to LA for the conference? Seems like a bad idea right about now, Leon.”

“SECNAV seems to agree with you,” Vance replied. “That was her on the phone. The conference is delayed while they look at changing the venue. Two narrowly averted bombings, and now this,” he said waving at the television screen. “No claims of responsibility yet, and they’re playing it close to the vest, but word is the FBI and Homeland have linked all three incidents.”

“They have an idea who’s responsible?” Gibbs asked.

“If they do, they aren’t saying,” Vance replied. “Not much else is known publicly at this point.” Vance added as he walked around the desk, looking at his watch. “I’ve got a meeting; thanks for bringing up the files, Gibbs.”

Both men turned to leave the office while ZNN replayed earlier footage from the LA incident. If they’d stayed a few moments longer, they might have picked out a familiar face in the background as the news camera panned across the scene at the warehouse fire.

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~Seattle, FBI Building, same day~

Joanna walked into the interrogation room and took a seat, meeting the other man’s curious gaze steadily.

“I must say I’m surprised to see you,” Salah ventured.
“Oh, and just why is that?”

“Not many walk away from a confrontation with LaPointe,” he answered, feigning concern. “I haven’t seen Agent DiNozzo…perhaps it is him that didn’t walk away?”

Joanna’s eyes narrowed, but her lips quirked. “Public defenders,” she shook her with a pretense of dismay. “Your new lawyer isn’t keeping you very well informed,” she said. “What makes you think that a confrontation happened?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

“You went to Los Angeles, did you not?”

Joanna smiled sardonically. “You didn’t think we were so determined to get LaPointe that we were going to blindly take you at your word, did you?” she taunted, without answering. “Not when The Calling used information on laptops to lure us into the open before…so your little cadre of watchers could identify us, right?”

Salah lifted his shoulders carelessly. “If you missed him, then it is clear they changed their plans after my capture.”

“Did they, now?”

“The information I gave you was current. I aided your investigation,” Salah insisted emphatically.

“No. What you did was attempt to help LaPointe lure us into a trap,” Joanna said. “Well, it didn’t work and you’ve got nothing left to bargain with. I hope you enjoy your stay at Gitmo knowing LaPointe is still very much at large, and that you won’t be so unreachable there as you are here.”

“You can’t do that…I gave you everything you needed to find him!”

“No,” Joanna disputed. “I really don’t think you did. Are you a little worried now that everyone we’ve apprehended knows you helped us; that you’re the reason LaPointe’s set up didn’t work? That maybe LaPointe will wonder about that too?”

Joanna watched as a combination of fear and outrage flickered across the old man’s face at the
inferred threat. Then almost as soon as it appeared, the fear was gone and replaced with a calm visage.

“You should be worried,” Joanna goaded.

“You said I had nothing left to bargain with,” Salah began, self-assured once again. “I think perhaps I do.”
Close to Home

Chapter Summary

Back in Seattle, Tony and the team reflect on events in LA, and what’s next. A new discovery gives them a vital clue to what LaPointe might be planning, but did they find it in time?

Beta'd, leftover goofs are mine.

~Seattle, S3 Building, three days later~

Matt looked up and Lena offered a bright smile as Gary gingerly opened the conference room door fumbling one of his crutches, and hobbled inside. He carefully maneuvered his way around the table and balanced on his good leg while pulling out a chair and settling into it with a sigh.

"Gary, welcome back! We weren't sure you'd be in today after flying in so late," Lena greeted as he sat.

"Eh, I'm fine for desk duty," Gary answered. "Beats sitting at home." He froze as the lights flickered off then back on. "How long has that been happening?"

"That's new," Lena answered with a frown, "but there have been city utility trucks doing work a ways down the block for a week or so."

"Oh. They're still working, I guess. Tony and I saw a couple of trucks just outside when we got here."

"They're outside the building now?" Joanna asked, her voice rising in concern.

"Yeah," Gary nodded. "Do we need to check them out?"

Joanna nodded, pulling out her cell phone. "I'll get someone on it."

"Where is Tony, by the way?" Matt asked Gary.

"He dropped me at the front door before circling around back to the garage," Gary explained, rolling his eyes. "Shorter walk for me, he says. I appreciate the chauffeur service, and him being the one to stay behind in LA until I got out of the hospital, but he's been hovering a bit. Wouldn't even let me carry in the donuts and stuff we brought."

"Ah," Lena nodded knowingly.

"I think he's still upset that you got hurt," Matt offered.

"Well he shouldn't be," Gary scowled. "He was ahead of me in the warehouse and its pure dumb luck that the shooter hit me and not him. Besides..." Gary continued, his voice low and solemn. "I don't think I would have gotten out of there if it weren't for him."

"Focus on the fact that you both got out and you're going to be fine; not what could have
happened." Lena said.

"Tell Tony that," Gary countered.

"Tell me what?"

The others exchanged grins as the subject of their conversation walked in and set a box of donuts and tray of coffee cups on the table.

"Nothing," they all said in unison, still grinning at him as they grabbed at the spoils.

"Uh huh," Tony said, casting a mock-suspicious glance at the group around the table. "See if I bring donuts and coffee again," he grumbled in jest.

"You know you will," Joanna predicted with a smile as she came in and closed the door behind her. "Please say one of those coffees is mine."

Tony presented her a cup with a theatrical flourish and an impish grin of his own. "Milady," he said holding the cup toward her.

Joanna took the cup, at first raising an eyebrow at his antics, then smiling fondly at signs of Tony's long-absent lighthearted side making a welcome reappearance.

"Ok, down to business," Tony said, taking his seat. "Now that Gary and I are back, I want to get us all on the same page with regard to the most recent case developments."

"So how goes the FBI end of the investigation in LA?" Joanna asked Tony.

"Well," Tony began, "You already know the information on Salah's laptop turned out to be a mixed bag of hits and misses. FBI and Homeland forensics teams are still sorting through the ruins of the warehouse. The fire and explosions will make the arms harder to trace," Tony explained. "The good news is, in spite of the loss of the warehouse and damage at the port, there's a hell of a lot of arms and explosives that won't make its way somewhere else for other attacks."

"God knows what else they were planning for the stuff destroyed in the fire, and the little that was recovered, but we stopped at least two imminent attacks," Gary added. "And we just missed Rousseau and LaPointe in the sweep of the hill house and at the port."

"At least it appears we did," Tony mused.

"What do you mean?" Matt asked.

"At first, it looked like they changed their plan to target us in LA as we suspected they might…" Tony's voice trailed off for a moment. "But why didn't they just move up the timetable for the planned attacks instead, before we could investigate?" he wondered softly, thinking out loud.

"Who knows," Gary answered, following Tony's line of thought. "Maybe the chance to target us became a priority."

"Then why didn't LaPointe and Rousseau stay around to see their handiwork?" Tony continued, "The last confirmed sighting was at the port warehouse a couple days before the raid, before we even found the first bomb. The members of The Calling arrested at the warehouse all have matching stories. LaPointe and Rousseau removed several crates from the warehouse days prior and left together and then disappeared."
"Maybe they are preparing to attack one of the new targets on the list found at the house. Do we know what they took?" Joanna asked.

"Oh yeah," Tony drawled. "Gary?" Tony gestured at the team's ordnance expert, indicating he should continue their findings.

"According to the manifest recovered at the house in LA," Gary began, "the most worrisome items among the weapons we believe were relocated are crates of RPO-A launchers and rockets with thermobaric warheads." At the confused frowns from everyone but Tony, who he'd already briefed, Gary elaborated. "Thermobaric warheads are incendiary weapons. They can create intense fire and blast effects across large areas," he explained. "They're light, easily transportable, and easy to use. Several of the men apprehended believe those weapons were intended for an attack on one of the LA area airports. We already know they were targeting LAX."

"That being the case, since no one seems to know where they went and we have no specific idea what they were planning time and target-wise," Tony broke in, "it's imperative that we identify LaPointe and get his face on a BOLO along with Rousseau's."

"Speaking of Rousseau and updates on our end; we did link the lawyer's murder to The Calling," Lena said. "Here's the really interesting part. Rousseau surfaced here in Seattle briefly; facial rec identified him as the murderer. Surveillance cameras caught him on return to LA at the airport the next day. He was alone both times so there was no opportunity to identify someone who could have been LaPointe. We still don't know for certain what he looks like."

"We have sketch artist's renderings but they aren't good enough," Gary added. "I think these guys are terrified to positively identify him; probably for good reason, since LaPointe's solution for loose ends is a pretty permanent one."

"So where are we with identifying him, anyway?" Tony asked. "I understand you questioned Salah again; did he give you anything else?"

Joanna pursed her lips in frustration. "Salah is trying to convince us its someone it can't be," she asserted. "He's putting up a front of cooperation while in fact, he's trying to throw us off the trail again. If he identifies LaPointe or if LaPointe thinks he really has turned, Salah is as good as dead and he knows it. Look at LA; it was a trap all along."

"Maybe," Tony said thoughtfully. "So who would Salah have us believe it is?"

"He's trying to convince us that Aziz Despins is LaPointe."

Tony huffed in disbelief. "Well, he was one of the founding members of the group. Having had known associations with the Rousseau brothers and Daniel Budd, he'd be a great candidate for the one pulling the strings. There's just one problem; it can't be him," Tony explained.

"Why not?" Matt asked, flipping through the case file to see why the name was ringing a bell.

"His name hasn't come up in the context of the current investigation because he's dead. Despins was killed in a warehouse bombing in Shanghai when Tony and I helped dismantle The Calling's network the first time," Joanna answered. "We just barely escaped the warehouse ourselves before it went up, and a number of high ranking members of The Calling were trapped inside, including Despins."

"What if he wasn't?" Tony asked. "Don't take this the wrong way, Joanna, but the CIA's cleanup operation in Shanghai back then missed a few things."
Joanna grimaced at the reminder. Still she wasn't convinced Salah was telling the truth, but nodded in agreement at Tony's assessment. "Look at everything else Salah misled us about. Besides, Despins' body was identified by a family member."

Tony ran a hand through his hair, working and reworking the puzzle pieces in his mind. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

"What if he was misidentified intentionally?" he pondered. "What better way to hide than to convince someone you're dead?"

"That's a wild leap," Joanna said doubtfully.

"It would explain The Calling's continued access to the Despins' bank account before they were frozen." Tony persisted. "You have to admit, it's not out of the realm of possibility." Tony said.

"It's possible," Joanna admitted.

"I don't think it will do any harm to add Despins to the BOLO," Matt said, pulling a grainy old photo of Aziz Despins out of the file just as the conference phone in the center of the table began ringing.

Lena was closest and snatched up the handset. After a brief exchange her features shifted into a confused frown and she looked at Tony and Joanna. "Alright, I'll send them down," she said and dropped the receiver back in its' cradle.

Lena met the others' questioning looks and elaborated. "The computer forensics technician working with Mel on Salah's laptop is asking for Tony and Joanna," Lena stated. "Said they had an urgent case update that couldn't wait."

"What's the update, Campbell?" Tony asked. "Did you find a new lead for us?"

"Not exactly," the technician responded as he led them to his worktable where Salah's laptop sat open, but powered off. "I think we have a problem."

"Okay, we're listening," Tony said, crossing his arms.

"We were doing a routine RF scan earlier. Basically the antenna and scanner helps us locate any unauthorized cell phones, radios, and anything else that can broadcast as we work on classified or sensitive material related to investigations."

"And?" Joanna prompted.

"We kept picking up interference and traced it to this laptop," Campbell explained, indicating Salah's laptop.

"I assume you found the cause?" Tony prompted.

Campbell picked up a small evidence bag off the table and handed it to Joanna as she reached out.

"Computer chip?" she asked.

Campbell shook his head soberly. "This is a micro GPS chip. They're often used to track lost and stolen items."
"Was it transmitting?" Tony asked.

"This particular model would only transmit if pinged remotely by a user with the associated tracking application, but I'd have to say it's possible that it's been pinged," Campbell allowed. "The chip was hidden inside the laptop chassis under the motherboard, which might explain why Mel missed it."

"Where is Mel, by the way?" Joanna asked.

"She hasn't been in today," Campbell answered distractedly.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Tony muttered with a scowl. Suddenly he stiffened, as he remembered a bit of evidence collected at the hill house in LA. It hadn't made any sense at the time, and he'd thought it might be an account number or code of some kind.

He hurried over to an open workstation, logged in, and conducted a quick search.

Joanna and Campbell followed and hovered behind Tony, waiting for an explanation.

"Dammit!" Tony muttered a string of curses as he rose, nearly knocking the chair over in his haste. The picture coming together in his head was not good. Not good at all.

Tony pointed at Campbell, "Secure the lab and wait for instructions. No one leaves or comes in without my say so."

"Let's go," he said to Joanna, setting off at a jog and pulling her along. "We need to get to the comm center now, get this building on lockdown, and brief headquarters."

"Tony, what is it?" Joanna asked anxiously as she ran alongside him.

Tony stopped, exasperated at having to stop and explain what he'd pieced together, but knowing it was necessary.

"First of all, I saw Mel's car in the garage when I got here, but now, no one seems to have seen her. Then there's LaPointe and Rousseau disappearing with the ordnance and explosives removed from the port warehouse just before our raid. And just now in the lab, I made a connection to a piece of evidence collected at the house in LA. It was just a long series of numbers on a discarded, crumpled up scrap of paper. It didn't click until Campbell told us about the micro GPS tracker," Tony took a deep breath and continued.

"I had to do a quick search to verify my guess. It was a latitude longitude position. Specifically, for right about here," Tony said pointedly. "What if Salah pointed us to LA to give LaPointe time to put something else in motion? I don't think LA was the trap at all. I think LaPointe was looking to hit us close to home, and I'm afraid he knows exactly where that is now."


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Tony sat with Gary in the comm center, scanning the building security feeds since first thing in the morning as quickly as he could. They already updated the FBI director, and before Tony ordered the technicians out with the rest of the non-essential personnel, he'd been shown where to tap into the security camera controls and archived recordings remotely.

They glanced up briefly as Joanna entered, and went back to scanning the video footage from around the building, trying to locate Mel arriving.
"Tony, the bomb squad needs us out so they can clear the building," she told him a little breathlessly, as if she'd been running. "Everyone else is making their way outside."

Tony shook his head. "We've got at least two, maybe three people unaccounted for; Mel and two of the security guards," he told her. "I'm not leaving until I know they are out of the building."

Gary waved a cell phone. "Matt says Mel wasn't among the group of people evacuated outside of S3, and her car is still in the garage. No one from security has come out yet."

"Tony, the threat just went from vague to very real," Joanna insisted. "The city confirmed that no work is being done in the area today. The utility trucks are still outside but the workers have vanished. The bomb squad is treating them as if they're concealing more explosive devices. Bomb sniffing dogs have found two bombs out in front of the building, and one in the trunk of Mel's car," Joanna informed him. "Then there's the GPS chip she overlooked. I can't believe I'm saying this, but she might be working with them, and if so, she could be long gone. We need to get out and let the bomb squad work," Joanna urged.

"Just wait," Tony said. "Watch," he said. He'd finally found the footage he was looking for; Mel's car arriving early this morning.

Joanna and Gary leaned down to watch as Tony fast forwarded to the point where the car parked then let it play at normal speed. She let out a small gasp as Mel exited the car awkwardly and it became clear she was under duress. She was handcuffed to a passenger, his identity concealed by a cap pulled down low. He slid across the seat and out of the car behind her.

The man then un-cuffed himself and Mel tried to pull away but was yanked back and shaken roughly, then had both hands cuffed behind her back. They could see Mel was crying and shaking her head.

"Dark skin," Tony pointed out, watching the man's hands. "Maybe Rousseau."

Joanna nodded as they both watched as a second man exited the back seat of the car. The first man placed a handgun to Mel's back and prodded her toward the breezeway connecting the garage to the main building, and the group moved out of the field of view.

"I've got the other camera queued up." Gary quickly switched views to the camera on the breezeway door and sped forward through the video to the corresponding time stamp.

The two men forced Mel to use her badge to gain entry to the breezeway. Just before they entered, and disappeared from the field of view of the external camera, the second man looked directly into it and smiled.

"Oh hell," Tony swore. "Sometimes, I hate it when I'm right."

Joanna shook her head in disbelief. "Despins. He is LaPointe after all."

"Looks that way," Tony agreed. "They managed to steal city utility trucks and pose as workers to surveil the building without arousing suspicion. They've been collecting intel about our comings and goings. Mel was probably a target of opportunity; a way to get in. Now they are inside, and we have missing people."

"They've got to be here somewhere," Joanna said.

"I have a good idea where they're holed up. The security office's live feed went dark a bit ago."
"But why?" Joanna wondered.

"Yeah, why? If they were going to bomb the building, why go through the trouble to get inside?" Gary asked.

"Why? Because they want something first," Tony said. "Or rather someone. But just to be sure… let's just call them and ask," he said, handing Joanna the phone with a smirk.

Joanna raised an eyebrow, but took the handset and dialed security. There was no answer.

"Again," Tony said.

Joanna dialed again and her eyes flew to Tony's as the phone was answered. She pressed the speaker button so Tony and Gary could hear, and waited.

"Hello?" came a soft, hesitant voice. It was Mel.

"Is everyone with you alright?" Joanna asked, hoping to get confirmation that the guards were there too.

"Not everyone," Mel answered shakily. "But…" Mel broke off with a sharp cry of pain.

"Mel!"

There were sounds of a scuffle, then an instantly recognizable voice came on the line. The same voice that relentlessly tormented and threatened her those few days in Shanghai when she'd gone off grid.

"Hello, Officer Teague."

Tony recognized the effect of hearing that menacing voice on his friend. He put a steadying hand on her shoulder as she composed herself and answered coolly. "LaPointe, I presume."

"I think it's time we met, Officer Teague. Do bring Agent DiNozzo with you," he said with a pretense of politeness. "Our meeting is; shall we say…long overdue."

"Why should I give you more hostages?" Joanna asked.

LaPointe's voice hardened. "Because the security office surveillance system allows me to see that your people have not found all the explosive devices that have been placed in and around this building," he replied matter-of-factly. "If we're all going to leave alive, and if you wish those gathering outside to remain unharmed, I suggest you refrain from any further delays. I offer an exchange. If you both surrender to me, I will let your coworkers go. Otherwise…I shall have to consider my options." There was another cry of pain, muffled but still audible over the open line. "I think your friends would appreciate some haste," LaPointe taunted. "I believe you know where to find me," he said, before disconnecting the call.

"He knows you're here, Tony," Joanna said.

Tony nodded. "He could have forced Mel to confirm it. There's no cameras in here, so he also could have picked us up in the corridors. "He'll pick us up again as we head down, but there's a stop we need to make first…and LaPointe isn't the only one who can disable cameras." Tony's hands flew over the keyboard.

"The armory camera?" Joanna asked, confused.
Tony nodded as he worked. "I'm also making sure he can't turn the cameras outside security back on."

Joanna frowned. "Why not all of them?"

"Because I want him to think we're going in there for weapons, and hiding our approach because we've armed ourselves. If they send in a tactical team, they can get in the back way without being seen." Tony said as he pulled out his cell and dashed off a brief text to Matt. "Let's go."

"They'll search and disarm us you know," Joanna said as they followed Tony downstairs, wondering what he was planning.

"Yes," Tony agreed. "But firearms aren't the only things stored there." He turned to Gary. "You okay to back us up from the armory?" Tony asked, gesturing at Gary's crutches.

"Depends on what you have in mind," Gary said doubtfully. "I'm not exactly speedy or agile," he warned.

"You don't need to be." Tony explained his plan. "We just need you to be our conduit to Matt and the others outside."

Joanna arched an eyebrow when he was done, impressed with what he came up with on the fly. It wasn't ideal, but circumstances being what they were, there were few options to bring the hostage situation to an end without casualties. "That just might work."

Tony grinned. "LaPointe also isn't the only one who can deflect and distract," he added slyly.

Joanna and Tony moved cautiously down the corridor outside security, weapons drawn. They could see the door was open; LaPointe likely knew they'd disabled the cameras and was taking no chances at them catching him off guard.

They reached the door and Joanna darted to the other side, attempting to see in the room as she moved. She shook her head at Tony, opposite her, indicating she couldn't get a bead on anyone. Tony scowled and nodded.

"LaPointe," Joanna shouted. "We're here. Send out your hostages."

"I do not think so. Such a good faith effort would require something given on your part," LaPointe responded. "Please come in."

Tony nodded at Joanna, and they stepped into the room with weapons raised. They immediately saw that Rousseau and LaPointe had strategically placed themselves on opposite sides of the room, leaving he and Joanna at a disadvantage. They turned back to back so each of them covered one of the two terrorists, who were both using a hostage as a shield and holding a gun to their heads.

LaPointe's face lit up almost gleefully as he caught sight of Tony.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Agent DiNozzo."

Tony tilted his head at LaPointe, and stared in disdain. "I wish I could say the same."

LaPointe's eyes flared brightly with anger at being dismissed. He was holding a disheveled Mel in front of him; her face was bruised and tear-stained. Her hands and ankles were zip tied, but she...
seemed alright. Rousseau was holding one similarly restrained security guard as a shield. The guard had a heavily bleeding gunshot wound in his upper arm.

Tony's eyes swept the room, noting an open laptop on the desk. "Where is the other guard?"

"He was...uncooperative," LaPointe answered with a malicious smile.

Rousseau jerked his head toward the inner office. "He chose not to assist us with the cameras. I suggest you do not follow his example," he warned.

Joanna's eyes flicked briefly to the other room and saw the body on the floor.

"That was unnecessary," she stated. She was struggling to keep her fury under control. This man was responsible for so many deaths, and for working with Daniel Budd to conceive the plot that killed Ned. It was time his campaign of blood and terror finally came to an end.

"Perhaps," LaPointe shrugged, still smiling coldly.

"So we have ourselves a standoff," Tony observed. "Now what?"

"First, you will both place any weapons you retrieved from your stop at the armory on the desk. Then use the zip ties that have been placed there to secure each other's hands. Then we will see about getting acquainted."

LaPointe's face darkened in anger as Tony and Joanna hesitated.

"Now." Mel gasped in pain and fear as he jammed the muzzle of his gun into her temple threateningly.

Tony held up one hand in a 'stop' motion, "Okay, we're doing it. You don't have to hurt anyone else." He lowered his weapon and walked to the desk; he sensed Joanna behind him following suit.

Tony approached the desk laid down his gun. As he picked up one of the zip ties, he noticed a set of blueprints on the desk, and the speaker phone light on. Someone, somewhere was listening in to what was happening in that room.

"That was a slick piece of work; planting a mini GPS tracker in Salah's laptop," Tony offered conversationally while restraining Joanna's hands in front of her.

LaPointe ignored him and prodded Mel closer so he could watch Joanna place the restraint on Tony. With her hands already secured, she fumbled awkwardly with the tie.

"Tighter," LaPointe demanded, smiling at Tony.

Joanna looked at Tony apologetically, and tightened the restraint.

"Too bad you didn't think of that sooner," Tony continued, goading the man now. "With all the people lining up to turn informant on you."

"Is that what you think about Salah?" LaPointe asked as he directed Mel to sit on the floor. Rousseau knocked his bound hostage to the floor and joined them at the desk. He viciously tightened Tony's restraint even further then searched Tony and Joanna, removing their backup weapons and cell phones, tossing them on the desk.

"No," Tony answered, meeting LaPointe's eyes steadily. "I think Salah told us exactly what you wanted him to."
"Aren't you clever," LaPointe mused as he shoved Tony into a chair, while Rousseau did the same with Joanna. "Then you would have to be to evade me for so long. How did you manage that?"

Joanna cringed inwardly as Tony put on his best irritating grin; she wasn't sure angering the unstable man was the best approach. Didn't Tony see the light of insanity in the man's eyes?

"By outdoing you in the 'clever' department, obviously," Tony answered smugly.

LaPointe bristled at the insult and he pulled out a large knife. He nodded at Rousseau, who slammed a fist into Tony's gut. Joanna and Mel both shouted in protest, while Tony doubled over in the chair, coughing and gasping for breath.

Joanna's eyes widened at the knife and she flashed back to the gruesome torture inflicted by LaPointe on her friend, Officer Lee. She turned to Rousseau and LaPointe and spoke, pulling their attention away from Tony. "How about you comply with the terms of the exchange and let them go now?" Joanna asked nodding at Mel and the guard.

"Not yet," LaPointe replied. He turned to Tony and in a quick, unexpected motion, he jabbed the knife into his left arm. Tony gasped, more in shock and surprise than pain. He stared ahead, ignoring the shallow wound, and LaPointe.

"Now…which one of you will release the override on the security cameras?" Tony stifled a cry as LaPointe stabbed him again, a bit deeper this time. Tony clenched his jaw against the pain of the new wound in his stomach.

"Stop it!" Joanna yelled, while Mel clenched her eyes shut and turned away. "We can't turn them back on from here!"

"Can't or won't?" LaPointe asked threateningly. Tony was unable to stop a brief shout of pain as LaPointe stabbed him yet again, deeper still, in the left shoulder this time.

"That one really hurt," Tony thought as he looked down at the blood soaking through his shirt, jaw clenched hard, and breathing heavily through his nose. What was so important about the cameras? What was LaPointe needing to see? Or was it someone else who needed to see? Someone on the outside, maybe.

LaPointe turned to Joanna and she stiffened as he caressed her face with the flat side of the bloody blade. "You enjoy hurting people with knives, don't you," Joanna spat.

"I do," LaPointe agreed. "How long can this go on..." he began, jabbing Tony lightly with the knife again and again. LaPointe continued, sounding as if inquiring about something mundane. "Before I hit something a little more…vital?"

Joanna remained silent but her eyes glittered with hatred as she looked up at LaPointe.

"LaPointe," Rousseau called sharply. "We have what we came for. Let us go," Rousseau urged. He pulled LaPointe aside and spoke quietly. "We don't need the cameras to verify our escape route is clear; they've evacuated the building. We can still use the hostages and the concealed devices to cover our escape."

"LaPointe. We have what we came for. Let us go," Rousseau urged. He pulled LaPointe aside and spoke quietly. "We don't need the cameras to verify our escape route is clear; they've evacuated the building. We can still use the hostages and the concealed devices to cover our escape."
LaPointe was furious. He shoved Rousseau away and began to pace. "I don't have everything I came for," he hissed.

"Let me guess," Tony broke in. "You wanted to sneak in, had a plan to spirit us out of the building somehow," he said, inclining his head toward Joanna. "Then blow it to kingdom come with everyone else inside. Everyone thinks we all died and by the time they figure out we weren't in the building, it's too late. The task force that's been such a pain in your ass is gone in one fell swoop, and you get to take your time having your evil way with us." Tony grinned again and asked, "How'd I do?"

LaPointe stared at DiNozzo. The man was not what he expected. He was either very brave or very foolish; impertinent and completely unfazed by the peril he and his companions were in. Bloody and bound, he acted as if he still had the upper hand somehow.

"Flippant, aren't you? Do you think that's wise?" LaPointe asked with narrowed eyes.

Tony straightened, trying not to wince at the sharp pain in his shoulder. "You want serious? Fine. It's over LaPointe. It's only a matter of time before they send someone in to deal with the hostage situation. You aren't the only one with a link outside this room," he said nodding at the cell phones. "You're wrong if you think you're getting out of here scot-free."

LaPointe picked up Tony's cell phone and peered at the display. "Disconnected call. Who was listening?" he asked.

Tony was silent and LaPointe pulled a remote control from his pocket. "Sending someone in would definitely not be wise."

Tony looked at the remote and shook his head, "Not happening." Gary had been listening and relaying information outside, but that wasn't all. The dropped call told him Gary was able to find and activate the equipment critical to Tony's plan; the other reason Gary had remained in the armory. "Your devices have been neutralized."

"You are bluffing," Rousseau scoffed, pointing at the security feeds that were still active. "The devices in the building have not been disarmed."

"He's not," Joanna said, drawing their attention away from Tony again. "It just so happens that some rather powerful radio frequency jammers are stored in the armory. Someone stayed behind and activated them."

LaPointe and Rousseau looked at each other, absorbing their plans being thwarted again. LaPointe impetuously pressed a button as Rousseau grabbed his hand trying to stop him. "Wait!"

Tony smiled as nothing happened. "That's right. Your remote won't work. Nor will any cell phone or switch that uses a RF transmission."

LaPointe's face darkened like a thundercloud. He stepped back to the desk and leaned down to speak into the phone. "Kareem."

"I'm here LaPointe," came a faint reply.

"Stand by for my signal."

Tony and Joanna eyed each other apprehensively as LaPointe strode over to Mel and knelt down. Mel recoiled as LaPointe brandished his knife. He sliced through the zip tie around her ankles and pulled her roughly to her feet.
"Get him up, Emile," LaPointe instructed, and waited as Rousseau did the same for the guard.
LaPointe pushed them out into the hallway and toward the closest exit. "Go. Get out."

Tony frowned. Faced with losing the leverage he had in his explosive devices, LaPointe chose now to release half his hostages? Too easy.

"What now, LaPointe?" Tony glanced meaningfully over at the speaker phone and laptop. "Whoever you have out there keeping tabs can't help you get out now. The Calling is finished… you have to know that. It all stops here…today."

A muffled boom sounded from the back of the building. LaPointe leaned down and pressed the tip of the knife into Tony's torso as he spoke. "Your friends should have been more cautious making their way out. Jammers don't affect pressure plates and trip wires."

"Damn you!" Joanna cursed. Mel and the guard had probably just been killed. She seethed and suddenly tried to rise from the chair. "You sent them that way on purpose!" Rousseau clamped his hands on her shoulders from behind and shoved her back down.

Rousseau restrained her movements and she could only watch helplessly as LaPointe took hold of Tony's bound wrists with one hand and applied slow, steady pressure to the knife he now held to Tony's side with the other.

"Did you know it only takes two pounds of pressure for a knife to break skin?" he asked. "Such fragile creatures we are."

Tony threw back his head and groaned loudly through gritted teeth as the blade slid slowly into his side, just above the hip. He gasped and slumped forward as LaPointe pulled the the knife back out with a yank.

"How clever do you feel now?" LaPointe placed the bloody knife under Tony's chin and forced his head up. "You were right about one thing…" he added with a penetrating gaze, "it all stops here."

"LaPointe, what are you saying!" Rousseau exploded, angry with his friend now. "That is not the plan. Let us go now, salvage what we can. While we can!" He agreed to this plan against his better judgment only because his friend convinced him they would escape the building before it's destruction. He was doubting LaPointe; wondering about his true intentions. Now that the quarry he'd pursued for so long was right here in front of him, LaPointe's drive for revenge, to see DiNozzo pay for Daniel's death had driven him to the point of madness. He could see now; he'd allowed his old friend to deceive him into this dead end plan.

"I did not come here to die!" he shouted. "If you are turning this into a suicide mission, I want no part of it."

LaPointe snorted in disgust and glared balefully for a moment before he calmed. "Then go, Emile," he allowed. "You have earned a chance at escape, and freedom." He set down the knife and pulled the handgun from his waistband, pointing it in Tony and Joanna's direction.

Tony breathed through the pain tried to regroup. Joanna was talking softly next to him, trying to pull him from his apparent fugue. He wanted them all to think he was worse off than he actually was. Things had just taken a darker turn and it was looking more and more like LaPointe had no intention of any of them leaving the building alive. They had to find a way to warn those outside. Just maybe, he could get Rousseau and LaPointe even more distracted with one another. He glanced over at Joanna and mouthed, "be ready."
Then Tony began to laugh, even though it lit a fiery pain in his abdomen. Seeing he'd drawn the men's attention, he looked away from LaPointe's malevolent expression and spoke directly to Rousseau.

"Changed the end game on you, did he?" Tony began. "With everything you've rebuilt in the last few years on the verge of collapse again, are you wondering now if it's not the first time?"

LaPointe turned and swung his arm, clipping Tony on the temple with the handgun he was still holding. "Be silent!"

Tony recovered quickly and looked at Rousseau again, urgency to gain some control and avert imminent disaster led him to risk provoking the men further.

"He's letting you leave; why? What else hasn't he told you about…like maybe his role in your brother's death?" Tony asked.

Rousseau frowned, "What did you say?"

"Oh come on," Tony replied, rolling his eyes mockingly. "You really believe your brothers' death in prison was random violence? I'm sure your fearless leader here hoped so." Tony saw the suspicion begin to dawn on Rousseau's dark features, and he fed it further.

"Oh no; that's not what happened. Your brother was a loose end and his death was deliberately planned. Who do you think ordered it? The only person who could have?"

Rousseau's face went blank and the hand holding the gun trembled. The old grief rose up again as he recalled learning of his beloved older brothers' murder in prison.

Joanna flinched as LaPointe struck out at Tony. "I said be silent!" he screamed, kicking Tony hard enough to topple the chair and send him sprawling to the floor.

Tony saw stars for a moment as his head bounced off the tile, but he kept goading. "That's right; just like the deaths of your little group of watchers caught spying on us. You know he ordered them killed. Kind of a pattern don't you think?"

LaPointe kicked the downed agent hard, and turned away from their prisoners to see Rousseau pointing the gun at him now.

"Emile," he began. "He is lying. Surely you see what he is trying to do."

Joanna pulled her eyes away from Tony, who lay on the floor, breathing harshly and pressing his bound hands against the bleeding wound in his side. She could see Rousseau was convinced. She tensed in the chair as the two men watched each other warily.

"You ordered Matthew killed," Rousseau accused. "How could you do that? Would Salah have been next? Your oldest friend?"

"Emile, I didn't," LaPointe insisted, shaking his head in denial.

Anger consumed him as Rousseau looked at his old friend in disbelief. "You did!" he shouted. In a blur of motion, Rousseau raised the handgun and fired. LaPointe reacted a scant second later, firing his own gun. Both men fell to the floor.

Joanna surged from the chair and kicked LaPointe's gun into the corner. She turned and leapt toward the desk, retrieving her own weapon and gripping it awkwardly in her bound hands.
she could bring it to bear on Rousseau, he was up and out of the room, limping heavily. She snatched another zip tie and quickly secured LaPointe's hands. He was wounded in the chest and bleeding badly, but she was taking no chances.

Turning to Tony, she was confused to see him sitting up and using his bound, blood-slicked hands to fumble with his belt buckle. "What on earth are you doing?"

Smiling in triumph, Tony finally freed his belt knife and held it toward her. "Give me your hands." He cut the tie around her wrists and let her take the knife to return the favor.

"You are full of surprises," she observed fondly. Joanna cut the tie and carefully peeled it away from Tony's bleeding wrists. Rousseau had tightened the tie brutally and it was partially imbedded in the skin.

Laughter came from the dying man behind them. "So it ends with us. As it should be," LaPointe said.

Joanna picked up their cell phones and tossed Tony's to him as he moved to kneel next to LaPointe. "No. It ends with you," Tony replied. Joanna looked down in satisfaction as the man behind her son's murder lay dying. "We're getting out."

"I don't need the bombs after all. You think you're safe now," LaPointe laughed, blood bubbling from his lips. "You're not." LaPointe lifted his head, mumbled "For Daniel..." and with all the volume he could muster he gasped out, "Now Kareem! Do it now!" Then he went limp and still.

It all came to Tony in a split second. The rockets and launchers LaPointe and Rousseau removed from the warehouse in LA. That was LaPointe's backup plan all along. He moved unsteadily to the desk, still holding his side and snatched up the phone handset. He disconnected the line LaPointe kept open and began dialing the armory. "Run, Joanna," he said urgently, pointing at the S3 building blueprints on the desk. "You know where. It's our only chance."

"You're injured and if you think I'm leaving you here, you've got another thing coming. Now let's go!"

"Trust me, I'll be right behind you. I can make it; I have to try and warn Gary first."

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The force of the blasts knocked Matt, Lena, and the others to the pavement. He scrambled back to his feet in time to see what happened. From their vantage point in the cordoned off safe area down the block, he saw two more projectiles of some kind fired from the roof of the warehouse across from S3. He watched in horror as there were two more thunderous explosions. Intense flames erupted from the entire front facade, rapidly spreading to engulf the rest of the building where at least four of his friends and colleagues were still trapped inside.

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~NCIS HQ, Washington DC~

Ellis and his team gathered around the large screen in the bullpen and watched somberly as ZNN's breaking news story interrupted the normal broadcast.

"A series of explosions rocked one corner of Seattle's warehouse district this afternoon," the news anchor reported, a furiously burning building framed behind her. "What started as a hostage
situation this morning went terribly wrong. A small explosion from somewhere inside the building prefaced four larger ones that started the intense blaze you see now. Incredibly, rocket fire appears to be the cause of the explosions, according to some witness statements.

Seattle PD has advised us that this is now the scene of a suspected terrorist attack and the burning building you see behind me seems to have been specifically targeted. While suspicious activity led to the building's evacuation earlier today, an unknown number of terrorists and hostages remained inside at the time of the attack, as well as a hostage rescue team. Seattle PD can't confirm any connection to the terrorist attacks averted in LA last week and we're working to get a statement from federal agents setting up a command center nearby. More on this developing story at the top of the hour."

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AN: I know...evil, evil cliffy. Not very nice of me, was it? So if you've read my most recently completed story "Borrowed Time" maybe you have to ask yourself: Is this the kind of author who would kill poor Tony twice in a month? Follow along with me and find out what the muse decides in the next chapter, "Hope and Fear".
Chapter Summary

Gibbs and the MCRT are watching as news breaks of the terror attack in Seattle. When they learn The Calling is responsible, they race to confirm their suspicion that Tony is a member of the task force targeted by the attack.

Chapter Notes

I'm back finally, with a two-chapter update for you. Progress is slow thanks to a crushing work schedule, classes, and an exercise regimen meant to get my health back on track. I'd love nothing better than to retire and write full-time, but alas, it's not to be at this point.

That said, thanks to everyone who continues follow this story as it nears the end. All of you reading, leaving kudos, and commenting. I love and appreciate them all and they keep me going, even if I've been remiss in replying. Sorry; I'll try to do better :)

No spoilers to speak of, but there are minor references to canon events, as well as events from previous installments of the trilogy.

Unbeta'd - any mistakes are mine. On to the story...

~Seattle, S3 Building~

Tony followed the sound of gunshots nearby, fearing that Joanna might have run into Rousseau on her way out. He ran as fast as he could in the dark, using the light emitted by his cell phone flash to guide the way.

After calling the armory to warn Gary, he’d dropped the landline and dashed in the direction Joanna had gone. He barely made it out of security when several blasts in quick succession shook the building. He staggered but managed to keep his balance, knowing immediately the rockets he’d warned Gary about had been used. The power flickered and went out as he reached the stairs. He kept moving, ignoring the free flow of blood and pain of his injuries, knowing his life depended on speed.

Tony felt the building heat and heard the roar of a fast spreading fire on the floors above him. He
began to cough as acrid smoke poured out of air vents in the walls and the thickening smoke slowed his progress as he moved along the dark passageway. Suddenly there was a rumble and a deafening crash from nearby, and pieces of ceiling began to crumble and fall.

Concrete and metal continued to rain down, heavier chunks knocking him to his knees and he cursed as the cell phone went sliding just out of reach. He’d been wrong when he told Joanna he’d make it.

*There wasn’t enough time after all,* he thought.

For a fleeting moment Tony felt a sense of regret, then an explosion of pain in his head sent white flashes through his vision and he crumpled the rest of the way to the floor. The ceiling supports began to give way and he knew nothing but the darkness.

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~Ducky’s house~

Ducky turned up the volume on his television as the anchor on ZNN prepared to update the day’s lead story. The sense of foreboding he felt upon hearing the breaking news story hours ago had only grown stronger as night fell. He’d been unable to reach Anthony and hoped it was simply due to the sporadic cell phone service in the Seattle area in the wake of the attack. He felt so helpless; all he could do was wait and hope that Anthony would find a way to contact him and assure him he was alright. The alternative didn’t bear thinking about. He turned his attention to the news.

*Greg Wayson, our field correspondent at the scene in Seattle is standing by with an update. “Greg, what have you learned?”*

“The investigation is still unfolding but here’s what we know so far. We continue to follow the aftermath of an apparent terrorist attack by rocket fire on an office complex in Seattle’s warehouse district. City records show that the converted warehouse building was leased by the private security firm Sentinel Security Systems, also called S3. Within minutes of the attack, Federal agents and local law enforcement officers converged on a neighboring building where the rocket fire originated from. There was a fierce exchange of gunfire in which two fleeing suspects were killed, and one critically wounded. The Seattle FBI office’s command center on scene is now working with Seattle PD to maintain a secure perimeter around the still burning building and coordinate with first responders on scene.”
“Has anyone claimed responsibility for the attack yet?”

“In a statement just provided to us, the FBI attributes the attack to a terror group known as The Calling. They also tell us that the S3 security firm was a front intended to protect and conceal the operations of a joint federal task force for counterterrorism. The task force was recently successful in averting a number of attacks overseas, and domestically, two planned major attacks in Los Angeles which were also attributed to The Calling. The group primarily operated out of east Asia and sought to gain a foothold in the US.

“What do the authorities say about the potential for new attacks?” The ZNN anchor asked.

“This attack is assessed to be an isolated incident and the group responsible all but disbanded due to the task force’s efforts both here in the US and internationally. It appears a few members managed to evade capture and specifically targeted the task force for attack. Whether the attack was an act of revenge or last ditch effort by a few remaining to avoid being apprehended is unknown at this juncture.”

Ducky gave in to the compulsion to try Anthony’s number again and sighed heavily as it went directly to voice mail. He rose and turned off the television, deciding to change clothes and head back to NCIS. Should any news come…good, bad or otherwise, he’d rather be among friends than alone. Just in case.

~Seattle~

Smoke drifted into the sky as concrete shifted and groaned in the smoldering remains of the S3 building. Somewhere under the ruin, a ringing cell phone cast a dim light in a dark, cave-like space for a few seconds before going quiet again. There was no reaction from the lifeless figure nearby, half buried in debris and lying with one hand outstretched toward the phone just beyond reach.

~NCIS HQ, Washington DC~

Vance looked up at the sharp knock on his office door to see Gibbs lean inside.
“Any word, Leon?”

Vance pulled the ever-present toothpick from his mouth and tossed it in the trash. Grinding it to splinters wasn’t resolving anything, nor helping alleviate the tension and stress he felt over the terror attack in Seattle. He certainly wasn’t alone in that feeling; Gibbs and the MCRT were completely focused on finding a way to contact or get word about DiNozzo.

The recent visit from Tom Morrow about the NCIS case file on The Calling finding its way to the task force, seen now in a new light, definitely helped connect some dots. As did findings in their own internal investigation of hacking into NCIS’ databases. Both were at least indirectly related to the attack. There was also more than enough circumstantial evidence of late to indicate DiNozzo might have been involved with the task force in some capacity.

As soon as The Calling’s name came up in the news report, Ellis’ team were worried he might have even been caught up in the attack. McGee and Bishop were using every contact and resource they had, short of hacking, to get something more than the slim details released to the public. Vance resigned himself to the possibility that they probably were hacking, and he should get ready to field angry phone calls from the FBI and Homeland again.

“Come in, Gibbs,” he replied with a wave. “I managed to catch Tom Morrow in the office. One of his agents is on the task force and working out of the command center; Tom spotted him in some of the news footage. Communication is still spotty and similar to what happened after 9/11, cell and internet service in the Seattle area is overwhelmed right now, but Tom will call us if he hears something.”

Gibbs shook his head, still reeling from the latest news report. “The Calling, Leon. How is that even possible? Did you have any idea about this?”

“That DiNozzo probably was part of the task force? Yes, Tom and I have suspected that for some time. Did I know that The Calling was back in the US? Not until the FBI took over the MCRT’s hacking case, and not with any degree of certainty,” he explained.

“And?” Gibbs challenged. “No one said anything to me?” So much about DiNozzo’s actions and secrecy in the last two years made perfect sense now. He wished he’d known, but it probably wouldn’t have changed anything even if he had.

“And nothing, Gibbs. If DiNozzo wanted anyone here to know, he’d have told them,” Vance
reminded him sharply. “As for The Calling; not our swim lane this time.”

Gibbs sighed and nodded, trying accept he’d been kept out of the loop, and probably for good reason. Doctor Silva’s voice chided him in his head. He needed to set aside those old petty control issues trying to rear up from the past; this wasn’t about him. There was one person who probably knew about DiNozzo all along, and his friend was probably worried sick right now. He resolved to pay Ducky a visit soon.

“You get anything from Fornell?” Vance asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

“He says FBI Director Whitman left for Seattle earlier. Organizationally, the joint task force fell under the purview of the FBI and he wants to support his agents on scene personally. The FBI office in Seattle is getting hold of some satellite phones for the agents working out of the onsite command center,” Gibbs said. “No news about casualties will be released publicy until the families are notified, but Whitman will get Fornell a list when coms are established. Fornell will send it to me or McGee.”

“Then we wait,” Vance said quietly.

Gibbs exited the elevator and headed toward the bullpen. He’d spent some time keeping a worried Ducky and Palmer company, only leaving when an unrelated case update for one of the field teams required their attention for a short time. At least they had work to occupy them for the time being. Overnight on a weekend, he had nothing to distract him and he decided to check in with Ellis and his old team.

Finding them all gathered around the big screen, he approached and took in the scene quietly. The fire was out now, although smoke still billowed from the half-destroyed building.

“Anything new?” Gibbs asked solemnly.

“Six confirmed still missing; four from the task force and two security guards,” Ellis informed him. “No names released yet.”

“They’ve found two survivors and recovered four bodies,” Bishop added grimly, not taking her
eyes off the footage of the smoldering building. “all from the hostage rescue team sent in shortly before the attack was launched.”

McGee jumped slightly as a loud chime sounded from his desk. “Email notification,” he mumbled apologetically as he turned to the desk. “I wanted to make sure I could hear in case it was one of my contacts getting back to me,” he explained.

Leaning down to unlock his screen, he paled and looked up at the others. “It’s from Fornell. You got it too, Gibbs.”

“Go ahead and open it, McGee,” Gibbs said, his heart starting to pound. “It’ll be faster than me trying to find it on my phone.”

McGee closed his eyes in a silent prayer and took a deep breath, while Bishop, Ellis, and Gibbs gathered closer around him. Was he about to see a good friend’s name listed among the missing? He opened the email and scrolled down.

“Tony’s not on the list of those missing,” he said, heaving a relieved sigh. “Oh.” his face fell. “There’s a name we know, though.”

“Oh no…who?” Bishop asked.

“Joanna Teague,” McGee answered somberly, recalling the CIA Officer and Ned Dorneget’s mother.

“Damn,” Gibbs muttered. It made sense that the CIA Officer had been drafted for this task force, but what about Tony? Where did he fit? Then it hit him…he’d suspected Tony had been working under an alias.

“Let me take a look at the list, McGee.” Gibbs’ gut feeling was screaming at him now.

McGee frowned and moved to the side, making room for Gibbs to take his place behind the desk.

Gibbs scanned the list and pulled in a shaky breath. Cold fear washed over him as his suspicion
was confirmed, and he read a name he recognized. He shook his head and blinked in disbelief, but
the name was still there.

“Gibbs, what is it?” Bishop exclaimed, worried to see Gibbs suddenly go still and quiet.

Gibbs backed up unsteadily and dropped into McGee’s chair as if his legs suddenly refused to
support him. He turned a pale face from McGee’s computer back to the news on the big screen,
taking in the flashing lights of the fire trucks and rescue vehicles staged in front of the smoking
building in the background.

Ellis stepped closer and put a steadying hand on Gibbs’ shoulder and asked calmly, “Gibbs, do you
know one of the others on the list?”

Gibbs forced himself to acknowledge Ellis.

“Tony…” was all he could manage before words failed him.

McGee tilted his head in confusion. “Gibbs, what about Tony? Are you thinking one of those
names is him?”

Gibbs’ reply was gruff, almost angry. “Look at the task force section of the list again, McGee.”

McGee looked back over the short list of names.

*Gary Walker*

*Joanna Teague*

*Melanie Davies*

*Nick Paddington*

“Paddington,” McGee said uncertainly, searching for the reason the name was familiar.

“Like the bear…” Gibbs whispered, lost in a years-old memory, then spoke louder. “His mother’s
“Yeah, I remember now. That could be a coincidence, Gibbs,” McGee insisted as Ellis nodded in agreement. “It’s not all *that* uncommon of a name.”

Gibbs sighed deeply and shook his head. “I wish it were, but it isn’t.”

“What makes you so sure, Gibbs?” Bishop asked.

“The first name,” Gibbs began; his expression bleak. “Nick. Short for Dominic…Tony’s middle name.”

“How could you know that?” McGee questioned, knowing only his middle initial was ever listed in Tony’s personnel files and medical records. He didn’t want Gibbs to be right. Maybe it was naïve, but he wanted to hold on to the hope that Tony hadn’t been in that building.

Gibbs huffed a humorless laugh. “How do ya think, McGee? He *told* me.”

The others shifted uncomfortably at the revelation. If Gibbs were right, Tony was indeed among those missing after the attack.

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Gibbs rushed down the stairs toward autopsy as fast as his reconstructed knee allowed, in too much of a hurry to wait for the elevator. He’d just returned to the bullpen after briefing Vance on the unofficial list of missing personnel, and his assertion that DiNozzo was likely among them, when an agitated Palmer called upstairs to say Ducky needed him.

His stomach began churning uneasily as soon as he entered autopsy. Ducky was seated, white as a sheet and looking down vacantly at the cell phone in his limp hand. Palmer, shaken at the state of his mentor, stood next to Ducky with a comforting hand on the older man’s shoulder.

“Agent Gibbs,” Palmer greeted worriedly. “Thank goodness. He got a call; I think it might have been about Tony.”
Gibbs nodded an acknowledgement as he knelt in front of his old friend and touched his hand, trying to get him to meet his eyes. “Ducky, you with us?” he asked softly.

Ducky looked up at the sound of Gibbs’ voice and his eyes focused.

“Jethro?”

Gibbs looked into the misty blue eyes. “I’m here, Duck,” he soothed. “Are you all right?” he asked, worried about Ducky’s heart condition in the face of possible bad news.

Ducky nodded slowly, “Yes. But Anthony…” he began, holding the phone toward Gibbs with a helpless shrug.

Gibbs didn’t want to utter the words, but he had to know. His eyes were flat and his voice emotionless as he asked, “Is he dead?”

Palmer held his breath as he waited for Ducky to answer.

“He was in the building,” Ducky confirmed. “But they haven’t found him yet.”

Palmer exhaled deeply, then without speaking, went into Ducky’s office and pushed out two rolling chairs. He slid one next to Gibbs, knowing that kneeling for very long would hurt the agent’s bad knee. He took a seat next to Ducky and placed one hand on top of the old doctor’s arm.

Gibbs smiled his thanks at Palmer and turned back to Ducky.

“Can you tell me about the call, Ducky?”

Ducky gathered himself and explained.

“The call was from the agent in charge at the scene, Matthew Carson. He worked…” Ducky
stopped himself and corrected the past tense emphatically. “He works with Tony on the task force, although until recently they knew him by another name.”

“Nick Paddington,” Gibbs guessed.

Ducky nodded, an eyebrow raised in surprise, and continued. “I was contacted because Anthony asked me to serve as his medical proxy and secondary next of kin before he left Washington. He needed to change it after leaving NCIS,” looking at Gibbs apologetically, knowing he’d taken Gibbs’ place. “And he needed someone more reliable than his father.”

Gibbs shook his head, brushing off the older man’s concern. “It’s fine, Ducky. I’m glad you were there for him. What else?”

“Agent Carson confirmed that Anthony was among the hostages in the building at the time of the attack and is currently listed as missing,” Ducky told them, shades of anguish coloring his eyes a darker blue. “Search and rescue teams are looking for survivors, but must proceed cautiously. The street-facing portion of the building where the rockets struck is unstable. The first responders fear a collapse.”

Gibbs leaned back as Ducky suddenly straightened and rose from the chair. “I need to go to Seattle. I have to be there when they find him.”

Gibbs nodded. “I’ll drive you home; you’ll need to pack a few things. Palmer, can you let the director know what’s happened? Tell him I’ll call him once I get Ducky home.”

“Of course, Agent Gibbs,” Palmer replied, anxious to do something useful.

As soon as Palmer was out of the room, Gibbs turned to Ducky. “I’m going with you,” he said decisively.

Ducky looked at him sharply, uncertain of his motivations. “Why?”

Gibbs faced his friend and sighed, scrubbing a hand over tired eyes.
“Ducky, I won’t try and convince you the thought of never getting a chance to make things right with Tony doesn’t scare me, because it does,” he admitted. “But that’s not my main concern right now. You are.”

Ducky just looked bewildered at the admission. “I’ll be fine, Jethro.”

“I know that. But you don’t have to do this alone. You’re my oldest friend and if the worst happens…” Gibbs stopped, his voice hitching with emotion at the thought of Tony dead. He closed his eyes briefly and swallowed against the tightening in his throat. “If the worst happens, that’s not news you need to hear two thousand miles from home and surrounded by strangers. We’re going to need each other; all of us.”

Ducky patted Gibbs’ arm gently, gratitude shining from his eyes.

“Thank you, Jethro.”

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A short time later, a subdued Abby and Palmer were seeing them off at the airport. Gibbs checked his messages one last time and made a mental note to thank Vance when they returned home. He’d coordinated with FBI Director Whitman and arranged for them to be allowed to wait for word on Tony in the command center at the attack site. Having another doctor on scene in Ducky probably couldn’t hurt, and he could pitch in himself wherever needed as well.

While Abby pulled Gibbs away for a good bye hug, Jimmy turned to his mentor. “I’m glad Agent Gibbs will be with you,” he began. “But I wish I could be there too, Doctor Mallard,” he said regretfully.

“I believe you are needed as much here, Mister Palmer.”

Jimmy nodded with a sigh. “I know,” he said, flicking his eyes toward Abby, and thinking of McGee and Bishop; back at NCIS waiting for word from their own sources. “You’ll call as soon as you hear something about Tony?”

“Of course I will.”
Nearby, Abby stepped back and fixed worried eyes to Gibbs’ as he broke their embrace.

“You’ll find him, right, Gibbs? You’ll find him and tell him how much he’s been missed,” she pleaded.

“Abby,” Gibbs began, “That’s not why I’m going,” he said, looking at Ducky meaningfully.

“But Gibbs…” she exclaimed.

Gibbs shook his head, stopping her protest.

“Abby, no. You saw the footage and you know the situation,” he reminded, not wanting to give her false hope. He knew how smart and resourceful Tony was, but he’d lost so many people he cared about. And though he was trying to stay positive, looking at that partially ruined building on television didn’t lend itself to holding out much hope at all.

“We aren’t going to be there in an official capacity, Abby. It’s not up to me to save the day,” he told her, painfully aware of that reality himself. “I’m going to be with Ducky, so he isn’t out there alone. And if they bring Tony out of that building alive, I’ll be there for him too, assuming he’ll let me be.”

“Not if. When. I’ll ask the nuns to say a prayer for Tony and the others. He’ll be fine, you’ll see,” she asserted.

Gibbs heard the determination and the denial in her voice; her unwillingness to believe there was a chance Tony might not have survived. He wished he had her faith, even knowing that was just her way of coping. Gibbs nodded in resignation. “You do that, Abby.”

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AN: Ducky and Gibbs arrive at the scene of the attack to wait for word on Tony...but things don't look very promising. Will Tony be found alive? Find out in the next chapter, "Rescue or Recovery".
Rescue or Recovery

Chapter Summary

Gibbs accompanies Ducky to Seattle to wait for word on Tony and others among the missing after a devastating attack. Hope fades with every moment that passes as a rescue operation turns to a recovery effort.

Chapter Notes

No spoilers to speak of, but there are minor references to canon events, as well as events from previous installments of the trilogy.

Unbeta’d - any mistakes are mine.

~Seattle, day after the attack~

Some hours after leaving DC, Gibbs and Ducky finally arrived at the scene of the attack and were faced with a horrific sight. Gibbs trembled a bit as a flashback to the bombing at NCIS came crashing forward in his memories. Tony had been trapped in the wreckage of that building for a time too. He felt a gentle patting on his arm, and he was grateful for the knowing touch that kept him from falling deeper into the flashback.

“Jethro?” Ducky asked worriedly, catching the tremors in his companion.

Ducky’s quiet concern pulled him back into the present. “I’m alright, Duck. Just thinking about NCIS.” Gibbs ended the explanation there, and studied the scene, knowing Ducky would understand the reference.

*Dammit, Tony. I need you to be okay.*

On the surface, the scene was chaotic. Cranes and digging equipment were interspersed among rescue vehicles, fire trucks, and police cars. Lights flashed and rescue workers moved about urgently, talking on radios and adding an indecipherable din to the noise of the digging equipment.
Even the nearby parking garage was partially collapsed, but it was the main building that drew their attention. Gibbs was sure being up close and personal to this devastation would have challenged even Abby’s steadfast faith and optimism.

The front of the building was obliterated and the worst case scenario they feared had happened while they were in flight. The S3 building’s burned and blackened front wall had collapsed inward, too heavily damaged from the rocket strikes and subsequent fire to remain standing. With the floor supports compromised, the interior floors and walls collapsed too, pancaking downward into a smoldering pile of rubble that left only the building’s rear section and side walls marginally intact. And Tony, along with Joanna and others were in there somewhere.

“How unlucky can one man be?” Gibbs mumbled, thinking out loud.

Ducky could sense Gibbs was fighting his own demons; struggling not to be pessimistic about Tony’s chances now that he’d seen the building. “I prefer to think he was quite lucky last time,” Ducky reminded him firmly. “Other than some cuts and an impressive array of bruises, he was fine. I have to believe he will be this time too.”

“This is worse. I want to believe, Duck. To not give up on him. Look how carefully they are working,” Gibbs said, pointing at the cranes ever so gently lifting slabs of concrete and debris, and placing it carefully to the side. “They are working slowly, methodically. It’s a good sign; it tells me they are still looking for people trapped, not bodies.”

“But?” Ducky prompted.

“But it’s not in my nature to discount the evidence in front of me, Duck, and believe the odds aren’t long. Very long.”

“He has proved us wrong more than once when we counted him as lost; when evidence told us he was lost. You said you don’t want to give up on Anthony. So don’t.”

Gibbs couldn’t help the small smile that escaped at that.

“Just that easy, huh?” Could it be too much to hope for that Tony beat the odds once again? No, not too much. Maybe hope was just that simple.
He and Ducky were escorted into the warehouse across the street from the wrecked building, where the command center had been set up. Matt Carson, now the ranking member of Tony’s team, introduced himself and assessed the new arrivals.

“You’re the Doctor Mallard I spoke to on the phone?” he asked. “Tony’s medical proxy and next of kin?” He also realized this must be the Agent Gibbs from Tony’s NCIS case report on the Calling; the one who’d nearly been killed when the group first emerged from the shadows several years ago. That meant they also knew Joanna.

“One and the same,” Ducky replied. “Please call me Ducky,” he offered before introducing Gibbs. “Agent Gibbs and I are longtime friends of Anthony’s. Aside from his father, who’s out of the country, we’re also possibly the closest thing he has to family right now.”

Matt was pleased to learn that Tony had people in his life willing to travel across the country to wait for word, knowing it might not be good.

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear Tony isn’t alone and has family and friends in his corner. He’s been pretty much alone here and a hard man to get to know, but we all like and respect him a hell of a lot.” Matt said. “I’m very sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances.”

“Don’t despair, young man. You don’t know Anthony the way we do,” Ducky advised. “He hasn’t led an easy life and has persevered through all of it. I believe he is in there somewhere, impatient and wondering what is taking us so long to find him.”

Gibbs snorted softly. “Yeah, that would be just like him.”

Matt couldn’t help but feel his somber mood buoyed by the older man’s humor and absolute conviction. He grinned at the diminutive doctor. “He lets you call him Anthony?”

“Yes, well…perhaps that’s a privilege he allows an old man. I’ve always done so,” Ducky smiled. “Can you update us on what’s happening? We’ve come straight from the airport.”
Matt’s grin faded and he was serious once again. “Thanks to Tony, we know a lot about what happened inside, how the building was infiltrated, and the identities of the two terrorists who got in.”

Tony had truly come into his own leading this team. Gibbs couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in his former agent as Matt went on.

“Also thanks to him, the building was evacuated before the attack, and several explosive devices disabled. Tony’s the main reason we have so few casualties and why the number of potential hostages was so small.”

Matt outlined everything that transpired in the hours that followed as Gary, holed up in the armory, relayed information back to the task force monitoring the situation from outside.

Matt’s features crumpled a bit as he thought about Gary, and the others. The perceptive doctor expressed his concern.

“Agent Carson? Are you alright?”

Matt composed himself and explained. “We haven’t released this publicly yet, pending family notifications, but the death toll has gone up by three. The bodies of Melanie Davies and one of the security guards were found in the rubble not far from the security office a few hours ago.”

“You said three?” Gibbs prompted.

“Yeah…” Matt answered, exhaling heavily. “Gary Walker. Gary was pulled alive from the front fire stairwell not long after the attack, but was badly injured making his way there. He’s the one that gave us Tony and Joanna’s last known location in the building. Tony was able to call and warn him right before the attack. We think Tony and Joanna managed to overcome the two suspects, but didn’t have enough time to make it out.” Matt’s voice wavered a bit as he continued. “Lena Duarte, our fifth team member, went with Gary to the hospital. She called a short time ago to tell us he didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry,” Gibbs offered simply.

“Our condolences on the loss of your colleagues,” Ducky added sincerely.
“Thank you,” Matt said, looking at his watch. “Look, I’ve got to check in with the rescue team and get official updates ready for Director Whitman’s next press conference for the media and various alphabet agencies.”

“Agent Carson,” Gibbs broke in, wanting to make clear their intentions. “We’re not here to disrupt or make this situation more difficult for you. We’d like to help if we can. Ducky is a physician, and NCIS’ medical examiner. He can assist in the triage tent and makeshift morgue we saw outside. If you can’t find something for me to do, I’ll make food and coffee runs.” Gibbs’ voice was grimly determined when he spoke again. “Just know that we are going to be here one way or another, until Tony is found.”

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~Seattle, 36 hours after the attack~

Gibbs stood at the window, haunted eyes watching the activity around the disaster scene across the street. It was hard not to give in to the notion that Tony’s being here was indirectly his doing, and the emotional rollercoaster had him on edge. With every update from the crews working outside he crashed between the high of believing Tony would come out of that wreckage, grinning and irreverent, to the low of the wreckage becoming the scene of a loss they’d find difficult to recover from.

Massive floodlights lighting the area showed the scale of the devastation, while aiding the search and rescue effort going around the clock. Ducky was assisting with the makeshift morgue on scene, and helping to treat rescue personnel’s minor injuries incurred by shifting and falling debris. Gibbs was left alone with his thoughts, and his guilt.

Gibbs wheeled as the phone near Carson rang. Every time he hoped it was word coming that Tony had been found, and every time his hopes were dashed. He stepped closer and hovered anxiously. Carson’s eyes flicked toward him. His expression was unreadable as he hung up the phone and Gibbs’ heart started to race.

Matt turned to the other man and said quietly. “We’ve got two bodies coming over, Gibbs…both unidentified males. Grab a hard hat,” Carson said, knowing Gibbs would want to come with him.

They grabbed raincoats from a stack by the door and put them on before making their way outside, where it was now raining heavily. As Carson turned toward the makeshift triage and morgue tent,
Gibbs stopped him.

“Wait. Let’s go to them. I want to know if one is Tony before they bring those bodies anywhere close to Ducky,” he said protectively.

Carson nodded in understanding. He led the way around the perimeter to the rear of the destroyed building, where the rescue efforts had been concentrated. They met the small group of rescue personnel carrying two blanket covered stretchers.

Matt went to the first stretcher and lifted the blanket. “Our missing security guard,” he sighed, replacing the blanket gently.

Gibbs suppressed a shudder as he stepped up to the second stretcher and looked down at the blanket covered figure. As he reached for the edge of the blanket covering the face, a memory from two years earlier came back, bringing with it almost crippling remorse.

It was Tony’s voice in his head, from the last time he saw him in person. The day after Tony resigned, when he’d confronted him in the basement about his erratic and abusive behavior, and urged him to get help.

_One of these days you’re going to get your head on straight, and for all that’s happened, I really hope so. When you do Gibbs, you’re going to realize it didn’t have to be this way._

He knew Tony had been right about almost everything he’d said that day, and Gibbs desperately wanted the chance to tell him that; to apologize. To let him know that he had gotten the help he needed and Tony was the catalyst he had to thank for it. Now he was faced with the possibility it was Tony under that blanket, and he’d never get the chance.

“Gibbs?” Carson asked quietly, seeing him freeze. “Do you want me to do it?”

Gibbs shook his head. He held his breath and lifted the edge of the blanket. The breath gusted out in a rush as relief washed over him, and his knees wobbled slightly. It wasn’t Tony.

Carson leaned forward, and spoke unsmilingly. “That, my friend, is the leader of The Calling,” he said, as he recognized LaPointe.
“You’re kidding.”

“Nope,” Carson answered. “Let’s go back; there’s something else you need to know.”

Once back inside out of the rain, Matt pulled Gibbs aside from the others working nearby.

“About the phone call I got right before we went out there. They found the bodies in what used to be the security office, Gibbs.”

“And?”

“That’s Tony and Joanna’s last known location as of about a minute before the first rockets were fired. There was no sign of them in or around the office and the teams aren’t sure which direction to start digging next.”

Gibbs frowned, not quite tracking what Carson was getting at. Did that mean they were getting close to finding them or not?

“Okay…”

“They’ve pulled out to reassess; the area they were digging in is unstable now. There’s the rain to contend with too. It’s making work dangerous and progress has slowed to a crawl. What I’m trying to tell you Gibbs, is that the operation has changed. It’s no longer a rescue operation; they’re now calling it a recovery operation.”

“What? Gibbs glared. “They’re giving up on finding them?”

“Gibbs, conventional wisdom says their chances dropped sharply after 24 hours and it’s been 36. The odds of them surviving are next to nil at this point, surely you know that.”

“No, I don’t know that!” Gibbs protested hotly, feeling a wave of impotent anger. “They damn well better keep working.” The hope he’d been trying so hard to maintain faded in the face of
this development. Carson was probably right; he knew his anger was misdirected and apologized for his outburst. What Gibbs really didn’t know was how he was going to face Ducky with this news.

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~Seattle, 42 hours after the attack~

Gibbs retreated to a secluded corner in the command center to be alone for a time, while leaving the surviving half of Tony’s team to their work. Carson had introduced him to Lena Duarte earlier, the only married member of Tony’s team. After the death of Agent Walker, she’d left the hospital, taking a few hours to go home to her family and had just returned to duty.

Gibbs was beginning to feel despondent. A day and a half of waiting and wondering was taking its toll on his nerves; on all of them. He restlessly fidgeted with Ducky’s cell phone, accidentally left behind after he’d browbeat the exhausted man into going back to the hotel to rest for a while. He was tired too, from lack of sleep and the emotional ups and downs…brooding and fighting back against the grief trying to claw its way inside him.

Gibbs scrolled through the contacts on Ducky’s phone and found a “Nick” with no address or last name…Tony. He gave in to the temptation to dial Tony’s phone just so he could hear his voice on the voice mail greeting, and hoped Ducky wouldn’t mind the small invasion of privacy.

He smiled soon as he heard Tony’s voice. Then the vivid memory of walking in on Ducky in the middle of a video phone call with Tony not long ago leapt forward from his subconscious. He’d screwed up, reignited Tony’s anger all over again. He made a mess out of that opportunity to show Tony he’d changed, that he cared about him, and regretted causing the break in their friendship.

Your concern would have been welcome a couple years ago, when I got back from risking my life trying to bring the people who damn near killed you to justice…it might be touching now, if I hadn’t spent the better part of my last year at NCIS feeling like gum under your shoe.

He remembered the hurt, anger, and betrayal in the younger man’s voice. Although he hadn’t known it then, it was clear now that Tony had left NCIS to continue pursuing some faction of those responsible for his shooting. It would be arrogant to presume that was his sole reason, but Gibbs was beginning to suspect this dogged pursuit that was so characteristic of Tony meant he still felt some semblance of loyalty toward him.
If true, it would be an incredible gift considering Gibbs’ own actions. Maybe things between them weren’t so unsalvageable as they once seemed. Gibbs wondered if it would make any difference at all to Tony that he’d come here now. The pragmatist in him was saying he might never get an answer to that question. Gibbs gave himself a mental shake and resolved not to dwell on that.

He dialed the number again and listened to Tony’s voice. Then the significance hit him. Tony’s cell phone was working. He leapt up and rushed to where Carson and Duarte were huddled together at one of the computers.

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Matt watched Lena’s fingers fly over the keyboard as she tried to trace Tony’s personal cell.

Gibbs was baffled. “I don’t understand,” he said as he stood watching over Lena’s shoulder. “How could a phone have escaped damage and still work from inside that?” he asked hooking a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the ruined building. “And how can we be getting a signal if the phone was buried under three floors of rubble?”

Matt shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense,” he agreed.

Lena blew out an exasperated breath and pushed away from the keyboard. “This doesn’t make sense either. The signal is coming from outside the footprint of the building.”

“That’s impossible,” Matt said. “We know he had the phone with him; Gary was listening in on the open line after Tony and Joanna went to confront LaPointe. They didn’t lose contact until Gary activated the jammers.”

“Well, it’s right here,” a frustrated Lena said pointing at the map graphic on her screen.

“Okay, let’s think a minute,” Matt said calmly. “Where is this position in relation to the building?”

Lena checked her map again and narrowed the view. “It’s 20 feet or so outside the west wall. Not moving.”
“That’s where the breezeway between the garage and the building was before the collapse.” Matt mused. “That can’t be right; all the debris from that area has been cleared and no one was even close to it after the evacuation.”

Gibbs’ hope faded again as Lena shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, Matt. There’s plenty of towers around to trace the position accurately.”

“It’s almost like the phone is underground…” Gibbs said uncertainly, not knowing how all this phone tech worked.

Matt’s eyes lit up at that. “Oh my god… I think I might know where they could be. Is the city engineer still on site? I need to talk to him now.”

Gibbs stood outside watching the frenetic activity with a growing optimism as the search and rescue teams concentrated around an access stairway a block away from the disaster site. There was a renewed sense of urgency that had been missing since the digging effort shifted from rescue to recovery mode.

They’d consulted with the city engineer, who’d confirmed Carson’s educated guess was spot on. Not only did a city utility tunnel run almost directly under S3, there was access to it from the S3 sub-basement.

“So you’re thinking Tony and Joanna went down instead of up?” Gibbs asked. “He knew this tunnel was there?”

“Well Tony’s phone sure says so,” Matt smiled, feeling hopeful again.

“How are we even getting a signal from his phone if it’s that far below the surface?” Gibbs wanted to know.

The city engineer spoke up. “Just like in some transit tunnels, there are cellular repeaters installed in most of our utility tunnels, for the safety of work crews. It also allows them to communicate with their respective utilities companies as they work, instead of resurfacing to relay information.” He held up a tablet. “Good news. I’ve just received the map of the tunnels in this area. The sub-
basement entrance is still blocked by debris, but there’s an access stairwell to a connecting tunnel a block away.”

“There’s just one problem with all this,” Gibbs pointed out. “If they made it to one of the utility tunnels, why haven’t they surfaced?” Gibbs continued as the others’ excitement gave way to troubled expressions once again. “Why hasn’t Tony tried to call us?”

The reason Tony and Joanna hadn’t contacted anyone became clear as the rescue crews worked their way deeper into the network of utility tunnels. The close proximity of the rocket explosions and intense fire caused collateral damage to the subterranean passages nearby. The crews accessed the tunnel leading back toward S3, only to find their way blocked by a ceiling collapse.

What turned out to be a small collapse was quickly cleared and a cheer went up in the command center as word was radioed in from rescuers that a female survivor was on the way out. Their elation that Joanna had been found was tempered by word that a body was coming out too.

Gibbs, Lena and Matt didn’t speak as they sprinted to the tent set up near the tunnel access stairwell. They stepped inside and immediately saw Joanna sitting up on a gurney. She was dirty and disheveled, had a wrist and ankle splinted, and was receiving fluids via an IV.

Gibbs stayed back, moving aside to allow the team mates their reunion. He looked past Joanna and suddenly his feet refused to move as he saw another blanket covered body.

"Matt…Lena!” Joanna exclaimed in a voice hoarse from dehydration. “Tony’s still in there. They’ve got to go back!”

“That’s not Tony?” Matt asked, gesturing at the blanket covered stretcher a few feet away.

“What?” Joanna frowned, confused. Gibbs stepped closer to hear her answer.

“No! That’s Rousseau,” she said, realizing they thought the body on the stretcher was Tony. “They’ve got to go back for him!” she insisted desperately.
Gibbs sagged in relief; glad Ducky was still at the hotel. Gibbs had no intention of calling him until they found Tony. He didn’t know how many more of these wild swings he could endure himself, much less subject an elderly man with a heart condition to them. Ducky wouldn’t thank him for it, but he didn’t want to expose his dear friend to more uncertainty and stress than was necessary.

“Gibbs? Is that really you?” Joanna asked in disbelief.

Gibbs joined Matt and Lena next to the gurney. “Yeah, it’s me. Ducky’s here too.”

“I’m so sorry, Gibbs. I left him,” Joanna revealed, flushing with shame and self-loathing. “He told me to go; that he’d be right behind me as soon as he called Gary. He wouldn’t leave without trying to warn him first.”

“You did the right thing, Joanna,” Gibbs reassured her. “They’ll find him, I promise.”

Matt wasn’t sure about the wisdom of promising Joanna that, even to calm her agitated state, but he nodded in agreement. “We won’t let them stop looking, Joanna. Now let them take care of you.”

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~Seattle, 48 hours after the attack~

To Gibbs, it seemed interminable hours had gone by, but in reality it was only two hours since Joanna had been freed and taken to the hospital. Two hours to clear the second, larger collapse that had partially buried Tony. Two hours until a pair of EMTs could rush in to the tunnel to treat and stabilize Tony so he could be moved. There was a collective sense of dread as they waited for the crews to make their way back through the tunnel and up the stairs to street level.

Gibbs’ stomach roiled as they waited. He jumped as the door to the stairwell banged open. A group of dirty, dusty firemen poured out, bearing a stretcher, while the two EMTs ran alongside. There was no blanket covering the figure this time; allowing them glimpses of the pale, still as death, and instantly recognizable form.

*My God, that’s Tony. Our Tony*, he thought numbly.
Gibbs watched grimly, almost in a trance, as they ran by him. They bypassed the tent and ran directly for the ambulance standing by. The stretcher carrying the battered, dirt and blood covered figure was loaded and the EMTs jumped inside.

The doors slammed shut and he was gone.

Gibbs squeezed his eyes shut against those fleeting images of a battered and bloody Tony replaying in his head, not sure they’d ever leave him.

Damn it Tony, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Not like this. Never like this.

Matt turned to Gibbs when the ambulance doors slammed shut. The man had been determined and controlled throughout this whole ordeal of waiting and wondering about the fate of someone he obviously cared about a great deal. Except for the understandable flare of temper when he thought the rescue was being called off, he’d been stoic and calm. At least outwardly. The mask had cracked now and there was just one emotion on display as the ambulance pulled away with a screech of tires. Anguish.

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AN: So, Tony and Joanna made it out alive. Will Tony stay that way? Find out in the next chapter, “Of Vigils and Moving On”.

Also, Seattle really does have a network of underground pedestrian, transit, and utility infrastructure tunnels; many with stealthy entrances hidden in plain sight. This little tidbit proved very convenient to the plot of my story! ;)

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Of Vigils and Moving On

Chapter Summary

Tony’s friends and colleagues hold vigil in Seattle; unable to do anything but wait and hope he recovers from his injuries. While they wait, thoughts turn to what comes next.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone. I’m back from what’s been a partial social media hiatus, and almost total writing drought for these past couple months. I won’t bore you with the details of BS going on in my life that made this necessary, when perhaps all you really want to know is “darn it, will she ever finish this story?” The answer is yes, she will. So I humbly offer this update for those still following the story, and unless something unforeseen happens, the conclusion will be posted later this month. I hope you enjoy, and comments are most welcome if you'd like to offer encouragement as I wrap this story up ;)

Beta'd.

~Seattle~

Matt and Lena were already at the hospital by the time Gibbs and Ducky were able to make their way there. On hearing their patient’s next of kin had arrived, one of the duty nurses assisting in Tony’s care had come to the waiting room to talk to Ducky. She informed them that Tony had been taken for a CT scan and would go from there directly into surgery, so his doctor would not be able to speak to them until afterward.

Ducky was presented with a sheaf of papers authorizing the surgery. Once signed, the nurse hurried off, leaving him feeling extremely worried and struggling to keep his professional mask carefully in place so as not to upset Gibbs and the others.

Gibbs, on the other hand, stared after the nurse and managed to look both fearful and angry that they would have to wait awhile longer to know how Tony fared. Ducky could tell he was fighting the temptation to go on a tear demanding answers from the medical staff.

“Well,” Ducky began, hoping to avoid having Gibbs alienate a new hospital staff, “This isn’t Bethesda, so I’ve no influence here, but perhaps I can still persuade the nurses to allow me a
Matt and Lena looked up anxiously as Ducky returned a short time later, looking less hopeful than when he left the room.

“Duck?” Gibbs prompted, an edge of fear bleeding into his voice.

Ducky sighed, feeling older than his years. “Anthony’s head injury is causing some concern. He hasn’t been conscious at all since they brought him out of the tunnel. He has internal injuries from being struck and pinned by falling beams, and a number of stab wounds.”

Lena inhaled sharply and Matt scowled. “That must have happened during the hostage situation,” he ventured.


“Yes,” Ducky confirmed. “Most of those wounds are superficial…but some are not,” Ducky intoned. “And it appears infection has set in. Anthony has a high fever and is also showing signs of respiratory distress.”

“From the smoke and dust?” Gibbs asked with a wince.

“Presumably.”

“How bad is that, on top of everything else, Ducky?”

Knowing Gibbs was asking about Tony’s pre-existing lung damage, Ducky gave a small shrug of his shoulder. “Unknown. The surgeon will be able to tell us more. In the meantime, I need to call Bethesda and make arrangements to have a complete copy of Anthony’s medical records forwarded here.”

Gibbs nodded. “I’ll call NCIS. They should at least be told Tony’s been found alive.”
McGee was jolted awake by the buzz of his cellphone on the nightstand. He sighed as he reached to silence the phone before it could wake Delilah. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and his stomach flipped as he looked at the display.

Gibbs.

There must be some word about Tony. McGee slipped carefully out of the bed, managing not to wake his wife. He walked toward the living room, pulling the bedroom door shut behind him. He sat on the couch and answered, trying to prepare himself for the worst. What else could it be at this late hour? “Hey Gibbs. You have news?”

“They found him; he’s alive,” Gibbs confirmed without preamble. “Joanna Teague too. She has minor injuries and will be fine.” Gibbs sounded weary and grim as he spoke again. “Tony’s in bad shape.”

Alive. McGee let out a relieved breath and leaned back against the cushions. “Is Tony going to be alright?”

“We don’t know yet; he’s still in surgery,” Gibbs reported, not sugar coating Tony’s status. “We’ll know more in a few hours, but I thought everyone would at least want to know he’s been found. Can you tell the others?”

“Of course. Bishop, Abby, and Palmer have been pretty upset by the television coverage. I’m glad there’s some good news to give them.”

“Can you do something else, Tim?” Gibbs asked.

“Anything you need, Gibbs.”

“Try to get in contact with Senior. I haven’t had any luck reaching him and…well,” Gibbs said
hesitantly. “The docs think he should be here.”

McGee swallowed heavily at the implied “just in case”. Tony’s chances must not be all that promising if they were trying to track down his father. Yes, Tony had been found alive somehow, and he was glad for it. That Tony had come out of that building alive was a miracle in itself, but it was one they’d find difficult to be grateful for if they were going to lose him anyway.

“We’ll work on tracking down Senior. Call us as soon as you know something more, okay, Gibbs?”

Tony had gotten a lot of kidding about his “nine lives” over the years. McGee found himself fervently praying he had at least one more left.

~Seattle~

As the hours passed without an update, Gibbs had taken to pacing the small waiting room like a caged tiger, ignoring the comfortable chairs and couch. Ducky huddled with what was left of Tony’s team; the old doctor’s empathy for others compelling him to provide comfort where he could, even though Matt and Lena were virtual strangers to him. The agents appeared to appreciate both the effort, and Ducky’s gentle, calming influence. They left Gibbs to his tense pacing; taking their cue from Ducky. They seemed to sense he would rather be left to his own devices than accept being comforted or placated.

The waiting room door opened, and Gibbs turned and stared intently at the man who entered. He’d donned a white coat over a set of bloody scrubs, and his face was expressionless; giving no indication as to whether he was bringing good news…or bad.

“Doctor Mallard?” the new arrival called, glancing around the room questioningly.

Ducky rose and the others flanked him as he walked toward the other man.

“I’m Doctor Mallard,” he confirmed, extending a hand.
“Doctor Irons,” the doctor greeted, shaking Ducky’s hand and nodding toward the others. “I performed the surgery on Agent DiNozzo,” he informed them in a monotone voice. “He’s currently in recovery and will be moved to ICU shortly.”

“And how is he?” Ducky asked.

“It’s rather complicated, I’m afraid,” the doctor replied in a cool, unemotional delivery that set Gibbs’ teeth on edge.

“Agent DiNozzo’s injuries taken individually, while serious, would not typically be considered critical. However, the combination of injuries and the delay in getting him to a hospital has created a unique set of challenges for his treatment.”

“And those are?” Ducky asked.

“Alright,” the doctor began. “First things first. The surgery accomplished several things. Agent DiNozzo was pinned by fallen steel beams. One struck him in the lower back. While there’s no damage to his spine that we can discern, it did cause a minor laceration to his left kidney. We were able to repair the laceration and we’ll be monitoring his kidney function carefully for a least a few days. We treated ten superficial stab wounds to his arms and torso, and two deeper wounds; all of which had become infected. Of the two deeper wounds, one was to the right side of his abdomen and one to the left shoulder. We repaired some damage to the shoulder, and he’ll require rehabilitation to regain full range of motion in that joint.” The doctor paused to let his initial report sink in.

Gibbs got the sense the worst was yet to come and he mentally prepared himself for unwelcome news. “What else?”

“Agent DiNozzo has developed a respiratory infection that we’re trying to keep from turning into pneumonia,” Doctor Irons continued. “Aside from exposure to smoke from the fire and dust from the building debris, we’re told the tunnel he was trapped in was exceptionally cold, and wet with standing water from the nearby firefighting efforts. He’s extremely dehydrated from the length of time he was trapped and that is being exacerbated by a high fever. He needs fluids to help resolve that, and assist in restoring kidney function, but we can’t administer them to the extent he needs.”

“Why the hell not?” Gibbs demanded.
“Jethro, please,” Ducky said soothingly. Many things about Gibbs had changed for the better in these past months, but his impatience and inability to deal well with medical professionals clearly wasn’t one of them.

Ducky turned back to the physician, knowing where this was going. “The head injury,” he surmised.

“That’s exactly so,” Doctor Irons confirmed. “The blow to the head Agent DiNozzo received has caused some minor localized swelling of the brain, so we’re worried about a further increase in intracranial pressure. On its own, the swelling might resolve itself without surgical intervention. That’s what we hope. However, Agent DiNozzo needs to be awake and coughing to clear his lungs. We can manually suction the fluid from his lungs, but that isn’t ideal. He also needs IV fluids to combat dehydration and blood loss, but administering them is problematic,” the doctor informed them.

“Those treatments will raise his blood pressure and increase his ICP, making an invasive brain surgery more likely,” Ducky added.

Doctor Irons nodded. “As I said…complicated. Agent DiNozzo will remain in an induced coma and we’ll administer fluids in small amounts until the swelling is resolved or until we have to intervene. It’s a delicate balance and we hope he can hang on until we’re able to treat the other problems more aggressively.”

A few minutes later, Gibbs stared dismally as Tony’s doctor made his way from the room. After giving that clinical description of Tony’s many injuries, the doctor couldn’t be persuaded to speculate on Tony’s chances of recovery until they’d monitored his progress for twenty-four hours. He reinforced the grave warning that the delay in treatment complicated Tony’s care immensely, and went on to recommend that Tony’s family be called, “just in case” he took a turn for the worse.

Hearing that matter-of-factly issued implication that Tony might not pull through hit Gibbs as a though it were a physical blow. After two days of the agonizing uncertainty while Tony had been missing, they’d been given hope once more when he’d been found. Now they weren’t even allowed to visit Tony yet and on top of that, a robotic, uncaring doctor that didn’t know Tony wanted to snatch their hope away again. So much for bedside manner; at least with this guy.

Gibbs needed an outlet for his frustration. The others jumped at the loud bang as he struck the wall sharply; giving in to the impulse to vent. Knowing it was pointless gesture, he flushed with embarrassment and rubbed his hand, throbbing and stinging from contact with the waiting room wall. Tony’s teammates, Lena and Matt, were watching him warily, unsettled by his sudden display of temper.
“I’m sorry,” he began, meeting the other’s eyes. “That was a little hard to listen to.”

Lena and Matt nodded in understanding as Ducky took Gibbs’ hand and examined it for injury. They were no more impressed by the insensitive doctor’s bedside manner than Gibbs was, and were equally unnerved by the suggestion that Tony’s family be notified.

“Does Tony have a family?” Lena ventured as Ducky continued to assess Gibbs’ hand.

“Tony’s father is his only living close relative,” Gibbs answered, wincing as Ducky prodded his scraped and reddened knuckles. “I tried to call him, but he’s traveling overseas and tends to be difficult to reach.”

_He’s probably ignoring our calls; still sulking about Tony’s secrecy_, Gibbs thought uncharitably. “We’ll keep trying,” he answered without elaboration.

Ducky gently released Gibbs’ hand and sighed. “I don’t think you’ve done yourself any injury other than abrasions, Jethro, but perhaps a different outlet for your frustration is prudent.”

“You’re right.” Gibbs blew out a long breath. “I need some air; I’ll be back.” He turned abruptly and left the room. Ducky offered Matt and Lena an apologetic glance and followed his friend.

Gibbs strode quickly down the corridors of the unfamiliar hospital, sensing Ducky approaching from behind him. He wanted to move even faster, but restrained the impulse, and slowed instead, out of deference to Ducky’s aging limbs. He said nothing as they walked but even so, Ducky had no trouble reading him.

“Jethro, I understand your reaction to this news and its delivery, but this agitation helps no one. Nor will it get us in to see him any sooner.”

“You heard that doctor; he’s telling us to bring Tony’s father here. He’s not even giving Tony a chance!”

“Are you?”
“Am I what?” Gibbs said, raising a challenging eyebrow.

“Giving him a chance. Are you giving up on Anthony?” Ducky asked frankly.

“No!” Gibbs protested. “But…two days, Ducky. What if that doctor is right? Two damn days he laid there pinned in that tunnel, hurt and getting sicker by the hour. What if it took too long to find him?”

“Don’t borrow trouble, Jethro” Ducky advised. “Anthony is still with us; he has a chance and that’s all that matters right now.”

A chance, Gibbs thought. A chance he’d recover meant it was at least equally possible he wouldn’t.

“You didn’t see him at the scene, Ducky,” Gibbs reminded.

“No, I did not and it would not have mattered if I had. When did you stop believing in him?” Ducky asked in a disappointed tone. “I know how strong; how stubborn and tenacious he is. So do you. Or has that changed?”

Gibbs stopped walking and the pragmatist in him carefully considered Ducky’s question. Gibbs wanted to believe in Tony’s will to live; so very much. The last thing he wanted was to have to attend Tony’s funeral knowing he’d helped set the events in motion that led them here.

Two years could change a person radically. It had certainly changed him, and he believed it had been a resoundingly positive change. He knew himself much better now, his strengths and his flaws, thanks to Doctor Silva and his friends back home. But did he really know Tony anymore? He wasn’t entirely sure, and he had no one to blame but himself.

“I’d like to believe it hasn’t changed, Duck. But two years is a long time and I have no way to really know, do I? You know him better than anyone now,” Gibbs emphasized, trying not to feel a resentment he knew was misplaced about this aspect of their role reversal. After all, Ducky was the one; the only one Tony had trusted with the truth about what he’d been doing the last two years. “What do you think?”
“I think you should have faith in him, Jethro, just like you used to.”

~Seattle-four days later~

Gibbs stared out of the window in Tony’s hospital room, the gray Seattle day reflecting his somber mood. He heard a rustling behind him, and even though he knew its’ source, he couldn’t help but turn and check. Tony’s legs moved restlessly beneath the thin sheet covering his body from the chest down. Tony’s upper body was elevated, to lower the chances of fluid continuing to collect in his lungs and his left arm was strapped across his chest to prevent movement in the shoulder where he’d been stabbed.

Tony’s head tossed from side to side on the pillow and he coughed weakly. Gibbs frowned at the sheen of sweat on the younger man’s flushed face. His fever must be up again. The swelling in Tony’s brain had largely diminished, and his condition upgraded from critical to serious. The doctors were cautiously optimistic about the head injury continuing to improve. Tony had been allowed to surface naturally from the sedation, but he had yet to rise further than a half-conscious state and still wasn’t completely out of the woods. The respiratory infection and infection in his wounds continued to rage, causing a dangerously high temperature.

Tony’s persistent fever and lack of response to the antibiotics was troubling to the medical team caring for him. Ducky was concerned too, but was hiding it well. Gibbs stepped close and reached hesitantly for the sponge lying in a bowl of water on the bedside table. He gently blotted Tony’s face and neck for a few moments and was rewarded as Tony settled slightly and gave a small sigh of relief.

The flicker of satisfaction he felt at that faded as he recalled Tony’s reaction to being touched by him last night. Tony had several brief periods of semi-awareness since being allowed to surface from the medically induced coma. Each time, his eyes had been glazed; confused, and he’d been unable to focus on anything or anyone for long before lapsing into unconsciousness again.

Gibbs swallowed his hurt and disappointment as he recalled sitting next to the bed the night before, one hand resting gently over Tony’s wrist. Tony’s eyes opened and in a moment of lucidity; glanced down to see the hand touching him. He snatched his arm away as if burned, then immediately tensed. Tony grimaced in pain as the abrupt movement jostled his injured shoulder, his surgical wound, and the multitude of other injuries as well.

Gibbs rose and backed away from the bed, disheartened by the reaction. He wanted to help but
didn’t want to upset Tony further. Should he go? Before he could ask what Tony wanted, the pained expression faded and his body relaxed as he fell unconscious again.

Dammit. If that was Tony’s instinctive reaction to him, it strongly indicated the younger man wouldn’t want him hovering around as he recovered. Ducky seemed to believe things between the two men weren’t so irretrievably broken, but Gibbs wasn’t convinced. There was one other person who might have some insight.

He’d visited Joanna once or twice after she and Tony had been admitted, but not since the surgery she’d had to repair a badly fractured ankle. So he’d gone back last night to check on her, and hoped she might have an idea where he would stand with Tony.

~flashback~

Gibbs arrived in Joanna’s room to find she already had visitors. Matt and Lena were sitting with her, chatting quietly. The group looked up as he entered and Joanna waved him in.

“Come on in, Gibbs. How’s Tony been today?”

Gibbs shrugged. “Head’s better; they’re still worried about his fever.”

Worried was an understatement, Gibbs thought. Tony’s fever was hovering in the danger zone above 103.

“He’s not responding as well as they’d like to the antibiotics.”

“Has he been awake at all?” Matt asked.

Gibbs sighed and shook his head. “Not really; still in and out. Ducky’s back at the hotel catching a nap. Tony’s alone if you two want to visit. Maybe it will help if he hears some more familiar voices.”

Lena rose with a nod. “I think I will.”
“I’ll come with you,” Matt added, sensing Gibbs wanted to talk to Joanna.

Once they were alone, Gibbs shuffled to one of the chairs the others had been using and slumped heavily into it. He rubbed at tired, reddened eyes and then sat back in the chair, regarding her grimly.

Joanna tilted her head and studied Gibbs, it wasn’t hard to see he was distracted or preoccupied with something. It could only be one thing. Or more accurately, one person. “How’s Tony, really,” she asked.

“His fever’s dangerously high and nothing seems to be working. If they don’t get a handle on it soon, he could be looking at organ damage, or worse.”

“You’re really worried about him.”

“Ya think?” Gibbs shot back testily.

“I’m just a little surprised is all, given the way things stand between you.”

Gibbs gave her a sharp glance, wondering just how much she knew about that.

Joanna neatly changed the subject before he could ask.

“You should have seen him, Gibbs,” Joanna said, with pride and even a little awe in her voice. “There was never a time where he didn’t believe we were going to get out of that building alive, Gibbs. Not even when he was in that chair with his hands tied and that animal was stabbing him, over and over,” Joanna finished, her voice cracking a bit with emotion.

Gibbs remembered two other times Tony had been tied up in a chair, in a seemingly hopeless situation. He’d turned the tables both those times too. He listened, enthralled, as Joanna continued.

“Tony was the reason almost everyone was already out of the building when the terrorists took
over security. He manipulated them like a master; set them against one another and gave us the chance we needed to gain control of the situation. He’s the one who remembered the tunnels, too.” Joanna leaned over and opened the drawer in the bedside table.

Gibbs’ brows drew together in confusion as Joanna pulled out a small plastic bag and handed it to Gibbs. “That gave us precious seconds,” she said, gesturing at the bag. “I mean, who the hell carries something like that? Only Tony…” she said, shaking her head fondly. “He’s the reason we got out in time.”

Curious now, Gibbs opened the bag and looked inside. He gasped a little in surprise as the bloodstained, but instantly recognizable item came into view. The blade part of Tony’s belt knife.

“In the chaos after we got free, I shoved this in my pocket instead of handing it back to him.” Joanna noticed Gibbs frozen, staring into the bag. “Gibbs? What is it?”

“I gave Tony that…a long time ago,” Gibbs disclosed. “I can’t believe he still wears it, after all that’s happened,” he mused.

“It must mean a great deal to him, then. Maybe things aren’t as bad between you as you think.”

Gibbs pulled a face, not sure he wanted to go there. “Why did you tell me all that?” He asked in a subdued voice.

“Because after all he’s been through I can’t see him giving up now. Or ever.” Joanna asserted confidently. “I just can’t bring myself to believe he won’t get better, Gibbs.”

“Thanks, Joanna. I think I needed to hear that from someone who knows him better than I do right now. So, when are they letting you out of here?” Gibbs asked her.

“I’m cleared for crutches,” she said, nodding at the aluminum devices propped next to the bedside table. “One more check by the orthopedic surgeon in the morning, then I’ll be discharged.”

“Good,” Gibbs replied. “What’s next for you and your team?”
“Well, obviously the task force is no more. Lena will be transferring back to Langley for a position at CIA HQ and Matt is leaning toward going back to Homeland Security. I think FBI Director Whitman has something in mind for Tony, but he’s keeping it under his hat.”

“And you?” Gibbs prompted.

Joanna snorted at the question. “Working with Tony these past two years has altered my view of the sort of work I did for the CIA. I’m moving on too, back to the east coast. Retirement…maybe some consulting work.”

“Really?” Gibbs asked, surprised. “Huh.”

“Yep; I’m done. Something else on your mind, Gibbs? Besides our future plans?”

Gibbs smiled ruefully. She knew *exactly* what was on his mind. “Tony. I’m not sure how he’ll respond to me being here. I may be the last person on earth he wants around.”

“And you think I might know, one way or the other?”

Gibbs huffed. “Yeah.”

Joanna narrowed her eyes, and her voice was decidedly cooler when she spoke. “Tell me something, Gibbs,” she began. “Do you blame Tony for what happened to you when we were in Iraq?”

“No. I never blamed him,” Gibbs answered, rubbing the scar on his chest absently. “But I can see how he would have reason to believe I did. Saying I treated him like shit after you two got back from Shanghai is an understatement. To make matters worse, I kept doing it most of his last year at NCIS and never explained why.”

Joanna bit her lip, surprised at the admission and wondering how much she should tell Gibbs. “He hid it well, but it just about killed him when Vance ordered us off that ship and back to Iraq, not knowing if you were going to make it out of surgery,” Joanna revealed. “But he soldiered on; did his job. When Vance finally got word to us about you a few days later, his sense of relief and gratitude was so profound, the reaction actually knocked him off his feet for a few minutes.”
Joanna’s tone hardened again. “That’s the kind of loyalty and devotion you tossed aside, Gibbs.”

“I know,” Gibbs said softly as he looked down, unable to meet her eyes for a moment.

“He never talked about it in any detail, but it was pretty clear when I recruited him for the task force that you two had a serious falling out.”

“We did,” Gibbs confirmed, “But it wasn’t because of anything he did or didn’t do. It was pretty much all about me and my issues. I was nowhere near ready to admit it to myself at the time, much less tell him that.”

“And you are now?”

“If he’s willing to hear it,” Gibbs conceded.

“Tony may not want you to know this, but I’m going to take a chance and tell you anyway.”

“Okay,” Gibbs said hesitantly.

“When the task force was first created, we knew The Calling was somehow making a comeback. They came to our attention because they were targeting everyone directly involved in bringing down Daniel Budd and the first network.’ Joanna paused and closed her eyes as grief over Ned’s death resurfaced.

“Including you and Tony.”

Joanna nodded and opened her eyes. “Especially us. Several people, CIA operatives and informants both, had already been killed. I was upfront with Tony about that.”

Joanna had just confirmed his suspicion; that Tony had joined the task force knowing he would very likely become a target.
“Tony was furious with me that he hadn’t been told sooner,” Joanna disclosed. “But it wasn’t himself he was worried about. He was terrified that someone close to him might be hurt or killed; collateral damage in an attempt by The Calling to get to him.”

Gibbs sighed resignedly. That explained so much. Why Tony left so suddenly; why he dropped out of contact with everyone but Ducky and off the radar almost completely for so long…and under an alternate identity.

“You may not blame him for Iraq, but he never stopped blaming himself,” Joanna said.

Shame rose up in Gibbs at that, not for the first time. “There was nothing he could have done to prevent the shooting. If it hadn’t happened when it did, they simply would have looked for another opportunity. If they’d known what a threat Tony would become, it could have been him they targeted, not me.”

“I told him that too, more than once. I’m not so sure he believes it, even now.” Joanna drove her point home. “Whatever happened between the two of you broke his spirit a little bit, Gibbs. He pretended it didn’t, but…well you know Tony. He feels things deeply, even if he tries to never let you see.”

Gibbs nodded, well aware most people saw only what Tony wanted them to see.

“Most of the time,” Joanna continued, “His mask is impeccable. But not always. The mask slips a bit when it comes to you. As bad as things were for him when he left NCIS, he willingly isolated himself and lived a lie for over two years. His sense of justice aside, he did it to protect his father and everyone else there in DC. Especially you.”

~end flashback~

Gibbs couldn’t stop thinking about that conversation with Joanna last night. Tony sacrificed two years of his life to keep everyone he cared about safe from The Calling, including Gibbs. He’d never told the younger man, but the depth of Tony’s loyalty had always amazed and humbled him, and never more so than right now. The tragedy of it was, he didn’t deserve it and now Tony had paid, and was still paying a heavy price for his loyalty.

The door opened again but lost in thought, he didn’t react to Ducky appearing in his peripheral vision.
There were a few moments of awkward silence, then Gibbs spoke without turning away from the window. “What’s the doctor have to say, Ducky?” He asked.

“The on-call doctor is still worried about Anthony’s high fever. They are trying a different antibiotic; another one he’s responded to favorably in the past.”

Unable to shake off his dark thoughts, he gave voice to the guilt and shame that filled him after talking to Joanna.

“This is my fault.”

Ducky stiffened. “Outside,” he said simply. Jethro was about to get an earful and he didn’t want to take a chance Tony might sense the discord and react negatively. He turned on his heel and left the room, confident he would be followed.

As soon as Gibbs closed the door to Tony’s room, Ducky rounded on him and allowed annoyance to color his response. “How do you come to the conclusion that this is your fault, pray tell?”

“I talked to Joanna…she told me about how she recruited Tony away from NCIS. And his reasons for leaving.”

Ducky’s gentle features went stony and he flushed with rare anger. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for this,” he hissed. “You diminish Anthony’s courage and integrity; his choices. You disregard his actions; carried out for the sake of friendship and loyalty, as if they mean nothing. You’re making this about you and you’ve done that to him quite enough. I won’t have it,” Ducky finished vehemently.

“I couldn’t be expected to know all that, now could I?” Gibbs said, feeling defensive and taken aback at Ducky’s uncommon display of fury. “I didn’t ask him to do any of it!”

“Do try not to be an ass, Jethro. He knew you’d never ask…and you know you didn’t need to.”

“I’m trying here, Duck,” Gibbs said. “But I can’t help how I feel.”
“Jethro, if you are going to fall back into old habits, you will not be allowed to see him again,” Ducky snapped back. “Furthermore, if you cause him upset, I will be compelled to locate this hospital’s morgue and make you a guest,” he warned, glaring at Gibbs.

“Alright, you’ve made your point, Duck,” Gibbs sighed tiredly.

Ducky raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms impatiently. “And?”

“And you’re absolutely right. It’s not my intention to dismiss Tony’s actions,” he assured his old friend. “This whole thing has me off balance, and not knowing where I stand with him, well…the uncertainty is hard to take.”

Ducky nodded in understanding. “Bear in mind Jethro; when he awakes, my primary concern will be Anthony’s physical and emotional state, not yours. If you aren’t prepared to put him first for a change, Anthony will not be the only one to question your place here.”

“I hear you, Ducky,” Gibbs nodded, yet again feeling the pang of regret at their role reversal. Ducky was as protective of Tony as he himself had once been. “I’ll say it again…I’m really glad Tony hasn’t been completely alone in this. That you’ve been there for him, and are here now.”

Satisfied for the moment, Ducky went on. “Consider the situation beyond the immediate concerns about Tony’s condition. It will be some time before he goes into the field again. He doesn’t have a job; the task force building is destroyed. And then there’s the loss of life, including members of his team.”

Gibbs cringed inwardly at the blunt reminder.

“I heard what you said to Abigail at the airport. That you were coming to Seattle to support me. I also heard you tell her that you’d be here for Tony too, assuming he’d let you,” Ducky reminded. “Are you prepared to live up to that? The last thing he will need is to be burdened with your guilt and regret over the falling out between you, and what’s happened here. He’ll have plenty of his own guilt to overcome. And you may have to accept that the only way you can help is to stay in the background.”

Gibbs hung his head, feeling gutted at Ducky verbalizing the very thing he feared. That maybe Tony would want nothing to do with him once he was on the road to recovery. "He'll have
whatever he needs, Duck,” Gibbs affirmed. *Even if that isn't me,* he thought.

Gibbs looked up to meet Ducky’s knowing gaze. Those assessing eyes saw entirely too much sometimes.

The old doctor’s anger subsided and he felt a flicker of empathy at his friend’s struggle. “Jethro, stop wrestling with guilt over things you can’t control. Go for a walk, clear your head. Call Doctor Silva if you need to. But when you return…before you come into this room again, be sure to leave your issues at the door,” Ducky warned him.

A short while later, Ducky was settled in the chair next to Tony’s bed. He had a hand loosely wrapped around Tony’s and was holding a one sided conversation with the unconscious man.

“Did you hear all that nonsense, my boy? Of course you didn’t. Good thing, really,” Ducky rambled. “As far as he’s come this year, as much as he’s changed for the better, Jethro can still try the patience of a saint at times.”

Tony’s hand twitched, seemingly at the same time Ducky mentioned Gibbs’ name and his eyes darted to Tony’s face. Nothing.

“Yes, Anthony; Jethro is here,” Ducky told the still figure, trying to get another reaction. “And he’s quite unsure of his welcome.” Ducky smiled as Tony’s eyelids fluttered a bit, then stillled. “Well then, my dear boy, if you’d like to join us sometime soon, I must admit I’m curious about that myself.”

With that, Ducky settled back in the chair to watch…and wait.

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Chapter Summary

Gibbs comes to realize what's happened to Tony is triggering symptoms of his PTSD and seeks advice. He struggles not to sink back into old ways, knowing the time has come for him to face the consequences of his actions and past behavior toward Tony.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Here we are at last. Really; I need to stop trying to predict when I'll update. I'm just terrible at it. For those who've come this far, thank you for sticking with this story. You've come back time and again as I leave you with my notorious chapter end mini cliffhangers and then take forever to update. You've lurked and left kudos and comments...all of which have been so encouraging and I'm immensely grateful for your readership.

This trilogy of stories has come to mean a great deal to me and I'm very emotionally invested in its inevitable conclusion. Three years after I began the first story in the series "Turning the Page", that time has come.

No more waiting, no more cliffies. I give you the final three chapters in this story, which brings the trilogy to a close. I hope you’ve enjoyed reading this tale as much as I’ve enjoyed bringing it to life. Now, on with the story ;)

No spoilers to speak of, but there are minor references to canon events, as well as events from previous installments of the trilogy.

Beta'd - any mistakes are mine.

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day of reckoning (noun) – a time when the consequences of a course of action, mistakes, or misdeeds are felt.

~Seattle, nine days after the attack~

Gibbs and Ducky hung back, keeping a respectful distance as the others stood at the graveside of their second fallen teammate. Gary Walker had been laid to rest yesterday, and now it was Melanie Davies' turn.

Matt and Joanna, who both had a comforting arm around the distraught woman, flanked Lena on either side. Matt confided to him earlier that Lena and Melanie had been quite close. Gibbs had simply nodded in acknowledgement, all too familiar with the grief of laying someone you cared about to rest.
Finally, they all turned and started away from the gravesite. The ground was soft from the previous days' rain, and Matt steadied Joanna as she made her way across the spongy surface on her crutches. They had just one more stop to make…

Later, the group gathered in a small church. Gibbs stared blankly ahead, the sounds of others speaking in turn was nothing more than a steady, unintelligible drone in his ears. The talking stopped, but he only noticed when the others rose from the pews and moved into the center aisle.

He stood and followed a few paces behind everyone else as the others filed forward, stopping in turn at the simple, yet elegant casket at the head of the aisle. Gibbs' feet and legs felt increasingly leaden the closer he came to the casket with its' open lid. His field of vision seemed to tunnel; leaving everything but the casket at the end of the aisle in a foggy blur. In some far off corner of his mind, he felt as if his own body was rebelling against coming closer. He focused his misty vision on the open lid and felt a building sense of dread.

"Jethro…"

He was dimly aware of Ducky calling his name and briefly penetrating the building fog before fading away.

"Jethro…" the voice called again; more insistently. He stopped moving forward and turned his head slightly, catching Ducky's disappointed gaze in his peripheral vision. He looked as though he were saying get on with it. Gibbs glared down at his traitorous feet and forced himself to start moving again.

Suddenly he was next to the casket, eyes firmly fixed straight ahead on the inside of the open lid. He saw only the soft, dove gray satin lining in his oddly narrowed field of vision.

No…I don't want to do this.

Gibbs looked down, and as much as he had not wanted to look a moment ago, now he couldn't tear his eyes away. The figure was dressed in a suit; probably by that designer whose name he could never remember, much less pronounce. Handsome even like this, he noted absently; the face calm and peaceful in repose.

What was he supposed to do now? Say goodbye? Offer an empty apology? None of that mattered anymore. The only thing that mattered was this casket was about to be lowered into the ground and its sleek, elegant surface covered with earth for all time. Tony was gone forever, and he'd never told him any of the things he hoped Tony would allow him to say…things that the younger man deserved to know and should have been told long ago. He closed his burning eyes.

"Gibbs." Now Tony's vaguely chiding voice sounded in his head.

Gibbs looked down again and gasped as Tony's face was now bruised; covered with dirt and blood; just like when he'd been carried out of the collapsed tunnel. He backed up in horror as sea green eyes snapped open and pinned him with an accusing, hate-filled stare. He shook his head in denial.

"Tony…no!"

"Jethro!"

Gibbs bolted upright, heart racing and the shout of denial still echoing in his ears. He whipped his head around, confused and disoriented at first until he realized he was on the couch in the hospital's visitor lounge. Ducky was there, a calming presence beside him.

"I've been trying to wake you, Jethro. You were dreaming?" Ducky asked with obvious interest.
"Something to do with Anthony?"

Gibbs swung his feet off the couch and onto the floor. "You could say that," he answered vaguely, taking a few deep breaths to try and dispel the panic caused by the dream. "Doc Silva would say my subconscious is messing with me."

Ducky nodded knowingly. They'd paid their respects at the funerals for Anthony's team members the previous afternoon and he wasn't surprised Gibbs' subconscious was dwelling on it. "Funerals have a way of doing that, even those for people you aren't close to." He decided not to press Gibbs further and let the vague answer slide for the moment. "I have news."

Gibbs glanced up hopefully.

Ducky nodded with a broadening smile. "Anthony is awake."

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He was lost in the gloom; no matter where he looked, darkness was everywhere. Sometimes the dark veil lifted into shades of gray. He wanted more light, but pain came with the light; pain everywhere, along with confusion and an all-consuming heat. He sank back into the dark, where the pain and the heat burning him from the inside out were distant, more bearable.

At times when the light came, it brought voices and hands on his body. Sometimes the touches hurt his fevered skin and he tried to recoil from those. Other times, the touches were cool, gentle, and comforting.

Voices often accompanied the touches and it was good to know he wasn't alone in the dark, even when the touches brought pain. The voices were muffled; indistinct, but he could sense the differences and separate them. There were the clinical voices of the medical staff, and then there were the familiar voices of people he was sure he knew but couldn't quite remember. Team? The voices were full of concern, cajoling him to wake up already.

*I'm trying, can't you see that?*

The gentle, comforting storyteller voice was the one he heard most often and the one he was drawn to most. There another compelling voice from time to time, but the more he listened, the more he remembered about the voice. It wasn't all good. This voice was gruff and caring now, but he somehow knew it could also turn on you, becoming angry, or cutting and hurtful. As drawn as he was to it, he didn't completely trust this voice so he retreated to the shadows once again.

Time had no meaning as he floated in the dark. The sensations of heat and burning came and went, pain ebbed and flowed, and the voices washed over him. Occasionally he tried to surface, wanting to hear the voices better. At times he got tantalizingly close, but the dark veil only lifted so far and he instinctively knew he wasn't ready to leave it behind quite yet. But soon...

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Gibbs watched the methodical movements of the doctors and nurses through the ICU window, trying to catch a glimpse of Tony. It was a bit unnerving to watch, knowing Tony hated this part of a hospital stay. He could hear muted voices, and see doctors and nurses poking, prodding, and making notes in Tony's chart. Ducky was at his side, watching closely, but calm and unconcerned, so he took comfort in that.

They looked on as Tony's surgeon, Doctor Irons, stepped away from his patient's bed and joined them outside the room. The same doctor who expressed such skepticism for Tony's survival at
first; who had upset them all with his detachment and lack of empathy as he informed them of Tony's condition, now had a completely different attitude.

"Doctor Mallard," he began, "He's got a bit of a long road in front of him, but not only do I believe Agent DiNozzo will recover, there's a very good chance he'll have no permanent physical damage from his injuries. His lungs are clearing and his temperature has dropped out of the danger range. As far as the head injury, Agent DiNozzo's cognitive functions seem unaffected but right now, he's confused about what landed him in the hospital."

"He doesn't remember what happened?" Gibbs asked, giving the surgeon a worried look.

"Not completely. The combination of head injury, duration of the high fever, and medications are impacting his ability to recall recent events correctly," the surgeon answered. "It's not uncommon with blows to the head however, I believe even that will resolve itself with time. For now, he's understandably confused and upset about the lack of clear recall. I think it's best to restrict his visitors to next of kin until he's moved out of ICU."

Ducky could see the protest building in Gibbs' eyes and quickly asked, "When do you expect that will be?"

"I'd like to keep him in ICU so we can monitor him closely for another 12 hours or so. If he continues to improve in that time, and I expect he will, he'll be moved to a regular room. There won't be any restrictions on visitors then."

The surgeon glanced back through the window, impressed by his patient's constitution. "I was wrong about him," he said as the nurses left the room, giving them a clear view of Tony again.

"People often are," Gibbs replied, quiet pride in his voice. He turned and watched Tony through the window again as Doctor Irons followed the nurses down the hall. His view was partially obstructed by various monitors and equipment placed around the bed, but he could see Tony appeared to be sleeping now.

"I'd like to see him when he wakes up, Ducky," Gibbs said, eyes still fixed on Tony.

"You will, but I'm not sure it's the best idea that you do so right away."

"I can't completely trust that he'll be alright until I see him," Gibbs insisted.

Ducky shot his friend a displeased look. "Then you'll have to trust me for the time being," Ducky asserted firmly. He recognized Gibbs' attempt to use their shared concern for Tony to get what he wanted, even if the man himself didn't realize he was being manipulative.

"Anthony's inability to clearly remember recent events has changed things somewhat, Jethro," Ducky added. "He may be dealing with anxiety over his incomplete memories, and that may worsen as what happened in that building comes back to him," Ducky speculated. He certainly won't expect you to be here, and I don't think it's wise to overwhelm him with another stressor so soon after awakening. Rushing an unexpected reunion that he may not even want could be detrimental to his recovery."

At first, Ducky's assertion made him angry. He was a stressor now. Probably so, Gibbs admitted to himself, knowing his anger was misplaced.

Anger quickly faded to acceptance. "Alright, Ducky," he agreed, remembering Ducky's earlier warning about Tony being his first priority. He hadn't consciously realized it until now, but Ducky's concern about him backsliding into old behaviors in this situation was a valid one.
Gibbs suddenly remembered what Tony's father shared with him almost two years ago, after Senior's ill-fated attempt to intervene and get the two men talking to one another again. Tony had told his father quite accurately, to Gibbs' annoyance at the time, that Gibbs was a man with demons and how he chose to deal with them was a problem. Tony also adamantly indicated that there would be no fence mending between the two of them until Gibbs learned to bend, and he didn't see that happening anytime soon, if ever. Tony had been right...about so many things.

His desire to be more open and honest with important people in his life; less angry, unapproachable, and selfish about how he handled the ordeals thrown in his path was being challenged. It was clear that so far, he was not just failing, but being a jackass to boot.

The impact of Tony's ordeal presented the first true gauge of his success in therapy and aspects of his resolve to change for the better. If he was failing with Ducky of all people, that didn't bode well for his plan to make things right with Tony. Not to mention Ducky wouldn't even let him in the door if he didn't turn this behavior around. Gibbs recognized if there were any chance of returning to Tony's good graces, he had to show Ducky and Tony his demons weren't in control. That he could bend for the people so important to him.

"I care about him too, Ducky. The last thing I want to do is make the situation any more difficult for him, or you, than it is already. I'll wait as long as it takes." In the meantime, he'd take Ducky's advice and get Doctor Silva's help in sorting out the complicated mess going on in his head.

"Be patient, Jethro," Ducky advised with an understanding look. His longtime friend's decades of bad habits couldn't be erased overnight, but he was trying. On occasion, he just needed a nudge back in the right direction. "Go back to the hotel," Ducky suggested. "You haven't been getting enough rest. You also need to allow Anthony some time to get his bearings and let me get a sense for how he'll feel about you being here."

Gibbs returned to the hotel, feeling frustrated and confused by his behavior. His relief about Tony's slowly improving condition had been replaced with anxiety about how Tony would react to his presence now that he was awake. Now that he was here, where Tony had been badly injured and nearly died, his obsessive control and guilt issues had been triggered. They were longstanding personality traits that stopped serving him well some time ago, and Tony himself had called him out for them during that confrontation in his basement, only hours after resigning from NCIS. But why was he regressing now?

Would Tony be receptive to even seeing him? Not if he was going to be the same man he was when Tony left. Gibbs knew he might not get more than one chance to clear the air with Tony, and wanted to get it right. Guidance from the one person he knew and trusted to help him get to the root cause of his backsliding was just what he needed. As Doctor Silva had often reminded him in therapy, it wasn't enough to know when you needed help, you had to accept it when it was offered, even actively seek it out.

A feeling of resolve came over him as he sat down on the bed. Gibbs pulled his phone from his coat pocket, scrolled through his contacts until he found Doctor Silva and dialed. After they exchanged greetings, Gibbs shared the details of the situation and admitted he wasn't handling it as well as he'd hoped.

"I think I was doing fine before we got here," Gibbs said as he finished his summary. "I don't understand why all of a sudden I seem to have forgotten all the progress I've made with your help."

It didn't take Silva long to get to the heart of the matter.
"We'll circle back to the why, Gibbs. Let's work our way up to it," Silva suggested; pleased about the check in from his patient and that he reached out for help in sorting out his complex feelings around his former partner.

"OK, where do we start?" Gibbs asked.

"You have progressed a long way in your recovery, but it's a fine line you're walking now, Gibbs," Silva began, "Recovery is an ongoing process, and setbacks are often a part of that. In years past, this situation is just the kind of event in which your PTSD symptoms would manifest. You were helpless on the sidelines as someone you consider a member of your extended family was endangered, subjected to a traumatic event, and critically hurt. His survival was in question for days and you had a front row seat to the aftermath of the attack."

Gibbs closed his eyes at the reminder of two days of waiting outside the destroyed building to learn Tony's fate. One hand tightened on the phone reflexively and the other pinched the bridge of his nose as scenes from Tony's rescue replayed in his head. "I'm following so far, Doc."

"You're treating your friends like chess pieces, Gibbs," Silva warned, "Your guilt is driving you to direct the outcome in your favor. Doctor Mallard recognizes the maneuver, and you do as well. The good news is you not only recognize it happening, you're acting to mitigate the problematic behaviors."

"Well, Ducky's little wakeup call helped on that point." Gibbs gave a snort of frustration. "I can't fix it if I don't know why I'm doing it. I don't know what to do now, or what to say to Tony. I just know it's important to me that I don't sabotage the only chance I might have to talk to him."

"Before you see him, I think you need to sort out and understand what you actually feel guilty about first, Gibbs. And accept responsibility for it." "I have," Gibbs insisted.

"I don't mean just to yourself," Silva disputed. "To DiNozzo. From where I sit, it's not so much guilt about him getting hurt. You know very well you have no responsibility for that, nor were you in a position to prevent it."

"What else would it be then?" Gibbs asked.

"Oh, it's definitely about guilt. It's also about control, and you trying to influence the situation to get the outcome you want. We touched on this already in your therapy. You've been looking right at it...you just don't see it."

Gibbs scowled. "You going cryptic on me, Doc?"

"Don't be stubborn now, Gibbs. You called me, so let's work our way through it," Silva advised. He immediately saw the problem, but he had learned Gibbs responded best when he was guided through reasoning out the root causes of his behavior on his own.

"Honestly, what do you really feel guilty about?" Silva asked. "Think. You know damn well it isn't about DiNozzo being injured because of his work with the task force. That's just a convenient excuse. Would he have stayed at NCIS even if 'The Calling' hadn't been in the picture?"

Gibbs considered those questions carefully, as uncomfortable as it was to do. When the others back in DC were blaming him for Tony's sudden departure, he'd insisted Tony was his own man, made his own decisions and that had nothing to do with him. Not so much because he really believed it at the time, but because he didn't want to be held accountable for his behavior toward Tony.
He would choose what he was responsible for, and he wasn't going to allow anyone else to place blame. He certainly hadn't wanted to admit Tony's theories about what drove his actions were largely correct. As post-traumatic stress influenced his behavior and decision making increasingly toward the irrational, the younger man had become a threat. He'd dealt with that threat mercilessly.

"No," Gibbs conceded. "The reality is Tony would have left NCIS anyway."

"And why is that?"

"We've been over this territory before, Doc."

"Go over it again, Gibbs," Silva instructed. "Because you seem to be ignoring it. Tell me why you think he would have left if Officer Teague hadn't entered the picture."

Shame and regret tightened Gibbs' throat once again as Silva forced him to recall exactly why things were this way between him and Tony. "Because what I did to him was a betrayal of trust," he admitted softly.

"How?" Silva prompted.

"I used my knowledge of Tony's background and insecurities to drive a wedge between us. At work, I cut him off at the knees; practically benched him in those last months. Even worse, I made him feel useless, isolated, and unwanted on my team. And by me. I knew what I was doing, and how it would affect him. I had no grounds to get rid of him so I was making it impossible for him to stay instead. I hurt him, and did it intentionally."

"Good; you haven't lost sight of that. Facing DiNozzo finally, knowing the truth behind your actions, and your desire for him to understand is what has you off kilter. You can be pretty eloquent when you choose to be; I believe you'll know what to say to him." Silva paused

"You're right," Gibbs agreed. "I've been so wrapped up in my desire to make things right with him, the fact that he's just been through a traumatic event took a back seat. Once we knew he was out of danger and would recover, that's when the switch flipped," Gibbs reasoned. "I became more focused on myself than him, and that's exactly what started this whole mess between me and Tony. I've been dancing around that; looking but not seeing, just like you said."

"You're too close to it...sometimes you just need an outside perspective to help you sort things out," Silva reassured him, pleased Gibbs had come to the answer mostly on his own. Now it was time to help him get the rest of the way there.

"What you consider your betrayal and hypocrisy is what drives your guilt, Gibbs. It's behavior you would never tolerate directed at yourself," Silva said as Gibbs nodded in agreement. "You've done it repeatedly, while at the same time holding DiNozzo and others to a higher standard of behavior. You're ashamed and remorseful now that you're finally facing accountability to him for it. You've spent most of your adult life righting wrongs; it's who you are. You've created this one yourself. You'll do anything to fix it, even regress back to trying to control and manipulate the situation and people around you to make it happen," Silva explained.

Gibbs sighed. Silva's assessment of the situation and his actions rang true. "Yes, I'd say that's accurate," he replied. "I've got to figure out how to talk to him without doing that."

"Yes; because my guess is that won't work with DiNozzo, and you know it. Not only that, it will likely make matters worse. I'd say he needs to hear what you just told me, if he's inclined to listen."

"And what if he isn't willing to hear it?"
"Now you've finally circled around to what you're really afraid of," Silva pointed out. "That is the very thing causing you to regress. You've come to a day of reckoning, Gibbs, and that's the difference between your sessions and now. You've answered to yourself for your behavior. You've accepted accountability to your boss, your team, and your friends. Everyone except the person most harmed by your words and actions. You're looking for something from him; understanding and the chance to atone. But somewhere inside, you think there's a damn good chance you won't get it."

Gibbs was nodding to himself; forgetting for a moment Silva couldn't see him. "Yes," agreed aloud, recognizing he was almost desperate to speak to Tony. The need to explain himself, admit his culpability for the break in their friendship, and apologize and not leave it undone…or at least make the attempt. He was very much afraid it was too late, that too much time had passed.

"You really want to make amends with your former partner?" Silva asked. "Ultimately, seeing is believing. It's even more important that you listen to whatever he has to say to you, no matter how hard it is to hear. Demonstrating you've changed is a good place to start."

"How do I do that?" Gibbs asked.

"Show you can respect his decisions; put the control in someone else's hands and accept what comes of it." Silence stretched over the phone line as Silva paused before cautioning, "Just don't expect miracles, Gibbs."

~ Seattle, twelve days after the attack ~

Tony tugged at the sling holding his left arm and shoulder immobile. He was already tired of wearing it, but resisted the temptation to take it off; knowing Ducky would be arriving any time now. He clicked the remote with his free hand, aimlessly browsing the limited channel lineup on the small TV in his hospital room.

He had a steady stream of visitors now that he was out of ICU; most often Ducky, followed by Joanna, Matt and Lena. Joanna managed to visit two or three times a day. It was as if they were afraid to leave him alone with his thoughts for too long. Even FBI Director Whitman visited, having returned to Seattle to attend the funerals of the task force members killed in the attack on S3. His team.

Once he'd been moved to a regular room, Joanna had been his second visitor after Ducky. No sooner than he'd seen her hobbling into the room on crutches, the last of the disjointed bits and pieces of his memory slotted into place. He remembered all of it now; the hostage situation, Mel and the security guard tripping LaPointe's booby trap; the desperate run through the burning building and its smoke-filled stairway to the service tunnel. Hearing the echo of gunshots ahead of him in the tunnel and fearing for Joanna, knowing Rousseau had escaped the building too. Then the tunnel partially collapsing around him.

He had been in and out of consciousness for a time; hazily aware of pain and being pinned. He was unable to free himself and his cell phone had fallen just out of reach, tantalizingly close, screen lighting the tunnel from time to time as people outside tried to contact him.

Recovering his missing memories had come at a physical and emotional cost. Adding to his distress over the attack, he learned the S3 building had been destroyed and six people killed, which brought on a headache so severe he'd been sedated. He knew no one blamed him for the attack on S3 and he shouldn't be blaming himself, but he felt guilty just the same.
Gary and Mel's deaths weighed especially heavy on his conscience, as did missing their funerals. Those were much harder pills to swallow, and he struggled with depression and reconciling his feelings of responsibility as their team leader. Ducky's almost constant presence and guidance helped him keep perspective and resist the temptation to give in to despair over the mess his life had become. Again.

While frequent, the others kept their visits short, mainly out of deference to the fact that he was still ill and tired easily. They also sensed his discomfort and frustration with his weakened condition. The respiratory infection was better, but not quite gone. He stoically endured frequent headaches and pain from his numerous injuries, aggravated by the persistent cough. He was miserable, and though he was on the mend, that wasn't going to get better overnight.

Tony sighed as his shoulder throbbed and a headache began to build behind his eyes. He was thinking too much, that's what it was.

Ducky, unsurprisingly, was proving to be a great sounding board and source of support as he mulled over this latest forced crossroads in his life. Even so, he had a bone to pick with the man who'd become his closest friend and confidant in these last couple of years. Ducky was keeping something from him. As the man himself entered the room, he was determined to confirm his suspicions about what he wasn't being told.

"Hey Ducky," he greeted, stifling a small cough.

"Good morning, Anthony," the older man replied. "You look better today. How are you feeling?" Tony scowled in annoyance as Ducky picked up his chart and scanned it for updates since his last visit.

"Fine," Tony emphasized sourly as Ducky continued to scour his chart.

Ducky paid little mind to his friend's suddenly cranky mood. "No need for the ill temper, my boy. Just ensuring everything is as it should be," he soothed. "I see you had rehab for your shoulder this morning," Ducky noted, inclining his head at Tony's arm in the sling. "Is that the source of your irritability, or is it something else?"

"A little of both, I guess."

Ducky sensed something serious behind this mood. He pulled a chair close to the bed and sat before speaking.

"And what would the 'something else' be? Can I help?"

"Depends. When are you going to let me in on whatever it is you're hiding from me?" Tony asked.

Ducky flinched a little guiltily in spite of himself. "What makes you think I'm doing that, Anthony?"

Tony snorted. Instead of answering, he asked, "How long have you been here in Seattle, Ducky?"

"Agent Carson called me not long after the attack. I was on my way a few hours later. Why?"

"I see," Tony nodded. "And how long has Gibbs been here?" he asked, his tone daring Ducky to deny it.
Ducky answered while closely observing his friend's reaction. "He came so I wouldn't be alone if… well, if you didn't pull through, to put it bluntly." After a brief hesitation, he admitted, "Jethro has been here all along."

Tony frowned at the confirmation Gibbs was here, and had been the whole time. He felt at odds; cognizant of the same old hurt and anger rising, but also wondering why Gibbs didn't return home after he'd been found. What did that mean? It irritated and perplexed him that he was unable to be indifferent about Gibbs' presence, because that's how he wanted to feel.

"Uh huh. Makes sense he would be there for you." Tony emphasized a little bitterly.

"You don't think he was here for you too?"

"What reason would I have to think that?" Tony's annoyance mounted. "For all I know, his meddling in my affairs could have actually helped The Calling find me."

"Whatever you may think of Jethro, I assure you he did not do that. And he does care about your welfare."

Tony huffed and narrowed his eyes at Ducky defending Gibbs. He also ignored the very idea that the man was concerned about him. "When were you going to tell me he was here?"

"It wasn't my intention to keep it from you any longer than necessary. Jethro sat with you as much as he was allowed when you were unconscious," Ducky revealed. "Do you remember any of that?"

Tony remembered a voice; a presence that felt like Gibbs. His lips compressed in displeasure as he considered that Gibbs had been in his room when he was unconscious and vulnerable. He wasn't prepared to deal with the fact that after everything that passed between them, he could still respond to Gibbs while unconscious. He shook his head in denial at Ducky's question, then asked one of his own.

"Well, where is he now?"

"He's been waiting nearby; until he has permission to see you," Ducky informed him. "Your well-being is first and foremost in my mind, and I told Jethro as much. I asked him to wait until you had your bearings and could decide for yourself if you wanted to see him. As much as he wants to know where he stands with you, he agreed to wait."

Tony frowned. He wasn't fragile, dammit. Even if he was sick, injured, and weak as a kitten, he had no interest in being handled with kid gloves. He appreciated that Ducky was looking out for him, but he chafed at the implication that he couldn't handle seeing Gibbs.

"Is he here now? Because if he is, we can find out where he stands with me right now." Tony drawled.

"He is, but…" Ducky was concerned about the dangerous glint that appeared in the younger man's eyes. "Are you certain you want to see him?" he asked doubtfully, but wanting to respect whatever Anthony felt he needed to do.

"No time like the present," Tony answered in a carefully neutral voice.

"Alright…we'll be back soon," Ducky said uncertainly as he headed for the door. He turned back and spoke again. "Don't do anything rash, Anthony."

"Like him? Believe me; I've had time to come to terms with what happened before I left NCIS."
Had he truly done that? Tony supposed he was about to find out.
Tony looked up as Ducky entered the room with Gibbs following close behind. He kept his face expressionless as Gibbs came closer, and stood next to the bed. He noted that other than a slight limp, and the shadows under his eyes that implied a lack of sleep, his former mentor looked well. He already felt at a disadvantage, being far from well himself.

Ducky took his usual place next to the bed, opposite Gibbs, who shifted awkwardly as he seemed to be struggling with what to say first. For all his silence and apparent indifference, he could tell Anthony was taking in every detail of the man who'd once been as close as a father to him. As he glanced back and forth between the two men, and the silence dragged on, Ducky was still unsure of the wisdom of this visit. He resolved to put an end to it if Anthony became agitated.

Thus far, he had no idea what his younger friend was thinking and feeling. His features were completely composed, giving away nothing. Only Anthony's eyes hinted at some level of turmoil beneath the surface. He noticed they'd darkened from their usual sparkling emerald to a flat gray-green.

Gibbs was unnerved by Tony's steady, impassive gaze. He swallowed against his suddenly dry throat and spoke before the tension could build any further.

"Hello Tony," he greeted.

"Gibbs," Tony returned blandly.

Gibbs resisted the urge to sigh, and waited expectantly until Tony finally spoke again.

"What brings you here? Tony asked emotionlessly. "You were a little late to swoop in and save the day, you know."

As he suspected, Tony wasn't going to make this easy. "I...I'm glad to see you're doing better, Gibbs began hesitantly. "I was hoping we could talk, if you feel up to it."

"Talk," Tony repeated incredulously. "Now he wants to talk," he muttered. "What could we possibly have to talk about?"
"I'd like to explain some things, if you'll hear it," Gibbs said sincerely. He swallowed heavily and continued. "I'm ready to listen too, if that's what you want."

Tony snorted. "Feeling generous, huh?" he asked, giving no indication of his intentions either way. Before Gibbs could answer, Tony spoke again. A bitter, combative edge crept into his voice.

"Why are you really here, Gibbs?" he demanded. "You sure you aren't here for a few rounds of 'I told you so'?"

Ducky inhaled sharply and watched in concern as twin spots of color appeared on Anthony's high cheekbones; he was becoming agitated.

"Maybe you'd like to berate me for what happened here; tell me how I screwed up?"

"Of course not; you didn't do anything wrong!"

"So what then? Am I your new white whale, Agent Gibbs?" The words tumbled out in a rush as Tony's hurt and disappointment in his former mentor escaped that place in his mind where he'd been keeping it hidden.

"You're going to be heard out, and have your guilty conscience eased no matter how I feel about it, right? My role is to take the high road again, is that it?"

"No!" Gibbs started back at that. "That's not why I'm here!"

Tony could see the protest building further and cut Gibbs off. He just didn't want to hear it.

"Good; because that sure as hell isn't happening."

"Tony…please listen," Gibbs pleaded. "I'm not here to upset you."

"Just looking at you upsets me, Gibbs," Tony fired back.

"I get that," Gibbs nodded, swallowing his disappointment. "When and if you're ready Tony, there are things I'd like to tell you. Things I think you deserve to know."

"There's no reason at all for you to be here, Gibbs. You made it very clear a long time ago where I stand with you, and I've made my peace with it."

"What can I say, Tony? I know I screwed up back then, and I'm trying to make it right."

"Don't do me any favors, Gibbs."

"If you think I'm going to walk away without even trying to clear the air with you, well…I'm not."

"The world still revolves around you, right?" Tony retorted. Gibbs had the nerve to look startled at that, and it made him angry. "I don't want anything from you, especially not some half-assed attempt to ease your guilty conscience. Now go home."

"You know me better than that, Tony."

"That's just it Gibbs, I don't know you," Tony shot back, his voice rising to a near-shout. "I wonder if I ever did at all," he lashed out, wanting Gibbs to hurt the way he'd been hurt. Tony gasped and his free hand flew to his head, pressing as the headache that had been building earlier exploded behind his eyes with frightening speed and intensity.
"Tony, what is it?" Gibbs' concern almost got the better of him and he reached out toward Tony. He stopped just short of touching him, knowing Tony wouldn't welcome the gesture.

"Jethro…" Ducky warned, shaking his head as he moved closer and placed a comforting hand on Tony's shoulder. Fine lines of pain had suddenly appeared around the younger man's eyes and mouth, and a sheen of sweat had broken out on his pale face. Ducky pressed the call button for the nurse's station and coaxed his friend into lying back down. He frowned at the younger man's eyes squeezed tightly shut against the light in the room. This was going to be another bad one. "That's enough now, both of you," Ducky chided softly.

Gibbs was taken aback by the disdain in Tony's voice and shocked at the sudden onset of severe pain. He barely registered that Ducky was putting a stop to the conversation. His first impulse was to be angry; throw out a biting reply. A part of him wanted to insist Tony hear him out but he knew that would be disastrous, and he fought the impulse back. That would have been the old Gibbs, and there was no place for the old Gibbs here. He needed Tony to know he'd changed, that he learned to bend, but he resolved to put what Tony needed first for a change.

He sent Ducky a look conveying he understood it was time for him to go. "I'll give you space, Tony," he said softly, letting out a resigned breath. He apologized; the first of many he owed the younger man, and hoped he would be willing to listen later. It was clear this was not the time or place.

"I'm sorry I upset you. I'll go now. If you change your mind, I'll be here."

"Don't bother coming back, Gibbs" Tony opened his eyes long enough to glare up at Gibbs. His breathing was harsh and erratic now as the headache intensified further. "I'm not one of yours anymore; I haven't been for a very long time." Tony felt a twinge of guilt as Gibbs flinched; the barbs clearly hitting home. He closed his eyes again. "You aren't needed or wanted here. Get out."

Gibbs backed away from the bed wordlessly, bumping into the nurse who'd entered the room to check her patient. He turned and fled to the visitor's lounge, glad to find it empty. He sat on the lounge sofa, dropped his head into his hands and tried to come to grips with what just happened.

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Ducky checked the lounge some time later and found Jethro staring blankly at the television. He didn't bat an eye as Ducky muted the sound.

Gibbs didn't seem aware of his presence at all until the couch shifted as Ducky sat next to him.

"Is Tony alright?" Gibbs asked quietly.

"Migraine," Ducky answered succinctly. "He's received medication and is resting comfortably now."

Gibbs nodded and scrubbed a hand across his eyes. "Dammit. If I'd known that would happen, I would have waited to try to talk to him."

"The stress probably didn't help, but he admitted it was coming on before you came in." Ducky shook his head ruefully, as he remembered Anthony's irritability when he'd first arrived earlier in the day. "He's been getting them since he regained consciousness. I should have noticed the signs."

"Don't beat yourself up, Ducky." Gibbs replied. "It's not the first time he's hidden the fact that he's in pain."
Ducky let out a long, slow breath to release the pent up tension in his body. The ongoing migraines were a concern, and he hoped that would not be a long-term consequence of one too many head injuries.

"True," he answered. "And how are you, Jethro?" he asked, redirecting his concern to his old friend. "Obviously, that didn't go as well as you hoped."

Gibbs wasn't sure how he felt. After talking to Silva, he'd been uncharacteristically optimistic about how Tony would react to seeing him. Total rejection was something he hadn't been prepared for, although he certainly deserved it. He hadn't been so arrogant as to automatically assume Tony would be willing to forgive him immediately, but he'd been hopeful that they could at least start talking.

"I am holding on to the hope that he's testing me, and how hard I'm willing to work to reconcile things between us," Gibbs finally answered.

Ducky hummed noncommittally. "Or perhaps he's not above getting a little of his own back. How does it feel to be shut out, Jethro…to wonder if you really did push him so far that he doesn't even care to hear you out yet?"

"I've known Tony to be a lot of things, Duck, but to be truly spiteful and vindictive was always more my style than his."

"If you believe his motivations are that unsavory, you should be ashamed, Jethro."

"No; I don't really believe that." He and Tony had always had a lot in common and the use of masks and deflections to manage physical and emotional distress was one thing they shared. "He's protecting himself," Gibbs surmised. "From me."

"It's a defense mechanism," Ducky agreed, pleased Jethro was able to see the situation from Anthony's viewpoint. "The man you knew is still in there, Jethro. Even so, he's in no hurry to be hurt again. Broken trust is not an easy thing to repair."

Gibbs knew there was a better than average chance Tony wouldn't be happy to see him, but he'd been so certain Tony would at least hear him out. He'd been sure that coming all this way to be here and wait for the outcome would show Tony that he cared. That his presence would mean something to the younger man like it used to, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

"He's not going to want me to visit again, is he Duck?" Gibbs asked glumly.

Ducky wanted to reassure him that something could be salvaged of what was at one time, a seemingly unbreakable bond. He couldn't in good conscience do that, so he just answered simply and honestly.

"He's been through a lot, and he's still recovering. Give him time, Jethro."

~Seattle, fourteen days after the attack~

"Why the long face, Anthony? I understand you're well enough for discharge in the next day or two. I should think you'd be pleased to finally go home," Ducky said, curious about his friend's unhappy demeanor.

Tony sighed. Ducky was right; normally he'd be trying to get out of the hospital as soon as he was
mobile. He'd leave before he was well enough, even going as far as to sign himself out against medical advice. This time was different.

Tony shrugged. "I'm wrestling with what to do. Go home? I just go back and sit in my apartment? Then what? The S3 building is destroyed and half my team is gone," he began. "The task force is being disbanded. I honestly don't know, Ducky."

Tony looked down, his face flushing in embarrassment. He hated the fear and uncertainty that plagued him. He trusted Ducky with the admission, "I haven't felt this lost since I broke my leg in college. I think I'm afraid to leave."

"Ah…understandable," Ducky said, giving his arm a comforting pat. "There's no shame in how you feel, and certainly no judgment. You simply need time to sort it all out."

Tony grimaced. Time he had, but it wasn't infinite. At some point, he had to start thinking about what came next, both personally and professionally, including a new job offer from Director Whitman. Right now, he was nowhere near ready to make a decision one way or the other, and fortunately the Director was content to wait.

"My life is in shambles again, Ducky. I don't know if I have it in me to start over one more time."

"I believe that you do, and you will," Ducky said firmly. "You have always been able to right the ship eventually, Anthony. I believe this time will be no different. I won't presume to tell you not to feel that way, considering all you've been through, but know this. You don't have to struggle alone. I'm here," he said emphatically. "You have friends here and in Washington who care about you. Even Jethro is still here, and will remain if you wish it."

Tony lifted his head and stared at Ducky in surprise. "He's still here? Why, Ducky?"

"The answer to that question can best be addressed by Jethro himself."

Tony frowned. "Are you telling me I should talk to him?"

"That is up to you," Ducky said with a small shrug. "If you do, I think you'll find he's a different man in many ways. You might be surprised."

Tony flopped back against the pillow and looked up at the ceiling to avoid Ducky's shrewd, assessing gaze. He regretted the position the older man found himself in. Ducky was stuck firmly in the middle of this very broken thing between him and Gibbs, and he had a feeling Ducky hoped to see them on good terms again eventually. What did Gibbs want?

"I don't know what he wants from me," Tony sighed. "I don't need anything from him, and I don't have the energy to dwell on it."

"Are you certain? Maybe you do need something from him." At Tony's questioning eyebrow, he continued. "Closure, Anthony. To speak your piece to someone who's finally ready to listen. He's not the same sullen, bitter, and angry man who spurned your attempts to help before you left NCIS. He really has changed."

"Gibbs never changes," Tony disputed, shaking his head in denial. "He just holds out and waits for everyone else to capitulate and fall into line."

"In the past, yes," Ducky agreed. "Considering what happened between you, I don't blame you for not wanting to believe it. No, I won't pressure you into talking to him. However, I will tell you that he's out there now; has been every day hoping you'll change your mind. He's out there because
even though you won't see him, he can't bring himself to abandon you again."

"Why? Tony asked plaintively. "Why does he care?"

"Consider this; he was sure you were dead, Anthony." Ducky's eyes misted as he continued. "When we saw that building, even I had doubts you'd survived. But while I was able to maintain hope, Jethro's past experiences made him skeptical of the odds you would be found alive. You were dead to him for two days; not for a few hours like when your car was bombed. From the moment we learned you were inside the building to the point where the rescue operation became a recovery effort; through the two days outside that destroyed building…every minute was hell for him. Don't doubt he cares, Anthony. He always did; he just forgot it for a time. The why of that is his story to tell."

Tony angrily scrubbed his stinging eyes, moved in spite of himself. "What the hell am I supposed to do about it, Ducky?"

"That decision is yours to make, and I will respect and support whatever it is. So will Jethro. The question to ask yourself is this; does your hurt and anger toward him outweigh the desire to understand?"

Tony laid back on the pillow and closed his eyes. "I'm tired, Ducky. I'd like to rest now." He felt badly about dismissing Ducky so curtly, but he needed some time alone to think. He hoped his friend understood.

"Of course, my boy," Ducky answered with a small, sad smile.

"I'll think about it, Ducky," Tony added in a low voice.

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"I think that's everything, Tony," Lena said as she pulled the bathroom door shut behind her. She handed a shaving kit to Matt, who shoved it in an oversized duffle resting at the foot of Tony's hospital bed.

"Thanks for the help packing, guys," Tony said as he readjusted his sling for what felt like the hundredth time. "I will be so glad to get this thing off."

"To be honest," Matt began, "I'm surprised you're still wearing it."

"Ducky will give me hell if he catches me without it," Tony admitted.

"Scared of him, huh?" Matt teased.

Tony grinned. "You have no idea."

"Are you sure you don't want one of us to hang around and give you a ride home?" Lena asked.

"Nah; Ducky will be back after he picks up my meds. As soon as the doc gets around to giving me my walking papers, we'll be on our way."

"So, when do you have to decide about the new job?" Matt asked.

Matt glanced up from his packing as Tony started to answer, but he stiffened and his voice trailed off uncertainly.

Gibbs was at the door.
They'd seen Tony tense, but that was about work. This was something altogether different. As the two men stared at each other implacably, Matt almost felt like he was intruding.

"Matt; Lena, could you give us a few minutes?" Tony asked, without looking away from Gibbs. They'd seen Gibbs in the lounge every day when they visited; waiting for Ducky to come and reassure him that Tony was still getting better. They questioned Joanna about why he stopped visiting Tony after he woke up and she told them there'd been a falling out between the two men, if not the details of it. They'd seen Gibbs' obvious concern for Tony at the scene of the attack and here in the hospital. They'd both wondered at the mystery behind Tony's refusal to see him and now it seemed that had changed.

Lena moved to stand next to Matt, and Tony noted both of them were positioned almost protectively in front of him. Lena narrowed her eyes at Gibbs. "Are you sure you don't want us to stay, Tony?" she asked.

"I'm sure guys, thanks." At Matt's doubtful look, Tony made a shooing hand motion and smiled. "Go on; its fine," he reassured them.

Gibbs stepped closer as Tony sat back down on the bed and made himself comfortable. Tony crossed his good arm over the one in the sling as he leaned back against the head of the bed. The defensive body language didn't escape Gibbs' attention and he hoped to put Tony more at ease.

"Thanks for agreeing to talk to me, Tony."

"Ducky seems to think I need closure. I'm not crazy about his timing though…or yours," Tony said pointedly.

"What do you think you need, Tony?"

"I don't know yet." Tony leaned forward, his eyes intent and serious. "Why are you still here, Gibbs?"

"That day in my basement," Gibbs began, "the last thing you said to me was when I got my head on straight; I would realize things didn't have to be this way. You were right, you know...and somewhere inside my head I knew it as soon as you walked up those stairs for the last time." Gibbs sighed deeply. "You were right about that and a lot of other things you said; but I was nowhere near ready to face it then."

Tony's expression went stony. "So you are here to ease a guilty conscience after all."

"I do feel guilty," Gibbs admitted, "but that isn't why. No…I'm still here because I feel the need to right a wrong I've done you, Tony. I'm here because I still think of you as family, though you may not feel that way any longer. I'd like the chance to change that," Gibbs said sincerely.

Tony sighed, still feeling so very torn. "How did we get here, Gibbs?"

"You don't have to ask. You and I both know it started and ended with me. You have no idea how much I regret it. You told Abby no one could fix things between us until I fixed myself. It's still a work in progress and I lose ground sometimes, but in many ways I've done exactly that."

Tony nodded in acknowledgement and then looked away without responding. Gibbs fidgeted, wondering what Tony was thinking.

Finally, he felt the need to speak, and make sure Tony understood he was in the driver's seat.
"Tony, I don't want to force the issue. I told you I've changed and I meant it. Yes, I want to clear
the air between us, but this is on your terms. I'll go if that's what you prefer I do."

Tony huffed in frustration. He hated the feeling of being on edge all the time, and Gibbs' presence
wasn't helping. "Gibbs, I just can't deal with this right now, can't give you what you want. My life
has been turned completely upside down again and I've lost people I've come to care about."

Tony felt overwhelmed with conflicting emotions and closed his eyes as despair crept in, rising
above all the other things he felt. He thought of Mel, Gary and the others; of images he'd seen on
the news showing the burned out shell and piles of rubble that were all that remained of S3. The
idea of what came next filled him with uncertainty. He was chilled at the thought of returning to
his beautiful apartment that in spite of its stunning Seattle views, never managed to give him that
settled feeling.

"Gibbs, I have no job, an apartment in a city that never really felt like a home, and no idea what I'm
going to do now. This," he said, waving his free hand between the two of them, "is not on my list
of things to deal with right now."

"I understand," Gibbs assured. "What I want is secondary; it's more about what you want and need.
I can see right now that isn't me hanging around complicating things."

Gibbs shoved down his disappointment. "Whatever you do Tony, don't make the same mistakes I
did and allow guilt about all that's happened keep you from moving on, starting over again. I
wasted a lot of my life wallowing in guilt, and it took me far too long to get unstuck. I also burned a
lot of bridges instead of building them. I just..." Gibbs paused, almost afraid to voice the question
foremost in his mind. "Have I burned my bridges with you, Tony?"

Tony glanced away and pondered how he should answer, feeling oddly grateful at Gibbs' understanding and advice, unsolicited as it was. This newly verbose Gibbs both surprised and confused him, but he recognized an olive branch when he saw one. There was a time he would have been happy, even grateful for it but now, he had misgivings about opening himself up for hurt and disappointment again.

He could give in to the temptation to brush aside Gibbs' attempt to talk, just as Gibbs had done to
him that long ago day in the basement. No one would blame him. Even Gibbs himself was
apparently prepared to accept that. Maybe he really had changed and in light of that possibility, he
couldn't bring himself to treat Gibbs as he'd been treated. It just wasn't in his nature. He'd always
been the one to take the high road but now it seemed unnecessary. Gibbs was willing to meet him
more than halfway.

Tony heard a soft sigh as the quiet moment between them lengthened. Gibbs seemed to be
gathering himself to leave, apparently taking Tony's lack of response to mean that Gibbs had
burned his bridges.

"I'll be heading back to DC now," Gibbs said in quiet acceptance. "For what it's worth; thank you. I
hope we can talk again, Tony." Gibbs waited a few moments longer, his heart sinking as Tony
seemed unwilling to speak or meet his eyes. Just as he turned to go, Tony spoke softly without
looking up, but his words gave Gibbs hope.

"There's still a bridge, Gibbs."

~*~*~*~*~*~

~Seattle, One month after the attack~
Ducky methodically walked through each room in Anthony's apartment, checking for anything that might have been missed. Not that there was much of his in the apartment to start with other than kitchenware. When Anthony first invited him to stay in his apartment rather than a hotel room, he'd been surprised to see none of the furnishings he remembered from Anthony's old apartment. Even his mother's piano was missing. Aside from a few candid photos of his Seattle coworkers, books, and a scattering of DVD's, it held very little personal touches and almost no sign of the vibrant personality he'd known in Washington.

At first, Anthony had shrugged off his gentle questioning on the surprisingly impersonal decor; simply explaining that the apartment had already been nicely furnished. He wasn't supposed to be Tony DiNozzo when he'd arrived here anyway, and opted to leave most of his personal things in storage for the time being. Once again it hit home in just how many ways, large and small, that Anthony had placed his life on hold in order to join the task force in their pursuit of The Calling.

One way or another, the self-imposed limbo would be coming to an end for the younger man. Satisfied the movers missed nothing, Ducky set down his small carry-on case next to their other luggage placed by the front door. He turned to see his friend at the large windows, seemingly preoccupied with the panoramic view of the Seattle skyline. It was quite impressive, he thought, as he joined Anthony at the window.

The young man was rubbing his bad shoulder absently while looking out over the cityscape.

Ducky gave him a concerned look. "Is your shoulder bothering you? I do hope you've heeded my warnings about not overdoing it once you were out of the sling."

Tony looked over, lowered his hand and smiled brightly. "It just aches a bit. Don't worry; I didn't do any of the heavy lifting, that's what the movers were for."

Ducky shot him one of those critical looks. "Hmm."

"it's really fine, Ducky." He'd gotten the stitches removed a few days earlier and was out of the sling now. The surgical wounds mostly just had that healing itch, and his back and damaged shoulder joint had settled into a tolerable ache that gradually improved with each passing day.

Ducky returned the smile, encouraged by the other man's good mood. He'd seen a change recently in Anthony. He'd shed the uncertainty that plagued him on his discharge from the hospital and regained his confidence. He seemed more settled; comfortable with his decision to continue his recovery in Washington as a guest in Ducky's home. Ducky had been hesitant about making the offer at first, knowing a certain amount of angst behind Anthony's sudden departure two and a half years ago still lingered, largely unresolved. It had been a pleasant surprise when his invitation was readily accepted.

"Any regrets about leaving here, Anthony? I should think you will miss this incredible view, at the very least."

"Nah, I don't think so," Tony replied. "It's beautiful, but I think I always knew somehow that this was just another temporary stop. I'm still trying to figure out where I fit…where I belong. I do know it isn't Seattle."

"What about your return to Washington? Is that temporary too?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure yet; but DC is as good a place as any to try and figure things out," Tony answered noncommittally. "Thank you again for letting me stay with you until I get myself sorted. Are you sure I'm not imposing?"
"Of course you aren't imposing," Ducky affirmed. "You are a most welcome houseguest, and I'm simply returning your hospitality," he said, gesturing around at Tony's apartment.

"Well, I'm grateful anyway. Joanna, Lena, and Matt have already moved back east, so I really don't know anyone here now..." Tony trailed off with a frown. "At least in DC, I'll be recovering in familiar surroundings."

"And how do you feel about all of that?"

He'd felt more than a little trepidation as 'starting over' morphed from a concept into a reality. Now that he'd come to this first decision, the trepidation was fading; turning into something a lot like anticipation...and relief. Seattle was a beautiful city with much to offer, but ultimately it was one more addition to the list of aborted attempts to find a place to call home. Because he'd lived under an alias for so long, he'd never connected with anyone outside his team, and had no particular affinity for the area. This wasn't where he belonged, but it had been a necessary stop along the way to finding his place after leaving NCIS.

"To be honest Ducky, I feel optimistic."

"Does that mean you've come to a decision about your future?" Ducky asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

Tony laughed. "I'm surprised you waited this long to ask. Let's just say I'm a little closer to making a decision than I was a couple weeks ago."

"That sort of leading statement is beneath you, Anthony," Ducky said with a raised eyebrow.

"No...it really isn't," Tony replied, with a cheeky grin.

"Touché," Ducky nodded and chuckled. "Keep your secrets then, Anthony," he teased in return. "I'm sure all will be revealed in good time."

"Yes...but for the time being, there are some details that need to be worked out. I just need to be sure this change is what I want."

"Of course," Ducky touched Tony's shoulder gently in support. "Before you left Washington, you said for the first time in a long time, you were doing the right thing and doing it for the right reasons," Ducky recalled. "You must keep that as your guiding principle. The last thing you need, Anthony, is pressure about your choices. In my observation, every time you've made a major change in your life and career, it has been because of an external influence...or you were running from some unfortunate occurrence," he said pointedly.

Tony sobered. "I'd say what happened here was more than unfortunate, Ducky."

"It was," Ducky agreed. "The difference now is that you aren't running from it, or anything else. What happened here, while tragic, isn't something that will follow you, or dictate what comes next. Ultimately, you've done exactly what you came here to do, and what the task force achieved here under your leadership is something to be proud of. I am honored to call you friend."

Tony flushed at the affirmation from a man whose opinion of him mattered a great deal. "Thank you," he replied sincerely. "You're right. Things will be different this time...they already are."

"Which brings us back to the subject at hand," Ducky smiled lightening the moment. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, you have no shortage of options, Anthony. This fresh start will happen entirely on your terms. I'm quite pleased I'll be there to see it evolve."
"I'm beginning to feel you believe I need a keeper, Ducky," Tony said in mock suspicion.

Ducky made a tisking sound. "A gatekeeper, more accurately. You need time and privacy and because your former coworkers at NCIS know you will be staying with me. They are overly anxious to reconnect. I have no intention of letting them overwhelm you before you are ready. They won't see you unless it is what you want."

"Mother hen," Tony accused with a smile. "You already know I've been talking to and emailing Jimmy, Bishop, and McGee. Abby too, a little," he added more quietly. "Abby and I still have a couple things to talk through."

Ducky's expression turned hard as he recalled Abigail's selfish, manipulative actions during Anthony's Christmas visit two seasons ago. Without telling either man the other would be there, she'd secretly arranged to bring Jethro and Anthony together at her apartment so they could 'make up'. It had been a disaster, and he wasn't surprised Anthony had not mentioned Jethro among the list of people he'd been in contact with.

At Ducky's suddenly dark look, Tony guessed he was thinking about Abby and assured him, "I'm actually looking forward to seeing them at some point, but you're right. It's not something I need to do right away. I have to get my affairs in order first. You'd be surprised how hard it is becoming Anthony DiNozzo again."

Ducky laughed aloud at that. "I've no doubt you'll manage."

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Full Circle

Chapter Summary

Tony has left Seattle and begins to make some decisions about his future. It's not the first time he's had to start over; to build a new life. There's just one thing standing in the way of his fresh start; Gibbs. This time around, things are going to be different.

Beta'd, remaining mistakes are mine.

Last chapter, folks. I'd like to take a couple lines to thank my beta and personal spaz-wrangler, whose editing catches and input made this story better. Also, much gratitude to Hinky Hippo, who created the amazing cover art for each installment in this trilogy.

~Washington DC, Ducky's House~

Tony was clearing the dinner dishes when Ducky's voice called from the foyer. "Anthony," Ducky called, leaning into the doorway with a serious look on the usually gentle features. "How is your headache?"

He was still troubled by frequent headaches, but the severe migraines he suffered in the first few weeks after he'd been injured seemed to have abated. "It's mostly gone, why?"

"You have a rather unexpected visitor. Do you feel up to it?"

"Depends who it is," Tony answered. Ducky pressed his lips together a bit grimly and that set Tony on edge immediately.

"It's not my father, is it?" Tony asked in exasperation. "I told him there was no need to change his plans on my account."

"I'm sure your father is still enjoying his extended European vacation," Ducky assured him. "Still…I doubt this visitor will be any less disconcerting than a surprise appearance by your father. It's Agent Fornell."

Tony groaned and threw his head back, staring at the ceiling in mild annoyance.

"He's waiting in the parlor. Shall I ask him to leave?" Ducky asked.

"No; it's okay, Ducky," Tony said as he dried his hands on a dish towel. "Might as well get this out of the way now."

Ducky's eyebrows furrowed in concern, wondering what 'this' was. "As you wish. Go ahead; I'll finish in here."

When he first joined the task force and opted to join the FBI, Tony remembered joking with Joanna; telling her if Fornell got wind of the career move, he'd never hear the end of it. He figured this little visit indicated Fornell had gotten the memo.

When Tony reached the parlor, he paused in the doorway and crossed his arms in irritation. He
scowled at catching Fornell poking through Ducky's bookcases.

"Looking for something, Fornell?" he asked sharply, amused when the FBI agent jumped guiltily and turned to face him.

"DiNoteso," he greeted smugly. "Good to see you looking well," he said, scrutinizing Tony for a long moment. "You had folks here pretty worried for a while," he added more seriously.

Tony shot the other agent a narrow eyed glare. "It's DiNozzo, and I'll thank you to remember it," he said curtly. "Your concern for my welfare is touching. To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?"

"Okay…DiNozzo it is," Fornell agreed good-naturedly. "And people really were concerned about you, including myself," Fornell admitted.

"Nice to know, Tony replied blandly. "Is there a reason for this visit?"

Fornell broke out into a shit-eating grin. "FBI, DiNozzo? You came to the dark side, huh?"

Tony made a show of rolling his eyes. He figured this ribbing would come at some point, but he didn't have to tolerate it the way he would have as Gibbs' second. Oh yes; things were going to be different from now on, and putting up with that was just one.

"If you came here to antagonize me, I've got better things to do. I wasn't finished washing the dishes when you showed up uninvited."

"Aw, come on DiNozzo; is that any way to treat a colleague?" Fornell snarked. "I'm just surprised is all."

Tony snorted in disbelief. "Are you really that surprised? For years, you annoyed Gibbs with your half-assed attempts to poach me over to the Bureau."

"True," Fornell allowed. "I never thought you'd actually leave Gibbs' team."

"As it turned out, he made it an easy decision."

Fornell sobered. "Yeah. His behavior was uncalled for and he's well aware of that fact."

"What do you know about it?" Tony demanded, growing uncomfortable and wondering where the hell this conversation was headed.

"I know you didn't deserve to be disrespected or belittled."

"I didn't. Not by him, or you."

"Alright," Fornell held up his hands in a surrender gesture. "For the record, yes…I've given you a lot of crap over the years, but I've always respected you as an agent," Fornell replied.

"Uh huh."

"Seriously, DiNozzo. What you accomplished out there…that was something else. Impressive, by all accounts," Fornell told him, admiration in his voice. "You've more than earned the competition that's ongoing right now among the alphabet agencies to bring you onboard. For my part, I'd be happy to see you stay with the Bureau. Maybe even here at HQ," Fornell urged meaningfully.

There it was. An undercurrent of friendship. The professional respect for his skills and abilities; the affirmation that he was wanted and had a place. All those things that Gibbs dangled like a carrot
for years, only to snatch away time after time. It came so easily from a man who didn't know him much beyond a surface level and who'd delighted in making a pain in the ass of himself at NCIS. More to ponder as he weighed what came next career-wise.

"Is the chance of working with you supposed to be motivation for me to stay or go? I can't tell."

"You almost got me fired if it makes you feel any better."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Tony stared stonily before continuing. "It wasn't me that almost got you fired. You let Gibbs convince you to misuse government resources for a personal inquiry neither of you had any business conducting. That almost got you fired and might have gotten me killed. Worse; a civilian who happened to be my father, along with his security detail."

Fornell grimaced. He truly hadn't come here to piss DiNozzo off, yet that's exactly what he managed to do. "Point. In our defense, it wasn't you we were looking into. We were looking into the people following your father."

"Irrelevant."

"Not really," Fornell insisted, wanting Tony to understand the 'why'. "Your father went to Gibbs, scared and looking for help. Gibbs was looking out for your old man."

"So he said," Tony shrugged. Gibbs admitted as much when he'd interrupted a video phone call between him and Ducky. "They're friends."

"Yes; but that isn't the only reason Gibbs asked for my help. He suspected your father had gotten himself in some sort of trouble; it's not unprecedented, you know."

"What's your point," Tony asked sharply.

"The point is; you couldn't be here to look out for the old man. Gibbs felt partly to blame for that," Fornell revealed. "Gibbs thought he was helping and he was doing it as much for you as for Senior."

"Somehow, I doubt that. And when you found the flagged file?"

"Gibbs may be a bastard," Fornell conceded. "But you know good and well he's no fool. He started to put two and two together then. When you sent the old man off on a paid trip to Europe, he got a sense for what you might be up to, and backed off and left no tracks. Talked your father into backing off too."

"Fine. Are we done talking about Gibbs now?" Tony asked, in a tone that said yes, they were.


"Like you'd be the first person I'd tell," Tony snorted. "Be careful what you ask for. If I stay with the FBI," Tony warned, "I'm not going to be anyone's sidekick; those days are done. I've got plans to be the kind of colleague you might end up working for someday, Toby. Think you can handle that?"

"I can if you can," Fornell winked.

Ducky returned from seeing Fornell to the door, open curiosity on his face.
"You were listening, weren't you?" Tony chided mildly, not really angry but wanting to call Ducky out for the slight breach of etiquette.

"Merely standing ready to provide an intervention, should it have been needed," Ducky returned, not even a little ashamed about eavesdropping.

Tony laughed lightly, patient with Ducky's ongoing tendency to get carried away with the overprotective bit. "With Fornell, you never know."

"Indeed," Ducky nodded. "Now, my boy, is there anything you'd like to share in the wake of that little visit?"

"Like what?"

"Multiple job offers and practically a bidding war over you, for one. The grapevine tells me the top two contenders are Tom Morrow at Homeland and Director Whitman, who's determined to keep you with the FBI; and both those job offers are here in the DC area." Tony stared incredulously for a moment. "You never cease to amaze me, Ducky. Sometimes, I forget you have friends and contacts everywhere. It's a good thing you aren't a gossip; there'd be no secrets left in Washington," Tony mused. "The specifics of those job offers didn't come up with Fornell. Where did you hear all that?" he asked.

"Your name comes up with some frequency in law enforcement circles these days."

Tony waved dismissively. "All that chatter will die down anytime now."

"Don't diminish what you accomplished, Anthony. I know the loss of life at S3 still weighs on your conscience, but you have a great deal to be proud of. The directors of several Federal agencies are personally working to recruit you, and for good reason."

Tony's face colored at the praise. "I do know that, Ducky. I'm working through the rest of it."

Ever perceptive, Ducky moved the conversation on from the awkward moment. He smiled slyly and shared, "Director Vance has thrown his hat into the ring as well, and is rather put out that NCIS doesn't seem to be higher on your list," he revealed.

"Go figure," Tony snorted. That wasn't happening, not unless Vance's own job were on the table, and likely not even then. It wouldn't exactly represent the fresh start he was looking for and there were better options. "Anyway, I certainly wasn't going to let Fornell in on my decision before telling you. I've decided to stay with the FBI. Director Whitman made a very attractive offer."

"Is that so?" Ducky prompted with an expectant look.

"Head of the new Directorate for Counter Terrorism being established here at Bureau headquarters. All the regional CT task forces and branch offices will fall under my purview."

"Congratulations, Anthony...and well deserved!" Ducky exclaimed with a pleased smile. "I'm very happy for you."

"Thank you, Ducky. Your support means a lot," Tony replied sincerely. "As an added bonus, I've managed to bring Matt and Lena onboard with me too. They'll be transferring to the FBI soon," he continued with a pleased smile. "While I couldn't talk Joanna out of full retirement, she's agreed to be a part time consultant as needed."
"Things are falling together quite nicely now," Ducky observed.

"It seems so. I'm medically cleared to go back to work Monday and I'll be out of your hair soon. The couple renting my apartment are being transferred and have asked to be let out of their lease early."

"Ah," Ducky said, a little disappointed. Anthony had been a most polite and considerate houseguest, and very good company to boot. "I've very much enjoyed having you here, Anthony, but I'm pleased you'll be staying close by."

"Well, of all the places I've been, DC is the one that felt most like home. At one time, a lot of that had to do with the people in my inner circle," Tony said a bit wistfully. "That part has changed some, but as for the rest of it, I think this can be home again."

"So...you don't have any reservations about returning to Washington permanently?" Ducky asked, tone heavy with meaning. Shadows flitted briefly through Anthony's clear green eyes and he was fairly certain of their source.

It hadn't escaped Ducky's attention that Jethro was never mentioned. He'd been keeping his distance as promised and letting Anthony decide if, and when he'd make contact. So far, he hadn't.

"Reservations...not so much. Just the elephant in the room."

"Jethro."

Tony gave a small nod of confirmation.

"Everyone is walking on eggshells around me whenever a conversation turns anywhere close to Gibbs. It's weird, and very awkward. It doesn't feel right to force them to tiptoe around the situation between me and Gibbs. Especially now that I'm planning to stay."

"What do you plan to do about it?" Ducky inquired.

Tony had been thinking about that for some time. After he resigned from NCIS, he thought he'd largely moved on from what happened. But he hadn't; not completely. He realized after seeing and speaking with Gibbs in Seattle, there was still a lingering pain that he needed to deal with. It was holding him back. Ducky had been right. He needed some sort of resolution to move on, because there was every chance he'd run into Gibbs at some point.

"I plan to talk to him," Tony said decisively.

"You're sure you're doing this because you want to, and not because of the others?" Ducky asked.

"I want to. It feels like unfinished business, Ducky. One way or the other, it has to be done if I'm going to stay in DC," Tony elaborated. "And I finally feel ready to hear what he has to say."

"I certainly hope you'll have plenty to say to him, too."

"You can count on that," Tony answered, a glint of determination in his eyes.

"I'll look forward to hearing how it goes," Ducky said, trying not to express any obvious optimism that his two friends might find common ground again. Anthony might read that as manipulative; an undue influence on his decision.

Tony didn't miss the fleeting, hopeful expression. "Maybe we'll be okay, and maybe we won't,"
Tony admitted, unwilling to predict the outcome. "I've always believed that everyone deserves a second chance, Ducky. I still do...even Gibbs."

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It was dusk when Tony pulled into Gibbs' driveway and cut the engine. The house and yard looked much the same, with the exception of a bright glow coming from all of the first floor windows. That was odd. Usually the house was dark, with the only light to be seen coming from one living room lamp or most often, the small windows of Gibbs' basement retreat.

A moment of doubt washed over him, and he couldn't seem to make himself get out of the car. Ducky urged him to be sure this was what he wanted, so what did he want? In Seattle, Gibbs said there were things he wanted to tell him...that he deserved to know. At the time, he'd been too angry and unsettled by Gibbs' presence and hadn't wanted to hear a damn thing the man had to say.

After that first contentious meeting, he'd been unwillingly moved when Ducky revealed Gibbs stayed nearby to keep tabs on his recovery, in spite of Tony's refusal to see him. He'd softened a little, felt like he could eventually be receptive to hearing Gibbs out and maybe getting a few things off his chest as well. That hadn't been the right time, though. Now...it was.

He exited the car before he could talk himself out of it, and strode resolutely onto the porch and up to the front door. He took a deep breath, turned the knob, and stepped inside. He froze in shock as the door clicked softly shut behind him.

Inside, it was not the same house he remembered. The cold, unwelcoming home that had once been frozen in the past was completely gone. In its place was an almost cozy room, painted a pale parchment gold. The color complimented the lustrous wood floors and furniture; Gibbs' handiwork, no doubt. The wood gleamed in the glow of lamps placed around the room. A soft looking brown sofa and matching recliner had taken the place of the plaid monstrosities he remembered. A glimpse of stainless steel through the kitchen doorway spoke to updates there as well.

In Seattle, Gibbs claimed to have changed, and alluded to coming to terms with things in his past. Not only that, he'd been largely solicitous in his behavior toward Tony in that last meeting, calm and accepting in the face of his former protégé's anger, hurt, and unwillingness to hear Gibbs out. Looking around this warm, welcoming room he could begin to believe something had changed for the better in Gibbs. Either that, or it was a sign of the apocalypse.

While he was still frozen just inside the door, Gibbs came in from the kitchen, cup of coffee in hand. "Tony!" Gibbs beamed, blue eyes bright and happy.

Tony's face crinkled a bit at the effusive greeting. This pleasant, smiling Gibbs was so foreign to the stoic and often dour demeanor he remembered. In combination with the décor changes, it was almost pod-in-the-basement creepy. He didn't trust it.

"At least one thing is familiar here," Tony said placidly, eyes on Gibbs' coffee cup.

Gibbs watched Tony closely, hoping to get a sense for why he dropped in out of the blue. He used to be able to read Tony, but that seemed ages ago. Right now, he was completely unfazed by Gibbs' laser-like scrutiny. His eyes were calm and expression completely shuttered. Gibbs didn't know what to make of it, and so he just came out and asked.

"So why did you come? I have to admit; I didn't really expect you to."

"I'm here because it's hard to start over in DC when I'm still carrying the baggage of how I left
before."

Gibbs mouth dropped open. This was unexpected. "You've come back permanently?"

"As permanently as anything ever can be in my life," he confirmed. "You didn't know?" Tony asked, honestly surprised. He'd assumed one of the others would have mentioned it to Gibbs.

Gibbs shook his head. "They're all pretty tightlipped about what you're up to these days. They don't volunteer anything and I'm not prying; keeping my distance as I promised."

"I appreciate that," Tony acknowledged reluctantly. "I realize chances are better than average we'll see each other around now that I'm back in DC. If I'm going to start over with any kind of balance, you and I need to come to some sort of understanding. When I first left, I thought I was doing it to put myself first for change. But no; I was still putting everyone ahead of me. That's done now," Tony asserted firmly.

"Okay," Gibbs agreed, moving to sit on the sofa and gesturing for Tony to take the recliner. As Tony sat, his eyes widened in appreciation at the plush comfort of the chair. "Where do you want to start?" Gibbs opened.

Where, indeed. The blind, unconditional devotion he'd had to Gibbs in the early years had long since cooled and tempered into something new and wary. Oh, there was some devotion and loyalty still buried somewhere in his psyche. In the last years of his tenure at NCIS, he was no longer blind to the man's flaws and increasingly frequent demonstrations that he was all too human. With every misstep, every miscarriage of justice the feet of clay became more visible. And still he stayed.

He'd have done anything not to let Gibbs down, anything to measure up to his expectations. Tony was disappointed that Gibbs so easily thrust aside the standards he'd set for others in order to mete out personal justice. He denied Gibbs that opportunity by bringing down The Calling along with Daniel Budd, and that was when things between them became irretrievably broken. That was when the distance that had developed between them turned into something colder; something darker. It had taken far too long for him to see it.

"Gibbs, you threw a lot of crap at me over the years. That last year...you took it to a whole new level. You made me doubt pretty much everything I thought I knew about myself, my place at NCIS, and my role in our little makeshift family. And that's what I thought we were once; family."

Gibbs cringed and nodded. "If you're still listening to that voice in your head telling you that you're not good enough, you need to stop. Sometimes it sounded like your father, and I'm ashamed to admit it sounded like me more than I care to remember; especially your last year at NCIS. You are more than good enough...you always were. I'm glad you started trusting yourself enough again to move on. You were never supposed to stay in my shadow. I forgot that, and a lot of other things too...and so you left."

"I would have left anyway, Gibbs. Just...maybe not so soon. I couldn't wait in the wings forever, and you were suddenly determined to stay indefinitely whether you were fit to or not. Before that last year, there was never any doubt you cared about me and valued me as a member of your team, but that changed." Tony paused and took a breath, swallowing against the resentment that bubbled up.

"Working with you was like a minefield on a good day. Nothing I ever did was enough and I was never sure what would set you off. On a bad day, it was like being in a cage with a rabid dog and never knowing when your teeth would be at my throat," Tony vented, as the hurt and confusion over Gibbs' behavior resurfaced.
"The job went from something I loved doing, and working with people I loved as much, to something that was untenable and toxic. You were responsible for that, and something had to give. You made it personal and that's when I finally had to go."

"Did I ever tell you about rule 51, Tony?"

"Just so we're clear, I'm pretty much done with you and your rules, Gibbs."

"It's not about the rules as they apply to you, Tony. It's about one in particular that I lost sight of myself," Gibbs clarified. "If anyone deserves an explanation for my behavior before you left, it's you. It's just a matter of whether or not you want to hear it. That decision is yours."

"Gibbs, just say whatever it is you wanted me to hear, so I can get out of here and on with my life."

He considered how different this Tony was. This Tony was jaded; cynical when it came to him, and for good reason. When he allowed Gibbs to see it, his eyes flickered with the same sense of hurt and betrayal he'd seen that day in his basement, the day Tony left them for good. How could he ever make up for this?

Gibbs continued quickly, knowing he was starting to try Tony's patience. "Rule 51 is the last one I added, after the whole cluster with Paloma Reynosa. Sometimes you're wrong. I've been wrong about so many things, and you were right about so many, that day in the basement," Gibbs said meaningfully.

"You lost sight of a hell of a lot more than one rule, Gibbs," Tony accused. "It's a pattern with you going back years. What the hell does that have to do with what happened between us?"

"You're right about it going back years. You ever hear those stories about seeing visions when you die?" Gibbs asked.

Tony's gaze sharpened at the implication, and he gave a small nod in answer.

"The day you pulled me and Maddie out of that submerged car…the last thing I saw was you taking her up. I'd been down too long; couldn't hold my breath any more. And I died," Gibbs said quietly.

"I know; I was there," Tony reminded coolly, hiding his discomfort at the memory of seeing Gibbs' blank, dead stare when he dove back down.

"I should have been grateful you saved my life, and hers. What you don't know is I saw Shannon and Kelly. I was with them again and you pulled me back. For a long time, I struggled with resenting you for it."

He saw Tony flinch minutely at that and Gibbs went on quickly, rushing to get the difficult words out. "The same thing happened on that ship after I was shot, when Taft was working on me. You were all wrapped up in that. I saw them again and they told me I had to go back, stop the bad guys. I woke up unable to do a damn thing for months while you were out there saving the world. When you got back, I hated you for taking that away from me. I was wrong…so very wrong.

Tony inclined his head thoughtfully, but said nothing as Gibbs kept speaking.

"I hadn't had your back for a very long time before you left. You never stopped having mine…even after you'd gone."

Tony finally broke his silence. "Do you have any idea how much it hurt to be dismissed by you?"
Treated not just as unneeded and unimportant, but as if you couldn't stand the very sight of me? I thought you trusted me, had faith in me," Tony accused, his eyes glittering briefly with dark pain. "You wouldn't talk to me. You kept all your problems in that stupid, stubborn jackass head of yours, and wouldn't let me help."

"I did a lot more than that," Gibbs admitted. "You're better than me Tony; you have been for a long time and that was damn near intolerable to accept after I was hurt. I had all the faith and trust in the world in you, and none in myself. It was the last thing in the world I wanted to you to know, so I made my problems about you when they were always about me."

"I didn't realize it was PTSD at the time," Gibbs charged on, praying the younger man would understand the reasons, if not excuse them. "How I treated you; it was cruel…and it was wrong." He waited, trying to gauge Tony's reaction to what he'd been told.

Tony had never been comfortable with anyone being able to figure him out, even Gibbs. It was an old defense mechanism rooted in childhood neglect. Which made Gibbs' treatment of him that last year at NCIS that much more of a betrayal. Now Tony met his eyes with a level stare; he was completely unreadable.

Tony was the master of pulling the wool over people eyes when he wanted to, and now he wore a hooded look that saddened Gibbs. Once upon a time, he had a sixth sense when it came to reading Tony, and a feel for what might be going on with the younger man. Tony knew it. Gibbs had always thought it was because they were so much alike. It was a sense once so reliable that the younger man would avert his gaze or act in a way completely opposite to his feelings when people got too close.

Now, he met Gibbs' stare head on and Gibbs would only read what he allowed him to see.

"Fear-based responses," Tony muttered. "I've learned from my mistakes. Have you?"

Gibbs blinked at the expression heard so many times from Doctor Silva. Tony must have talked to a professional too. He was wrong…he did know this Tony. This was the strong, confident, self-assured man that had always lurked beneath the surface. The Tony DiNozzo that, after a time under his tutelage, was the one that he'd intended to inherit his team. Tony was a natural leader who'd spent far too long following Gibbs lead, out of loyalty.

All that was before he'd destroyed everything he'd built, and nearly destroyed this man right along with himself. But Tony had always been the strong one, and stronger now that he'd finally found a place out of Gibbs' sphere of influence. Tony was resilient and adaptable to change, more so than any of them, while he himself had always been inflexible and self-absorbed.

He'd once been the teacher and mentor and Tony followed his example. Now that he wasn't blinded by his own arrogance, he could see in some ways, Tony was the one to emulate. His eyes flicked around the room, so different than it was two and a half years ago.

"It's a process, but I'd like to think I have learned from my mistakes. You have no idea how much I regret our falling out. I wanted you to know how sorry I am for that."

"Breaking more rules, Gibbs? You've apologized to me twice now," remembered Gibbs' attempt at an apology in the hospital. "That's a first."

"First time for everything," Gibbs agreed with a hesitant smile. "It's a new rule. Apologize when it's warranted. If there's ever been anyone I owe an apology to, it's you, Tony. I didn't train you to stand behind me forever. I forgot that. I put my ego over what was best for the team; for NCIS."
"And how did you come to these epiphanies?" Tony asked, challenging Gibbs to explain further.

"I owe that to you, Tony."

"Me? Why me?"

Gibbs grimaced. "You heard about my spectacular crash the year after you left?"

"I may have heard something about it," Tony allowed.

"You told me some hard truths that day in the basement. You were right; I wasn't fit for field duty physically or mentally and you were right about me feeling threatened by you," Gibbs admitted. "Once you left, I realized how much I relied on you to function at work. You were always watching and assessing. You knew me so well; I was constantly working to put up a pretense of being fine. After you left, I didn't have that, so my behavior got even more erratic and irrational. Bishop's injury in the field when I was supposed to be backing her up opened the floodgates."

"What happened next?" Tony asked curiously.

"You know I was removed from field duty permanently. I sulked at home for weeks while my knee healed, feeling sorry for myself and hating the world," Gibbs recalled, pinking in shame at how he'd treated the others during that dark time. "It was your replacement that talked me around. I hated his guts at first," Gibbs laughed ruefully. "He'd had his own journey with PTSD and it was him sharing his experience that really opened my eyes. It was then that I began to open my eyes to the impact of my behavior on people I cared about, and that the situation I found myself in was entirely of my own making. I entered therapy to keep my job."

"I can only imagine how well that went at first," Tony drawled.

"About as well as you imagine," Gibb smirked back. "I had no more second chances. In Doctor Silva, I found someone who saw right through my bullshit and wasn't going to be cowed into signing me off. I started taking therapy seriously not because I had to in order to stay on at NCIS, but because I realized I needed it."

"Wow."

"Yeah," Gibbs agreed. "I'd alienated everyone around me by that point, even Ducky. You were just the first. Depending on how you look at it, whether directly or indirectly, I have you to thank for the fact that I finally got the help I needed for years. So, thank you," Gibbs finished with an earnest smile.

"An apology and thanks in the same conversation. Will wonders never cease?" Tony asked, real humor in his voice for the first time. At first he'd seriously doubted things could ever get better between the two of them. Before they talked, Gibbs' attitude change was a head scratcher. Now he had a lot to consider.

"What's with the house?" he asked, not knowing what else to say as he pondered this more open, expressive version of Gibbs. The man who was driven to control every aspect of the environment around him, to always ensure he had the advantage, was completely absent.

"I get that a lot still," Gibbs answered, still smiling. "I told you Tony, I've changed. I'm learning to put the past behind me. The house is a reflection of that. I want to use what time I have left in the world to make a better future for myself. It took a long time, but I know now that's what Shannon
and Kelly would have wanted."

"What is it you want from me, Gibbs?"

"I just want things to be like they used to be," Gibbs said

Tony bristled in anger. "I can't believe I was so stupid."

"What?" Gibbs said, shocked.

Tony glared fiercely. "I have no interest in going back to the days of being under your thumb and serving as your metaphorical punching bag. I guess you haven't changed that much after all, have you? I'm done here."

"Tony, please wait!" Gibbs pleaded. "I didn't mean what you think. God, I'm screwing this up…"

Tony gives him a searching look and seems satisfied with what he sees.

"What did you mean then, Gibbs?" he asked, voice carefully neutral.

"I meant I'd like us to be on good terms again like we used to be, Tony…that's all."

"Really, Gibbs? You offer an apology to ease your guilty conscience and think we're going to take up like it's old times?"

"No, I don't think that. You're right," Gibbs replied. "Ducky told me guilt was no foundation from which to repair a friendship and he's right. He also reminded me that broken trust isn't easily repaired."

"Ducky is a very wise man."

"Damn straight he is," Gibbs agreed. "I'm thankful he's allowed me back in his good graces, and now that Doctor Silva has helped me get my head on straight, I'm better equipped to be a friend. Not a boss or a 'my way or the highway' mentor. I've missed you and I'd like to be part of your life again, to call you friend. I'd be grateful to be counted as one of yours. I'm asking for the chance to earn that privilege. What do you say, Tony?"

Tony thought hard about what Gibbs was asking of him. NCIS used to be everything to him, and the people there an erstwhile family. His self-worth became wrapped up in it, and in Gibbs. When Gibbs turned on him and he lost that validation, he floundered. When he finally righted himself, he came to the realization his life needed to be about more than that. He certainly didn't need to seek validation and approval from a man who'd let him down more times than he could count. That failing was on him, not just Gibbs.

Gibbs had been only partly right when he'd said this thing between them started and ended with him. It may have started with Gibbs but it hadn't ended. It had been in limbo for two and a half years. Now it was time to close not only this chapter of his life, but the whole damn book.

It was time to move on and make this fresh start something different. Ducky had been right in his observation that every time he'd moved on before, he was running away from something. Now he was running to something worthwhile. A new life; and for a change, one he was living for himself. A life where he no longer felt the need for approval and validation from father figures. Father figures had only ever disappointed him. He needed friends and peers. He was optimistic that after today, one might eventually be found here. They still had things to get out in the open, but truth be told, he missed Gibbs too. With his openness and honesty today, he'd earned his second chance.
Tony leaned forward in the recliner and extended an arm toward Gibbs, who reached out and clasped his hand firmly. Gibbs raised a questioning eyebrow.

"We'll call today a start," Tony affirmed in answer. Gibbs grinned broadly and squeezed, a first tentative step toward rebuilding the bond they once shared.

To seal the deal, Gibbs offered, "Cowboy steaks and beer?"

Tony's twinkling eyes and burst of laughter was like a warm balm on Gibbs' soul.

"Sounds perfect."

~Finis~

AN: So ends this story, and with it, the 'Turning the Page' trilogy. It's become quite the epic and something I hadn't envisioned three years ago, when I started a little stand alone story called Turning the Page. That first story started as my attempt to replace Tony's dreadful canon departure from the show with something far more palatable to me. The overwhelmingly positive response convinced me to continue the story.

Once I did that, the second and third installments became about two things. Tony's journey to move on and find his place outside Gibbs' shadow. Along with an interesting case story, I wanted to create an ending for Tony that was more worthy of the character than the one he got. I also wanted to dive into an explanation for the complete jackass Gibbs became toward him in season 13. PTSD makes as much sense to me as anything. I wanted to explain it, take him to rock bottom and bring him back again, redeeming him in a way that felt realistic, not done in a snap as the show tended to do. So the trilogy became almost as much Gibbs' journey to finally move on from his past traumas and dramas as it was Tony's journey. All those things we'll never see onscreen.

Maybe this wasn't the end you hoped for, or expected. But it's pretty close to the ending I envisioned from the very beginning. Tony in a place career-wise that recognized and valued the smart, capable agent and leader. Tony and Gibbs working to rebuild their friendship from a more solid foundation of mutual respect rather than a place of one-upmanship and deference to the almighty Gibbs.

This has also been a writer's journey. Three years ago, if anyone had told me I could conceive such an intricate, complexly plotted story (and so darn long!) I don't think I would have believed them. It's been amazing for me to write this and I'm incredibly proud of the story its become, in spite of its' flaws. I hope you've enjoyed it and if you'd like to share your thoughts in a comment, I'd love to read them. Thank you for reading, and I hope you'll stay tuned. There are new stories to tell and I have several brewing currently.

If you got all the way to the end of this long-ass author's note, thanks for indulging me!

Love, E

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