Lost and Found

by AnyaMcL

Summary

Tony’s tolerance for the team’s bullshit and demeaning attitude was already low, but it just took one little boy coming into Tony’s life to see the team utterly shatter. And sometimes, just like in the rhyme, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty back together again.

Notes

This will be a slow posting story, after the first nine chapters, but it’s all plotted out and will be completed.
The Foundling

Wednesday Nov 26, 2008

Tony DiNozzo gave a wild happy grin, darting between the players, and snagging the ball out of mid-air, successfully blocking the near score. With a smooth twist and lift, he tossed it up, and it fell easily into the basket at the far other end of the court. “Game over, guys!” He called out, laughing lightly at the sudden moaning and groaning around him.

Hands on hips, he surveyed the gym around him, and the lanky pre-teen bodies that were milling around. “Seriously,” He said, as they pestered at him for just one more play, “It’s Thanksgiving tomorrow, you little turkeys… some of you guys have travelling to do tonight and tomorrow, and I’m sure your parents don’t want tired cranky kids in the car to deal with. So, scoot! Scram! I’ll see you next week at practice.”

Groans turned into laughter, and with many a cheery wave, and many shout outs of “Happy Thanksgivings, Coach Tony!” the kids scattered to the wind, leaving him alone in the YMCA gym to clean up. Tony shook his head with a laugh, and smiled. Who would have thunk that coming to the Y, and working with thirty snot-nosed pre-teens on the verge of hormonal bursts would be the highlight of his week? If someone had told him he’d be doing this ten years ago, he’d have set them up for a emergency psychiatric review.

What was even weirder than spending time with the kids, was that he’d so very enjoy this time, barking like some insane DI at those same kids, and that he was grateful for the time he spent coaching each week. It was his stress outlet, it wiped the slate and eased the strain he worked under day in and day out. Even after a brutal day at work, dealing with an incredibly irritable boss, a Mossad officer with a grudge, and a Junior Agent with an ego-trip gone wild, these few hours each week with these kids at the Y really invigorated him and gave him the strength to carry on.

It wasn’t that he hated his job at NCIS. He didn’t. He was a cop to the core of his soul, and investigating crimes so that justice could be served was what he did. But, the team he had worked with at NCIS five years ago was truly dead, even if most of the individuals that made up the team were still alive. After Gibbs lost his memories, something vital had died in the team. Sure, the Boss said he had his memories back, but Tony knew in his gut, that wasn’t true. Too much of the man he had been, all the camaraderie they had once enjoyed, the sense of partnership that had laid between Gibbs and him had been utterly wiped out.

But this coaching… had been a lifeline at a time in his life when he hadn’t realized he needed one. Just a few years ago, just before Ari Haswari had come into their lives and wrecked hell, his frat brother Marcus Pask founded a nationwide program named SCULPT (Sports Culture Understanding Laughter Play Teamwork) that brought underprivileged children together in community centres like the Y for sponsored activities like basketball, or music lessons, art lessons… anything that got them off computers, off the streets, and into safe environments where they could learn team-work, camaraderie and have fun working off the surplus of energy that kids always had. It was brilliant, and the entire frat alumni had been really supportive of the project -- but Mark had wanted more from Tony, and had used every tool in his frat-brotherhood repertoire to beg, bribe, blackmail Tony into coaching for a few weeks, until they found someone who could do it regularly.

Four years later, excluding his six months as Agent Afloat, acting as coach to the Basketball program of SCULPT became a weekly regular gig. “Too bad it’s only once a week, DiNozzo.” He muttered to himself, walking around the room to gather three of the balls that had been used in today’s session, and lining up to neatly toss them some fifteen feet into the large bin across the court where the balls
were stored. “Don’t be a whiny little bitch about it. It’s not like you have spare time for more that wouldn’t impact the job. Daniels has the Tuesday class. Marnie takes the weekend session. You do the Wednesday. That’s it.”

Gibbs would have flipped out if he knew what Tony was doing with his free time. Somehow, even his free time was to be reserved for Gibbs use, if need be. And having a slew of kids as baggage, well, that wouldn’t fly if a case came up. As a result, Tony took great pains to ensure that no one at NCIS knew what he did on Wednesday nights. And no one was ever going to know if Tony had his way. ‘Honestly, so what if it was a school-night?” Tony grumbled. “It’s not like I’m staying up until midnight. We’re done before nine at night every time.” Besides, coaching these kids was rewarding on so many levels. They had fun, he had fun; they learned a game he loved, he got to play a game he loved; they learned to stand against bullying, to share in the sense of accomplishment, to make a difference to each other and themselves in little ways, and they made a huge difference to Tony’s sense of self and self-worth, when others in his day to day life were trying so hard to tear those qualities down.

Tony heaved a sigh, annoyed with his maudlin thoughts that crept in almost immediately after the kids left; it’d been another bad day with his team, another epic go around with Ziva’s bitterness, Mcgee’s ego, and Gibb’s indifference. This had to end. It wasn’t mentally healthy, and the distraction, if it should happen in the field, could get him or a teammate killed. “But how do I make it stop?”

Point was, the insubordination of Ziva and McGee, sometimes concurrent, sometimes at differing times, began during Gibbs little Mexican hiatus. It had escalated when Gibbs had returned, mostly because Ziva had seen Tony’s demotion as proof she was right about his unworthiness to the position, and McGee because he was bitter about no longer being SFA with a probie of his own.

“I should have dealt with it then.” he thought glumly, wandering over to the boys locker rooms to do a walk through for any straggling kid. “In between jumping to Gibbs tune, running an undercover op, and working twenty-four seven, yeah… sometime then.”

Realistically, Gibbs hadn’t had his back then. He was too busy proving he was the alpha wolf amongst the pack. The displays of temper, the barking, the ridiculous undercutting of his authority over the junior members. It had gone on for months, and would have continued if Jenny hadn’t decided on suicide by proxy.

Sometimes, though, he wondered if Gibbs had his back now. God only knew what Gibbs thought of him, it seemed he never gave enough or worked hard enough to make the Senior Agent happy, anymore.

Wandering up and down the rows of lockers, he shut a few doors, and checked that the showers were properly turned off. The arrangement the city had set up with the YMCA allowed the kids to use the facilities at no charge. He’d be damned if he allowed that kindness to be abused. And so, he made sure that there was no damage, that the kids treated the property with the respect it deserved. They had learned, from the outset, that he’d not tolerate mock or real fighting.

Really, the kids only used the lockers and the benches. They had to bring indoor running shoes to play on the court, and shoved their coats and backpacks (if they had them) in the lockers while they were playing.

The showers were never used. But, Tony didn’t for a moment thing the kids wouldn’t go in there if they had a prank they wanted to pull. It was the kind of shit he would have done as a kid, after all.

Having cleared the boys lockers, Tony flicked the lights to the locker rooms out, and made his way
over the girls. The team was co-ed, but they had very few girls actually show up for basketball practice. They tended to gravitate towards other activities. Usually, only Teresa Miller, and Bethany Roddy came to the practices. Bethany, Tony felt, would make a great player at College level in her future. She had some wicked instincts on the court.

Tapping three times on the door, and then twice more after a pause, he entered the rooms and went walk-about. They were empty, neat and tidy. Tony returned to the gym, and went to the small office at the end of the court. Here they had a desk, a white-board for diagrams, and a small locked cabinet for emergency medical supplies. Grabbing his leather jacket and trusty backpack, he turned off these lights and made for the exit.

His hand was on the primary lights to the gym, when Tyler Johnston and David Sydney came running full pelt towards him from the foyer. “Coach, Coach!” Tyler was shouting, while David was waiving his arms as if Tony would miss seeing them. “You gotta come… there’s a baby been abandoned out front of the gym!”

Tony blinked, hit the lights, and moved towards the boys. “A baby?” He asked calmly. “Are you sure?”

“He’s hurt -- yeah…and real little. Teresa and Kevin are with him. He’s tucked into a corner, behind the garbage cans -- we only spotted him because we was waiting, and heard him crying.

The boys were jogging on their shorter legs to keep up Tony’s longer strides. Bart, the security guard, was obviously on his security walkabout, as the desk was unmanned. That wasn’t an issue, normally, given that the YMCA doors were closed to the public. Though, ironic, how it seemed that security was never there when you needed it. ‘Story of my life.’ Tony thought sourly.

Tony absently patted down his pocket, feeling the jingle of keys, before pushing the main doors open,

“Coach Tony! Coach Tony! Over here!” Tony’s gaze swept to the far east wall, where the wall jutted out to form the shadow of the actual gym. Tony pulled out his cellphone, and triggered the flashlight app. It wasn’t late, but in November, night fell early now, and this particular spot behind the garbage bin was particularly dark. The two girls were on their knees on the ground, twisting away from whatever they were protecting to wave their arms at him.

Drawing closer, Tony’s lips pressed into a thin line as he spotted the child they were hovering over; he wasn’t quite the infant that the boys had claimed, but he was definitely too young to be out anywhere on his own. Teresa, a good team player that she was, crouched closer to the child and titled her water bottle up to the child’s mouth, giving the the small boy a drink. When the bottle came down, and Teresa leaned back on her heels, her blue eyes looked up for instructions or cues from her Coach. Tony jerked his head to the side, as if to say, step back, and the kid complied.

Finally, Tony got a good look at the child. What he saw, however, wasn’t making the investigator in him the least bit happy. A small overly thin face had a few light bruises around the right temple, and some dried, and some damp tears tracked through the dirt on his face. But what triggered Tony’s anger the most, was the pain marked around tired eyes and a pale mouth. His internal investigator canvassed the rest of the scene in a solid long sweeping glance, taking in the overall size of the child and mentally deciding the child was about three or four years of age. The boy’s right arm was broken, the angle of the arm to the body all wrong, and there was distinctive bruising on the child’s neck, consistent with choking. This kid had been seriously abused.

‘Someone,’ he thought grimly but kept it silent for sake of minor children gadding about, “Really needs to die.”
Tony immediately beganshrugging off his leather jacket, dropping into a crouch in front of the child, aware of Bethany and Teresa scooted further away, coming to stand up and join the boys.

“Hey there,” Tony said calmly, letting his broad back serve as a windbreak for the boy. He was dressed too simply for this cold weather, clad in threadbare pjs. His hands and feet, both dirty, were exposed to the November night air. “My name is Tony DiNozzo, I’m the basketball coach for this group of kids.” He reached out with one hand, to touch the boy’s leg. The child flinched away.

“Listen, I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. But, you look really cold there. Can I put my jacket around you? It’s very nice and warm.” Hazel eyes held a green gaze steadily, offering assurance through force of will that Tony wouldn’t hurt him. The bruise on his temple, and the pinched look on the kid’s face painted an awful picture, and Tony’s gut clenched. Oh, oh, somebody so very desperately needed to die in a spectacularly slow and painful way. Extra hard.

For a moment, Tony honestly thought the kid was going to refuse any help, but suddenly, miraculously, the child nodded with the tiniest jerk of chin.

“I know your arm really hurts.” Tony said gently, reaching out again, this time to cup a cheek, gently stroking soft cold skin with his thumb. The kid shuddered, but after a simple moment, leaned into the warmth of Tony's hand. “Can you lean forward?”

A soft whimper, but compliance was automatic. The kid had been abused, definitely, but he wasn’t at the point of fighting against his abuser, yet. The fact he obeyed immediately told Tony that the child was used to doing what was instructed. He held his hurt arm close to his chest, though the pain of doing so brought fresh tears, and leaned forward, away from the wall, from the waist.

Tony rose up from his crouch, wasting no time to swoop leather jacket down and around the tiny shoulders. Given how large it was compared to how small the child was, it nearly encapsulated the kid completely. Only the tiny head appeared above the collar of the jacket. “Good work, buddy!”

Tony praised, gently running a hand over the mop of filthy dark hair. The kid hadn't seen clean water and soap in some time, Tony noted grimly, but he didn’t feel any contusions on the kid’s head.

Rocking back on his heels, Tony surveyed the waif’s response to his praise, and the reaction to warmth from his jacket. The November air having taken on a bit of a wintery chill, it was too cold, even with the jacket, to let the boy stay outside long. For him, an adult, his tolerance to cold was higher but even he knew that five or ten minutes was his max, more than that and he risked a cold or chest infection.

It begged a few concerning questions. ‘How long was he out here?’ Tony wondered, looking up and around for the surveillance cameras that he was certain were in the area, and returned to the kid. ‘His feet are ice white. But, no signs of frostbite yet.’ Realistically, the corner they were in provided a lot of shelter, but it wasn’t perfect by far.

Sharp green eyes, well experienced in looking for evidence, tracked the cameras, their position relative to those camera’s range, and then the streets around the YMCA. If the kid was dumped, they had used the abutting street to the complex, and sent the kid up over the gardens. Or the kid had climbed that way, hugging the wall to escape the wind.

Yeah, somebody really, REALLY, needed to die. Maybe two or three times, using medieval torture methods like… honey and ants or chinese water torture.

‘Those cameras will show nothing,’ Tony gave those stupid cameras a withering glare for their incompetence. ‘Honestly… why just the front doors of the gym, the cheap administrative bastards?’ About all he could expect to see, from that footage, was possibly the child as he scuttled up along the
wall of the gymnasium to this sheltered point. There would be no footage showing who dropped him off, who abandoned him… Dammit. Tony killed the flashlight app, and hit the eighth speed-dial on his phone. It went to voicemail, and he cursed silently to himself. ‘It’s Thanksgiving, DiNozzo. It’s eight-thirty at night… what did you expect?’ Frowning, he scrolled through his address book and found the alternate number he needed.

“CPS, how may I direct your call?” The perky voice on the end probably came partnered with bubble-gum and overly teased hair.

“Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, NCIS. I’m trying to reach Caseworker Patty Smythe. I understand her office hours are over, but I’m wondering if you could contact her? I’m at the YMCA 1325 W St NW, and I’ve found an abused and injured small child. No guardian around. In need of medical attention. I think he’s been abandoned. I’d like Patty’s recommendation on a contact at CPS before I call 911.”

There was silence. The sound of a scratching pen. And, and a murmured, “One moment please.”

The muzak was annoying kiddie pop, and it made Tony’s lip curl. Ugh. What was wrong with classical music? A small sound behind him caused Tony to look down and around at the kids surrounding him and the toddler on the ground. Tony frowned, tucking the phone against his shoulder, and made an executive decision. They couldn’t stay out in this wind.

“Kids,” He said to the quartet still hovering, “Head home. Your parents have to be getting worried. I’ve got this. If I have any questions, I’ll call your parents, okay?”

There was hesitation, and their open caring concern for the little boy made Tony proud of each child in this group. “It’s fine, me and my l’il buddy here will be okay. I’m going to get him inside the Y where it’s warm, call for an ambulance, and I’ll go with him. Okay?”

They fussed, and Tony let them. He turned to the child. “Hey buddy, can you get up? Let’s go inside where it’s warm, and I’ll get you something warm to drink.” Those sad, tired eyes met his, and the defeat in the weary face broke his heart. “Okay, Plan B.” Tony said gently, “I’m going to be very, very careful, but I’m going to pick you up, and take you inside, okay? I’m sorry if this hurts at all.”

Killing the call on his cellphone, he dropped the unit into his track-pants pocket before bending down and carefully, as if picking up a wounded dog, scooped the child up, cradling him like a baby to his chest, and being very careful not to jostle the shoulder attached to the broken arm. There were still faint whimpers, but the kid’s white face turned into his chest, and burrowed for warmth.

Reaching for his right pocket, Tony found his keys, and loosely held them in the arm supporting the kids legs, then rose to his feet.

“I’ll get the door,” Tyler declared, the kids still lagging behind, David pulled the keys from Tony’s hand before he and Tyler made a race of it to get the door open. By the time Tony made the half dozen steps to the door, it was being held wide open by Tyler and David.

The bigger kids waited until Tony and the little boy were securely inside, and then, wishing their Coach much luck, booted it. Tony made mental note to call each household in the morning, and give praise where praise was justifiably due, and hopefully prevent any incidences of punishment for tardiness.

The slight weight carried his arms was crying softly, the gentle movement of Tony’s gait jarring the kid’s arm, causing pain. Oh, where was the Autopsy Gremlin when you needed him?
Tony headed towards one of the long leather sofas in the reception, and sat down, with the kid in his lap. He had two reasons for holding the kid, one, his body tended to run hot, and he could help warm the child up, and two, to make it easier to pick him up again if the need warranted such action.

“Sssh.” He hushed the soft cries, stroking the child’s head gently, soothingly. “You’re okay. You’ll be okay. Sssh.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and with a little juggling, he managed to get it out. “DiNozzo.” He answered briskly.

“I’m en route to you, how badly hurt?” Patty’s rough voice echoed on the cellphone, she was obviously using speakerphone.

“Aww, hell…” Tony sighed. “I didn’t mean for you to come, Pats… I would have been happy with anyone you vouched for.”

She snorted. “No one else would willingly deal with your crew, DiNozzo. Focus… how bad?”

“Broken arm, bruises, signs of strangulation, I suspect malnourished, and from the sounds of his breathing, fractured ribs. Someone tried to kill him, Pats. No shoes, no coat, and threadbare pjs. Seriously, Patty, I’d like to track down who was looking after this little guy and beat some common sense into them.”

“I’ll call 911. I’ll be there before them, but let's get this kid some help” She decided. “Where are you now?”

“Inside the club at reception. I brought him inside, he’s on my lap, wrapped up in my coat.” Tony said. “I’d like to get him a warm drink…”

“Don’t. Wait until he’s been assessed.” She advised, apology in her tone. “I’ll call now. Keep him warm and awake, if you can.”

Tony sighed, and pocketed the phone. “Some Thanksgiving, huh?” He said softly, still stroking a dark head. The breathing had eased, the cries had stopped, and the boy seemed to be leaching the warmth from his body. Drowsy eyes blinked at him as he looked down. “So the lady I was talking to is a very good friend of mine. She works for Children Protective Services -- those are people whose job is to make sure kids are safe and not being hurt by anyone. My friend’s name is Patty Smythe. She’s very nice.” The tired hazel eyes seemed to stare into his unflinchingly. “Patty is going to help you see a doctor. And after they fix your arm, we’ll see about some food, warm clothes, and a nice warm bed… I bet you’re real tired, aren’t you?”

The soft sigh and nod at least gave Tony assurance the kid understood him.

“Things will be better, soon.” Tony promised. “Now, before we got too far, and Patty gets here -- can you tell me your name?”

The kid tensed, and seemed to curl up into a tighter ball.

“Hey… relax.” Tony gently ran his hand up and down the painfully rigid back. “You’re okay. You’re not going back to where you came from, I promise you. Please tell me your name?”

Tears filled the eyes, and the lips trembled. “Boy.” He said with such a soft almost silent voice. “Her call me Boy.”

Tony blinked. ‘Oh, dear sweet God and Angels on High,’ he thought. ‘I’m going to need Gibbs best rifle and rustiest bullets as soon as I find this ‘her’.’ There was no way around it. Someone
REALLY, REALLY, utterly needed to die with extreme prejudice. Preferably with his hand around their throat. One did not call a child ‘Boy’.

“Well,” He drawled slowly, mind racing to figure a way to have this conversation. “Yes… you are a boy, so am I. So were two of the kids that came to find me. The other two were girls, they were sitting with you.” Deliberately acting as if he hadn't understood what the munchkin was telling him. “But, do you know your name?”

The head shook a little, “No. Her call me Boy. An’ Memaw calls me Boy an You.” He said in that soft near whisper.

Tony frowned, but made the expression look silly. “Well, that won’t work. I’m a “You” too, and a “Boy” too. So are the two boys who came to help you. They’re you-s too! Nope, I guess that means you need a real name… something distinctive, something unique for a little boy like you… I know… how about… Brutus?”

The kid’s eyes went wide. Clearly he believed this stranger holding him in his nice warm jacket was completely nuts.


“Pooh!”

“That’s right! Winnie the Pooh!” Tony smiled. “Now, how about we call you Christopher, and you can be named after Christopher Robin, then? I’ll call you Chris for short.”

“Boy don’t got a Pooh.” The kid told him sadly. "Boy don't got nobody."

Tony risked a soft kiss to a brow. “Ah, Chris, trust me, you will.” He promised. "And, you do."

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They had been chased out of the exam room and into the hall by the nurses, initially, but little Christopher-but-not-Christopher-Robin made such a wailing racket, that the decision was overturned. Oddly, the tiny boy hadn’t warmed up to Patty, who usually had kids eating out of the palm of her hand within minutes of meeting. Christopher had remained tense, unbearably so with just the CPS agent in the room, and so Patty, more worried for the child than upset by his lack of trust, had sent Tony in to stay with the child while the doctors examined him.

“X-rays are easy!” Tony was enthusiastically telling Chris, while a nurse helped him clean up via a sponge bath. The room they were using, was above normal in temperature, for the purpose of keeping the kid warm, despite the impromptu bath. “They slide you under this nifty machine, and position the machine arm just so… and poof.. take a picture of your bones.”

“Poof?” The kid repeated the word hesitantly.

Tony grinned. “Okay, you got me, it’s really more of a click, but you’ll see what I mean. ‘Poof’ means that it’s something that happens really, really fast. After that, the doctor will probably give you a special needle, that makes you feel awfully good… and he’ll set your arm, and then put a cast on it. You need to pick a color, now, though.” Tony said thoughtfully. “When I last had a broken bone, I wasn’t paying enough attention until after the shot -- and I picked a bad color.”
“Pink?” The nurse guessed, her smile teasing as she lifted up a color sample. Christopher’s eyes swung to her and went huge.

“Lilac purple.” He answered, and the nurse flipped that color up to Christopher’s delight. “Pink was okay -- see how bright it is? It says, “look at me!, I got hurt -- be nice to me!” y’know, and then the pretty girls offer sympathy. But, the lilac? Gives the entirely wrong message.” He heaved a tragic sigh. “There I was, wounded in the line of my duty, and received mocking, not sympathy for my tragic circumstances. The pink, they would have known I was mocking my wound, myself. The lilac? Nope. No go.” He gave Christopher a grin. “You should go with the blue. It’s nice. Or yellow. We can draw pictures on that.”

Little hazel eyes seemed to consider that, and the pursed lips suggested proof was needed.

“Well now.” The door open, and a merry faced balding doctor found his way in, “I’m Dr, Janga, and I'm here to see... Christopher.” Chart in hand, he seemed to be speed reading everything. “And it looks like we need an x-ray or two.”

Tony kept quiet, though it was a battle. The fact was, now that the bath was over, and the child was warmly wrapped up in a blanket, the sheer degree of negligence and abuse the little boy had already endured was somewhat masked. He was absolutely plastered in bruises from head to toe, and Tony, with years of experience in law enforcement knew these were marks from being punched and kicked. It pissed him off. There was no excuse on this godforsaken planet for any child to ever be treated like a goddamn punching bag.

“Well, then, Mr. Christopher,” said the doctor, “We shall be off to get that x-ray. If your friend, Agent DiNozzo, wants to come along, that’s okay with me.”

It wasn’t how he planned to spend his night, truthfully, but it was a better use of his time than drinking himself unconscious. Tony followed along, playfully teaching Chris how to play the traveling game of eye-spy. The moving bed, and limited life experience made it hard for Chris to play along, but he gamely tried.

An hour later, they were back in the examination room, and Christopher had chosen the yellow cast. “Good choice.” Tony praised. “Subtle, cheery….it's a canvas waiting to be drawn on.” He tapped his chin, making a thinking pose. “We’ll need crayons. And markers.”

In short order, and with just a few tears, the bone was set, the cast was placed, and Christopher was slowly falling asleep, the warmth of the hospital bed, the lack of pain courtesy of a shot, and his arm being tended taking what little fight to stay awake out of him.

The nurse tucked the blanket tighter around the little boy as his breathing evened out into sleep, a soft sympathetic smile on her lips. She left with the remains from the casting plaster, passing Patty as the door opened.

The CPS representative was a well-known associate to the MCRT, having helped on a number of cases where minor children were involved. She knew their team well, and the team also learned well of her personality. She put the children first, and was willing to go toe to toe with Gibbs for that reason. It wasn’t a one-upmanship, it was always about the kids and what was best for them.

Gibbs hadn’t liked losing to Patty, but he respected her for her stance all the same. Truthfully, so did Tony -- because standing up against Gibbs took balls of steel. Big balls of steel.

Briskly, she made her way across the room to inspect the new cast. “Very nice.” She commented. “I see you’ve already autographed it Special Agent DiNozzo?” Her smile was cheeky. She tossed a
gray bag filled with clothes for Christopher onto a nearby chair.

The nurse returned, and between her and Patty’s gentle efforts they dressed the soundly sleeping child in clean warm clothing. Afterwards, Patty pulled Tony aside, “I don’t know what to do.” She confessed quietly to the NCIS Agent. “The hospital won’t keep him overnight, I don’t have a foster parent I can line up quickly enough -- my two emergency fosterers have some critical cases already -- I’m flying out early in the morning for the weekend, or I would take him with me...I should cancel my flight, and it’s horribly selfish, but I’d rather not.” Patty bit her lip. “I may have to transfer him to another hospital and see if can get him in as a patient until after the holiday. He’s not going to enjoy that.”

Logically, Tony knew a trap when he saw one. And this, while not Patty’s intention, seemed like a karmic trap of epic proportions. Of all the YMCA’s that a child could be abandoned at, the powers that be selected the one he was at.

“He can stay with me for the weekend.” The words were no sooner out of his mouth, than Tony wanted to request video proof he had said them. What was WRONG with him? Kids and him were oil and water. Okay, the team aside, most small kids and him were oil and water.

“Oh, I didn’t mean…”

Tony shrugged, in for a penny as it was. Besides, other than dinner at Steve’s on Thanksgiving, and a few hours in the office working on cold-cases, he had no other plans for the holiday weekend. “I’ve got the days off, Patty, so it’s fine. And, I know you weren’t asking it of me. I’m offering. I’ve got the most of the training a foster parent does, plus I’m three months from finishing my Masters in Psychology. I get my certification with the Red Cross every year. As a cop, I sat in on the pre-training for foster care -- well, actually I sat in that because I was undercover at the time and that was part of the assignment. I could take him. I’ve a nice apartment, a bed he can sleep in, plenty of good healthy food -- I have a BA in Physical Education and that includes nutrition.... besides, I’ve no commitments on my time this weekend.” The football game he could watch at home just as easily as at Steve’s.

For just a moment, something sad wavered in Patty’s eyes, and then it vanished. Tony was glad, he hated pity with a passion. “You’re sure?” She asked.

“Sure.” He waved it off. “It’s just three days, Patty. Easy peasy.”

“He’ll need a toddler bed, or rails, you know. And, based on the rashes, he may not be past wetting a bed. He appears to be toilet trained, but I don’t know how far his comfort levels are.” She sighed. “He needs a lot more clothes than I provided, and shoes.”

Tony looked at his watch, and winced. It was getting late… nearly eleven already. Nearly all retailers would be closed tomorrow, and the only one he could think of that might have what he needed and was still open now, would be closing very soon.

“Walmart.” Patty murmured. "It closes in a few minutes, though."

“Yeah.” Tony found his backpack, and pulled out his sketch pad, and a pencil. Faster than spit, he began listing shit he felt Christopher needed.

Patty chuckled, reading over his shoulder as he added bath toys. “You sure you don’t have kids?”

“Hmm?” Tony kept making notes. “What?”

“That’s pretty specific list -- and NCIS doesn’t deal with kids that often.” She took his notepad and
made a few notes, before adding a “child’s potty” to the list, and scratching out the car seat. “I’ll call this in. Hopefully, they’ll allow CPS to settle up later.”

Tony shook his head, and went for his wallet, fishing out his American Express. “Make it easier than haggling that out. Charge what we need to my card. We can settle up later if we need to.”

At her apparent protest, Tony raised a hand. “Seriously, I don’t wear Zegna and Armani because I’m poor, Patty. And I don’t work at NCIS because I need the money. Believe me, one kid’s emergency needs barely takes an inch on my earned monthly interest. It’s fine. Go. Order. I’ll see how much longer we’re gonna be here.”

Patty huffed, but went off to a quiet corner by the windows that had fair reception for cellphones. Tony went back to Christopher’s side. The nurse was gone, but the doctor had returned and was writing in Christopher’s file. “Is Ms. Smythe still available?” The doctor asked. “I hope she hasn’t left.”

“She’s on the phone.” Tony gave a jerk of his chin towards the door, eyes looking down at the little boy, he seemed smaller now, laying on the big hospital bed. Christopher had curled on his left side, his broken right arm a lump draped under the sweatshirt, the cast resting across his belly. The poor kid was exhausted, sleeping soundly only in part from the administered pain-killer, but mostly from just having been worn completely out. What worried Tony about the deep sleep was that the kid hadn’t eaten anything yet.

“He’ll likely sleep for the balance of the night.” The Doctor said softly, coming to stand by Tony. “If you’re worried about moving him, don’t be. He won’t wake easily. In the morning, a solid fare, of perhaps a simple oatmeal porridge, or scrambled eggs and toast, would be easiest on his stomach.”

Tony nodded. He’d begun changing his own eating habits after the plague. Oh, he made a bit of a show with his lunches, but breakfast was steel cut oats, with fruit and greek yogurt, dinner was usually a grilled fish or chicken with vegetables and quinoa, or stir fry. Something heavy with vegetables far healthier than what pizza offered. Once a week he indulged in beef, but overall, kept his diet lean and heart healthy. His lungs were compromised, he had to do something to make it easier on his body given that fact.

‘No run tomorrow morning,’ He realized, thoughtfully, a hand coming up behind his head to scratch through his hair. ‘And no beer tonight… it’s well past my dinner time too.’

The doctor removed a prescription from his bad, and shoved it at Tony. “The painkiller is safe enough for him, but only use as needed. I’m also prescribing some vitamin mixes in a powder format that I’d like to see him take, as well as an ointment for those rashes on his rear end.”

Tony read over the lines, and pocketed it. “Okay.” He nodded. “When can he leave?”

The doctor shrugged. “Now, if you’d like. I’ve no reason to keep him in, well, other than the fact he’s underweight, but that would take time to cure, and can be done in the care of a good foster home, rather than wherever he was living prior, and just as effectively as it could be done in hospital.” The doctor struck Tony as a kind and caring man, his touch on Christopher had been carefully gentle, and considerate of the discomfort and pain the young boy was feeling. He wasn’t disinterested, Tony could tell, in keeping Chris under his care, he was measuring what would help Christopher best, and it wasn’t the sterile hospital environment.

Tony appreciated that. God only knew how much he hated staying in hospital as a patient. His dislike was founded in his childhood, and he didn’t want Chris to develop the same instinctive need to avoid hospital stays. “Any instructions for bathing, or diet?”
“Healthy, whole foods, light on heavy sauces or spices, he’s not used to them. Fruits and vegetables, light on proteins perhaps two to three ounces there at mealtimes. Cover the cast when showering or bathing. Common sense really. He should come back in two weeks, we’ll see how his ribs are doing, and give his arm another check.” The doctor gently stroked Chris’ head. “He’s a survivor, this lad.” The doctor murmured, smiling down at the boy.

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. He took a breath, and reached with careful hands to pick up the child. Per the doctor’s exam, Chris was barely twenty-three pounds, a great margin off where he should be at his current age. For Tony, the child’s weight was negligible. Setting the child high on his hip, Chris’ head rested against his shoulder, and soft puffs of air brushed across his neck. Limbs were little limp noodles, dropping bonelessly around. The doctor helped Tony arrange Chris’ casted arm from where it lay under his shirt, ensuring his little hand was pinned against Tony’s torso. Gravity, or boneless resistance, the child’s grip wasn’t there, and the left hand, falling behind Tony’s arm, fell in a free-for-all downwards. His head slumped against Tony’s shoulder, and legs loosely dangling only Tony’s arm supporting his butt kept the kid upright in his arms. Tony barked a soft laugh, amazed by how stubbornly asleep the squirt was. Child settled, the two men made their way to the hallway, where Patty was waiting, his credit card in hand.

“It’ll be bagged and at the doors for you. The store manager said he’ll stay late until you’ve come and gone.” She said, one critical eye surveying the sleeping child’s flushed cheeks. Something must have pleased her in what she was seeing, because she gave a faint smile of approval. “I can’t thank you enough, Tony.” She said softly.

“Meh.” He shrugged. “I’ll deny ever saying this if you try repeating it.” He told her with a smile, “But after my Mom died -- I had desperately wanted someone to rescue me… I can’t, in good consciousness walk away now.”

She made the sign of a brownie. “Your secret lies safe with me.” Patty snagged the backpack still hanging off Tony’s shoulder, and hefted it onto her arm, snagging his now unencumbered left arm as she went. “I’ll move the car seat from my car to yours when we get down to the garage.”

“She’s at the YMCA, still.” Tony remembered, suddenly. With Christopher being so upset and his arm hurting badly, it had been Tony he clung to for comfort, and so Tony was the one who went in the ambulance with the child.

“Bet you never thought you’d see yourself as the one a kid would turn to, huh?” Patty laughed, well used to the team dynamic where it was Gibbs who handled the kids, and Tony who stayed as far away as he could. “Your car is in the lot downstairs. Forgive me, but I called mutual friend of ours at DCPD, and they had it very gently towed here.”

He eyed her with skepticism, “Gently towed?”

“Very gently. Not a scratch or dent on it, I swear.” She assured him, laughing at his fussy nature where cars were concerned. “Come on now, foster-Daddy DiNozzo, let’s get this car seat in, and you on your way. I daresay, this won’t be a weekend you ever forget.”

Tony frowned, suspecting she was alluding to all sorts of childcare horrors that she had seen. He and Christopher would have to have a few words about living chez DiNozzo. Things like, the Little Debbie’s were his, and if asked nicely he might share. The oreo cookies Chris could have -- technically, they belonged to Abby, but she’d forgive the kid.

Mercifully, Patty was an old hand with the car-seats. She had it installed into his vehicle in record time, and explained the process as if Tony would need to know it in future. He looked at her like she was nuts, but she laughed at him. Deftly, between the two of them, they moved Christopher from his
arms and into the seat, and Patty gently fastened up the restraints. From somewhere in the depths of her voluminous purse, a baby blanket was found, and tucked around the sleeping child.

“All set.” She decided. “I’ll call Sunday night when I get back, and see how everything is. Do you want me to pick him up then, or Monday morning?”

“Monday will be fine. I’ll let the Boss know I might be a few minutes late.” He decided. A tired, jet-lagged woman would not want to deal with a cranky kid. He figured Monday was soon enough to pass the gauntlet. “Have a wonderful Thanksgiving, Patty.”

Patty smiled, like the sun coming up, and bathed in face in happy creases. “Oh, you too, Tony!” She gave him an impromptu hug. “I really can’t thank you enough… I wish I had the resources to place Christopher long-term somewhere, until we can find out his background and situation, but…”

“It’s Thanksgiving, and your short-handed and short resources. I know.” Tony smiled. “It’s fine. Go.”

One last squeeze, and Patty left, casting one last glance at Christopher who slept peacefully. Tony checked his backpack was in the front seat, where Patty had initially tossed it, and that his wallet hit the console, he’d need it to pay the parking fees.

The Walmart Supercenter wasn’t completely out of his route, and mercifully, was ten minutes away for the Howard University Hospital. Tony turned to go south on Georgia Avenue NW, and mindful of sleeping child, and the traffic, kept to a sedate speed. Total trip took twelve minutes when he pulled into the parking lot, and right up to the front of the store doors. Stepping from the car, he looked in askance at the sleeping child. He didn’t feel right leaving the kid there, but he also didn’t want to disturb the little guy.

“Special Agent DiNozzo?”

Tony jumped a country mile, and then mentally kicked himself for his situational awareness being so poor. The man that hadn’t really snuck up behind him, snorted a laugh. He had a large loaded cart in his hands, and the wheels made an awful screech. How had he missed that?

“Sorry.” The chap said with a smile. “I imagine you’re quite tired and more than a bit absorbed in that kid. I’m Miles Davies, general manager.”

It took nothing to don the social genial mask he wore day to day, at this point in his life, it was nearly instinctive. “Tony DiNozzo… I really can’t thank you enough for staying so late.”

Miles waived the gratitude off. “Oh, think nothing of it. Seriously, this is the kind of stuff we do here, all the time, for CAS. And none of us mind helping out these children in our own small ways.” He moved the cart towards the trunk of the car. “Ms. Smythe said you were covering the costs out of pocket, so I gave you a 10% overall discount, if that’s okay.”

Tony grinned. “That’s great.” He opened the trunk to his car, and began moving the bags in, making mental note of what was in what bag.

“Great… now, we had a set of plush for Winnie the Pooh, it included Eeyore and Tigger.” Miles was explaining, “And it came with a DVD, it was ten dollars more, but I thought…”

“No, no… you thought right. That’s totally awesome.” Tony grinned, sensing the man was hesitant about some of the purchases. Well, if he selected the more expensive things, so be it. It was done over the phone, and in general terms. Buyer beware and all, Tony wasn’t expecting the bill to be cheap, and he honestly wasn’t worried about it.
It was a tight fit, the trunk not being terribly large, but the entire order that had filled the cart was accommodated in the end. Absently, Tony wondered how he’d get it upstairs, but figured he could put the sleeping child in his bed short term, with pillows as bolsters, and run down for the rest.

Tony signed off on the invoice, and wished the man a Happy Thanksgiving before watching him go safely back into the store. A quick glance at his watch, and Tony sighed. It was nearly midnight.

Traffic was practically dead now, mercifully so, and he managed to get back to his apartment in thirty minutes. He extricated Christopher from the car-seat, carefully carrying the child up five flights of stairs, and then into his apartment.

Freely admitting he was a pathetic example of a man, still using a twin bed, Tony chided himself in silence. Despite its small size, the bed dwarfed Chris, so he tucked him in under the covers after stripping off the sweatpants, socks and sweatshirt, leaving him dressed in the t-shirt and underwear. The duvet covering him was winter-weight, and leaving the child in too many clothes would have been stifling. Tony then set about using copious pile of pillows as bolsters. Once certain the kid couldn’t roll out of the bed (but setting the spare pillows from the closet on the floor just in case), Tony made three quick trips down and up with the purchases.

Sitting on the floor in his living room, he sorted it all out, removed tags from clothes, and set about doing a quick load of laundry. The stuffed toys were sealed in a box, and while he gave great thought to washing them first, he decided to wash the Eeyore and Tigger, but let Chris have Winnie straight away. If the kid wheezed from the stuffed animal, he’d wash it later The coat was carefully examined, as were boots and shoes. Gratefully, Tony found socks -- something he hadn’t had on his list -- included in the order.

All in all, it took twenty minutes to sort, five minutes to throw the clothes into the wash, and then another ten to reheat a quick small meal for himself, even if it was well after midnight. By 1 am, clothes were in dryer, and Tony finally sought refuge and a few hours of sleep in his reclining chair, mind worrying over what the next few days might bring, and how to make a scared child happy.
Much Ado about Pooh!

Thanksgiving - Thursday November 27, 2008

"Pooh!" Christopher jumped up and down with excitement, eyes wide and alight with delight to spot his favorite bear in the whole wide world dancing in front of his eyes.

Tony laughed, and jiggled the stuff bear some more, a wordless encouragement for Christopher to reach out and nab it. The kid was awfully hesitant, and that told Tony too much about his background. “Come on, squirt… Pooh wants you to play with him.” He encouraged.

It’d been a good morning. By virtue of the sun streaming through his eastern windows, Tony had woken up before Christopher. The kid surfaced not long afterwards, albeit Tony had to coax him out of the bedroom. They’d done morning ablutions, to which Tony felt immense relief -- Christopher handled the toilet like a pro, needing only a little help to get up reaching the right height, and then getting re-dressed.

The concept of breakfast, however, was clearly very new to the little boy; he was terribly hesitant to touch the food that was freely given. It was a meal that typically took Tony less than ten minutes to eat. Goading Christopher to try the food stretched breakfast out to a full forty-five minutes. It was heartbreaking to watch the little boy be so fearful, to not recognize common breakfast foods like a bowl of porridge, laden with mashed strawberries and bananas. But, each new flavor was carefully tried, considered, and retested, and the child gradually became enthused with putting these new foods in his mouth. Even so, Christopher’s little stomach was woefully under-trained, so he struggled to finish his bowl.

After that, Tony had helped Christopher with a very careful bubble bath, his broken arm skillfully wrapped up in plastic, and taped to keep water off of it. There was something to be said for practical life-experiences. With the number of broken bones, or gunshot wounds Tony had endured in his career, Tony was an expert at waterproofing casts. And even better -- wrapping his own cast -- which could be challenging, wrapping someone else’s was a breeze.

The bath itself had taken another hour to accomplish -- and not all of that time was fun. Christopher had screamed and fussed horribly at first, utterly terrified of the bath, and expecting cold water. Tony had persevered, using a washcloth to prove the water was warm, and ensuring copious bubbles formed in the tub. Plus, the small army of bath toys he liberally dumped into the foamy cloud. Curiosity eventually led Christopher into the water, puzzled by the bubbles, and confused as sin about TOYS in the bath. And Chris soon changed his tune about bath time.

Once the epic battle of the bubbles was done, and Christopher’s clean wet hair was sculpted into a Mohawk, Tony helped the boy dress in new clothes, being especially careful with the casted arm. The kid’s excitement at having new warm clothes was an absolute vicious kick in Tony’s gut.

Now, the pair were standing, or bouncing, depending on the individual in question, in Tony’s living room, and faced with not only Pooh bear but a movie about Pooh, the child (the individual bouncing, for the record) was beyond verbiage with delight.

With trepidation, as if expecting someone to take it away, Christopher reached out for Pooh. Tony let it go once the child had it firmly in his grasp, smiling as Chris hugged it tight, smushing his face into the soft plush. “Pooh!” He whispered into the bear. “My own Pooh!” Little arms tightened as much as they could with a cast impeding him.
“Yup.” Tony agreed, lips twisted in a bittersweet smile. This kid was just ace at ripping his heart out. “And now, you and your own Pooh, are gonna watch Christopher Robin and his Winnie the Pooh.” Lifting Christopher up, he placed him on the big squishy leather couch, tucked a cushion under the casted arm, and then grabbing the remote, Tony started the DVD he’d preloaded into his system the night before.

And just like that, Christopher was gone. Big eyes, open mouth, zoned out completely on the screen, with his Pooh bear squeezed tightly against his chest. Tony had a terrible feeling that this might be the first cartoon the little boy had ever seen. He made a mental note to increase the kid’s repertoire of animated movies.

Tony returned to the kitchen and poured a plastic tumbler full of chocolate almond milk, and then himself a mug of coffee. Carrying both through, he set the glass for Christopher on the coffee table, sat down on the couch beside the rug-rat, and sipped his coffee as he watched Christopher while the child watched Winnie the Pooh.

The DVD, he was pleased to note, had two stories back to back, and lasted for a total of forty minutes. In breathtaking silence, it was watched the first time. The second, Christopher was a more lively viewer, though Tony had left him to watch alone for some of the time, disappearing into the bedroom to strip the bed (and was he ever happy to see no bed-wetting happened), before hitting the head and cleaning up the mess from bath time.

On the third play through, to which Christopher was haphazardly singing along, Tony got the ball rolling for the rest of the weekend ahead. He moved to the kitchen doorway, from where he could monitor Christopher easily on the couch, and picked up his cellphone.

“Tonio! What’s shaking? You still on for dinner and the game this afternoon?” Steve’s happy greeting was plenty warning that his frat-brother had already started drinking.

“How many beers have you had, Steve?”

“One.” Steve said, making a chug sound. “Just finished.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Right. Listen, I can’t make it today. Something came up, and it’s more important. But, that’s not why I called -- do you still have that queen mattress you wanted to get rid of?”

“Hell yeah.” Steve replied. “But what do you mean you can’t come? Come on man, you swore you were off duty this year.”

“I am.” Tony smiled at the whinge. “But, and I blame Mark, while I was coaching at the YMCA last night, we found an abandoned child, somewhere between three and four years old. Poor kid had a broken arm, fractured ribs, and had been someone’s kicking bag for some time. Hospital wouldn’t keep him, it’s the holiday so CPS was a little bit tapped out last minute. Long and short, he’s with me for the weekend.”

Silence chirped down the line. In the background, he could hear Steve’s significant other instructing the bird going into her oven to ‘cook nicely!’.

“Steve?”

“I only had one beer, I swear to God, DiNo.” His frat brother said suddenly. “I’m sure it was a normal brew… nothing fancy about it… Syd…” He called out to his wife, “I only had one beer, right? Just one?”
In the distance, Tony heard Sydney’s shout back. “Steve. Don’t start. You’re showing signs of brain damage. Yes, you idiot, you only had a single beer. I’m going to cut you off if this is the shit you’re going to ask.”


“There was an abandoned child outside the YMCA, last night. I called CAS. We went to the hospital, kid was x-rayed, casted, and discharged. But he doesn’t have a home, CPS was tapped out because of the holiday, so he’s with me until Monday.”

Silence again. For a long hanging moment, broken finally with a, “Holy Fuck. The world is coming to an end.”

This wasn’t the first time Tony wondered if joining a frat was really such a good idea. He’d had the thought numerous times over the past fifteen years. Usually the pros outweighed the cons, but right now… he was in a very con-position state of mind.

“Steven.” He lowered his voice the ‘Federal Agent, stop or I’ll shoot’ gravity. “I have a three year old watching the third round of Winnie the Pooh, we have fifteen minutes, tops, for you to focus your hypothetical intelligence and get with the program. Listen carefully: I want to buy the queen mattress set off of you. How much, and is Manny coming today, and does he have the truck?”

Steve blew out a breath. “Dude, you’ve got to understand -- you, Anthony D. DiNozzo, patron sex god of bachelors everywhere on this primitive planet, have just told me that there is a kid - not the ball, but the chain of bachelors - living in your apartment with you for the next four days. And that CPS is okay with that. Seriously, dude, this is like… the apocalypse I think. Honest to God, the only thing more traumatic to me would be Sydney telling me she was pregnant.”

There was a muffled smack, and a unmanly yelp before the sound of a phone hitting ground. Suddenly, Tony found himself speaking to Sydney herself. Steve’s girlfriend/common law wife was far easier to deal with. Usually.

“Tony, I understand that you’re not coming today. And, if I’ve overheard my untrained idiot here, it’s because you’re looking after a child?” Sydney asked calmly. She, like Steve, was a lawyer. Though while Steve worked in corporate law for a private practice, Sydney worked in the Virginia State Attorney's office. The high pressure arena she operated in had created a calm, self-controlled woman out of her. And as always, in any crisis, she was a pleasure to work with.

“Do I really have to explain this again?” Tony huffed. “Yes. A three year old with a broken arm, found abandoned outside the YMCA. CPS had no where to put him, hospital wouldn’t keep him, so, I offered. Look Syd, I called to see if Steve still had the mattress he wanted to get rid of. That’s all.”

“He does. It’s yours. Steve and Manny will drop it off right after lunch, I’ll confiscate their drinks immediately. And lunch is on the table to be eaten NOW…” She shouted the last few words to the dolts in her home. “Do you need toys, books, or videos for the kid? My sister has scads.” She offered, her tone completely changed to calm sweetness.

“How much for the mattress?”

“Nada, Tony. I want it out of my home. I need that bedroom converted to an office, because between Steve and I, we bring home so many files and drop them all over the livingroom and dining room that sometimes we can’t even sit down. And the guys will drop the mattress, boxspring and rails off
gratis, too. Because right now I want THEM out of my home, just as much. Toys, Books, Movies, Tony. Your turn to focus.”

Tony peered around the half wall in the kitchen, Christopher was mesmerized by the screen, the bear in his arms cuddled close. “I think we’re okay.” He said. “I hit the Walmart last night and loaded up with stuff. I’m going to feed him shortly, then see if he’ll take a nap. Tonight, I’ll get him outside for a walk, maybe do the monuments at night, and tomorrow I think I’ll take him to do the Smithsonian. I’d do the zoo, but I don’t think the weather is warm enough for a full day outside.” Getting Christopher outside and moving was good for them both. Kept inside his apartment too long, and Tony would go stir crazy. He couldn’t see a little boy being any different.

Sydney hummed. “The Discovery Theatre at the Smithsonian would be good for him,” she agreed. “He won’t understand the monuments, but he might like the visuals and lighting. Alright. Expect the boys in an hour or so. If you need them to move anything, make sure you know what you want going where.”

Just like that, Sydney was done and the phone disconnected. Sometimes, Tony wondered if Syd was distantly related to Gibbs.

Speaking of the devil, he quickly sent a text to his boss, explaining he’d be late on the Monday, and that he had to meet with Patty Smythe before he could come in.

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Laughter pealed through the DiNozzo apartment, childish sweet bales of laughter. Through the door, you could hear squealing, and running feet, and then a sudden mocking rawr, and more laughter.

For Steve Adler, it was the strangest most surreal experience of his life. He’d known DiNo since their Freshman year at Ohio State. Kids and DiNo were like oil and water. It just didn’t mix. They avoided DiNo, and truthfully, DiNo had always looked at them in askance.

Standing outside of DiNo’s door, and hearing those…. strange family-like sounds was a Twilight Zone worthy experience. “Knock already.” Manny was grumbling some eight feet away, holding the mattress upright in the poorly lit hallway.

“There really is a kid in there.” Steve muttered wide-eyed.

Manny blinked. “Right.” He said, dropping his end of the mattress to fiddle with his coat. “Hold up a minute, let me get my cellphone out and ready.” He fumbled, fussed with buttons, and then nodded. “Knock, and get out of the way as soon as you can so I can take the picture. If it’s good, I’ll get some video.”

Steve grinned suddenly, wildly. Oh yes, this belonged on the Alumni site. It would be the highlight of the holiday weekend amongst their fraternity, creeping out many of their brethren. Saul would likely send an email out with the pictures attached preaching on the apocalypse and offering life-insurance packages. Gleefully cheered by anticipating the ruckus, Steve banged on the door.

DiNo jerked the door wide open in a sudden lurch, and Steve jumped back. He must have been sitting on the door -- but all snide comments were washed away by the picture his frat-brother presented. Oh, and what a sight he was. Standing with one arm wrapped around the waist of a kid, who was suspended upside down, head at Tony’s knees, laughing riotously. Little legs were lightly kicking at DiNo’s torso, and Steve could see the reason for the laughter -- DiNo was tickling the kids bare feet.
Now, despite the prior knowledge that a) there was a kid in there, and b) there was clearly a lot of fun being had by the kid, the entire scene was too much, and Steve’s jaw hit the ground. “Holy Shit.” He blurted unconsciously.

Tony’s eyes flashed ominous warning, “Language!” He barked, flipping the kid around until he was upright on Tony’s hip. “Listen to me, Christopher. This is a friend of mine, his name is Steven. Anything that Steven says and that you hear is NOT to be repeated, ever.” He told the child. “Steven has a bad habit of using bad words.”

Steve huffed, eyes rolling. “Right.” A nudge of the mattress he was holding pulled him from saying anything else.

“Move it, guys. I’m double-parked.” Manny whinged from behind.

Dutifully, Tony stepped aside. “Christopher.” He continued as the mattress entered the apartment. “That’s Manny. He’s a friend too. Guys, put it in my room. I’ve cleared out the office, and if you don’t mind helping, I’d like to move my old twin bed into that room. I’ve bought rails for it. Chris will sleep there, and the queen can become my new bed. It’s time I grew up and got a big-boy bed, anyway.”

Manny gaped at his friend, Steve went totally non-verbal. “Holy Fucking Batshit -- are you serious? What has this kid done to you?”

The slap upside his head, as he walked by, made the kid laugh, but Tony’s scowl spoke volumes. “Christopher -- we don’t repeat any words Manny says either. Those are very bad words.”

Defiant in the face of Tony’s disapproval, and innured to Tony’s glare from four years playing on the same football team, Manny grinned shamelessly, raised his cellphone-camera and snapped a picture. “Cheers!”

Tony sighed. Setting Chris on the floor, he pointed towards the couch and TV. “I need to talk to these guys for a moment, buddy. Can you go get Pooh, and show him how to play with the blocks?” He asked.

Chris shyly had a thumb in his mouth, peering at Manny and Steve with great uncertainty. “Nope. We don’t do that.” Tony gently plied the finger free. “You’ll ruin your teeth.” Behind him, Steve choked. “Go get Pooh, help him building something, okay? Just for a few minutes.”

Slowly, Christopher nodded, and keeping a wary eye on the two strangers, backed away before suddenly spinning on heel and running toward Pooh, who had fallen off the couch and was half under the sofa table. Tony kept a weather eye on the kid, before addressing his frat-brothers. “Seriously, idiots. Watch the language around him. I don’t need CPS shooting me for teaching him bad words.” He glared.

“Pax.” Steve raised his hands. “We’re just… surprised, and it’s tripping out of us, DiNo. I mean, think about it, DiNo -- what if you came over to my place and found me all zen with a kid running around?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “One, kids do run around your place. I’ve met Sydney’s nieces and nephew. Two, when they do, you’re running around with them leaving poor Sydney to deal with three misbehaving kids. No go, buddy. Now, move that mattress into the master.”

The two hefted up the mattress, and followed Tony to his bedroom. They dropped the mattress against the closet wall, and lifted up the pieces of the twin bed. Separating mattress and boxspring, each man carrying one item, and Tony carrying the bed-frame itself, they made their way to the newly vacated office. It hadn’t been hard to clear the space out. There had been a light computer desk, his laptop, and a small printer. His internet connection, thanks to McGoogle was a wifi configuration, set up around his stereo system. In the myriad of wires and connectors there, it blended in seamlessly.

The desk was now located in a ‘dead end’ corner of the hall. It should have been an open passageway through to the living room from the bedrooms, giving access to the bedrooms from both the kitchen, and from the living-room/balcony area, but a previous owner of the unit had sealed it off to form a dead-end. After his morning calls, and before the third playing of Winnie the Pooh ended, Tony had dragged the desk to it’s new home, before crawling underneath it to reconnecting his laptop and printer.

A quick sweep of the floor in the newly emptied room, a check for cobwebs, and it was good enough for a kid to use short-term, though, it needed a bedside table and lamp to make it usable as guestroom long-term.

Tony centered the bed under the window, and watched fussily as Steve dropped the box-spring, and Manny the mattress. The men disappeared back downstairs to get the box-spring for the queen bed, leaving Tony to quickly remake the bed, and find a night-light he could set up in the room.

A quick check on Christopher found the kid trying to share his milk with Pooh. Tony snorted quietly, and let the kid be. In moments, Steve was tumbling through the door, a metal bed-frame collapsed and tucked under one arm, the other busy carrying the edge of the box-spring. “Stay with the kid,” Steve said. “I’ll set the bed up, you can make it later -- you do have bedding for a queen, right?”

Tony nodded. He’d always intended to get a larger bed, but had never bothered. The hours he worked, and his preference to never bring a date to his own home… well, he’d just not gotten around to it. That didn’t mean he didn’t have the sheets and a duvet for it. One of his father’s secretaries had set him a lovely egyptian cotton Bed-in-a-Bag for Christmas one year. He just had to find where he’d stashed the damn thing.

Again, Steve and Manny vanished, and Tony made his way over to Christopher. “What are we building?” He asked, dropping down to sit on the ottoman beside the spread out pile of duplo. It had come in a massive little plastic dufflebag, and the pieces looked like mutant lego; they were huge. Tony freely admitted his exposure to toy aisles was limited, but he’d never seen stuff quite like this before.. The small brochure inside the package -- well -- It had sparked his curiosity. Tomorrow, he felt they needed to take an emergency field trip to Toys R Us to investigate. These were not the toys he had as a kid. His toys were more like ponies. Actually, his toys were ponies. And his toys were never allowed in the house..

“A boat!” Christopher told him, wide-eyed. He was awkwardly attaching pieces, using his right hand to stabilize things, his left to make connections, since his left had greater freedom of movement. As any kid would do, he had adapted very quickly to having his dominant hand less functional.

“Hmm.” Shades of Gibbs, it seemed. Tony slunk down on the floor, and began helping. “I think that blue piece needs to go there.” He said, pointing to a piece that was clearly wrong.

“Nuh huh.” Chris told him, pointing to a red-piece. “That one.”

“This one?” He lifted it up, turned it around and pretended to examine it closely.
“Yeah!” Chris bounced on his bottom. Pooh, sitting in his lap, bounced too. It reminded Tony that Tigger and Eeyore were waiting in the dryer.

Following instructions as given by a 3 year old, they assembled several more pieces on what was inevitably going to be a very lopsided boat, before Steve and Manny reappeared.

“I moved my truck to visitors. Is that a problem?” Manny asked anxiously. His pampered, often waxed and buffed Ford F1 was his pride and joy, and he treated it like it was some sort of precious jewel. Manny lived in Ohio, and only came into DC a few times a year, usually for Thanksgiving, and again at Memorial Day. The truck, they all understood, wasn’t to get those miles too often.

Tony grinned. “It’ll be towed for sure. Hooked up and paint scuffed off the bumper.” He teased. “Yes, it’s fine. You’re not staying long anyway, don’t you have a party chez Steve’s to attend?”

“Meh.” Steve plopped down on the couch, eyes fixed on Christopher who was studiously ignoring the strangers, and focused on his rather un-water-worthy boat. “Syd can handle it.”

Tony’s nose twitched. Those words “Syd can handle it” got Steve into worlds of trouble, more often than not. Sure, Sydney could handle anything that came her way -- Steve’s idiocy being a good example -- that didn't mean she liked it. “You really want to sleep in a tent on your balcony this late in the year?” He asked, moving the platform the boat was being built on so that Chris didn’t have to move from where he was sitting.

“Hmm?” Steve asked. His head was cocked to the side, eyes alight. And Tony knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the highlights of what Steve and Manny had seen chez DiNozzo would be retold a thousand times tonight.

“Steven… your not-wife is hosting your Thanksgiving party with all your friends and some of your firm partners attending and you’re not there. You will be kicked out of your nice warm bed, just like last time.” Tony warned him.

“She’ll forgive me.” He said. And blinked as if a brilliant idea had struck. “You should come. Bring Christopher. It’ll be fun.”

“He’ll be bored to tears, surrounded by too many people for him to cope with, given his circumstances. And dietarily, Thanksgiving dinner is too rich for him to handle, I suspect. So, no. I’m keeping things quiet for Christopher.” Tony vetoed.

Manny was suspiciously quiet, hovering by the standing lamp. The cellphone he was mucking with didn’t fool Tony any. Sighing silently, and knowing it would fuel Steve’s amusement… he reached out and plucked Chris off the ground, plopping the child in his lap, and out of the direct line of sight of Manny’s camera, his body and face hidden by the cover of Tony’s larger body. “Stop filming him.” He ordered.

“But…”

“No.” Tony’s voice was firm. “Look, I can’t talk right now, but there’s a criminal investigation going on, and we need to keep things quiet.” Well, he couldn’t say much, because while there would be an investigation triggered by CPS, and the abuse made it a criminal investigation, it hadn’t started just yet. Besides, he wouldn’t be part of it, other than a statement on finding Christopher, and other observations, so his comments could only be vague at best. But if it stopped them from posting film or pictures, it was a fabulous excuse.

Both Manny and Steve looked crestfallen. “Oh.” Manny slumped. “So, no OSU…”
“Absolutely not.” Tony barked. Chris stiffened in his lap, and he softened his tone immediately. “Get your kicks out of what you want guys, where I’m concerned, but not on this child.” He waited until he saw acceptance. “Okay, you saw Christopher, you’ve seen me. The apartment hasn’t burned down, and Christopher isn’t screaming for help. You have a party starting in twenty minutes, Steve-O. And I like Sydney enough to kick you out of my apartment.”

Eyerolls followed, and complaints about non-gratitude for their efforts, but the two dutifully left shortly thereafter.

Tony sighed in relief, hefting Chris up under his arm like a parcel, but being mindful to keep weight and pressure off the kid’s ribs. “And you,” He decreed, “Must explore your new room!” Christopher was laughing, which was good. They made their way down past his bedroom to his former office, stopping at the bi-fold doors that hid the washer and dryer. He set Chris on the ground, and using a pillowcase that was folded on the prep table beside the stacked machines, he stuffed Tigger and Eeyore in. Then, scooping up Chris again they made their way to the room.

It was small space, only 8’ x 10’, but the twin bed fit well in here, and Tony was pleased to see that while Steve had set up the metal bed-frame for the Queen, Manny had deftly installed the railings for the twin bed. He dropped Chris on the bed with a little plop, and then tossed the stuffed pillow case on his lap. “Look inside. I think you’ve got some new friends to sleep with tonight.”

He fumbled a little, but the squeal of delight was pure joy. “TIGGER!” He crowed. “EEYORE!” The unfortunate stuffed critters were being squeezed within an inch of the stuffing. “Tank you! Tank you!” Chris chanted, dropping the toys and throwing himself at Tony wrapping arms around a leg and squeezing some more.

Tony laughed, “Silly boy! You’re welcome.” He sat down on the end of the bed, Christopher beside him. “Now, Pooh, Eeyore and Tigger are yours, no matter where you go, what you do, these are yours. Do you understand?”

Christopher nodded, tugging Tigger close for a cuddle.

“So, when Patty picks you up on Monday, Pooh, Eeyore and Tigger go with you. So does all the new clothes, and any other toys we have here, okay? It’s all yours.”

Christopher sombered. “I no stay hewe?” He asked sadly.

“Sorry, buddy. That’s not the way things work. If you had a good Mommy or Daddy, you’d go to them. But, someone hurt you, and while it would help if you could tell us who, we have to believe your Mommy or Daddy is missing. So the good people who look out for little boys and girls are going to be responsible for your care. And they’ll find you a foster home, with a foster mommy and a foster daddy, and maybe other kids to play with.”

“Oh.” The kid slumped.

“That doesn’t mean you won’t see me again.” Tony tried cheering him up. “I’m sure Patty will let me visit.”

The thumb found his way to his mouth. “Nuh huh.” Tony pulled it out. Honestly, he needed to write Maria and Pablo a letter of apology for all the times they had to stop him from ruining his teeth. “Teeth!”

The tragic sigh was worthy of any stage production, and Chris curled into his chest, apparently quite sad by the news this wasn’t his forever-home. For Tony, it sucked to be the bearer of such bad news,
but as a kid, all he had wanted was someone to shoot straight with him. He wouldn’t be the hypocrite now and deny another kid the truth.

Some few minutes later found Eeyore, Tigger and Chris joined Pooh on the couch with Tony and Christopher, all set to watch Toy Story. It wasn’t the football Tony planned on watching, but Christopher soon forgot the bad news, caught up in the wonder of the adventure.

And so the day rolled. After the first Toy Story, they started the second, but by a little after 1700 hours, Christopher wilted, and Tony tucked him to bed for an hour nap. It was of course, at this time, that his phone started ringing off the hook.

Patty was the first, checking in on the two, and relieved beyond all measure that everything was okay. The fact was, her checking up on them didn’t dishearten Tony, Patty was the kind of caseworker that checked up on all her foster parents and kids, regardless of how new or experienced they were. It’s what made him most comfortable to work with the older woman. She took her job seriously, and her diligence and attention to the children under her care made her a success.

The second call was Sydney, preemptively apologizing for anything Steve and Manny may have done, and inviting Tony and Christopher for dinner the following night. She swore to keep Steve on his best behavior, but that Tony well knew was beyond anyone’s ability to control. “We’ll see.” Tony offered. “Let’s see how we do tonight.”

The last call was Gibbs.

“Whataya mean you’re going to be late? What’s CPS got to do with it? You don’t work for CPS, DiNozzo. Or do you need a reminder?” His Boss barked in lieu of greeting. His boss was in a foul temper for some reason.

This couldn’t, and wouldn’t, he knew, end well. “Ahh, well, I was at the Y shooting hoops on Wednesday night. As I was leaving, I found a small child abandoned outside in the cold, with a broken arm. I called Patty.” He replied, omitting the finer details that Gibbs really didn’t need to know.

“Do your statement on your own time, and fax it to her from the office on Monday morning.” Gibbs ordered. This was the kind of shit that made Tony think his Boss, two years after the event, didn’t have his memories back. His lack of empathy for a kid was appalling.

“No can do.” Tony countered. “Because, the kid is staying with me until Monday. They had no where to place him last minute before the holiday, and the hospital wouldn’t keep him for a broken arm. So, he’s here.”

“With you? Jesus Christ... That woman's completely lost her mind! You can’t sit a kid in front of a tv for three days, feeding it pizza and thinking that’s all there is to do. I can’t believe Patty’d do something so irresponsibly dumb.” Gibbs barked. "I’ll call her now and straighten her out before you ruin the kid for life."

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, and forced himself not to get angry. “You know, Boss. It’s this kind of crap that makes me wonder why you keep me on your team.” He said softly. “I’m starting think it’s time for me to leave the team, if you think so little of me.”

Gibbs snorted. “Don’t start that crap, DiNozzo. You know what I’m saying. You’ve got no clue what to do with a kid. You ain’t far from being one yourself half the time. And if you’ve been rolling woman after woman through your place for your own private thanks-giving while the kid is there, I’ll kick your ass!”
“Yeah.” Tony answered, his voice hardening. “Because, after seven years working with you, I’m still a flake. A piece of shit kept around for entertainment value, but not to be considered a responsible member of your team. I just jump in the sack with every woman whose path I cross, and ignore the baby down the hall. You know what, Agent Gibbs? Don’t worry about me being late on Monday. I’ll make an appointment with the Director and get permanently out of your hair.” Disconnecting the call on a mobile was far less satisfying than slamming down a good ol desk phone. But he had to make to. And he promptly put his phone on silent.

Gibbs was, by all accounts, in Stillwater with his Dad. He couldn’t come storming over to beat down his door willy nilly.

He ignored the next dozen incoming calls, knowing it was Gibbs, ready to declare war; instead Tony dialled the Director’s line to the office. He’d leave a nice tidy message asking for an appointment, and beg for a transfer to anywhere but the MCRT.

To his surprise, he got the big man himself.

“Special Agent DiNozzo, I’m surprised to get a call from you on the first Thanksgiving you’ve had off in four years.” Leon drawled.

“I’m equally surprised to be making a call today,” Tony admitted. “Or that you’d pick up. Honestly sir, shouldn’t you be at home eyeing the pies coming out of the oven? Doing the family thing? I was hoping to leave a quick message for you, for after the weekend. But, since I’ve got you on the line now -- I’d like to make an appointment with you for early next week. I want to transfer off the MCRT.”

The sound of a toothpick snapping was audible through the clear line. “Could you repeat that?” Vance’s tone wasn’t relaxed now, his voice was sharp.

Tony pulled the phone away and looked at it in askance. Why was everyone asking him to repeat himself today? He shook his head, and put the receiver back to his ear. “I’d like to transfer off Gibbs team.” Tony said succinctly. “My contributions are not wanted or needed per the junior agents, and my team leader has apparently no trust in me, or respect for me. They’ve all now made it abundantly clear that it’s time for me to leave. If they have no respect or trust for me then how I can I trust them to watch my back in the field?

“I see.” Leon’s desk chair betrayed him, it squeaked as he leaned back. “Has there been an incident in the field? If so, I expect you’ve at least reported it Gibbs. But, if this is about how long it took to transfer back from Agent Afloat...”

“No sir.”

Vance sighed, a tired sound, “Domino, then?”

“No sir. Not at all.” Tony countered. “Though that I consider a symptom to the disease. Look, this has been building for awhile. But, today -- I... Okay. Please keep this confidential, but once a week I volunteer with kids at the YMCA. I’ve been doing that for years.”

“I am somewhat aware. Jared has been begging me to go. One of his classmates, Tyler, is a regular in your team.”

“Right. Well, last night was my night, and after I dismissed the kids, all of whom are pre-teens between nine and twelve years of age, I was alerted that an abandoned child was found outside the building. I contacted Patty Smythe at CAS, and to make a long story short, due the holiday and a
shortage of time, the kid is presently under my care until Monday.” Tony took a breath, pulling his thoughts into order. “I notified my Team lead I would be a few minutes late on Monday, as I transition care from myself to CAS, and Agent Gibbs called me just a few minutes ago. He was insulting, and derogatory. And insisted that I could not be responsible enough to look after myself, much less a kid.”

He could hear Vance groan in the background.

“I don’t need that, Director. I realize you don’t like me, and that’s fine, sir. To each their own. As long as my contributions are respected by team, I could deal with not being liked, hell, McGee and David hate my guts most days -- but that’s okay. I’m okay with that. If my team respected me, that was all I needed. But, they don’t. Not any of them, right down to my team lead, or, no offence sir, even you. And that means it’s time for me to move on before I end up dead.”

Vance sighed. “It’s not that I don’t like you, Agent DiNozzo. Your methods are just not my preferred. Despite my personal opinion, having reviewed your work as Agent Afloat, and gone over MCRT reports, there is no doubt to me that you are an effective investigative agent, and an asset to the agency.”

Tony didn’t snort. He almost did, but he didn’t. He had no doubt it was killing the Director to say anything complimentary about him. And, more than complimentary, that was a completely different song from what the Director typically sang, usually in McGee’s ear.

“I trust you’re not looking to leave NCIS?” The Director continued.

“Not at this time.” And that was truth. He didn’t want to change everything. He knew NCIS. Knew the systems, the players. He knew the protocols, the rules, and liked having oodles of vacation time on the books. Who knew when he would need them? Besides, he couldn’t go to the FBI. Fornell would never drop it.

“Okay. I’m out of office Monday in meetings with SecNav. I can schedule you for 1000 hours, Tuesday.”

“That would be fine, sir” Tony felt some tension drain from his back. Sure, it meant he had to put up with Gibbs on Monday. There would be fireworks, but he could do that. He had done it before.

“Hmm.” Leon’s keyboard was clattering. “Alright, then. 1000 hours.” He paused. “And Agent DiNozzo? I think you’re mis-reading how your team feels about you. But, that’s between you and them, and I can only offer that suggestion.”

The call disconnected, and Tony tossed the phone on the kitchen table, and sank down in a chair. He wished Vance was right. He doubted it.
Monday December 1, 2008

Monday dawned dreary, the sky a dark miserably cold December day, which Tony strongly felt appropriate, all things considered. He had woken early, after an uncomfortable night on what was truly a wretched mattress - no wonder Steve was getting rid of it -- and with his mind racing on what today would bring. He forewent a shower, and instead began to quietly pack up Chris’ new world, wanting to get the chore done before he got too maudlin about it, and definitely before Christopher woke up and got worked up about it. It was kinda sad, though. He’d had a lot of fun with the little guy, and was honestly sorry to see him go.

Locating an old backpack stuffed into the back of his closet, Tony carefully rolled up the new clothes saving one outfit for the day, packed up the Duplo, stuffed in the few toy cars that they’d gotten, his rubber duck, shampoo and bubble-bath, the crayons and colouring books, as well as the handful of movies and books that they had acquired. Tigger and Eeyore went into the new “Cars” kiddy backpack that they had bought at Toys R Us on Saturday, small enough in scope and size for Christopher to carry himself. Pooh, Tony was absolutely certain, would be kept close at hand in Christopher’s arms throughout the day.

After that was done, he quickly washed his face and shaved, before dressing, and carefully selecting his armour. It was well known in the office, if he came in looking like he stepped off the pages of GQ, right down to a new bespoke suit, he was defensive. If he slummed in jeans, he was relaxed. It wasn’t bespoke today, but instead one of his favorite Brioni suits, a dark grey heather wool, a sharp white ribbon-stripe shirt, and a dark grey silk tie. Sharp, elegant, but not new, and would throw his detractors off their speculation. Going in without a suit just simply wasn’t on. There was a feeling of power in looking good, and since he was facing a Gibbs-shaped dragon after ignoring the man’s calls all weekend, Tony needed all the feel-good vibes a good suit gave him. If it had to be done, he’d do it in style.

He studied his reflection in the mirror, scrutinizing it for impact. Somber. Solemn. Grave. Hell, he felt like he was going to his own funeral, truth be told. There wasn’t much to look forward to today, except coming home and getting back to his original plan for last Wednesday night and getting rip-roaringly drunk.

Christopher, when he finally tumbled with tired eyes from his bedroom into the kitchen, Pooh dragging on the ground, was clearly in a glum mood, perhaps not recognizing this was “Monday”, but sensing something was changing. The thumb has found his mouth, the exuberant energy of Saturday and Sunday was absent, instead very sad puppy eyes kept looking up at him. Tony savagely squashed the feeling of guilt, and pushed the munchkin on to breakfast.

At 0730, Patty arrived as promised. "How is everyone?" She asked cheerfully, sashaying into the apartment with great joy de vive. “Oh.” She dimmed immediately, finding a very sad little Christopher hugging Pooh, sitting too quietly on the couch in a picture of complete misery. “Didn’t we have a good weekend?” She asked Tony quietly.

“Yeah, we did, until this morning.” Tony rubbed a hand through his hair, turning organized chaos into complete disaster. “I made sure all his toys and clothes are packed, Pats. If it’s okay with you, let him carry his Pooh bear. Honestly, he’s just a bit unhappy that things are changing, I think. Um. He might need a mid-morning snack, I could only get him to eat half his breakfast.”

Patty gave his arm a soft squeeze of empathy, clucking her tongue. “This part is always hard.” She
admitted.

And in all truth, other than this morning, and that brief moment on Thursday, the rest of their weekend together had been very good. For a man convinced kids hated him, he’d really connected with Christopher. And Christopher, far from that scared little boy huddled against the YMCA, had really come out of his shell for Tony. It seemed, however, this morning was washing away the previous two days.

Christopher had barely touched his scrambled eggs, and only half-heartedly eaten his toast, but given that he had devoured a big (by his small tummy standards) meal while visiting Steve and Sydney on Sunday night, Tony felt he probably wasn’t all that hungry.

Sydney had pulled out all the stops to impress Christopher, and done her darndest to make sure nothing she fed the child would give him an upset tummy. As it was, Sydney had raided her nephews toybox. But, Sunday had been a long day for the little guy. He’d had so much fun at Smithsonian in the morning, partnered with the fun he’d had at Steve’s house that by the time dinner was over, he was nearly asleep in his fruit salad dessert. Christopher had been sound asleep when Tony had carried him out to the car, and didn’t twitch at all when Tony had changed him into PJ’s for bed.

“It’s okay, Champ.” Tony bent down to the little guy, gently running a hand over his head and ruffling hair. “Remember? Today Patty is going to introduce you to an awesome new Foster Mommy and Foster Daddy… you’ll have other kids to play with, it’ll be a lot of fun for you.”

“No.” Christopher whispered, tears welling up. “Boy wanta stay hewe.”

“Oh, Buddy.” Tony swept him up into a hug, and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead. “You can’t, Christopher. I have to work, and you’d have to go to daycare if you lived with me. And that’s not what the nice people at Children’s Protective Services want for you. They want you to have a home environment, where someone is with you all the time until you’re old enough to go to school.”

The sob was more of a deep suck of hair and a heave of the chest. Christopher clearly wasn’t sold on the bright future Tony was painting. Little arms wrapped around Tony’s neck, the cast a heavy solid weight at the back of his neck, and he burrowed into Tony’s shoulder, a second sob following, leading to tears.

Patty, sadly shook her head, she picked up Christopher’s two bags, and with a soft smile, urged Tony to carry the little guy downstairs. “He’s going to be upset, no matter what,” She said softly. “Let’s just get him in the car, and I’ll let him cry it out.” Finding Tony’s keys in the basket by the door, she ushered Tony out into the hall, and carefully locked the apartment behind her.

Tony carefully carried the sobbing child down the stairs, gently rubbing the back that heaved so against him. “It’s okay, Buddy. Trust me.” He whispered. “Everything will be alright. This is a good thing, Chris, honest.”

The shudders never eased up, and in fact, as Tony placed Chris in the car seat, they increased into full on wails. It was a miserable way to say goodbye, the crying little boy, and the lump in Tony’s throat made it hard. Patty knew this, and made it easier by ensuring the moment didn’t linger. “I’ll call you with an update, Tony.” She assured him. “Don’t worry about the other car seat. I’ll fetch it later this week.”

He nodded, watching Patty get in her sedan, and start the engine. Tears pricked at his own eyes as he waved goodbye, but ruthlessly, he willed them away. This was best for Chris, and THAT was what mattered most. What hurt was that they hadn’t been able to say goodbye on a happy note.
Tony took a few minutes to pull himself together, then, patting himself down in the usual check for keys, id, firearm and wallet -- he made for his car, sighing at the sight of the car seat, but forcing himself to ignore it.

Poor kid.

By the time he made it to Navy Yard, and through security, he had pushed Christopher to the back of his mind, and geared his mind for the workday, though his stomach was still in unhappy knots, but his game face ready. He was all of twelve minutes late… and Gibbs could just choke on it.

With no fanfare, he swept into the bullpen, grateful to see Gibbs wasn’t at his desk, though the monitor was on, and his jacket was thrown on the back of his chair. Tony sat down at his desk, ignoring Ziva’s caustic comments about his tardiness, and McGee’s rejoinder suggesting Tony had spent the weekend anywhere but at home.

He marvelled at their venomous statements. After all, his suit wasn’t something you pulled out of a go-bag. And, he hadn’t spoken of any amorous relationships in months. But, the profile he’d built in their eyes four years ago was still strong in their minds. In many ways, he was disappointed. As investigators, what was on the surface was not the truth, and they were training to look below. That didn’t stop with perps. It meant with life.

Fixing their perspective wasn’t going to be his job much longer. Instead, Tony didn’t even glance at them, he focused entirely on his job. The catty comments were background noise of no interest, as he pulled up the requisition forms, checked his inventory report, and ensured they were good for supplies in the truck for the next two weeks. Printing off the inventory, he initialled it and put it into the file he maintained. This was just as much so he could ensure he’d not dropped the ball, and that no theft of supplies happened.

Setting that aside, he opened his spreadsheet on active cases and cold cases, and checking the status on all of them. He’d updated all the case files on Wednesday for active files, and now he needed to ensure the statements and reports Ziva and McGee were to file was up to date on his log. The cold cases, he thought ruefully, could remain cold a little bit longer. As it was, the team would be working on cold-cases until a new call came in, anyway.


“No.” Tony replied calmly, serenely hitting save as he sent Ziva’s back to her, and then made a note under supervisor’s comments on his log. He scrolled up to Tim’s last comment, and reviewed his last statement. Sadly, no improvements had been made, so there was nothing to change. The quarterly evals weren’t due for another month, but if he left the team, it was best to complete them while he remembered the details.

Gibbs stormed up to his desk, bending low and voice dropping ominously. “I can air the dirty laundry right here, just as good as there, DiNozzo.”

Tony’s green eyes glittered dangerously. “Sure. Go for it, Gibbs.” He bit back. “But, you do that, and you open yourself to my rendition of dirty laundry too. You sure you want to go there? Look, I’ve put in for transfer. I’ll be gone, soon. And then all the laundry can just be burned.”

“You don’t get off my team unless I say so.” Gibbs growled.

Tony’s jaw rolled and locked. They hadn’t had a big rip-roaring fight in the bullpen in seven years. Okay. He was raring to go. Gibbs wanted to play that role of bastard that he did so well? Tony
would show him his version.

“Go on then. Say so.” Tony retorted. “This team,” He sneered, his cold green eyes sweeping over a clearly shocked Ziva and Tim, before returning to Gibbs, “Has made it abundantly clear over and over again that I don’t make the grade. And you clearly support that -- so why keep me?”

“Bullshit.” Gibbs snarled.

“Really?” Tony barked a laugh. “That’s your rejoinder? Tim gets lead more than me, now. It isn’t a training exercise, because you aren’t there to correct his mistakes -- and he won’t listen to me when I try to correct him. And you know what? That tells me plenty. It says YOU don’t trust me to do my job, and they don’t respect me to do my job. Any untrained idiot can see that.”

“If McGee ain’t listening to you, that’s on you DiNozzo, not me.” Gibbs sneered.

Tony laughed. “No, Gibbs. That’s on you. That’s on your lack of support of the chain of command. That’s on you for not only saying that they only report to you, but showing it. As far as they are concerned, I’m only SFA in name, and that’s just because I’ve been here the longest. You were a fucking goddam Gunnery Sergeant, Gibbs. Tell me, Marine, if the chain of command is failing, whose fault is it? I’ve only got two years military school under my belt, and I know full well that it only falls because the commander does not respect it.”

Gibbs sucked a breath, fury bleaching colour from his face.

“Funny, isn't it?” Tony continued, the tone one his father would be proud off. Haughty, dismissive, cutting. “Tim grew up at an Admiral’s feet, Ziva served in Israel’s army, and Mossad, and you’re a marine. Me? A lowly cop, and I understand chain of command better than the lot of you.” He rose to his feet, letting his height tower over Gibbs. “And after what you said to me, Saturday, Gibbs. I don’t respect you anymore. So, go ahead. Kick me off your team.”

Gibbs was breathing hard, nose flaring with each breath. He stared at Tony for a long moment, turning sharply and marching to the elevator. He disappeared behind the doors without another.

“One, nuthing, DiNozzo.” Tony thought silently, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Opening them, he gave a glare to Ziva, who was rising to her feet, and McGee who seemed shell-shocked. “Your comments and commentary are neither warranted or wanted. Cold cases. Now.” He grabbed a stack of cold-case files off the top of the filing cabinet beside his desk, and divided them in two, thumping them down on each of the junior agent and officer’s desks.

A third stack was already on his. Cases he’d intended to work on that weekend, had Christopher not stepped into his life.

The thought of the little boy made his shoulder’s slump a fraction, and his internal misery well up. Remembering that small face crumpled in distress and sobbing, hands reaching for him. Poor kid.

He took his seat, pulled a file towards him, and pushed the thoughts of Christopher to the back of his mind. He couldn’t call Patty for an update now. It was too soon. He’d wait until this evening -- no, tomorrow. Maybe wait and see how Christopher made it through his first night at his foster home. Or, should he wait until midweek? Give him a few days to settle down?

He was unhappy thinking about it. He’d call Patty tomorrow. She could tell him everything he needed to know without upsetting Chris.

Deliberately, he turned the file folder open, and focused on a case of armament that had vanished off the USS Bainbridge.
Surprisingly, Gibbs was gone for two hours. When the Senior Agent finally surfaced, slinking back into the bullpen, the breath of all those individuals working on the floor came to a stillness -- and they watched the older man quietly take his desk without a glance at DiNozzo.

It set the gossip mill raging.

All in all, the quiet of the MCRT was frightening. It made McGee nervous, he was practically twitching at his desk. Ziva was moving glacially slow through her stack of cold cases, preferring to frequently scan her teammates, Tony and Gibbs in particular, much like a nervous animal sensing that it was surrounded by apex predators.

By noon, the tension was so high, Ziva and McGee literally cut and ran out the building to get lunch. Tony stayed focussed on his work, at the time the clock struck noon, he was arranging for a call in MTAC with the Chief Warrant Officer whose inventory report highlighted the missing shipment.

Gibbs stood up, and moved to the space between their desks, hovering for a moment. His shoulders slumped and he moved away, ostentatiously to get his own lunch.

Tony’s stomach was still so upset from the morning, both the scenes with Christopher and Gibbs respectively, he had no interest in eating. Instead, he made his crib notes in the margin of the case file, maintained his follow-up calls, requested some evidence boxes be pulled from storage -- he just did his job, almost mechanically.

At 1400, he escaped the silence for the MTAC. And he was fortunate enough, with enough notes and questions, that he was there until well after 1600. When he finally returned to the bullpen, Gibbs computer was shut down, and the man was gone.

As confrontations went, it was the most unusual. Their blowouts in the past had lasted full days -- shouting going from start of shift well until the next shift’s end. Hell -- there were times they’d even stormed into one another’s homes and carried out the fight.

“McGee is with Abby.” Ziva said, her voice subdued.

Tony nodded his understanding as he returned to his desk. The box from evidence had manifested and was sitting on the floor beside his in-box. His pen knife was pulled from pocket, and he quickly cut the security seal, before initialling on the evidence control tag to show he had opened the box. Setting the box on his desk, he rifled through his drawer for a set of gloves. Then, comparing the evidence log to the contents, went through everything piece by piece.

“You… believe we do not respect you.” Ziva said out of the blue.

Tony spared her a brief glance. “Yep.” He gave her a half-hearted response, because really, he was more interested in the fact the video surveillance tape wasn’t IN THE DAMN BOX! Tony growled under his breath, going through the control list again for who signed off on the contents.

“You are wrong.” She said firmly, rising from her desk to stand beside his, out of arm's reach, but close enough that she could speak quietly and not be overheard. “We do respect your skills and knowledge.” She insisted. “We do not like… your behavior.”

“I am who I am.” Tony retorted. “And your lack of respect is abundantly clear in the way you REFUSE TO DO AS TOLD. You question my orders, Ziva. Endlessly. Always. And you goad and push until Gibbs steps in and gives different orders which you then do obey instantly. How is that NOT a demonstration of a complete lack of respect?”
She took a step back when he looked at her, and he completely understood why. There was a reason he kept the goofy mask up. A good reason why he didn’t let the real Anthony D. DiNozzo show through. The real Anthony had grown up hard; it wasn’t easy moving from boarding school to boarding school, always being low man on the totem pole. He’d spent six years being continually and brutally hazed. You didn’t get tossed into the crucible, survive the fire, and not come out stronger for the experience.

A marine recruiter had taken one look at Tony, seen Tony’s academic file, and gently told his younger self not to enlist. “Son, those eyes of yours have seen battle enough. You need to take some time to find out why life’s worth fighting for.” He’d said.

His eyes, when not hidden by the mask of laughter and frat-boy nonsense, scared the shit out of anyone. They were hard emeralds, filled with shadows so dark, set in classic features that could be so remote and cold. He had, one perp had said, the look of a killer.

“I…”

“Don’t bother Ziva. Actions really do speak louder than words, that’s not just an expression but a truism. But, you two jokers even found the words to convey the clear opinion your actions made.” He carefully repacked the box, ensuring nothing else was missing. “And, you’ve won. I’m putting in for transfer tomorrow. I’ve an appointment with the director, and he already knows what it is for. McGee will probably be promoted to Senior Field Agent for the team, even if his performance, education and experience don’t match the requirements. Hope you have his back the way you didn’t have mine.”

She sucked a breath in, clearly not expecting that outcome. “You are truly leaving?”

“That’s the plan.” Tony slammed the lid on the box, set it on the floor and took his desk. He opened up a report form, designed for these situations. The tape, even if found now, might be inadmissible as evidence, having been out of chain of custody.

“I…”

“You have work to do, Officer David. Please go do it.” He looked up at her, pinning her with his gaze. “I said it earlier, your commentary is neither wanted or required. Seriously. Get to work.”

Her cheeks flushed, and lips pressed in a thin line. But even she, assassin extraordinaire from MOSSAD, knew when she’d pushed the envelope too far. She turned, and stiffly marched back to her desk.

Not for a moment did Tony think this discussion was over.

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‘How can everything change in just four days?’ Tony wondered, pulling into his apartment parking spot, and feeling something was missing. He knew what it was. Christopher wasn’t happily chatting with his bear from the back-seat, He wasn’t getting out of the car to go around to the passenger side, fold back the seat and pull Christopher out of the car-seat. He wasn’t teasing the little boy, goading a laugh out of him, or offering his hand to be held while they walked to the apartment and up the stairs.

He felt empty. ‘It was only three days, DiNozzo. Give a few more, things will be back to normal.’ Only, that was a lie. In three days, he’d have a new position somewhere else at NCIS, or be job-hunting. Normal wouldn’t be found for months, yet.

Trudging up the stairs, a pizza box in hand, he made his way to his third floor apartment. The day
had been an utter nightmare. He expected his night to be worse. It was just a matter of figuring out who would show up first.

The answer to that question was abundantly clear when he opened his apartment door and found Gibbs sitting on his sofa. “Get out.” He growled, tossing his backpack onto the floor by the door, and his keys in the basket.

“DiNozzo.” Gibbs voice held a pleading note, but there was no hiding the surprise in the other man’s eyes as he spotted the child his Senior Field Agent was carrying. “Look let me just say my piece. Yer pissed. I know. I was way outta line. I know it. I ain’t got an excuse for it. Not something I shoulda done. I know I was in a foul mood, and I had no business taking it out on you.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Is that some sort of apology, Gibbs? It’s supposed to make things better? Wipe the slate?” He sneered. “I’ve got news for you Gibbs. I was verbally punched by the best growing up with my Dad. The point is, Gibbs -- I refuse to be the paper you wipe your shit on anymore.”

Gibbs closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. “I ain’t good at this.” He admitted, sighing. “Look. We need to talk. Please.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “Why bother? I’m putting in for transfer, Gibbs. Already spoke to Vance. There’s no need to talk about anything.”

Blue eyes went wide, “No!” Gibbs protested. He turned abruptly, and stalked towards the window, clearly frustrated. “Aww, hell.”

Tony closed his eyes and breathed in slowly. He breathed out, counting to ten.

Gibbs rubbed his head. “I… I… Patty called me today. Told me what a great job you did. To take it easy on your today, ‘cause you’d grown really attached to the kid, and letting him go had been hard on ya both.” He admitted.

Tony’s gaze was level, and uninviting. “I don’t want to talk about Christopher.”

The Lead Agent blinked, his jaw opened, and then shut with a sharp snap. Clearly, what his gut wanted to say had been heavily filtered. Edited right down to a strangled, “Oh.”

Tony shut the door, and fished his wallet out of his pocket to toss in the basket he kept on a shelf behind the door. He kept keys, wallet and loose change there. Not the most secure thing, but really, it was more important he knew where it was when he was racing out at 4am for a crime scene. His guns, while Christopher had been living here had been locked up in his safe every night. The gun-box on his dresser wasn’t secure enough with a kid running around. Now that the kid was gone, it’d go there..

“I meant what I said, Gibbs. I’m done. You appointed me your SFA four years ago, but not once have you upheld the Chain of Command. And I’m tired of being treated like crap on the heels of everyone’s shoes. Ziva openly questions my orders in the field, hell, she’s so quick to pull out her lock-pick set, it’s ridiculous. Do you know how many times I’ve practically had to sit on her? Or did you want our cases thrown out of court? And, McGee gets off telling me how much an idiot I am. How useless I am. That I’ll never be a team lead, because I’m not smart enough. That my Phys Ed degree isn’t worth the paper it’s written on. I hope his precious computer degree is enough to get him through the SFA paperwork, because he is still shit at finalizing his own reports.” He shook his head, unhappiness heavy in his chest. “And you, how many times have my tangents netted us a clue or a direction? But you take such great pleasure in swatting me upside the head and announcing to all and
sundry that I’m a complete waste of space.”

He leaned back, his weight firmly on the door. Ankles crossed, he was visually the relaxed picture of indolence. His eyes, however, burned. “I took all of that on the chin, and let it slide…. But, to suggest that I can’t be responsible for another person. That I would be a harmful irresponsible influence on a child…”

“I should never have said any of that shit, DiNozzo.” Gibbs protested. “I know that. Hell, my Dad and I were having a rough patch, and I was real angry -- and then I got yer message. I snapped, and yeah, it was wrong, I know… but I just wasn’t thinking straight.”

“That was this weekend. It was nothing more than a straw, Gibbs.” Tony retorted.

Gibbs looked away, ashamed, almost. “Why didn’t ya tell me things were getting rough?”

Green eyes narrowed. “Because then I’m whining. Then I’m just being a baby. If things are so tough that I can’t handle my job, I should just quit. Do you remember any of those words, Gibbs?”

Hands flexed into fists and loosened. “I never said that.” Gibbs retorted quietly. “I fought to bring you back from Agent Afloat, DiNozzo. Don’t that tell you that you’re wanted on the team?”

“No. Not when you’ve heard Ziva and McGee say the crap they do when I tried to rein them in.” Tony was past anger, all he had left was weariness for the matter. Somehow, working to help Christopher accept a sense of self-worth had brought awareness to himself that the crap that his team dished out on him wasn’t worth enduring. He deserved better. “And you didn’t have my back. Worse, you don’t trust me to have yours.”

Gibbs shoulder slumped. “Whattaya want me to say, DiNozzo? I can see yer point -- but… I have always had your back in the field. And you wouldn’t be called my loyal St. Bernard if you didn’t have mine.”

“Domino.” Tony retorted shortly. “You haven’t. And you haven’t for a long time. It’s been four years since I felt like you have, Gibbs. it stopped when Ari killed Kate.” He bit his tongue, having harsher words he wanted to say. No. This couldn’t devolve. He needed to get his perspective back.

Tony pushed off the door, and made for his bedroom, stripping off his gun and holster as he went. Walking past Gibbs, he made it to his closet, and the safe. It was biometric, and took little more than his thumb to open. In short order, his gun was stored, the clip separate. His backup piece immediately followed, as did the knife on the other leg, and his penknife from his belt sheath.

Honestly, he thought coming back from the Seahawk would be a fresh new start for himself and the team. How wrong he had been.

Taking a deep breath, Tony returned to the living room. “Look. I can probably get past how Domino happened. Hell, you played the Director too.. And, truthfully, I’m used to you using me as your scapegoat. I didn’t like it. I don’t like being kept in the dark and hung out to dry, but as you know from the Grenouile op, I get need-to-know, and I take it seriously.” Tony said quietly, grimly. “But, it hit me on Wednesday night while I was surrounded by a ton of kids -- that I absolutely needed those nights surrounded by kids just to stay sane now. I actively look forward to them, crave that time. It’s literally the highlight of my week, and possibly the only reason I’m able to roll out of bed each morning. And why? Because I need to be surrounded by people who trust me, who believe in me, who believe I am a responsible fun person, and that I matter -- I need that just so I don’t wake up some morning and decide to eat a gun. That’s what this team has done to ME. That’s where you’ve driven me. Honestly, could get past what you said to me, if that was the only time.... But, it wasn’t,
and it never will be. “He shook his head. He didn’t have words.

The fact Gibbs hadn’t trusted him, and set him and Ziva up to fail hurt terribly. “Bottom line, I can’t trust you. Not anymore. You pushed me over when I was already teetering on the edge of a cliff, Gibbs. Ziva thinks I’m a joke. She’s never gonna see me for who I really am. McGee? He doesn’t think I have the intelligence or skills of a preschooler much less his superior. And, I’m so tired of trying to find ground with them. I’m tired of doing alone, and I am doing it alone -- every time they refuse my orders, you come along and confirm that veto. Bottom line: None of you respect me to do the job, Gibbs. And if I don’t have respect, then how will I know if they have my back when I need them to?” Tony ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it up into peaks. “I want more from my life than ending up dead because watching my back, or obeying an order was an inconvenience to my team.”

Gibbs closed his eyes, nearly swaying. “God… no. DiNozzo. They… I… I always have your back. I swear it. And I’d never let them… I need you. I need YOU on the team, DiNozzo. They’re good, they’re learning, but at the soul they ain’t investigators. They don’t think like you do. They don’t see the whole picture. They will never have your instincts. And, none of us ‘cept you is any good with people…”

“They don’t respect me.” Tony reiterated. “YOU don’t respect me. And you don’t have my back. When I tell McGee to do photos, and Ziva to bag and tag, and they disagree -- you don’t tell them to get to work, you change the jobs -- and they jump to it passively. So, hypothetically -- we’re doing our jobs. And we’re being shot at suddenly. I tell McGee to cover me, but he thinks he should save the evidence, and Ziva should cover… and I’m dead. That’s okay? Because that’s what they’ve learned from YOU -- that it’s OKAY to question MY orders.”

“No! Damn…” Gibbs threw his hands up. “That’s not okay. And they wouldn’t do that. They’d have your back, and follow instruction in those situations… you gotta believe that, DiNozzo.”

“I CAN’T!” Tony roared. “I am all out of blind faith, Gibbs!”

“Goddamnit.. find some. Give us a chance. Give me another chance. I NEED you on my team. More than them. YOU. God, DiNozzo… you’re the best damn agent I’ve ever worked with. An’ there ain’t no one else I’ve trusted as much as you. That there? If I didn’t respect you, I wouldn’t think that. I wouldn’t need you, I wouldn’t trust my back to you the way I do.”

Tony snorted dismissively. “Really? Can I remind you, YET again… Domino. I’ll beat this horse dead if I have to, Gibbs. You can’t say it was need to know. It was an agency effort to out a mole, and you knew that I wasn’t that mole. You knew that Ziva wasn’t -- and you used us in an op without giving us a fucking clue as to what was really going on. I’m your second, and more importantly an undercover specialist -- and you hung me out to drive to prove a fucking point. But, hey, it taught me a lot. You wanted that power play over me, you got it but what I learned is that you didn’t give a shit if I got killed in the process of your proving you could be God.”

“No. If you hadn’t…”

“The point is, Gibbs… in any operation, there is a big wide IF. You can’t predict the other players. You don’t know what the players are going to think, or hell, what your unsuspecting people are going to think. You can speculate, you can guess. But you don’t know. And since I didn’t know the truth, I had to go with my own instincts. If Ziva hadn’t…” Tony shook his head. “That was… you know what… it doesn’t matter. Bottom line, you DON’T trust me. Your actions proved it.”

“Fer crying out loud… I DO trust you.” Gibbs threw his hands up.

“Then you have a piss poor way of showing trust.” Tony turned away. “You say the words, but you
“I don’t practice them. Look, I’ll give you two weeks notice now, and then I’m done with your team, Gibbs.”

“Tony…”

“Really, this situation is more than just about you, but you are definitely part of the reason it’s snowballed. Learn from this, if nothing else, because when you treat your partner like shit, it comes back to hit you in the face.” Tony moved to the door, opening it. “Go.”

“Please…” Gibbs pleaded.

Tony shook his head. “No. Actions really do speak more than words, Gibbs.” He shrugged. “And like you said, you aren’t good with words. Think about it. Hell, pull the case files, and really look at things. Maybe then you’ll see what I’m saying.” Tony rubbed his suddenly aching temples. “Look, I’ll help you find my replacement, if you need. But, don’t bother if you’re gonna let the team rip that replacement to pieces. You worked fine as a three man team when I was Agent Afloat… this…”

“We were a mess. The solve rate dropped ten percent. The case time increased twenty-three percent. Why’d ya think Vance agreed to move you back without more of a fight?” Gibbs pleaded. “Look, fine. You don’t want to hear it… give me those two weeks. We’ll change your mind, please. Just… let me try.”

Tony shook his head. “You have the two weeks, regardless. But, honestly, I’ve got to have more to my life than being at your beck and call at all hours. I can’t be working eighteen hour days. I can’t take calls at three in the morning. I can’t live like this anymore, giving up all of my life to get so little back.”

“You have plenty…”

Tony snarled, coming up within an inch of Gibbs face. “Don’t you dare say that I have plenty compensation, Gibbs. The last three vacation requests I put in -- you shot down. The last time I booked a dental appointment, I had to change it four times before you’d okay the time. Don’t you DARE say that the pay is worth it. Because all the money in the world doesn’t make up for the fact I don’t see my friends, can’t make a family, can’t sit on a fucking beach and just roast my bones.”

Gibbs took a step back. “No, that’s not… “ He closed his eyes and breathed deep. “Okay… I’ll tell dispatch to put all case calls through to me first, and I’ll talk to Vance. I’ll change how I do things, Tony. I swear.”

“Whatever. It doesn’t change my mind.” Tony didn’t believe that was all Gibbs meant to say. Not for an instant did he believe it. Gibbs always put the job first, their personal lives second. And he expected his team to do the same. Up until now, Tony had no reason not too. Now, though, it wasn’t enough.

“Gimme a chance, DiNozzo.” Gibbs pleaded. “Just… try. It’s all I ask, and I know you don’t think I got a right to ask fer anything, but please… you and me put a lot of work into this team -- gimme a chance to make it right.”

Tony nodded shortly. It didn’t matter whether it was a fair shake or not. Gibbs had two weeks. And then, whatever options Vance had for him would come into play.
Explosions

Tuesday December 2, 2008

The Agency was a twenty-four hour, seven day a week operation. Crime didn’t take time off for holidays, weekends, or vacations, and as their marines were on duty or on leave, so too did NCIS have to remain on duty and on leave.

It meant the odd hours that Gibbs and DiNozzo were known to work didn’t phase security none. Gibbs might come in at four in the morning, but Tony was well known to pop in after ten at night and stay until two.

Assuming, of course, that they didn’t have an active case. Then, the whole team came and didn’t leave until the case was closed.

So, Gibbs showing up at 0400 hours did not surprise anyone, nor did it strike anyone as unusual. Gibbs showing up without coffee already in hand, or making an immediate beeline to the kitchen to make a pot of his unholy stiff brew, well, that was odd. Gibbs parking his arse outside the Director’s office, with a sheaf of old case files - that was just downright bizarre.

When Leon Vance showed up, it was typically 0700. A good hour before his EA. The Director’s routine was well established, and any changes to it were avoided. It was part of his security setup. Were he to miss arriving at 0700, and no word came in, by 0800 his EA would sound an alarm.

Vance’s morning routine was a little simpler. He showed up, passed general greetings with the security staff, stopped at the kitchen on his way up for a top off on his travel mug of tea, and while reading The New York Times in one hand, his mug in the other, sauntered up to his office.

He’d review his diary, go through any approvals that had been set on his desk the day before, and mentally prepare for the day ahead.

Finding Gibbs perched outside his door (but, surprisingly, he hadn’t just broken into the office), waiting for him threw his routine right off kilter. “Agent Gibbs?” Vance arched an eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

“Need to talk to you about DiNozzo.” Gibbs said, apropos of nothing.

Vance blinked, a shoe dropping somewhere in the back of his mind. DiNozzo’s call had been a wake-up. But, to have Gibbs here waiting for him in wake of that call? Oh, something ominous was afoot! “I have an appointment with Agent DiNozzo later this morning, Gibbs. He’s requested transfer. Is that what you wanted to talk about? Kicking DiNozzo off your team?” He asked cautiously.

It didn’t make sense. Gibbs had pestered him for his team back. Harassed, actually was a better word. More encompassing for the number of calls, face-to-face encounters, and general mulish behaviour Gibbs pushed at him after breaking the team. He’d caved giving back McGee. Then Ziva. But still, the man had been relentless about bringing DiNozzo back. After giving Gibbs what he wanted… it just seemed so surreal to find things shattering apart.

DiNozzo's call on Thanksgiving had thrown him for a loop. The man honestly, to his bones, believed his teammates thought so little of him. It was… astonishing. And, beyond any doubt in his mind, Leon believed DiNozzo wrong. That said, he was willing to cut him loose, and place him on another team.
Davenport rained doubt on that idea as being good. On the subject of one Special Agent DiNozzo, Davenport had reams to say, and all of it spun Vance in circles. His plan this morning was to really sit and study DiNozzo’s jacket in depth. It was a plan that he could see had just been torpedoed..

"Damn it, no!" Gibbs turned and thumped his fist into a wood door. The solid African blackwood vibrated under the force, but didn’t break. “I’ve screwed the pooch.” He muttered. “Didn’t expect there to be consequences… thought it’d just roll off of ‘im like everything always did.”

“Project Domino did not roll off your Senior Field Agents back, no matter what you might think.” Vance surmised at a loose guess, mentally reviewing the last few weeks and any significant activity for the MCRT. Project Domino had left a sour taste in Vance’s mouth. He could only imagine how DiNozzo, Gibbs second, had felt.

“Yeah. That too.” Gibbs grit his teeth, “No idea why it’s pissed him off. Told him it was need-to-know, he shoulda understood that..”

“The need-to-know was of your own making, Gibbs. You deliberately excluded your second in knowledge of the operation that involved him. You kept me out of the loop too, and I can honestly say it pissed me right off, but at least I wasn’t physically endangered by your plans.” Vance crossed his arms, leaning against a wall, still in the foyer outside of his office. “I took time on Friday, after DiNozzo called, to really review his case notes on Domino. It took a conversation with Jackie to read between the lines, but bottom line -- he was livid. Would have walked then if he could have been sure it wasn’t just his temper being up.”

He shook his head, watching a still Gibbs, whose head was down but at least he was listening. “I had a few words with Davenport about DiNozzo. He had some interesting input, and walked me through some statistics. The numbers tell a daunting tale, Gibbs. DiNozzo leaving your team will be a nightmare for the agency. Still, I have to give him transfer options, he has that right, but between you and me -- it’s going to hurt your team badly. It’s a safe guarantee that the close rate will drop back to where it was, initially, when DiNozzo was Agent Afloat, those last two months. The time it takes to close cases will increase. You’re average caseload per month ratio will fall. But, the complaints I get about you and David from other Law Enforcement Agencies is going to skyrocket. I can’t say I am looking forward to it.”

Leon took a sip of tea, and reordered his thoughts, mindful of the way Gibbs was silently snarling. “On the upside, if DiNozzo takes one of the transfers I can offer him, I benefit. If he takes Pearl, well, it’ll be nice not have to say thank you to the Governor’s task force for doing our job.” Vance was really warming to that particular thought. To not have to listen to the Hawaiian Governor’s snide little comments on how 5-0 stepped up and handled their issues, at 5-0 and the Hawaiian government’s expense. Hell, Davenport had already said if DiNozzo was insisting on leaving DC, the first place to send him was Pearl.

DiNozzo had a stellar closure rate as a detective in Baltimore, and had managed to maintain the MCRT closing rate while running an undercover op while Gibbs was in Mexico. The man would easily handle the NCIS units there and significantly raise the profile of NCIS Pearl Harbor.

Of course, there was also the possibility of ROTA. Depending on how DiNozzo handled the political aspects working with the Spanish government, Interpol and other European intelligence agencies, it was conceivable he would rise to Assistant Director in less than five years.

The possibilities were… tantalizing.

“I know.” Gibbs muttered. The pain filled blue eyes staring now at him spoke profoundly of remorse, of dismay, of deep hurt. “I know you see what I do. He’s the best damn young agent I ever
worked with, bar none. And, yeah, he’s way overdue for his own team. I get that Leon. It’s me that held him back. Because, I need him on my team. I need him as my second. I need him watching my six. NO ONE has ever done that like DiNozzo does.”

“Then why did you keep him in the dark?” Leon asked baldly. “Why would you call him up and basically declare he’s a worthless human being?”

“I… ah, Domino…. Ducky says it was a power trip. Maybe it was. But, I stuck to Rule 4… a secret is best if only 1 person knows about it… and I was that person, and so I kept it.” Gibbs ran a hand through his short hair, frowning. “DiNozzo told you about the call?”

“You’re a bit of a hypocrite, Gibbs. Rule 4 may be your excuse, but there were other people in the know. Dr. Mallard. Abby.” Vance shook his head. “Did you ask yourself what happens if the mole had gotten YOU? How was DiNozzo to step up if he knew nothing about what you were doing?” Vance moved towards his door, entering his security code, and entering his office.

Gibbs followed on his heels.

“I didn’t think of that.” Gibbs grumbled. “Not that I wasn’t aware that there could be consequences, but I believed and still believe there was no way I could be taken down.” He sighed. “The big problem is, DiNozzo coulda let Domino roll off his back if I’d let the sleeping dog lie. But he left me a message on Thanksgiving -- and I was in a shit mood. Called him back, and I…” Gibbs stumbled. He straightened his shoulders and manned up. “Shannon used to tell me I always went for the jugular when I was in the mood to verbally attack. That’s what I did. It was the wrong thing to do.”

Vance found his chair, leaned back and stared at him with hooded eyes. “And it really was the straw that broke the camel's back, then.” He surmised. “Why did you have an issue with him being a few minutes late? He wasn’t late for frivolous reasons, and frankly, our people are on salary, Gibbs. Would I like them to all report for their shift on time? Absolutely, but what DiNozzo was doing wasn’t for personal gain. It could be equated on the same unavoidable hindrance of a flat tire, or a traffic accident blocking a route.” He leaned forward, opening a pen drawer on his desk and pulled out a wrapped toothpick. “More importantly, why did you take your temper out on DiNozzo? If you knew you were in a bad mood, why did you return his call?”

Now, that hurt. It hurt, because the answer made him a boorish pig. “I… was raring for a fight, and DiNozzo’s always has…”

“…been your punching bag.” Vance sighed. “Well, I’m afraid that last punch broke the bag, it has fallen down, and ripped out a good chunk of ceiling doing so. It’s done.”

Gibbs ran a hand over tired eyes. “I wanta fix it. Convince him to give me another chance. He’s given me fourteen days before he goes… that’s fourteen days to make things right. Or at least, better.”

Vance snorted. “Why should I let you?” He asked. “You’ll just fall back on old behaviours, Gibbs.”

Gibbs shook his head. “No. No I won’t. I knew the moment he hung up on me I was in the wrong. Bad mood and all. And I knew then that I had to change his mind. I’d kick Ziva and McGee off the team before I ever did him, Leon.”

Leon tilted his head, “McGee’s a powerful asset. His computer skills are second to none.”

“He’s not an investigator. Not like DiNozzo. He doesn’t get people, doesn’t read into their actions, or state of mind. Does understand motives like DiNozzo. Can’t get under their skins and walk in
their shoes. If it’s a grain of sand on the net, yeah, McGee can find it. But he has to know what he’s looking for. DiNozzo can look at a murder scene, and tell you where the killer was standing, what kind of emotion was behind it. Most times, how the murder was done. Give a few more pieces, and he’ll tell you why.”

“He’s completing a Masters in Psychology.” Vance said. “I skimmed his file on Friday, saw the academic reimbursements we’ve been paying.” A pen began tapping, thoughtfully, “He’s doing it with Georgetown, and should be finishing next year.”

Gibbs nodded. “Yeah, I knew. Told him he didn’t need it. Said he wanted to do it.” Gibbs shrugged, looking down, “Told him he could do whatever he wants on his own time, so long as it doesn’t impact mine.”

A tired sigh came out of the Director. “Honestly, Gibbs, with that attitude, I think he’s right to transfer.”

Gibbs shook his head. “You do that, and you might as well draw up my retirement papers. I won’t finish a year alive without him on my six.” The older man laid his hands flat on the table. “I got a counter offer -- I am getting long in the tooth. We been working longer and longer hours. We all got vacation time backed up to a ridiculous degree… promote DiNozzo to co-lead. Give me two probies, and another agent to serve as our SFA. We’ll turn out probies for you on a regular basis, but have the ability to function as two teams in one.”

Vance steepled his fingers. “Why not create a second MCRT altogether.”

“Cause then I ain’t fixing McGee and David’s perceptions. I ain’t drumming home that it’s DiNozzo I value. That he’s worth the position he holds, and more.” Gibbs drummed the fingers on one hand. “Ima gonna work to rebuild his trust. Need to prove I do respect him.” He frowned, likely realizing what a difficult task that was.

The funny thing about trust, his wife once said to him, it was given freely the first time around, but once lost? It was a bugger to regain.

Vance leaned forward, “You have fourteen days, Gibbs. I'll put your offer on the table, but I’m giving DiNozzo the right to chart his own path. You’re going to have to sell your idea by actions, not by empty promises. I wish you luck with that.” He leaned back in his chair. “Now, get out of my office. I have work to do.”

He waited until Gibbs shut his door, and turned to his credenza, pulling out the bottom drawer that held the personnel files of the MCRT. DiNozzo’s wasn’t as thick as Gibbs, but it was the second place winner. He hefted it up, and slammed it onto his desk. Settling back into his chair properly, Vance found his reading glasses, and flipped the cover. “Let’s learn who you really are, DiNozzo.”

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The bullpen was still empty when Gibbs made back to his desk, only to turn on heel and make a run for the kitchen, as his caffeine withdrawal announced itself via headache. Thanksgiving had been a wretched experience. Jack hadn’t been at his best, the old man being frailer than Gibbs could ever imagine, and tiring far too easily -- but refusing to sit down and take it easy.

They’d gotten into a big fight over the issue of the store -- Jack refusing to let it go, and Gibbs believing his Dad needed to either sell the business or close it and retire. He’d admit, in hindsight, asking his Dad to pack it in, move to DC and into his house hadn’t been handled with any degree of delicacy. He’d all but said it was clear the old man was dying in degrees. And things had snowballed
It had been wrong to use Tony’s message as a reason to vent his spleen. It had been wrong to paint DiNozzo in a bad light. That man gave 150% to everything he did. If kids didn’t like him, it was because they got the read off of him, and he wasn’t trying to be liked. If this one did, it’s because DiNozzo made the effort.

The man had stepped up when no one else would for the sake of a child; Tony stepping outside of his comfort levels, stepping up to a responsibility far more serious than any other was just DiNozzo in every way he faced the world -- and Gibbs had completely disrespected that just because he wanted to snap and snarl. He was, beyond a doubt, an utter bastard.

He ripped the bag of coffee grinds with a bit more force than necessary, sending some of the contents flying. Most of it hit the filter properly, though. Inserting the filter cup, and pressing the start button, and the machine started doing it’s work. Gibbs watched the pot fill with hooded eyes, mind a thousand miles away.

How did one rebuild trust when they had torn it down? Could it be rebuilt? And wasn't that a dreadful thought. He had to believe he could regain DiNozzo's respect and trust. Had to. But, how did he physically go about doing it? Was it by partnering with the man in the field? Or, maybe he should give him lead more… only, that wouldn’t go well if McGee and Ziva didn’t follow along with the plan.

Gibbs filled a travel mug he found on top of the microwave, indifferent as to who the real owner was. No one was gonna come ask for it back, his reputation made sure of that. The first sip was nirvana, and fortified his soul. He made his way back to his desk, and sat down.

He needed inspiration. Some sort of divine guidance here. Another day like yesterday was gonna kill him, he realized. The silence, and frost coming from his SFA had sucked the life and energy out of them all. Twice, McGee had tried to start a conversation with DiNozzo, and DiNozzo had shut him down quick.

Maybe if Ziver hadn’t opened her mouth and bitched…

Gibbs dropped his head into his hands. The problem, he thought with a mental groan, was more than just HIS actions and words. Tony was right, he'd screwed the team on the chain of command by being a dictator. The way the junior member of the team treated DiNozzo was, in truth, appalling, and despite his attempt to ignore it, he knew it existed. Sure, there was teasing and jibes, DiNozzo gave as good as he got there, but… it wasn’t good-natured all the time, especially when it was directed at DiNozzo. He’d let those moments slide. Shouldn't done that, dammit.

And their lack of respect had communicated itself in the field, DiNozzo wasn't wrong there. Gibbs had damned well seen the way Ziva and McGee would question DiNozzo's orders in the field. And more the fool he was, he went along with it, often reassigning their tasks just to get them moving and the job done, and not thinking about what the consequence would be.

What message had his actions given? The wrong one. Dammit.

Christ...he had a mountain to scale, and no fucking gear but the worn-out shoes on his feet!

So, how did he change the team dynamic and make DiNozzo want to stay? Thirty minutes later, and two cups of coffee drained, and Gibbs was still fussing at the problem when DiNozzo showed up… early as he usually was. Cold green eyes skittered over him, and then turned to his own desk. He started his computer, without saying a world, pulled a cold case forward.
Quietly, Gibbs moaned. It was going to be another frosty day at work. Oh, how Gibbs hated glaciers. Solid walls of ice that were so slow to retreat.

“DiNozzo… I… ah, spoke to Vance this morning.” He tried tentatively. “He’s got… he did what you wanted… brought together some options.” Nervously, he watched for any response, any hint that Tony was regretting requesting a transfer. About all he got was a stiffening of shoulders.

Dammit.

“I… I asked him to give ya a counter-offer. Like I said last night, I don’t want to loose ya, DiNozzo. You’re important to this team, more than I can find the words ta explain.” He was grasping at straws. Lord, he wasn’t good at this shit.

“I don’t want to talk about it, right now.” Tony said quietly, deliberately flipping a page in the case file he was reviewing.

“Please…” Gibbs wasn’t above begging. Well, normally he was, but this was a really special circumstance. The MCRT was his reason for being. It was the reason he got up in the morning, the reason he kept breathing. But, if he was the soul of the MCRT, DiNozzo was the heart. And if the heart went...

Eyes, harder than agates, stared at him impassively. “Please what?” He snarled quietly. “Why would I want to stay on a team that thinks I’m a useless piece of human flesh? That has so little respect for me as a person, much less the Senior Field Agent of the MCRT? Why would I want to work with people who think it’s completely acceptable to treat me like crap?”

Gibbs winced. Yeah, well, he knew the junior members were as much a problem as he was. Oh joy. “It’s not acceptable. It’s not. I swear… I’ll make them understand. I promise, I won’t fuck up like that again.” He promised, desperately. “Gimme a chance -- I’ll teach them to give you the respect you deserve.”

DiNozzo’s snort was contemptuous at best. “You can’t teach what you don’t know.” He muttered, flipping yet another damn page.

Gibbs could feel his temper rising, but he fought it down. The writing on the wall said plenty. He lost his temper, and the price was going to be the fourteen days to woo DiNozzo’s trust. The churning of his gut said that keeping DiNozzo, even with his efforts and offerings, was a long shot. But he was a sniper by training. Long-shots were what he did best.

He settled down to his own reports with a quiet. “I do know, DiNozzo. You’re the best damn agent I’ve ever worked with, hands down. Possibly, the best federal investigative agent in all of the US. And I’ll prove that I believe that to you, somehow.”

DiNozzo had no reply, and Gibbs, wisely, chose to let the subject lie quietly -- for now.

The quiet that descended was, arguably, peaceful. The sound of a mouse click, or a page turning. The hum of a printer, or the sound of a sip from a coffee cup.

Forty minutes after DiNozzo had arrived, McGee toddled in, casting a wary sea-eye on his superiors moods, and slumping when he realized the dismal atmosphere from Monday was still, painfully, in effect. He scuttled into his desk, adjusted his monitors to obscure his visibility, and slunk down to face a stack of cold cases.

Ziva breezed in some five minutes after, still early, but not as early as the rest of the team. She took a look around her, and noticed the tension. Maybe it was her being a woman that made her react
differently, maybe it was her being MOSSAD, or an assassin by train. Or maybe it was because she really did have an agenda against DiNozzo. Gibbs wasn’t sure.

Either way, the woman had all the sense of a squirrel running across a hot highway. “So, Tony. Your alarm, it worked this morning? Or did you sleep at some new girls house and she kicked you from her bed on time? it is amazing that you are not late, Tony. That is quite the good accomplishment.”

IF, and Gibbs cast a wide aspersion on this, having only known the story thanks to Abby, that killing curse from the Harry Potter movies couldn’t come from eyes, then for than a wand DiNozzo was sure trying to curse her dead with his gaze. Seriously, dead. “Thank you for your input, Officer David. Take your seat, and get to work. Now.” He ordered, his tone flat.

Prudence advised Gibbs to support Tony, if he really wanted the boy to retract his request for transfer. “Agent DiNozzo has been a member of my team for seven years, Officer David. And he is your senior on this team -- the only person who has the right to question him for tardiness on the very rare occasion that it has ever happened, is me.” He levelled a flat glare. “Besides, ain’t you ever noticed that DiNozzo is usually here a good hour before you every damn day, David? You ever hear that people living in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones? Cause you ain’t no saint when it comes to be on time to work, so don’t preach what you can’t practice.”

She snorted disdain, but took her seat. Body language suggesting she was still raring for a fight. Perfect. Just what he needed. Ziver setting DiNozzo off, and him taking the first transfer Vance offers with an immediate request to leave. Yeah, it was official, his juniors really needed a two by four up their skulls.

“So, Tony…” Ziva didn’t give five minutes before starting again.

Gibbs wanted to slam his head into his desk. Instead, he reefed his desk drawer open, and threw his gun in there, before slammed the drawer shut, the bang cutting Ziva off, and making McGee and her jump. DiNozzo, he noted absently, hadn’t even twitched.

And people wondered why he liked having DiNozzo on his team. The kid had nerves of steel. “David. Ain’t tell you again. Cut with the chatter, and GET TO WORK, NOW!” he growled. “I don’t need another peep from you unless it’s related to the case file on your desk or your own damn resignation!”

Her eyes went wide, not comfortable with having his ire directed exclusively her way. In that way, she was totally different from DiNozzo. His glares, his growls, his temper had never put the Senior Field Agent on a jump. When he did flinch at head-slaps, it was always over-acted, never real. The boy’s situational awareness was greater than any Marine that Gibbs ever knew.

It came, he suspected, from a childhood of needing to know where the next beating was coming from, and how to evade it.

The quiet lingered, broken by a few phone calls, a couple runs to the kitchen for coffees or teas. Gibbs didn’t miss the odd glances bypassers gave, the stillness and quiet so unusual for the MCRT. And, when Abby called with input from a cold-case he’d looked at the day before, Gibbs fled for the safety of the elevator.

It was, he’d realize later, a mistake.
“You will tell us what you have done to piss up Gibbs.” Ziva rose from her test and came to stand in front of Tony. “I do not enjoy having him snarl and growl like a beast at me.”

Behind his monitor, McGee groaned, head coming to rest on his keyboard. The atmosphere in the MCRT was awful. Like, seriously, funeral. It hadn’t been this grim in the days after Kate’s death, but it was now.

McGee knew he wasn’t the best at interpersonal communications. He didn’t know how to read someone’s ‘tell’ like Tony did. But he did have fairly well developed survival skills in family dynamics. The MCRT was pretty damn close to that -- and his survival skills were telling him that there was a divorce looming on the horizon.

‘If Tony leaves, what happens to me?’ He wondered, eyes closed and prepared for the explosion. He could hear Ziva baiting Tony, pushing. And the Senior Field Agent, currently on the phone tracking down some former Agent Afloat, was getting pissed.

“SIT DOWN, DAVID!” Tony roared, his finger on mute. “NOW!” Half risen from his seat, Tony was leaning into Ziva’s personal space. It was clear his patience was shot.

‘Will Gibbs promote me to SFA?’ McGee wondered, even as he tried to make himself smaller.

“You are not my superior.” Ziva disdained. “I do not have to listen to you yip at me like some little dog.”

‘Do St. Bernard’s get vicious?’ McGee absently thought, even as he tried to envision the team without Tony, but with him in Tony’s role. The paperwork process would be streamlined, more orderly. He’d be able to do the jobs he preferred when out in the field. The cherry picking jobs -- like talking to suspects or witnesses. He froze, ‘Hold up. I hate talking to witnesses. I always say the wrong things.’ Sure, he liked sketching and measurements -- though DiNozzo was far better at sketching. And he was good at bagging and tagging… though, Tony always recognized the little ‘things’ that connected into a case that he and Ziva routinely missed.

He’d be more in Gibbs trust, be read into more stuff. ‘Like Tony was? Really? Stop being an idiot. Gibbs plays it close to his chest.’

Tony had his eyes closed, and was clearly counting to ten. “David,” He bit out. “If your ass doesn’t hit your chair in the next five seconds, I’m going to have you written up. Sit. Down. Now.”

She sneered.

‘Oooh, boy.’ McGee thought with a sigh. ‘Do I get involved, or stay out of it.”

“You have done something to anger Gibbs.” Her tone was condescending. “Who do you think he will support, when it is you who has angered him? You wish to leave the team because he is angered at you. It is a coward’s choice to run; a man would face his better and take his dues.”

‘Seriously, how can it only be 0930 hours, why isn’t it already lunch time? I’d like to be anywhere but here.’ McGee groaned.

Tony moved so fast, McGee thought it was a blur. He slammed the phone down, moved around his desk and seized Ziva’s arm in a furious grip, wrenching her around, and bent over the desk, arms behind like a perp. He kicked her legs wide, and put pressure so she couldn’t use her legs to flip him. Spread out like a criminal, she was cursing a storm against his desk. Tony bent down close to her ear. “Squirm all you want, Officer David. Bottom line: little girls shouldn’t play with matches if they can’t take the fire. You’ve been pushing every fucking button I have for years, and I’m done putting
up with it.”

It was into this scene, Gibbs returned, lips thin, eyes flashing and temper raring to blow.

‘Right.’ McGee thought, looking at the equivalent of a human nuke about to go off. ‘Do you really want to be on the receiving end of Gibbs temper every damn day like DiNozzo is?’

“WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE, DAVID!” He roared. “Let her up, DiNozzo. I can guess, and her ass is mine.”

Tony let go, and sprung back. It was wise he did, she came up with a kick, that would have gone straight to his stomach had he not moved. Gibbs moved faster than McGee thought the Senior Agent could, and swept her feet out from under her. She hit the ground hard.

“You’re off the team.” He decided shortly.

Her eyes went wide. “No!” She cried out. “No, Gibbs -- you misunderstand!”

“You’ve been baiting DiNozzo for MONTHS… and I’m done ignoring it. I’ve let it slide, thinking whatever bug crawled up yer ass would leave sooner than later. But it’s much later, and the cost is too high. Your attitude is goddamn ridiculous. He’s your superior, and he shouldn’t have to put up with your bullshit!” Gibbs growled. “No member of my team ever physically attacks their superiors or each other. Ever!”

“I… I am sorry!” She pleaded. “I… it was instinct…”

“Instinct would mean something if it really happened. But it wasn’t instinct. Yer trained, David. Yer training won’t let you cry ‘instinct’ and have the excuse bear weight. Yer using it cause yer only sorry that I caught you at your usual bullshit. Yer jist regretting that DiNozzo snapped this time, and had the upper hand. Yer jist sorry that there’s finally gonna be a consequence.” He sneered. “Ain’t instinct, Ziver. It’s retaliation, ‘cause you hate to lose. Y’know, I wonder what Daddy would say if he knew his little darling ain’t following the chain of command, just ‘cause she thinks she’s too good fer it?”

Eyes wide with the impending threat, Ziva’s breathing went somewhat shallow. This was, McGee thought, Gibbs at his most vicious.

“I’m sick of this shit. I said already that it’s got too high a price-tag, and I’m done.” Gibbs decided, casting a searing glare at McGee who was still huddled behind his desk. “Conference Room 3. Now. You. McGee. GO!” Gibbs barked.

McGee swallowed. He wasn’t sure how he got into hot water, but knew he was feeling it. He grabbed tablet, notepad and pen -- and made a run for it. Ziva got up off the floor, moving slower given the hard fall she had taken -- and walked a wide berth around Gibbs.

‘This week can’t get worse.’ McGee thought desperately, as he lost sight of the bullpen. “Seriously. It’s Tuesday, it can’t get worse.”

Somehow, he knew he was wishing on a pipe-dream.
Chapter 5

Tuesday December 2, 2008

His head was pounding. A night of poor sleep, a morning of high stress and foul temper -- and sadly the morning wasn’t over yet. Tony could only see the day as getting worse. Bent over his desk, one elbow propped on the table so his hand could support his aching head, the other holding the phone to his ears.

It had taken, Ziva’s interruption notwithstanding, far too long for him to track down the original NCIS agent who had handled the cold case he was now reviewing. And that irritated him.

“Regardless.” Tony barked authoritatively, “The evidence box contains NO tape, nor a CD or DVD, not even a cassette case.” He’d only said those words something around a thousand times. Clearly, this idiot had retention problems. “Your signature was the first and last for when the box was last sealed, and that was just before it was submitted to the archives. The seal was intact when I pulled it out, and that means, you were the last to touch it. So, go find your case notes, and tell me what happened to the video feed from the ship’s storage hold.

Gibbs had Ziva and McGee holed up in Conference Room 3. Ostentiously the junior agents being reamed for their lack discipline in the chain of command. Though really, he thought waspishly, they were probably going over the profiles of prospective replacements for him. He had no idea if McGee would assume the role of SFA -- but boy, if he did, he was he in for a world of surprise -- the paperwork alone would drown the computer nerd. Finding time to do the paperwork, maintain his physical training, earn a freaking Masters, as well as investigate cases as they happened was going to boggle his mind.

He really hoped McGee liked getting by with four hours of sleep a night.

“Uh huh. Yes, I’m serious. Look -- do you want to be accused of being in collusion for the theft, because that’s what will happen if you don’t find those notes, so help me find the damn surveillance tape.” Tony drawled. “No. You’re totally right. I really don’t care if we work for the same agency, because this isn’t a club, buddy, this is you having screwed up on evidence…. Uh huh. That’s what I’m saying. Yes. Now work with me to fix it.” He closed his eyes, and fought for some patience. Just a little bit. A tiny smidgen of patience. The kind of patience he showed to people like -- like Ducky’s mother!

‘Ha! How’s that, buddy.’ He thought scornfully of the Team Lead based in Norfolk. ‘I just equated you with a ninety-seven year old woman who suffers alzheimer's.’ Though, truthfully, Mrs. Mallard was probably more with it than this idiot.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m not being sarcastic… look, if you have a problem with me, that’s fine… I’ll take this up with the Director…ah, now you’re getting it. That’s great. Uh huh. Okay. Call me back in two hours. I’m not waiting longer than that In two hours if you don’t have your case-notes and can definitively tell me where the surveillance tape is, then I go to IA.” He hung up the phone, and
folded his head into his arms. “Oh, just kill me.” He muttered.

“Agent DiNozzo?” The voice of the Director coming above him was not what he wanted to hear at this precise moment.

Lifting his head, he winced. Yeah. The man was standing right in front of him. Perfect.

“Problems?” Vance asked, pulling a toothpick from an inside jacket pocket, popping it from the wrapper and sticking it in his mouth. Truthfully, Tony was convinced the Director was a former smoker, and his nervous habit had manifested into this after quitting.

He wasn’t going to ask, though.

“We have a cold case regarding a large crate of armament that went missing two years ago off of the USS Bainbridge. I was going through the file yesterday, and noticed that no one processed the video surveillance of the room -- which I thought odd. So, I had the box pulled from storage, and went through it. There’s a tape listed on the evidence forms, but no tape in the box.” Tony rubbed a hand through his hair. It wasn’t easing the headache at all.

He prodded the box with a toe, causing the Director to look down at it. “I called the Agent Afloat, who is now a SAC out of Norfolk. Greg Manderly.” He tapped a blunt finger on his notepad. “Greg doesn’t think it’s a big deal. Greg can’t remember two years back, am I a fool or what? Greg doesn’t have time to go digging through his notes, he’s a busy man with active cases. Greg thinks it doesn’t matter. Greg isn’t worried about the fact his signature was the last on the box before it went into storage -- and I can confirm, it was sealed when I opened it.”

Vance sighed, twisting the toothpick in his mouth. “You gave him two hours to find his notes?”

“Yeah.” Tony wondered if there was time to find some Tylenol 2s before he had to speak to Greg again.

“If you have time now, let’s talk about your transfer request.” The Director offered. He turned, and made for the stairs, when Tony nodded and rose to his own feet. “I have some options for you to consider.” Vance continued, almost conversationally. “And, having had a long discussion with SecNav, and another rather open conversation with Gibbs, I think you’ll be somewhat surprised by the possibilities.”

Tony sighed inside his head. Right now, he just wanted something better in his life. A workplace where he didn’t feel like he was a salmon swimming upstream, being stalked by bears. Oddly, on the MCRT, it wasn’t Gibbs who was the bear, he was the stream. Ziva and McGee, though, made for some formidable bears when it came to getting some respect.

He had to admit though, it was partially a consequence of his own choices. He had deliberately played prankster and clown when Cait and Tim had come on board, mostly to rub off that sharp brittle edge on Cait, and to toughen Tim up. Cait was abrasive, judgemental and hard when she arrived from the secret service. NCIS was a lesser recognized federal agency in the US, and that meant they had to be more accommodating, working with other agencies or police forces when necessary. And when working with naval officers and personnel, you couldn’t afford to be narrow-minded. His manner had been designed to rouse her temper, force her to recognize her own prejudices, and keep her ire on him, not the LEOs that they encountered. Tim, on the other hand, was so blindingly green at field work, Tony had to work desperately fast or else he was going to be walked all over -- and that just by his lead agent. Tim would have shattered within six months, had Tony not hazed him in his gentle way, and warned off the other agents not to touch his probie.
They hadn’t seen that. They never made the connection, and by the time Cait died, and Ziva came into the game, McGee hadn’t been ready for Tony to ease off. And Tony had never trusted Ziva. There was no way he was showing his true face -- she had an agenda.

He nodded politely to Shelly, manning her desk as the Director’s EA, as they walked by.

Vance had eschewed using his desk, and was sitting at the round conference table in his office, a stack of files already positioned on it. He nodded to a chair adjacent to his. “As I said, I had some long conversations over the past two days, SecNav chewed my ear off with his take of the situation; and Gibbs was sitting in my office waiting for me at 5am.”

Vance shook his head. “I’ve spent some time since then going through your jacket in detail. I owe you an apology, Agent DiNozzo. I saw only what was on the surface, much like your junior team mates, and didn’t care to look deeper.” He shook his head. “It’s taught me a lesson, and one I won’t soon forget.”

“Sir, you saw only what I wanted people to see.” Tony closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. “I was disowned at eleven, and thrown into boarding schools. Hazing is a mild word to describe what happened to me. I learned quickly -- studious nerds get beaten. They have few friends. About the only skill my father demonstrated to me that I understood or respected was his ability to network. As a nerd, in some elite boarding schools -- I wasn’t going to achieve that. So, I started quoting movies, and became a jock. That worked. By the time I got to college, a college I chose because I had earned a double sports scholarship which would pay for my tuition… the jock frat-boy was the safest routine I could go with. As a cop, with the surname DiNozzo, my captain assumed I was a rich kid playing at cop, and his attitude funnelled down. The jock saved my ass there. The frat-boy convinced them I was harmless, and because of that I was able to bring to light the corruption in Peoria PD’s narcotics division. That’s why I left that PD. Philadelphia saw me begin my career in undercover operations. I was eight months inside the mob. By the time I had everything to destroy the Macaluso empire, I was practically engaged to Mike’s daughter, and the heir-apparent to his throne.”

Vance shook his head. “You were twenty-five when you ran that op. At twenty-five -- I was a probationary agent... I couldn’t even imagine being in a short-term undercover operation at that point in my career. Eight months would have gotten me dead.”

Tony shrugged. “I’ve been undercover, I think, since I was twelve. It was just a different role with higher stakes.”

“Regardless. I owe you a serious apology, DiNozzo. Yes, much of the details of the Philadelphia operation are red-taped, but that doesn’t mean some of it isn’t in your file. If I had read it before…” He shook his head with a sigh, letting go of that line. It was fruitless. You couldn’t undo the past, you could only move forward. “I… ah… noticed that you’re finishing your masters in Psychology.” He said, changing gears.

“Should be done shortly after the new year.” Tony nodded. “Technically, my thesis is based in criminal psychology, but not narrowed to just that specific subject in my overall course load. I have a Masters in Criminology already, but this was a case of feathering my nest in case I needed another line of work. That, sir, is a reflection of sports training, where you have to plan for a second career after an injury or age benches you, it is not a reflection of this agency or my career in law enforcement.”

Vance frowned. “Do you intend to go for your Ph.D in either Criminology or Psychology?”

“Not at this time. Maybe never.” Tony shrugged. “That… degree of academica doesn’t interest me. I
can’t explain why, I just don’t know. If anything, I may start on a forensics course or two.”

Vance played with the toothpick, and continued flipping through the file, he ran his finger through the commendations and awards, shook his head and closed the file. “Talk to me about your involvement with the YMCA?”

Tony snorted. “I’m not involved in the YMCA program. I got roped into the SCULPT program by one of my frat-brothers; it’s his brainchild. SCULPT is a federally sponsored program for youth initiatives. Nationally, the YMCA donates space. Here in DC, three nights a week, kids between nine years and twelve meet at the YMCA from 6:30pm to 8:30pm, and we run drills and play basketball. The program is designed to break down social barriers, improve a sense of teamwork, and of fair play, to encourage the idea that everyone is equal. Get kids thinking as a community, rather than running around streets.” He rubbed the back of neck, wishing his headache would just please go away. “I handle the Wednesday night drills. I can’t commit to more nights because of my schedule. Mine is modified to run 7pm to 9pm. But the kids and parents don’t seem to mind. Been doing that for four years, excusing the six months I was Agent Afloat.”

Vance winced. “Right. Should I apologize for that, too? I honestly felt it would be a good move for you, break you from the habit of being Gibbs second. From what I saw, your career had stalled at that point.”

Tony shrugged, indifferent to how his career appeared to other eyes. “My last PD... I found out my partner was a dirty cop. That made two of three PDs, and dirty-cops apparently everywhere. I was… disillusioned. Gibbs offered me the guarantee he’d never play dirty. That he’d always have my back.” There was heartbreak in his voice, but it was hard to detect. The way Vance pursed his lips, Tony was pretty sure he’d caught the strain of it. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, to do my job to the best of my ability, taking the risks all the while knowing my partner has my back.”

“You told me you believe that your team wants you gone.” Vance levelled him a sober look. “That’s not what I heard from Agent Gibbs, DiNozzo. He’d do anything to keep you. Seriously, he surprised me this morning with the lengths he’d go to. Maybe he hasn’t communicated things well, God knows, I believe you once attributed Gibbs as a functional mute, but he does recognize your skills and contributions, and appreciates them.”

Tony made a soft sound, hands fluttering as if to politely disagree.

Vance shoved three files across his desk. “You have a few choices in the way of traditional transfers, and I have some other offers I want to put to you that wouldn’t be on the table for anyone else.” The director said, pulling out two more folders and setting them in a different pile. “I have two teams with leaders on the way out, they’ve reached the maximum age for field agents. I’m sure the current leads believe their SFA’s are expected to take over, but in both cases, the SFA’s are only a year or two in the job. I’d prefer a more experienced agent given the political aspects of the roles. Those teams are in ROTA and Pearl Harbor, respectively. I can see pros and cons for each position where you’re concerned. The most significant factor, however, is that you are multilingual, and can fluently speak Spanish. That makes you ideal for ROTA. But, it’s as much a political post as an investigative. Pearl means you’re going to step on the Governor’s toes in reclaiming our jurisdiction. His task force has been mightily involved in cases involving the Naval base there. And, the field office frankly needs beefing up.”

Tony nodded, but could see the Director wasn’t done.

“The third opportunity,” Vance pulled a file from his second pile, “I also have an OSP position for Miami starting up. The field office there is being expanded, given the amount of naval activity in the area. I had considered sending the Assistant Director there, but you could take that. Certainly your
lungs might thank you for a warmer climate, and all of three posts guarantee that.” He stacked the
three files and pushed them towards DiNozzo.

Tony took them thoughtfully, flipping each open for a quick glance and the office summary report on
top. Rota, Hawaii, and Miami… part of him swooned at the thought. Leaving DC hadn’t been part
of his plans, wasn’t what he wanted to do, truthfully, but maybe…

“Or,” Leon continued. “We could go with what Gibbs wants to offer you. He wants you promoted
to co-lead, bring in a new SFA to whip McGee and David in shape, and start training up probies.”

Tony dropped the folder for the Pearl team, it wasn’t the MCRT, it was a catch-all, fielding primarily
drug trafficking cases, the few odd assaults, and a couple UAs. 5-0 would hate him for being a
jurisdiction jackass. He looked up in shock. “He what?”

“Co-Team Lead. The way he sees it, David desperately needs FLETC. I’ve reviewed her file, and
agree. Jen Shepard letting her on the team without the procedural classes of the Federal Law
Enforcement Training was the biggest mistake that I can see. The woman has caused several
procedural issues in court cases with her habit of picking locks, something I can see you’ve filed
disciplinary reports on time and time again. And her driving -- our insurance rates for fleet have
doubled since she came onboard. Between herself and Gibbs…” Vance shook his head, “I’m
tempted to restrict them from driving any vehicle licensed to the Agency. It would save a tremendous
amount of money per annum.”

Tony winced, in sympathetic understanding. “I’m usually able to stop her from making a B&E on
our cases. But, I’m not always partnered with her.”

“You shouldn’t have to force her to wait.” The Director growled. “It’s on her, DiNozzo. We have
laws, rules and procedures for a reason, and if you’ve told her no once then it means no EVERY
time.” He shook his head. “I’m seconding Gibb’s recommendation of FLETC for her too. She’ll be
off the team for four months while she completes the full program, beginning in the new year. I’m
citing the procedural violations as my reason why.”

Tony knew that was going to go over like a lead balloon. Of course, it all hinged on whether Gibbs
was seriously about kicking her off the team. Tony had his doubts. Geezus, the more he thought
about it, the more Hawaii and ROTA were looking better and better. At least there would be a
significant bodies of water between him and her temper.

"McGee has, I confess, disappointed me in light of what I have recently learned. A BA in Phys.Ed is
practically pre-med, plus a Master in Criminology, and a second Masters expected next year? How
did he miss that?"

"He had no reason to look, Sir." Tony rubbed his temples. "McGee came in so shiny new... I had to
scuff that blinding brilliance off. He would have been eaten by suspects, assuming he survived
Gibbs." Tony watched the Director walk to his credenza. He poured a cup of coffee, spooning sugar
and milk in. He returned to the table dropping a blister pack of Tylenol, and pushed the coffee at
him.

"Take it."

The painkillers he chewed to break down faster, ignoring the way Vance winced at the sound. He
took a generous swill of coffee to chase the mess of chewed painkiller down. "Thank you."

"So, you hazed him to break him then build him?" Vance surmised.
Tony shrugged. "It worked. Maybe too well."

The director hummed under his breath. "Maybe, maybe not."

A sharp rap at his door, cut the Director off, and Shelly popped her head around. "I'm so sorry, Director. Special Agent DiNozzo? Patty Smythe of CPS is urgently trying to get ahold of you. She's called three times already, and from the background noise, I believe there's a crisis. I have her on line one, if you don't mind. I think you better take it -- you can take it at my desk if you wish."

"It's fine. The call can be taken in here. Thank you." Vance rose, and went to his desk. He hit the speaker on his desk phone, turning the microphone towards Tony, and then tapped line 1. The shrill scream of a terrified child filled the line.

"Patty?" Tony spoke out, rising to his feet, and walking over the desk, recognizing instantly the sound of Christopher's screaming, even if he'd never heard the child scream before.

"Oh, thank god... Tony, I'm sorry. I need your help. We can't get Christopher to calm down, we're going to have to take him to the hospital, I think... its a hysterical panic attack, I think. He was fine yesterday afternoon, I swear, but when his foster-father Gord returned home, he lost it. He's been screaming all night. Was he like this at all for you? You had him out at friends...did he have any negative reactions?"

Tony closed his eyes, hands fist ing. "God, no. He was fine. Shy, but curious. Warmed up quickly with positive reinforcement. What the hell happened?"

"He settled down on the car ride, yesterday. I went into the office, and by the time we got there he'd stopped crying. I had the usual paperwork done. You know, getting his fingerprints, taking a oral swab for DNA... he received a banana popsicle for that. He wasn't happy, to be honest, but he was calm. It was early afternoon when I brought him to his placement. Sally Hooper is a fabulous foster mom. She and her husband Gord have cared for a number of kids we've brought our way, and done a stellar job. Chris wasn't happy, but he was calm all afternoon, until Gord came home that evening, then he just lost it."

"Jesus. Where is he now...." The sound of a child screaming suddenly gave way to hysterical gasps for air. "Oh." Tony sighed, heart-breaking. The kid was utterly terrified. They could here Sally, trying desperately to calm Chris down. He wasn't having any of it. "Patty... give him the phone."

The screaming was awful, but the sound of the child hyperventilating was utterly distressful. Tony looked at the Director, whose gaze was focused on the phone. but mercifully, the Director didn't seem annoyed. "Christopher! What are you doing!" Tony said firmly once he as certain Chris would hear him. The sudden hitch, and hiccup said the sound of Tony’s voice was working. "Hey, now... what's going on, Buddy. You're scaring Patty and Sally."


"Aww, squirt...no one's going to hurt you there, I promise you you're safe. it's a nice place." Tony explained. "You need a Mommy and a Daddy, buddy. Give Sally and Gord a chance, please." Tony said gently. "Try, Christopher, I'll give Sally my phone number, and she can call me anytime, if you want to talk to me. And I can come over on Saturday, we'll do something fun together. How does that sound?"

"Noooooo." The tears came back in a flood. "Want Toneeeee! Want Toneeeee! Me want Toneeeeee!"
Screams rose again.

“Go.” Vance urged, coming around his desk, and turning Tony physically towards the door. “He’s going to make himself very sick. Get going. That kid needs you, now.”

“And do what? Jesus... I don't even know where he is.” Tony admitted, feeling torn. On one hand, he wanted to go to Christopher, but on the other, was that helping the kid? The child needed to let go of his attachment to him, if he was to grow in foster care.

“You head out. You do whatever you have to. I’ll get the address from Ms. Smythe and text it to you.” The Director urged, more with the mindset of a father than the mindset of a director of a federal agency. But, like most men, he donned whichever hat he needed in a moment. “And Agent DiNozzo… I haven't finished with your options. Call me with an update on the boy.”

Tony left the Director’s office at a run, ignoring his still active computer, and grabbing his bag at a fly before racing for the stairs. His car was just pulling out of the parking lot with tires squealing when the text message from the Director came through with an address.

It was possibly the only time he whispered a grateful blessing to Leon Vance.

Sally and Gord Hooper lived in Alexandria, on the other side of town from Gibbs home. Under optimal conditions, it was a 40 minute drive. Tony had, against policy, and completely unconcerned about the infraction, put on the emergency blue lights he kept in his glove box, and raced through the highways. He pulled into a residential neighborhood and only minimally eased on the gas, cutting his time down to a tidy 22 minutes.

The houses were much like Gibbs, older craftsman styles. Some had been added to, others were in traditional keeping. Neat lawns, bright colours, and there was a park abutting the row of houses that Sally and Frank Hooper lived on. It was a nice place for a kid to grow up, in Tony’s mind. Very open area, clearly family oriented. He’d seen five neighborhood watch signs already.

And there ahead, was Patty’s car. And an EMT bus. Fabulous.

Tony parked illegally -- he so didn’t care -- and ran up to the door. It was open, and ignoring social niceties, he walked right in and went to where he could hear a hysterical child. Christopher was red-faced, hysterical, and backed into a corner -- the kid did have good defensive instincts, Tony thought absently -- he was practically in fetal position, head tucked down and arms up to protect his head. .

“Oh, Chris.” Tony sighed. He waded through the crowd of people, including Patty, who was talking in urgent tones to one of the EMTs. A woman he guessed was Sally, the foster mom, was buried in her husband's arms (assumed by the fact the wedding rings, Tony glimpsed, were matching). Patty was practically in tears, her voice choked as she spoke, though she quickly announced who he was to everyone else in the room. One of the EMT’s was crouched by the boy, perhaps a foot away, speaking urgently on the phone with a pediatrician to get the okay to administer a sedative. Tony ignored all that, nudged the EMT out of his way, and swooped in to scoop up the struggling kid up into his arms, just hugging him.

He knew this pain. He knew the comfort of strong arms would make the difference.

A long, long time ago, on the day of his mother’s funeral, there had been a little eight year old boy named Anthony DiNozzo, who had holed up in his horribly 17th century decorated bedroom, and cried himself sick for two days. The one thing he had desperately wanted, the one thing he had desperately needed, was someone who cared. Someone to hold him, reassure him everything would be alright. To scare away the monsters and terrors and the feeling of being so alone and lost. He just
needed someone to assure him everything would be alright, even when it was clear as mud that nothing would never be the same in his life. It was the one lie he wanted. And the one lie no one told.

There were sensory factors that would calm down Christopher, Tony understood. The sound of his voice --- which was why he kept murmuring to the child. His scent -- which was why he’d lifted Christopher into his arms. The way he hugged the kid - because he’d carried Christopher so much in those three days, and had him sitting on his lap to watch movies, there was no way the kid wouldn’t recognize his touch. The feeling of him breathing, because maybe he could calm his own breathing down to a nice sedate pace.

In three days he’d stayed with Tony, Christopher had demonstrated a profound craving for physical contact. If they were on the couch watching a movie, Chris would lean into him, or crawl into his lap. He liked being hugged, though wouldn’t initiate a hug. He would reach out to touch Tony’s leg or hand if Tony was talking to someone else, not to draw attention, but just to have contact. He wouldn't instigate a hug, but would the simpler touches.

It worked…the child kicked and swung with his good arm initially, and then froze, hearing Tony’s voice in his ear. When Tony’s hand smoothed up and down his back, Christopher responded instantly his one good arm suddenly snaked under Tony’s jacket, found a fistful of shirt, and latched on tightly, even as his little body relaxed completely. His tiny wet face curled into Tony’s neck, tears drenching the collar as he sobbed, relief and terror mingling.

Mercifully, after a few minutes, with Tony softly speaking in his ear, and rocking his body side to side, the sobs soon hiccupped, dissolving from the body shuddering wails to big hiccuping gulps of air strangled, mingled with scattered tears. “Hey, hey buddy. Easy.” Tony cooed gently to the child, softly stroking his hair. Christopher’s head was dreadfully hot, and disgustingly sweaty from hours spent crying. “Come on, Christopher… I’m here. Tony’s here. No one is going to hurt you. Breathe, squirt. You’re okay. Come on, you can do it.”

In ten minutes, Christopher was done sobbing, and mercifully other than one single kick, which Tony was sure would become a wicked bruise on his abdomen, he was utterly still and compliant. He had curled his little body into Tony’s, holding on with a death-grip for certain, but was conscious and calmer. So long as Tony didn’t try to let him go, he was zen.

“He couldn’t have gotten that attached to me.” Tony made the statement more of a plea for confirmation.

Patty frowned. “No. This was, in my professional opinion, a terror response. Something, and I can only speculate, it was something about Gord that reminded him of something he’s utterly terrified of.” She looked at Sally and her clearly devastated husband, “And I mean nothing negative about you or your home, Sally, Gord. It’s more something in little Christopher’s background. He’s too young to articulate what it is that he’s scared of. He sees Agent DiNozzo as his rescuer, so as far as he’s concerned, if Agent DiNozzo is with him, he is safe.”

“It means, though,” Sally said, voice choked with tears. “We can’t help him. That he can’t stay here. I know. It’s… the poor guy. I don’t know where he’s come from, but clearly he needs a lot of love right now. And, I wish we could help him. I want to, but we can’t, Patty.... he won’t let us, and the other kids need stability....”

“Hmm.” Patty’s brown eyes studied the shuddering little boy still wrapped in Tony’s arms. The yellow cast, featuring a few colourful doodles on it now, hung over Tony’s shoulder, and the left hand was hidden under Tony’s tailored suit jacket. It was a miracle, that Chris hadn’t peed himself while screaming himself silly.
Two of the three EMT’s were hovering around the pair. One using his stethoscope deftly to check Chris’ heart rate, the other just watching Chris’ reactions closely.

“I think we can go.” The EMT with the stethoscope smiled, relaxing at the reading he was getting. “I’m a lot happier this was resolved without a drug intervention or hospitalization.”

“Me too.” Patty admitted. “I’m a little worried, though. This was extreme… does he need medical supervision or psychological exam?”

Tony gave her a quick hard look, lips pressed firmly together to avoid saying something inappropriate, and instead took Christopher outside, walking up and down the sidewalk as the EMT’s answered her question before packing up. The strange people surrounding him only added to Chris’ anxiety. And, though he wasn’t dressed for the cold weather, Tony was. He didn’t mind the kid leaching warmth from him. “You missed me that much, huh?” Tony teased him. He got a little huff for that.

The ambulance was pulling away, when Tony had reached the end of the street. He turned around, giving the driver of the vehicle a nod of gratitude, and walked back to the house. It was interesting, Chris’ eyes were facing the houses now, and he physically stiffened in Tony’s arms as they approached the Hooper home. Tony made a point to examine the house colours, plants in the gardens, the type of car in the driveway, talking aloud about everything he spotted to Chris as if studying a portrait. There was something in this picture had Chris incredibly tense, and he wasn’t sure it could be pinned all on Gord Hooper.

He noted the dolphins etched into the mailbox. The types of lights above the garage. Unfortunately, at three, and probably a young three, Chris wasn’t a credible witness. Add to his youth, his exposure to much that infants and toddlers should be exposed to seemed limited. His ability to speak sentences, brief as they were, was a miracle, it seemed.

Whatever it was that scared him about Gord, could have been the colour of his shirt, goatee, his hairstyle. It could be his height, or weight. The types of shoes he wore. Gord was a tall man, his build and demeanor striking Tony as former military. He had a head full of blond hair, and a trimmed beard. He wore jeans and a simple striped shirt. There was no distinctive marks on the man, and he looked rather average, when all was said and done. Still, whatever freaked Christopher out didn’t have to be rational. For all Tony knew, it was the bushes in front of the house, the shape of the mailbox, or the way the doorbell sounded. Fear was an instinctive response, and not usually rational.

At Chris’ young age, and with his limited experiences, Tony couldn’t begin to fathom what it was about this cheery home that scared him so badly.

Patty was waiting for them when he arrived in front of the house, her smile sad. “What now?” Tony asked, coming to stand in front of her, but still rocking his body. Chris gave a soft shaky sigh, and closed his eyes.

“Well.” She sighed. “I don’t really know. I’ve started an investigation on his circumstances. I rushed the DNA and should have results soon. But, in the immediate present, I need to get him placed. Obviously he can’t stay at the centre. There’s no accommodation for long-term stays.” She rubbed her forehead. “I’ll need to network with my people, and find a foster family he’ll be okay with.” She frowned. “This one was the best option. Gord works as an intake counselor at the rape clinic. Somehow, that skill transfers to children. He’s so good with traumatized children. Sally and Gord are our go-to for abuse cases, truthfully.”

Tony heaved a breath, aware that Christopher was still listening, and by tension of the little body in
his arms, he could tell Christopher was not happy with what he was hearing.

Instinctively, Tony knew that if he didn’t step up, he’d regret it for the rest of his life. Somehow, over the past weekend, Christopher had become an important part of his life. There was a gibbering voice of terror shrieking in his mind that he was blatantly ignoring. And certainly, his common sense was absence when he opened his mouth and said, “Is there any way he can stay with me?”

It was a huge commitment. He had to be insane. Transferring off the MCRT, giving Gibb’s hell, and now looking to take over guardianship for a clearly messed up kid. Nuts. Utterly snapped. He was five years too early for his midlife crisis.

Taking on a child meant there would be no more weekend escapes to tropical shores, no more trolling bars and clubs for cheap hookups, no awesome nights of casual sex. If he was raising Christopher, he couldn’t take Hawaii or Rota… he couldn’t leave DC… it would mean leaving Christopher behind. And that was something his gut said he just couldn’t do.

Maybe this really was a mid-life crisis. Huh. Wasn’t he precocious.

But, shit -- if he kept Christopher, he’d have to figure a way for NCIS daycare to cover a foster-child while he was at work, or find private day-care. Maybe a nanny? The costs of such didn’t bother him, it just… it just wasn’t ideal from Tony’s perspective. A parent taking care of their kid was of far more value, in his mind, than some daycare or a stranger. Maybe it was his own childhood experiences coloring his view, God knew, he had craved any parental attention he had gotten for the longest time. Both healthy, and unhealthy attention. Any type of contact was all he wanted. Instead, he’d had indifference nannies, and received more affection from the gardener and maid than he did his mother and father.

The NCIS daycare had extended hours, it ran practically 24/7 which was a major plus for it. If he had to source out a private day-care, it absolutely had to have really good security; and he’d probably still need a nanny for evenings that ran late. Maybe he could find a retired marine… given his position as a Federal Agent there would always be some idiot trying to use his kid as a get-away card, and that meant Christopher’s protection had to be a first priority.

Of course, this all depended on what Patty thought of his proposal. And strangely, he was desperately hoping she’d agree, even as he was thinking he was nuts.

Patty’s squinty eye wasn’t a good start for agreement. “Are you SURE you want that, Special Agent DiNozzo? Taking on the role of a parent is a lot of responsibility.” The skepticism in her voice was nearly insulting.

But, despite everything he’d end up sacrificing, and just how dramatic a life-change this would be, his gut knew this was the right decision and he wouldn’t regret it. “I know.” He agreed. “Oh boy, do I know. And the little voice in my head is screaming… but, this isn’t about me… foster parenting is not about the parents… it’s really got to be about what is best for the kids, Patty. Maybe I’m not the best option for Christopher, I don’t know if I am or am not, but I do know right now, I may be the only option you might have for him. He trusts me, he feels safe with me. And if he trusts me to keep him safe, then we can get him past the hurdles he’s facing right now without remanding him into a psychiatric facility. He’s not nuts, Pats. He’s just a very little boy who has been through an awful experience, and was scared.”

What he wanted to say was that there couldn’t be scenes like what had happened this morning again. He’d bet bottom dollar, given how lethargic Chris was right now, having calmed down, that the kid had spent the night prior screaming and puking. For a child already underweight, and healing with cracked ribs, it was simply too dangerous for his physical health. Why hadn’t Gord and Sally called
Patty hummed. She walked around them slowly, as if examining a prize stallion, her finger tapping her jaw as she thought about the situation. “I suppose we should ask Christopher what he wants, but I think he’s made his choice and wants abundantly clear already.” She rolled her eyes. “The problem is, Tony, you’re not a vetted foster parent. It was fine for the weekend on an emergency basis, and given your standing as a federal law enforcement agent… but to name you as his official foster parent, well, I know some stuffed shirts will be difficult.” She clucked her tongue, clearly thinking. “I think we need a court order. Maybe something pro tem.”

“No problem.” Tony agreed, still moving in a rocking motion on his feet, he knew the moment Chris fell asleep, his tiny fisted hand somewhat relaxing it’s grip on Tony’s shirt. The kid sure slept a lot, it seemed, but then, Tony had no idea if it was normal or not. Other than keeping the kid’s attention engaged, feeding him, and making sure he slept, he knew little to nothing about three year olds.

Oh, God -- he was going to need some books. This learning curve was getting awfully steep!

“Is there anyone you need to call before we do this, Tony?” Patty asked with a sigh. “A significant other, or anyone? I hate that… well, I rather feel like you’re being forced into this. It’s a big change to your life. If this works, you need to take time off just to get Christopher on even keel. You might need my help to get Gibbs to agree with that.”

“No problem.” Tony sighed. “I’ve already put in a transfer request, Patty. I’m leaving the MCRT. I’ll call my Director from the car and get the vacation time approved. Where do you want to meet?”

Her eyes were wide and jaw dropped. “You’re leaving the team? Why?”

He smiled a crooked grin that wasn’t echoed in his eyes. “It’s time, Pats. Where do we meet?”

She shook her head, as if that would put her thoughts back in order. “Ah...Judiciary Square, Moultrie Courthouse, Tony. You know where it is.” She smiled. “Though you’ve never been in the family division before, have you? I’ll call ahead to see who’s in that can see us en route, and get the background established. You take Christopher with you, and I’ll text you with who we are meeting. Just wait for me outside the Judge’s offices, and we’ll get this done fast.”

Tony nodded, and made for his car. “What about Christopher’s stuff?” He called over his shoulder.

“Already loaded in my car. We’ll trade later.” Patty called out.

It was almost deja vu, strapping Christopher into the car-seat, the little guy sound asl...
Chris in his back-seat, he carefully tucked the blanket around the child.

Patty was long gone by the time he got the car started. He took his time, letting the engine warm up after turning the heater on as the late fall air having drained the warmth from the car in the brief time it was off. He tucked the unneeded emergency beacon back in his glove-box, and hooked his cellphone into the car’s Bluetooth system. Finally, after perhaps fifteen minutes, Tony gave Chris a last glance in the rearview, and put the car in drive.

With Christopher now in his car, Tony drove far more sedately back to DC. It gave him time to think, to start making the mental adjustments needed. His life was changing in ways he had never anticipated, never dreamed of. The kind of big changes, the kind that most guys had nearly a year to adjust to before the shit hit the fan.

Tony drummed his fingers on his steering wheel, mentally building his to-do list.

Assuming the judge assigned custody pro tem to him, there was the short-term items that needed to be taken care of. Grocery shopping being foremost. The pantry was a little bare, post-weekend. And they’d need to eat even while everything else came together.

Tonight, once he had Christopher settled, and tucked into bed, he would order a new mattress to replace the piece of shit Steve had offloaded. Crap, even a feather-bed on top didn’t make that spring-wracked monster comfortable. No wonder Steve was getting rid of it, but in good conscience, when Tony was ready to turfed it, he wasn’t even going to let the homeless take it. That mattress was cruel and unusual punishment. So, a new mattress for him, and he’d outfit Christopher’s room with proper furniture for a little boy.

On the toy and clothing front, they were good for the short-term. And Christmas was fast approaching. He’d need a book on a child’s development to figure out what was age appropriate for Christopher. Maybe a trip to the library. That would be far more cost effective than buying mountains of books.

Oh boy. This was going to be a lot of work. The next biggest consideration - work. What was he going to do now that he couldn’t go to Miami, Hawaii or Spain? Stay on an expanded MCRT? The hours they worked weren’t good for a kid, that Tony knew for certain. He couldn’t stay overnights on hot cases, or come in at two in the morning if he was responsible for Christopher.

It was of course, at this point, that his phone rang. He jumped on it quickly, less the persistent sound woke Christopher. “DiNozzo.” He answered, checking the kid in his rearview again. Still asleep.

“It’s Vance, DiNozzo,” The Director’s voice came through the line. “Checking up on the situation.”

“Uh… well, we got the child calmed down, he’s sleeping peacefully now. I understand he had a bad reaction to the foster-father, and cried hysterically throughout the night.” Tony replied, signalling a left turn and pulling onto the freeway.

“We didn’t receive a call from Ms. Smythe until 1030 hours. Does that mean they left a child screaming for upwards of twelve hours?” Vance asked incredulously.

“It does look that way.” Tony agreed darkly. “I was able to calm him down, but I’ll eat my hat if he hadn’t throwing up all night in his hysteria. Given he was abused, malnourished, and recovering from injuries like strangulation, cracked ribs, and a broken arm, that’s the last thing he needed.” He took a breath to calm down his rising fury. “Regardless, he’s calm now. But, we have no idea what his trigger was. He was scared shitless of the foster dad, I think. From what Patty said, he was fine with the foster-mother and didn’t flip out until her husband walked in the door.”
"Damn. I hate shit like that, no child should be that scared of any adult, ever.” The Director growled. “Where is he now? What does CPS plan to do?” It wasn’t the voice of a Director of a Federal Agency speaking right now, but rather the voice of a father. If there was one redeemable value for the director in Tony's eyes, it was how great a parent Vance was to his kids.

"My back seat." Tony answered falsely cheerfully, green eyes again checking his rear-view mirror and the reflection of Chris’ slumped head. Still sound asleep. It was a skill he envied of the kid. Himself? He woke at the slightest new noise.

The impact of his statement brought a smirk to his mouth. For the second time in less than one week, he heard a toothpick snap. "Ah, your car? Dare I ask why?” The Director choked out.

Tony barked a sudden laugh, "Well, the only logical reason I can give is that I have finally lost my ever-loving simple mind." And, really that did best explain the situation. This kind of fell alongside the idea of base-jumping. Might be fun, but wow, you really weren’t the most mentally stable on the planet to fling yourself towards death so foolishly.

"The reality is that he was fine when he was with me. And, I didn’t have him caged all weekend. I had him out in the Smithsonian on Sunday, I took him to a friends home for dinner on that same day. We went to Toys R Us, and Borders. He was fine that entire time. Logically, placing him with me makes the most sense if it gives him a sense of security."

Vance grunted.

"I feel like someone has tossed me into the ocean without a life-preserver." Tony admitted. “What do I know about raising kids?” He collected his thoughts, and continued. "I'm currently enroute to Judiciary Square. Patty wants me named his foster parent, but can’t because I’m not a vetted foster parent. So, she wants to do something pro tem. Which brings a thought to mind, Sir -- maybe we should have some Agents vetted? We’ve had, as an agency, multiple cases where minors were kept as material witnesses or needed protection."

Again, the Director grunted. But, in the background, Tony could hear the keys of a computer keyboard clicking. "That’s not a bad idea, DiNozzo. Not a bad idea at all. It would save us having to make allowances for a CPS rep, that we haven’t been able to vet on our end is clean.” He agreed. "I'll have Shelly cross-references for cases where we had to pull CPS in, I think.” Vance shifted gears. “What can I do to help you with this situation, Agent DiNozzo?"

“Book me with the office shrink?” Tony quipped. “Ah, could you check with HR and see if there’s any way I can get my future foster-son into the daycare on site?”

"Alright, that shouldn’t be too difficult." Vance decreed. "Anything else?"

Tony sighed. "Yeah, if I can have him on site, that’d be fantastic. I'll come in and register him after we’re done with the Judge. Ah. Sir, I know this isn't the greatest time to do this, but... I need a week off? There’s a lot to get set up and done, and not enough hours in my day to do it all. Besides, I think if I place him in daycare tomorrow, he’ll flip."

Short laugh answered him. "He’ll flip in a week, too, DiNozzo. All kids do. Still, I think giving him a week to acclimatize would be the best thing you can do. HR will likely celebrate you taking time off... they hate coming to year end and finding vacation time still sitting on the books, DiNozzo. And we're quickly getting to that time of year where I have HR banging at my door to bitch.” The sound of another toothpick being popped from a paper wrapper echoed on the phone line. “If the Judge needs employer input, have him speak to me. Don’t bother coming back in today. If anything, I think you’re underestimating how much time you really need. Take the kid home -- he does have a
name, right? And get him settled. Call me later in the week with a status update, if you need more
time, take it."

Tony blinked, checked Christopher in the rear view mirror, and shrugged. “Thank you, Sir. I don’t
think we’ve given him a surname yet, but tentatively he’s named Christopher. He picked it, I guess
he’s a fan of Winnie the Pooh.”

The Director choked on laughter. “Christopher Robin, DiNozzo? He’s named for a fictional
character? Geezus, don’t blame the kid, DiNozzo. I know that’s all on you.”

“He’s a Pooh fan.” Tony defended. “He totally picked his own name. I suggested Brutus, but no…
he wanted no part of that. Besides, he and I totally bonded over Pooh.” He had a sneaking suspicion
the story of Christopher’s naming would be one blamed on him for the rest of his life.

Mercifully, Vance had other calls to deal with, and ended the call shortly thereafter, which was
fortunate, seeing as Tony was turning the car into Judiciary Square. Patty’s car was already there, but
the woman was long gone.

Parking the car a little away from others, but under the visibility of clearly marked cameras, Tony
took a moment to lean back on the headrest and just… breathe. This, his gut said, was the right
decision. The right road to take. Now, he just needed his panicking brain to agree. Eyes closed, he
went through a hasty list of pros and cons.

Pro -- good karma. And really, with his life, he could use all the good karma counters. He’d have a
good reason to get up in the morning, a better reason to go home, and Christopher would have a
much better life than the one he obviously had come from. He had a good income, and independent
funds -- Chris would have the best schooling possible. They’d go to all the sites in DC and area --
and come late Spring, he could take the kid to Disney World. That would be a treat for them both.
This was his chance to have a son, because he didn’t think nature was in a mind to provide one any
other way.

Con -- he was worse than a single parent. He was a single confirmed bachelor of a Federal Agent
playing at Foster Parenting. His working hours were (presently) atrocious. There wasn’t even the
guarantee that he’d be working Monday through Friday in the future. He was hospitalized at least
three times a year, based on stats of the past decade. Shit -- the kid wouldn’t know if he was coming
or going. As a rule, kids didn’t like him -- well, the kids NCIS ran into on cases. The kids he
coached thought he was cool, but he was just a coach there. He’d never had siblings, or even cousins
his own age, and his parental role model, that being Senior, could be graded at best as ‘piss-poor’.
Actually, Tony’s general rule of thumb for life was: if Senior thought it was a good idea, or had done
it, then don’t do it, ’cause it was very bad idea. Which might explain, now that he considered it, his
commitment issues.

Oh God -- Patty had to be out of her mind considering him a viable caretaker for a minor child!

Christopher made a small huff in his sleep, and Tony turned to check on him. Okay, maybe his
upbringing was actually a factor for the “Pro” list -- he knew precisely what NOT to do. You didn’t
hit a kid, you didn’t forget to feed a kid. You didn’t get piss drunk when there was a kid around.
You didn’t treat a kid like the star attraction of the dog and pony show, and you didn’t forget your
child in a hotel in a different state. Suddenly, it hit him, as his mind listed all the outrageous things
he’d NEVER do, things that were done to him -- he would be okay. “I guess I’m really doing this.’
He swallowed with a suddenly dry mouth. ‘I really am. And there is no do-over. No oops, I need to
give him back.’

Okay, yeah, in foster parenting there was the possibility of returning a child. But, Tony honestly saw
that as damaging to a kid. At eleven, disowned, he had desperately been in need of stability. He
didn’t find that stability until he was nearly sixteen.

Better for him or not, it looked like Chris was going to be his responsibility from here on out.
December 2, 2008 - 11:40 am - continued

The Honorable Rosen Dawes was a man in his mid-sixties. He was a distinctive character, of average height, but in good healthy shape. His close-cut hair, and tidy goatee made him look younger than his years, but the silver and white gave his true age away.

Dawes was well known in the Family Court circuit, a veteran of cases where children were endangered. He’d been on the bench for nearly a decade now, and had a well-established reputation of being controversial to traditional findings. With a long career spent advocating children’s rights and protections, Dawes had worked with the CPS for most of his career, and believed just because it was traditional to award custody of a child to the mother, didn’t make it the right decision. The safety and wellness of children should have always been the first concern. If that meant the father was clearly the better physical and emotional provider, then that was that. Conversely, if the parents sucked, but the grandparents or an Aunt or Uncle was a better guardian, Judge Dawes had never hesitated to assign custody to the best guardian possible.

And Judge Dawes ALWAYS followed up on the cases that went through his court.

Patty had gotten ahead of Tony, possibly as she had no children in the car, she had cut some corners off her route, and drove maybe a titch over the speed limit. Tony had no intention on calling her on that. He had been far too busy mentally goggling at what he was doing.

A text message had told him what floor to go to, and which Judge they’d be seeing. Patty was at her most efficient when it was something she wanted, and as it was usual for her, she had moved heaven and earth it seemed to get the Judge she wanted most. Judge Rosen Dawes didn’t see every case nowadays, and rarely did he do work in Chambers.

“Special Agent DiNozzo.” His Honor said, rising to his feet as Tony entered the chambers, a few steps behind Patty who had darted out to grab him upon his arrival. The judge moved around his desk to pull a chair further back, seeing Tony’s arms encumbered with the sleeping boy, the dried tears on his face still visible. “I gather that this little man has had a rough morning.”

“My Honor.” Tony dipped his head. He would have offered a hand, but with his hands rather full, he had to leave it with just gestures. Carefully, he lowered himself and Christopher into the chair, mindful of the wooden arms, and Chris’ cast. “I’m afraid so. I just hope we can make the rest of his day better.”

"As I was saying when I called," Patty began, "Christopher was found outside one of the YMCAs. He was wearing worn out pyjamas, two sizes too small, no socks or shoes, no coat, was covered in bruising, three cracked ribs, and an untreated broken arm."

"He was conscious, very cold, and in a lot of pain. He believed his name was Boy or You." Tony added.
Dawes frowned, pulled a steno pad from a drawer, and began making notes.

"As it was late on the day before Thanksgiving, I was short both time and resources. I was flying out to Seattle at 6am. On my authorization, Christopher was placed in the care of Special Agent DiNozzo until Monday morning. I've worked with Special Agent DiNozzo on multiple occasions, and know him to be of good moral character. On Monday afternoon, as agreed, Special Agent DiNozzo surrendered Christopher to me, and I formally placed Christopher with Sally and Gord Hooper, who are well reputed, long term Foster Parents in our system. Christopher wasn't initially happy about the change; he’s grown quite fond of Special Agent DiNozzo. Sally and him had a quiet, but good afternoon. He met the other children under their care, and while hadn’t avoided them either. I gather everything was fine until Gord returned home from work at 8pm. He was introduced to Christopher, who became immediately hysterical. They called me at 2am, unable to calm Christopher down. I authorized the use of medication, dimenhydrinate to help him sleep. I arrived at their home at 6 am. Christopher woke at 7am, and became hysterical again. We tried calming Christopher down. I took him outside, and sat with him, I spoke to an on-staff pediatrician -- nothing was working, he was absolutely beside himself. Finally, the situation became so bad that after calling 911, I called Special Agent DiNozzo to ask if he had any ideas. Honestly, I was about to have Christopher hospitalized when Special Agent DiNozzo arrived and was able to calm him down.

“I see.” The judge turned to where Tony was sitting, studying with keen interest as to how Tony handled the child, before scrutinizing the child. “Any theories on what caused the reaction or why you were successful when Ms. Smythe wasn’t?”

“Well, not as to what set him off.” Tony sighed. He looked at Patty, who shrugged. “Speaking as an investigator, we don’t have enough information. I know where he was found -- I found him -- I know his physical condition at that time -- honestly, someone needs to go to jail for a very long time given what he’s endured -- but, I don’t know WHO had him. We don't know if he has biological relatives alive…”

"Actually, we have a hit on his mother. Elizabeth Butti." Patty interrupted. "Ran away at 14, found dead two days ago in an alley in DC, approximately eight blocks from where Christopher was found. Suspected drug overdose, though autopsy is pending and initial police reports do not believe that the site was where she died. Sadly, her parents predeceased her."

"Right." Tony processed that quickly. "Despite that, for all we know, she was not the individual who hurt and abandoned him. But, she could very well be. Given some of what he's told me, limited in point of view, I’m pretty sure his mother was neglectful. She didn't report his birth, or name him, assuming she had custody of him.” Tony looked down at the cherubic sleeping child. His face was still too thin, but the bruises on cheeks were nearly gone. The more severe abrasions on his neck would take longer. “Either way, something about Mrs. Hooper’s home, or about Mr. Hooper, terrified him. It could be the colors she painted with, the curtains on the windows, the carpeting on the floor. The smell of the candles in the house. It could be all on Mr. Hooper -- his facial hair, or the style of clothes he wore, or the sound of his voice, his shoes... I have no idea what the trigger was, but there was a trigger. The only reason I can think he calmed down for me is that he trusts me to protect him and keep him safe.”

“So, it could be something innocuous or controversially, something profound. But, his terror doesn't allow him to be rational; and as his communication skills are still developing he isn’t in a good position to work on this emotionally issues.” Judge Dawes shook his head. “Going ahead, Patty tells me she wanted, based on Christopher’s comfort level with you, to assign you as his foster parent. Let's work on that assumption. What would your next steps be?”
Tony understood what the Judge was looking for. Assurance that it wasn’t the investigator looking at the child’s case, but a man invested in the child’s well-being. “Well, as I’ve already set up a room for him, and he has a few clothes, shopping isn’t the first priority, but it’s on my list. The first concern I have is that we’re pretty sure he’s not had any of the shots infants receive in their first year of life. It’s fortunate he hasn’t been exposed to too much, because a viral infection at this point could be life threatening. I’d also like to get him to a nutritionist too, and see what we can do to dietary help improve his weight and growth development. Before I can do that, though, I need to secure some legal documentation for him -- I reiterate, there is no registration of live birth on file for him. He’s an anomaly in the system, and as such, can’t be taken to a doctor unless paying out of pocket, he can’t be registered for schools, day-cares, or even YMCA programs like the learn-to-swim. That needs fixed, but I’d have to research how. So, my next action, assuming I leave here as his foster father, and can grovel to Patty for help in getting paperwork, is to ask a coworker of mine, Dr. Donald Mallard, to check with his network for a good pediatrician that he can recommend. I’ll springboard a nutritionist off of the pediatrician’s recommendations. The second thing I’ll be doing is arranging for a very good psychiatrist that I know personally, and who is a good friend who I know well has worked with children before, to meet and see if she can work with him. I’d love to know what caused his terror, but I’m more interested in his working past it and healing. Third -- as strange as this sound - paint, new bedroom furniture for kids, and then more clothes.”

Dawes nodded, “Very reasonable.’ He wrote down a few notes on a legal notepad. “And, as you are a Federal Agent working full-time, how do you provide care for him while working?”

“I already spoke to my Director, and he’s agreed to work with HR on this matter. The day-care facility arrangements do not specifically preclude foster children, but they also don’t include them. He’s going to have HR waive Christopher’s status, so that he can be included. I’d prefer my office daycare simply due to the fact the site is secure. I’m also going to see about getting him covered under my medical care plan, which is quite extensive.” Tony made mental note to bring that one up - truthfully, it was a long shot. He’d probably need to put Christopher on a private plan.

The Judge nodded. “I know of the facility, it’s located on the Navy Yard, is it not?”

“Yessir.”

“Good.” He squinted. “And you are open to home inspections?”

“Yessir.” Tony wasn’t keen on strangers in his place, but he was in no way ashamed of his apartment. He’d renovated it and decorated it to be comfortable to him. Most of his friends said it showed his wealthy upbringing. Maybe so. But he liked the high ceilings with crown moulding, good quality furniture that was designed to look good and last a long time. He liked the light fixtures he’d chosen, the paint colours he’d used, and the trim around the doors and arches in the place. It made it feel like a home, not a rented apartment. And his place was always clean. He had a cleaning lady for that.

Patty leaned forward. “I was in Special Agent DiNozzo’s home on Monday morning, I can attest it’s well lit, very clean, and, for a two bedroom apartment, the living space is exceedingly generous.” She smiled slyly, “I daresay, once Christopher loses his cast, he will find himself learning to play that beautiful baby grand in Special Agent DiNozzo’s living room.”

Hawes laughed lightly, his pen dancing on his notepad.

From her ever-present tote, Patty pulled out a file, and then a single piece of paper, and slid that across to the Dawes. “On the evening Christopher was recovered, we were in the hospital discussing his release. It was nearly eleven pm, and most retail was closed for the statutory holiday by that time. Walmart is known to close at eleven. Out of his own pocket, and of his own initiative, Special Agent
DiNozzo began a quick list of things Christopher absolutely needed. This is that list, and you can see the two changes I made. I called in the order, it was charged to Special Agent DiNozzo’s credit card, and he was able to pick all these items up at Walmart. As this demonstrates from the very beginning Special Agent DiNozzo has put Christopher’s needs first.”

Dawes nodded, taking the note into his hands and reading it in detail. He looked up, “You had Christopher in your care over the weekend -- tell me what you two did during that time.”

“Well, as I mentioned, one of Chris’ physical needs is better nutrition. He’s underweight. I have a Phys Ed degree, and know basic nutrition for sports. It’s high calorie, if you’re interested in a Sports program. In the short-term he would benefit from that simply because his stomach can’t accommodate volume. More importantly, though, and counter to high calorie, he needs simple foods, and clean eating for a stomach that has not experienced much. Breakfast for his first morning Chez DiNozzo was home-made steel cut oatmeal, with fresh berries mashed in, and chocolate almond milk -- homemade almond milk. I don’t like what’s sold in most stores. Too many preservatives. Christopher ate most of his serving which was two cups, but couldn’t finish. After that, I was most pleased to introduce Christopher to a stuffed Winnie the Pooh. I believe it was the first stuffed animal he’s ever had. Presently, they are best friends, your Honor.” Tony smiled, thinking back to the past weekend, and the way Christopher had lit up seeing the stuffed animal.

“Winnie came in a package of three stuffed animals, and a movie. As I said, we had breakfast, and then we watched the movie together. I can say with certainty it was the first children’s movie that he has ever seen. During his second viewing, I was able to make some calls. My apartment was never set up with a guest room, I had turned the second room into an office. And truthfully, after years at a military school, then college dorms, and sharing apartments during police training… when I moved to DC, I had been engaged, and never thought to buy a second bed for what was supposed to be a temporary home.” He didn’t like talking about his personal life. Despite the apparent outgoing character he portrayed to most, in reality he was a very private person. “To put a long story short -- my frat-brother Steve and his girlfriend needed to get rid of a bed in their place when they moved in together. I emptied out my office, and with their help, set a bed up in there -- with bed-rails -- for Chris.” Tony shifted in the chair.

“Mid-morning snack on Thursday was cheese and apples. We had lunch, which was sliced turkey on whole wheat, carrot sticks, a banana and homemade almond milk.” He frowned slightly, as he thought. “Chris ate all of his sandwich, most of his carrot sticks, a quarter of a banana and the almond milk lasted an hour or more. I've had him drink water between meals, too. And might I add -- my greatest relief came when he asked to use the head. I showed him his temporary room, and discussed what was happening with his future. He wasn’t really happy about it, but we moved past soon enough. We stayed in Thursday, watched Toy Story, and except for a brief walk outside in the afternoon, didn’t really go anywhere. Dinner was spaghetti squash and meatballs with salad. He had a sliced apple with peanut butter for dessert. Friday and Saturday, we had modified omelets for breakfast, and by Saturday, Christopher had cleaned me out of chocolate almond milk. He helped me make more. Between ten and noon, he watched Cars in the morning, while I cleaned up.” Tony shifted Chris slightly in his lap, and lifted a hip to reach behind himself, pulling out his wallet.

Given that he had to periodically do expense reports for the team when travel came up, Tony was long in the habit of keeping receipts. He did it now without thinking. “I don’t know how he can sleep through all this.” He muttered as the boy was jostled a bit.

The Judge laughed. “I have grandchildren, Agent DiNozzo, and there has been often times I’ve marvelled at the same thing. My youngest grandchild lets the family dog sleep in his bed. And he’s often pushed out… but continues sleeping with head nearly on the floor, and legs trapped by the dog’s weight. It’s the damndest thing.”
Tony snorted. ‘Note to self, no dogs.’ Finding the receipts he wanted, Tony placed them on the desk in front of him. “Saturday afternoon we went to the grocery store for more fruit, almonds and ice cream. We also hit the bookstore. Dinner was parmesan tilapia, green beans and sauteed spinach. And we started on Horton had a Who. Bed was at 8pm. He slept through, or seemed to. On Sunday morning, after breakfast, we went to the Smithsonian’s Discovery Theatre. En route home, after getting a late lunch at the Smithsonian where he had chicken nuggets, carrots and celery sticks, we hit Toys R Us. Honestly, I think that I was the bigger child there. My curiosity was a bit out of control after seeing his duplo set, so I needed to see what other sets there were. He is the proud owner of two kits now.” Tony slanted a smile. Every sales person at the Toys R Us had commented how well behaved his son was. Tony was certain they wanted to suggest the ‘father’ should behave so well.

The receipts he passed over showed one adult and one child admittance to the Smithsonian, and Discovery Theatre. The other, at Toys R Us had a Cars backpack, the duplo sets, and three new storybooks from the various movies they had watched together. There were also a few Disney DVDs picked up.

The Judge made a few more notes.

“Sunday late afternoon, we left for dinner at a friend’s house. Originally, I had been invited to Thanksgiving there, but they were hosting a lot of our college friends -- I thought it best not to expose Christopher to that kind of chaos, so instead we got together after the holiday and had a quieter Thanksgiving leftovers dinner. Christopher had turkey with a simple gravy, tried some butternut squash, a small spoonful of corn, a bigger serving of steamed carrots and green beans, and he ate a few bites of mashed potatoes. It’s not a meal I would have typically offered for his dietary needs at present, but as his breakfast and lunch had three healthy servings of vegetables, I was willing to let it slide. One thing I have to say, while we were at my buddy’s, Christopher was so well behaved -- he charmed my buddy and his girlfriend in no time. Honestly, he is a really sweet kid. We had no hysterical fits at all, nothing upset him, and I actually had expected him to get a bit upset given that a lot was thrown at him. Sydney, Steve’s girlfriend, has two nieces and one nephew. She raided her sister’s place and brought over several toys, including a train set meant for toddlers. He was hesitant to touch any of the toys, until we encouraged him. After that, Christopher spent most of the night working on building the train track, with help, and then he was conductor for the train.”

The Judge smiled, and jotted down a note.

“Yesterday morning was rough, he knew he was leaving. I had packed up all his toys, save for his bear, and made sure his new clothes were clean and packed before he woke up. But, he’s smart enough to figure out what that meant. I can’t say he was keen on leaving with Patty. There were tears, but I just associated that with him getting a bit too attached, too quickly.” Tony couldn’t fault Christopher for that. Hell, the two weeks he’d spent in England with his Uncle Clive, he’d grown incredibly attached to the man -- because he wasn’t his father, and it wasn’t the life he knew back home. How could Chris, who was years younger than Tony had been be any different?

Judge Hawes gave a slight smile. "I'm certain you understate how teary yesterday morning was." He put a hard line on his pad. "So," he glanced at Patty. "You've named him Christopher Butti?"

"Christopher... Ah. I'd rather not saddle him with a name that may have caused him pain. He has no living maternal relations." Patty was making her own notes. She licked her lips. “Assuming his mother was his primary abuser, I doubt he’d want to retain the name later in life.”

Tony snorted softly. “I speak from experience here. If someone had told me, at eleven when I was disowned that I could change my name without losing access to my academic trust, I would have. If I
could do it now, without losing a lot of contacts I’ve built through my name, I would.” There was no
love lost between him and his father. There never would be. Part of him yearned for a parent who
loved him. Most of his heart and mind knew it would never happen.

Judge Hawes arched an eyebrow, "I'm appalled your parents would disown a child, especially one
that became a fine upstanding young man like yourself, Agent DiNozzo. I can only see one reason to
disown a child, and that is only if the child is not yours and raised unknowingly of that fact. Even
then, had a man raised a child to age eleven and found out it was not his, then to disown such child
indicates only that something is wrong with the parent. Children are a gift to us, there to love, not to
revile. As unusual as your request is Ms. Smythe, there is truly no one alive to contest gifting a
surname outside of Butti...what did you have in mind?"

Patty glanced at Tony, her expression asking for suggestions. “Honestly, your Honor, this matter has
happened so fast, I’ve not put a great deal of thought to it. I instinctively oppose to Butti.. but.” Her
lips thinned, as pressed them together, thinking fast and hard..

Mentally, Tony ran through a gamut of possibilities. Funny, the kid didn’t look Italian in the least. Of
course, he himself wasn’t poster-child for stereotypical Italian, either. With his light brown hair, fair
skin, and (where they not slightly yellow with bruises) rosy cheeks, he’d be mistaken for an English
born child. Tony smiled, thinking of his mother. The pictures he’d seen of his mother as a baby
shared those same cheeks. He blinked.

“Paddington.” He said suddenly, tuning back into the conversation going on between the Judge and
Patty.

“What?” Patty frowned. “Tony, we can’t keep naming Christopher after fictional bears!"

He shook his head. “No, no... although that’s a good association, there Patty, but that’s not where
I’m coming from... look, Paddington is my mother’s maiden name. She was English. Um. other than
me, she had no other relatives in the US, and since she’s long gone, the name couldn’t be associated
with her. And it sounds good together, solid. Christopher Paddington. Distinctive. Would look great
on a few diplomas.” Tony smiled suddenly, “And, if I’m his guardian, then I get to cheat a little.
Legally, my full name is Anthony Dante Paddington-DiNozzo. Though, I’m more commonly called
Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr.; my father was Anthony Dante DiNozzo.”

“Your father was all about his ego, wasn’t he?” Hawes noted dryly.

“He still is.” Tony flashed a wry grin, but if faded immediately. “So, I’m looking at it this way, if
Chris and I share part of a surname, when I register him for school, or for kids activities, like, oh... soccer, or swimming lessons, or little Einsteins, I might be able to avoid having to show papers every
damn time to prove I have the legal right to sign him up.”

“Planning ahead, are we?” Dawes laughed. “The name has a good sound. Strong. May I suggest in
keeping with the child's love of Winnie the Pooh, though, instead of Robin, go with Robert for a
middle name. Christopher Robert Paddington. It makes it HIS name, not a storybook character’s
name.”

Smiles went around the room as a general consensus was made.

“Right, Christopher Robert Paddington it is. Next.” Judge Hawes tapped his pen. “Patty, are there
any financial remains of the Butti estate that need to be considered? Did they have a will that may
give some guidance?”

“I'll have to look into that. To my knowledge, at the time of Mariann Butti’s death, she didn't believe
her daughter was dead. The estate went into a lockdown for a period of time.” Patty pulled out her mobile phone and began to check the email she had on the matter. “I’ll have to secure a death certificate, and a copy of live birth, and then notify the law firm handling the estate.”

Tony shrugged. “Even if the estate has been liquidated and disbursed, Christopher will be okay. I’ll vest an education trust for him, seeding it with $50,000 to start.”

Hawes blinked. “Just how much are we paying Federal Agents nowadays?” He asked in surprise. Then waved a hand, “No, no. Don’t answer that.”

Tony smirked. “Private investments, sir. Old family money from my mother. I don’t wear Brioni because I’m poor. I wear it because I can.”

Judge Hawes snorted, setting down his pen and folding hands together. “Well. Let’s cut to the chase, because I want lunch. I could continue this dialogue, examining other avenues and questioning Agent DiNozzo for hours. But, does that serve any purpose? Not when the best outcome to this matter is so very clear to me. I feel it necessary to preamble with this: It’s a damnable thing, a nightmare in truth, to think a child can be born in this modern day and age, and society not know about it. All the protections, all the systems, and all the efforts we have gone to as a society, a government, a nation to protect our citizens and children seem to have failed this young man tremendously.” Hawes shook his head, his disappointment that the system to protect a child had failed.

“Ms. Smythe,” He continued, “Has presented a good case on behalf of the CPS regarding the need for an alternative arrangement in custody for this child, and I am satisfied with her findings. I’ll review in the order of importance in my eyes, beginning with his name; No child should ever think that his name is merely “Boy”. That he believed such saddens me. That who he saw as mother called him this disgusts me.” The judge paused, shaking his head. “As such: this unregistered and unnamed child is hereby named Christopher Robert Paddington, as of now. This new legal name, to be registered with the State Department of Vital Statistics.” He slanted a look with an arched brow at Patty. “I’m assuming you can come up with a reasonable birth-date for the lad?”

“My office will handle the registration, your Honor.” Patty agreed. “And I think his date of finding would do well.”

The Judge again made a few notes. “Excellent. I know Ms. Smythe had originally wanted to assign you, Agent DiNozzo, the child as Foster Parent, but given that some of the vetting procedures for Foster Parents have not been conducted as of yet, was hoping for Guardian pro tem while they vetted you. Typically, until all procedures are met, no child is placed in the prospective Foster Parent’s care regardless of the emergency nature. However, in this situation for young Christopher, the regulations are a hurdle. I am in no ways disagreeing with the regulations, they are protections put in place by CPS for the children. But in terms of what this young child has experienced, and the need for stability and security, plus your own stellar reputation as a citizen and Federal Agent, I find myself wishing to make an exception.” He pinned Tony with a steely gaze. “If, in the process of healing, young Christopher displays temper tantrums of a destructive or disruptive nature, would you surrender him back to CAS?”

“No sir.” Tony said firmly. “I’ve been there, albeit I was older. But, what I experienced taught me that having a determined tolerant mentor, one who offers and freely gives trust, will make the difference in a child’s life. It’s having the road remain stable when your car is running rough, it’s what that helps a person move past their grievances. And it’s hard on all parties, but it doesn’t last forever…” He looked away, thinking back to Remington Military Academy. He had been seventeen before he’d found stable ground for his feet. “Having someone you can trust, who had my back, who
would support me even as they disciplined me, who still cared about me even when I was been an utter terror, was the one thing I lacked for the longest time. When it finally came, yes, I acted out. Yes, I skipped classes, I was a total smart-ass, and I ignored rules. But that person -- stood up, held me accountable, and had my back, wore me down, reshaped me, guided me, and put me on a better path. I’d be a poorer man today if I didn’t pay it forward.”

Hawes face lightened, and Patty reached over to give Tony’s arm a squeeze.

“Then,” The Judge began, “In terms of custody and care for the child in this most unusual matter, it’s clear to me what would be best for the child’s immediate needs. Would I prefer Christopher in a foster home with two parents attending to his needs? Yes. Even more, I’d prefer an adoption with two parents. But wishes... well. We can wish in one hand, and piss in the other, kindly pardon the vulgarity -- but you know which one will be wet.”

Tony stifled a laugh, he’d heard that expression more than once, and in many differing variations.

“The fact remains,” Rosen continued, “Christopher has a lot of healing to experience, and not all of it is physical. And, as you rightly pointed out, he needs to TRUST his caregiver to protect him, just as we as society need to trust his caregiver to protect his interests and his physical being. I’m quite pleased with your commitment to this child’s well-being. His needs are the paramount concern, and include things more than shelter, food and water... something you have recognized from the outset. This is a tremendous change to your life, Agent DiNozzo, but I believe as much chaos as it creates for you, as much as a struggle as it may be from time to time, I think it would be the most rewarding experience in your life. As far as I can see, you are the best choice of guardian we can assign for Christopher.”

The judge smiled suddenly, “Therefore, in the matter of the minor child now known as Christopher Robert Paddington, custodial guardianship is assigned to Special Agent DiNozzo. Contingent upon regular inspection by CPS, on a schedule the Children’s Protective Services will set up with you.”

With that, he signed off on the order, making three copies which he gave to Patty for filing.

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December 2nd - 12:10 pm

Vance rapped on the door to Conference Room 3, waiting until he heard a barked “Come” from Gibbs.

The Senior Agent was holding court over his minions, it seemed, reading out a strong riot act left and right. Surprisingly, Dr. Mallard, and Abigail Scuito were in attendance, both at one end of the table, while McGee and David in the middle, and Gibbs pacing the room like a lion about to pounce.

For Gibbs sake, Vance sincerely hoped this exercise wasn’t a waste of time, but his gut said that no matter what Gibbs hoped to achieve, Dinozzo would leave the MCRT. It was sad really, the statistics he’d been reviewing for the past hour spanned fifteen years. Fourteen of those years demonstrated the effect of Agent DiNozzo’s partnership with Gibbs in the seven years he had been with NCIS. It went beyond closure rates. The stats included the number of procedural violations on case findings that were thrown out of court, demonstrated a decrease of complaints against Agent Gibbs, and clearly, a decrease of complaints against Officer David (the before and after seen while Agent DiNozzo was Agent Afloat).

Suffice it to say, Vance strongly suspected the departure of Agent DiNozzo from the MCRT would have repercussions for the Agency as a whole. SecNav only wanted DiNozzo to stay with NCIS,
Davenport had no idea of the impact he made to the team. ‘I should call him.’ Leon thought passingly, and then realized that no. It did DiNozzo no favors to force him to remain where he was. In fact, it might cause the man to leave NCIS altogether.

“Agent Gibbs -- Special Agent DiNozzo was called away on a family emergency. He will be out of the office for the next seven days.”

Gibbs blinked. He paused. And then he opened his mouth. “WHAT?” He bellowed.

“You heard me.” Vance folded his arms over his chest, unimpressed by Gibbs response. His gaze set sternly upon the Senior Agent of the MCRT. “I was there when Special Agent DiNozzo received the call. I can verify it was a legitimate emergency. He asked for, and I gave, a week of leave to handle the situation.”

Gibbs shook his head, “Leon - you can’t do this… Christ on a crutch -- how am I supposed to get him to stay on the team, if he’s already gone?”

Vance smiled slantingly, “Then you’ll be happy to know that our meeting hadn’t concluded before he left. He hasn’t taken a new position as of yet, and is still, at least on paper, on your team. He and I will resume our discussion after his return to the office.”

If Gibbs read between the lines, he’d understand, he’d just gotten a reprieve. Time to get his cards in order before he had to set the deck in front of DiNozzo. He watched Gibbs process, and the light in tired blue eyes told him the moment Gibbs got it.


Vance shrugged. “I assume so. I really don’t know.” He glanced over the room, taking the barometer of the individuals. He wasn’t keen on what he was seeing, the disinterest of David, and the nosiness of Scuito were playing up. McGee looked worried, and truthfully, from what Vance knew about Gibb’s temper when DiNozzo wasn’t there to curb it -- he should be worried.

“As you may be aware, Special Agent DiNozzo has asked for transfer.” He said widely to all. “I’m inclined, based on his exceptional performance alone, but in light of your negative attitudes towards Agent DiNozzo I wish to add, I’m not surprised he finally asked for it.” He paused. “Please be aware, Senior Agent in Charge Gibbs sincerely doesn’t wish for that outcome.”

Giving a genial nod to Mallard, then Gibbs, he turned as if to leave, and then changed his mind. “Gibbs -- would you mind if I sat in? Based on our discussion this morning, I’m interested in this discussion.”

Gibbs shrugged indifference. He probably didn’t want an audience, but couldn’t truthfully say no to his boss. Vance composed his face so not to smile, and took a chair at the end of the table. Folding his hands, he leaned back, and gave Gibbs who watched him a raised eyebrow.

“Well?” Gibbs said.

“Just so.” Vance agreed.

“Fine.” He repeated. Gibbs took a breath, and turned back towards McGee. “You got any idea how many degrees DiNozzo holds?”


“And?”
Tim shook his head. “I don’t follow, Boss. Tony’s only got that one degree.”

“So how he’d get to be SFA when it’s a required to have a Masters?” Gibbs barked, hands on desk. “Did you even look at the goddamn requirements at all when you were probationarily made SFA?” He growled. “You had three years after appointment to get enrolled or start your Masters to maintain the position.”

McGee leaned back in his chair, trying to avoid the growling bear in front of him. “Ah. No… we were… it was a busy time, Boss. I missed that. I guess, well, then I think that Tony must have his Masters in Phys. Ed.” He speculated.

Vance managed not to look away, but he wasn’t sure he hid the disbelief on his face.

“He’s got a Masters in Criminology.” Gibbs bit out. “Out of Pennsylvania… did that WHILE working as a cop, dumbass. He had it before he ever got his gold shield. He’s a half year from a second Masters, this one in Psychology at Georgetown. Still think he’s too dumb to be on my team? You focussed on his SAT scores, which he deliberately bombed -- though I’m damned if I know how he did that, and his undergrad degrees. How about the fact he’s multilingual, fluent in four languages, and can speak two others, but doesn’t count them towards is language proficiency cause he can’t write them yet?” He snorted at their startled expressions. “Yeah, by the way David… he’s learning Hebrew. He understands most conversations on the phone, but can’t quite read it yet. Give him six more months and you’ll have to be a bit more select in what info you’re giving Mossad.”

Vance growled. “There had best be no information being leaked.”

Ziva’s blood drained from her face.

Gibbs arched an eyebrow, and smirked at the Director, but resumed pacing. “You both assumed too much, and DiNozzo’s damn need to hide his intelligence behind his frat-boy jock routine tripped you up but good. And you call yourself investigators, but you can’t even see thru your own teammate. Explain to me how a man too stupid to do much more than dribble a ball up a court could concurrently earn his BA in Phys Ed and Criminology without dropping that aforementioned ball? Huh? Or, find the time to earn a degree from the University of Pennsylvania while working full-time on a beat in Peoria, and bringing down the Narcotics division of the PD for corruption simultaneously? You’ve heard him, McGee -- work smarter, not harder -- that’s how he did it. And that’s how he’s always done it, even as a fucking green as grass cop!”

McGee looked over to Ziva, and then back at his Boss, his resemblance to deer in the face of headlights was startling. “I… okay, we missed that, Boss. But, you know, Tony only ever talks about Ohio State and his frat…”

“Like you only talk about MIT and John Hopkins.” Gibbs retorted. “Does that make you all you are?” His gaze slid to Ziva. “I suppose you have input about DiNozzo’s academic worth.”

“He is foolish, Gibbs. He plays around, and takes nothing seriously.” She raised her chin. “You claim it is an act, but I am not so undiscerning. It is not an act. And, I do not understand why you would defend him or not see him for what he really is. He is a child. He was raised with a fancy spoon, yes? If he has these other degrees, they were bought, not earned. Old family money can do that.”

Vance snorted contemptuously.

“DiNozzo doesn’t hide this, he just doesn’t advertise it. Its public record. DiNozzo was disowned at eleven, so where’s that old money you’re talking about?” He sneered at her. “Might have been the
best thing t'happen to him -- seeing as it caused his inheritance from his mother to no longer be under
his father’s control. Senior managed to bankrupt himself in five years after his wife died. He’d have
run through the academic trust fund left to Tony if he could.” Gibbs glared at her. “How’d you think
he paid for private schools, huh? Daddy DiNozzo had no interest in helping his son when his son
needed the help most. DiNozzo paid for his entire education on his own since he was eleven years
old!”

He resumed his pacing. “You wanna know why he talks about Ohio State and his frat all the time?
Because, he worked damn hard to find a way out of the life his father had laid at his feet. He earned
a full-ride sports scholarship to Ohio State. Took it. He had to do the Phys Ed degree to maintain that
scholarship, but he was able to swing a double major, the other being in criminology. He studied his
ass of, played hard, and earned his Bachelors with Honors. So don’t tell me they were bought. They
weren’t. His time at Ohio State was the first time he ever got to choose his own destiny. That’s why
he loves it. His frat brothers were the first friends he had without a fucking agenda. That’s why he
talks about ’em. And when he went for his Masters, he used the higher education program supported
by the Peoria Police Department to afford it. He may come from old money, David -- but he had a
limited amount of it, and is careful with how he invests and spends it.” Gibbs spun around to lean
forward on the table, eyes narrowed and glaring at Ziva, “Oh, and if you think that any police
department would refund his tuition if he wasn’t pulling good marks in, think again!”

She stilled. “I did not know this.” She admitted.

“Right.” Gibbs said. “But, you made assumptions based on bullshit, he distracted you from looking
with a goofy grin, a movie quote, or the dimensions of some imaginary girl. Real sharp there, David.
It’s not me misreading him, it’s all on you. And, instead of asking ‘what does my team leader know
that makes DiNozzo an asset to the team, you looked for what you could see as a reason he shouldn’t
be on the team.”

Gibbs bared teeth, almost. “Here’s some facts to choke on. He was gone seven months on the USS
Reagan and Seahawk. You returned after three months, McGee and four and change, David. Let’s
look at that last month he was gone. Our closing rate dropped. It had dropped while I was running
with a team of idiots, but with three out of four original members it should have risen. It didn’t. And
while the case management ratio did improve… by 6%, we were still 17% short the closure ratio
from where we were before the team was split up.”

He took a seat, dropping into it with a thud. “I looked further back, thinking it was disruption to the
team that did it. Wasn’t.” He glared at McGee. “My Mexican hiatus was a busy time was it?
Funny, you managed to do a press circuit for your damn book at that time. And,” he turned to Ziva.
“I would have fired your ass six times over if I had been here. You clocked in eighty percent of the
time at ten hundred hours. You clocked out ninety-two percent of the time at sixteen thirty hours.
What the FUCK?”

“I was no different than Tony. He was in and out, scarcely ever here.” She defended.

“He was running cases AND a fucking undercover op. He was clocking twenty-two hours a day. If
he wasn’t here when you were it was because he was out there doing his damn job -- which you
weren’t. He filed 35 more case reports than you both, nearly 12 more than you a month. He worked
to the bone, and you barely worked. I'm ashamed I never looked at this before now. Overbearing?
 Pretentious? Those were the words you described him with when he was team lead. How would you
know? You were barely here!”

Vance's amused gaze had vanished, as did his relaxed posture. "Gibbs, were any infractions written
up?"
Gibbs nodded. "Yeah. I found electronic copies, Shepard never signed off. They ain’t in their files, but Balboa told me that DiNozzo did submit them" He admitted. "DiNozzo was fighting a losing battle on three fronts. Damn lucky that he’s so damn good an investigator that the closure rate held."

The Director’s eyes went hard as he stared at McGee and Ziva. "I see. I wonder if there was collusion between you two and Director Sheppard to push DiNozzo to taking that damn Grenoullie op."

Dr. Mallard took a sudden sharp breath. "I have long wondered the same, but feared asking. Anthony would need to be quite worn down to have agreed..." his voice trailed off, as he gazed darkly at Ziva and Timothy. “Tell me, did Director Shepard encourage your wayward actions? Were you encouraged to deliberately discourage and dishearten Anthony?”

“No!” Tim vehemently protested. “No... we... well, Director Shepard spoke to me a few times, mostly to see how we were doing, if we were coping with Gibbs leaving… but... she never encouraged me to...”

“To ignore your team lead, barely do your job, use company time and resources to promote your own side project.” Vance filled in.

“And bad-mouth DiNozzo.” Gibbs finished.

“I…” Tim looked down. “Yeah.” He admitted after a long moment of introspection. “But... I... was so angry.” He admitted. “I wasn’t mad at Tony, but...”

Gibbs nodded. “You were pissed at me for leaving, and took that out on DiNozzo.”

Tim looked away, shame written all over his face, and clear in his voice. “I guess so.”

“Can’t happen again.” Gibbs growled. “Won’t happen again. DiNozzo’s set to leave. You gonna be pissed at him for that and take it out on me?”

Wide hazel eyes seemed terrified. “No! Boss, but...he’s not you. Besides, there’s gotta be a way to make this right. You’re right. We can’t do the job without Tony. I can search the internet and hack computers all day long, but it doesn’t always give us an insight as to what happened... Tony can make connections to pieces, something I’m not great at unless he’s pushing at me. He gets people, knows how to read them, how to make them think.”

Gibbs nodded. “Yeah. He does. Makes that whole psychology degree make sense, don’t it?” His jaw set and he turned to Ziva. “Your turn. I’m serious Ziva. I’ll kick you off the team fer good, no second chances, if you go at DiNozzo like you did today. You got one more shot to stay with the MCRT, and that’s it. That profile you built for Haswari, I hope you get it ain’t so perfect, now!”

Ziva David was her father’s daughter through and through, stubborn to a ridiculous degree. Blinded by her own ambition and beliefs. “Perhaps there are a few details missing, but I stand by my findings. Tony is not the asset you think he is. The numbers you have stated must be wrong, I am certain. There must be other reasons for the change. New policies. New rules. There is nothing that can validate Tony as being an asset. You have seen him Gibbs. You checked his actions with a head-slap often enough, that I know this. Seen how he fools around on his phone, he is lazy. Unmotivated. And those endless movie quotes…”

Vance shook his head, it was amazing that the traits he admired in Eli were traits that painted Ziva’s character poorly. “I have some additional statistics to add, Officer David.” He leaned forward, hands folded on the table. “The USS Reagan has on average eight cases a month. There is, on average, an
80% close ratio for those cases. Mostly, it’s petty theft, a few fights, and a bit of misbehavior on shore leave. The same holds true for most carriers. Under Agent DiNozzo the closure rates for the ship were 100%, and he had twelve cases. In one month alone, he had the typical petty thefts, and UAs. But, above and beyond the eight, he had two gambling ring cases, one sexual assault, that were it not for DiNozzo, the victim would have never come forward. And, he handled a case of autoerotic asphyxia gone wrong and kept it far more professional than I could have ever expected of any agent.”

He stared at Ziva hard. “What I’m stating here was that none of those cases were easy. And he handled them efficiently, expertly, and without any resources of a team. That tells me his ability as an investigator is second to none. Do the fallen metrics for the MCRT demonstrate DiNozzo’s’s impact? Beyond a doubt, yes.” His eyes narrowed. “And that is the opinion of myself and SecNav.”

Okay, he was lying. SecNav had no idea, nor would he know. He’d certainly back that DiNozzo was a greater asset than David. After all, a Federal Agent holding two Masters degrees that were focused on his job was more of an asset than a Israeli MOSSAD officer who was trained primarily for assassinations.

The reason Ziva was an asset was that as liaison to NCIS, she made it possible for Leon to gain intel from MOSSAD. Intel which helped raise the visibility of the agency within the network of ABCs. Did that make her more valuable than DiNozzo? No.

DiNozzo’s personal network was a marvel, one he hadn’t realized until SecNav had pounded it into him. He’d built that jock frat-boy reputation in boarding schools, meeting future movers and shakers of the financial world. His reach, as a result, was astonishing. His ability to get the attention of Interpol or MI6 was impressive. Did he replace MOSSAD’s intel? No. Though, he could have, if Morrow and Shepard had groomed him properly,

Likely, it was unknown just how far DiNozzo’s reach could go, and would remain so until it was too late. The man kept cards close to his chest.

“Bottom line,” Gibbs was saying, “Things are getting fixed NOW. I’m assigning new tasks to each of you, you’ll have the list tomorrow. Things DiNozzo has been doing for too long, but clearly he had good reason for not trusting to the pair of you. McGee -- requisitions and truck loading. Yours. David -- evidence logging and recording - yours. Also, effective immediately -- DiNozzo will review your reports, mark the corrections he’s wants, and hand ‘em back. He ain’t cleaning them up for you anymore.”

“He doesn’t…” Tim puffed up.

Gibbs slammed both hands on the table and fair near crawled over it to bellow in McGee’s face. “He DOES!” He roared. Color drained of McGee, and he fair near fainted.

“That man,” Gibbs snarled. “Routinely comes in two or three times a week after 2200 hours, and stays until 0200 cleaning up your reports. He shouldn’t have to… but it’s clear to him that you won’t edit what he hands back for editing unless I ram it down your throat. So, consider all your fucking case reports rammed until further notice! Now choke on it!”

All in all, Leon though, this was unlike any other team meeting he’d ever sat on before. And, absently he also made note that the annual sensitivity training he sent all his field teams on clearly wasn’t working.
December 4, 2008

There was a huge blue glob of paint in Christopher’s hair, nearly three inches above his left eye, dripping down on his forehead. It was a royal blue, and quite eye-catching in the kid’s soft brown hair.

“How did you do that?” Tony laughed, tilting Christopher’s face up to admire the blob. Carefully taking a paper-towel, he removed most of the paint from the kid’s head, laughing all the while at the damage done to the kids light brown hair. There was going to be a good scrub in the bath tonight, that was sure. “Were you helping Uncle Steve and Izzy paint?”

“Ya huh!” Christopher’s head bobbed. “I did good!” He said. “Unca Steve showed me how to put the paint on the brush, and where to put it on the wall.” He beamed happily. “And… Izzy put Pooh and Tigger and Eeyore and Cwistofer Wobin on my wall!”

“He has!” Tony exclaimed with a grin. “Well, I bet your room is gonna be awesome when it’s all done!” Tony pushed the boy towards the kitchen. A new booster seat was hooked into one of the kitchen chairs, the latest addition to the DiNozzo household. Tony lifted Christopher up with flourishing sound effects of an airplane, and plopped him into it, pleased at Christopher’s happy demeanor. Sliding the prepared plate with a chicken, lettuce and mustard sandwich as well as the vegetable sticks in front of the boy. “Eat your lunch.” He instructed.

The young boy fell onto his food like a ravenous beast, much to Tony’s delight. Tony grinned at the happy sounds Christopher made as he chomped on his sandwich, and turned away to pour the child a glass of almond milk. The container was getting low, he noted, and after putting a glass in front of the child, he made a note on the grocery list on the fridge to buy double up on her s next purchase of whole unblanched almonds.

Christopher served, Tony quickly made up six more sandwiches, these ones roast beef and montreal smoked meat with tomato, avocado, mustard, mayo and lettuce for Steve and Izzy, his slave laborers for the day. Setting them on the kitchen table, he pulled out a prepared salad, vinaigrette, a few bowls, tongs and forks and set the mess beside the plate of sandwiches. That done, he leaned out of the kitchen and bellowed, “LUNCH, GUYS!”

Christopher giggled, and impishly bounced in his seat, “You yelled in the house!” He chortled. “You gotta pay the piper!”

The house rules were the first thing he and Chris had laid down, seeing as Christopher was a permanent member. They were fairly simple, given the boy was so young.

1) Dirty clothes go in your hamper;
2) Toys are laid away in the toy box;
3) No climbing on tables, counters or standing on chairs;
4) No shouting in the house;
5) Unless playing a game with an adult, involving running there will be no running in the house;
6) If you are hungry, ask for a snack, if you are thirsty, ask for a drink;
8) Do not talk or go with strangers; and
9) If Tony leaves work things out they are not to be touched. Ever.

Christopher had shown a great understanding of the last two rules, to Tony’s relief. They had talked
about bad men and good guys. That Tony was a Federal Agent was too hard for the child to grasp, that Tony was a policeman was easy.

Christopher also understood Tony’s guns and knives were not toys, they were for work, and were never to be touched. Even if he was curious, he was not to touch them. Hopefully, the need for the rule would never come up. Tony was rather diligent about laying such weapons securely away. He’d just be more so in near future.

“Yeah, I did shout, didn’t I? Bad me.” Tony agreed, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Good job, Christopher. A dollar goes into the penalty jar!” He pulled a dollar out of his pocket, and shoved it into the big glass jar with the sticky note reading “movie fund / penalty jar” on the counter.

The sound of a toilet flushing, and a sink running preceded Steve’s arrival. “Hey, squirt’s already eating? How is that fair when me and Izz did all the work?” He griped, winking at Christopher.

“Shut it.” Tony ordered. He wanted Christopher to eat regular full meals, and he needed no negativity about the boy’s eating habits. “Where’s….”

Izzy trailed in, scratching at paint on his hands that hadn’t come off with soap and water. “You got a scrub brush in this place, DiNo?” He grumbled. “I got a date tonight, and can’t look paint splattered.”

“Should have worn the gloves I provided.” Tony said calmly, opening the fridge to pull out three beers. He twisted off the caps, and set a beer down in front of his two friends. “Look at it this way, women love a guy that’s a do it himself type.”

The sour glare spoke volumes. “DiNo… despite my artistic leanings, I am an investment banker -- not a grunt -- I have minions.”

Tony served himself up a roast beef, and sat across from Christopher, beside Steve. “Relax, Izz… I have a small bottle of cleaner we use for crime-scene… stuff. It’ll clean anything. I’ll pull it out when we’re done. What do we have left?”

“Baseboard, and trim around window.” Steve answered. “Then clean-up. Walls should be dry enough by later this afternoon that a brush contact won’t damage them or cause transfer.”

“I need to finish a few finer details in the mural.” Izzy added. “But, no more than an hour more.”

“Cool.” Tony smiled, absently noticing Christopher was playing with the carrots on his plate. He rose quickly and dug into his fridge for some cherry tomatoes he’d bought at Whole Foods. “Try these, Christopher.” He said, scattering a few on his plate.

Experimentally, the boy took one, popped it in his mouth, and bit down. The sudden “Eeew” look, gave way to a ‘hmmm’, and then a final approval. Tentatively, he tried a second.

“The new furniture arrives sometime between fifteen hundred and eighteen hundred hours.” Tony carried on. “I paid for assembly.” He added. If the furniture showed up towards the later end of the window, he sure didn’t want to be frantically putting things together long after Christopher should have been abed.

Izzy blinked, doing the mental math. “Why can’t you tell time like a normal guy?” He asked plaintively. “So, between three and six. Got it. And those guys doing the assembly are the people we professionals call minions -- labourers to do the grunt work for you at a fee.” Izzy tipped his fork at him, a spear of red-pepper on the end, “That is the process by which the modern metrosexual male handles life. He hires minions.”
Tony glared. “Ixnay exualsay stuff.”

Izzy’s brown eyes went wide. “Seriously, DiNo? Seriously? You of all people, YOU are telling me to… Oh God… What has this kid done to you? Christopher, you broke Tony of all his super-bachelor stuff. He was the true living GOD of the single male, Christopher -- what have you done?” The tone was teasing, words light, but the confusion shone in Chris’ eyes.

Tony rolled his eyes, “Christopher, do you remember when I introduced you to Izzy this morning? What did I tell you?”

“He’s gonna say weird things, and to ignore the weird things, cause weird things won’t make any sense. Izzy just says weird things.” Chris parroted back. The kid’s memory was awesome.

“Very good.” Tony grinned cheekily at Izzy, “This was him being weird, Christopher. Izzy is just jealous that I have an awesome little boy living with me.” Tony finished serenely. “A little boy who’s getting a new bed, and a new toy box, and a new bookcase today after his new bedroom is painted.”

Those three things reawakened Christopher’s excitement for his new room, and Izzy was promptly forgotten. “An I can put all my toys and books in them?”

“Yes, you can.” Tony reached across to nudge the plate. “But, first we have to finish painting and cleaning up. And we can’t do that if you don’t finish your carrot sticks.”

The little nose scrunched up in distaste, but like a good boy, especially one who had clearly been deprived food for much of his young life, he ate his carrot sticks, making faces the entire time.

“Good work.” Tony praised, standing up and going to the new cookie jar on his countertop. He lifted the shiny aluminium lid, and reached in the clear jar for a cookie. A quick glance at Christopher, and he could see wide-eyed hope. “Yeah, you little monkey…” He affirmed, bringing the cookie over and depositing it on Christopher’s plate. “That’s your reward for eating all your lunch.”

If he thought the kid had fallen on the sandwich with enthusiasm, he was a veritable cookie monster with the way he devoured his chocolate chip treat. Steve and Izzy were finishing up their own meals, and carrying beers with them as they retreated back to the second bedroom of Tony’s apartment.

Tony detoured to the washroom to help Christopher wash his hands and brush his teeth, before joining them. Three of the four walls were painted a very vibrant “Athens Blue”, softened by a soft grey area rug over dark stained walnut floors. The white trim around the windows and on the baseboards really made the walls pop. On the fourth wall, a mural emerged from the top of the wall, where the blue was dominant, down. Give Izzy his due, but the man was a skilled painter. He’d paid for college as a painter, and specialized in murals like this.

Those days were long in the past, but the skills clearly lasted.

Winnie the Pooh rode on an ark, on sunshine filled waters, with all his friends. Pooh held a spyglass and appeared to be looking towards the bedroom as if it was land a-hoy.

Christopher had been kept out of his bedroom for most of the morning, and had only seen the emerging image an hour ago, when he and Tony had gotten back from their errands. He’d been utterly gobsmacked, but Steve, showing the deft experienced skills of an Uncle, had gotten the little boy a small brush, and set him to work immediately.

The room was going to be perfect for a young child. Not so good for an adolescent, but they had years before that time came. Realistically, Tony expected to be moving before then, but for now, this
apartment and this room was all that was needed to create a haven for the little boy.

“Looks great, guys.” He said, as Christopher, not quite running, hustled over to the carefully covered paint trays, eager to start again. Mercifully, Steve got to the tray before Chris could uncover it.

“Uh huh, short-stuff. We’re done painting the walls.” He laughed at the boy. “Why don’t you get Tony to put a movie on. You can’t reach the things we need to paint now, so I guess that means you get to sit in the living room and listen for the delivery guys.”

The pout was epic, but Tony had a way to squash that. “I think there’s a new movie in my bag, you know. It might be another movie about Christopher Robin and Pooh…”

The pout vanished, and Christopher bounced. “Really?” Eyes were lit with shining excitement.

“Really.” Tony nodded. “But, if you aren’t in the living room, you can’t watch…”

It wasn’t quite a run, but it wasn’t far off.

“I’se here! I’se here! I see the tv now!” Christopher called out.

Steve chuckled. “You better get that movie on, bud. Or he’s likely to run back in here and drag you out there.”

Snickering, Tony made his way to the living room, finding his new ward sitting on his knees, bouncing on the middle cushion of his sofa. Pooh, which Christopher had wisely relocated there so he wouldn’t get covered in paint, was already firmly wrapped in his arms.

“Ready?” Tony teased.

Big eyes accompanied a big nod. “I is!” He affirmed.

“Okay, then….” Tony turned on the TV, and queued the DVD he’d inserted that morning before Christopher had woken up. “Here we go.” And just like that, the boy was sucked into the wonderful world of animation. Tony grinned, and stuck the DVD controller on top of the TV, safely out of the child’s reach.

Returning to the room where work was in progress, Tony grabbed a pair of neoprene gloves, and snapped them on.

“Brush and the paint is ready for ya, T.” Steve said, pointing to a clean brush sitting on the bed of a small paint-tray. “I’ll finish the window trim, if you’ll start on the baseboards.”

The baseboards had been pried off, and set on three workhorses. Taking brush, and paint, Tony got to work. They weren’t in bad condition, but it’d been a long time since they’d been painted, and a touch up never hurt.

“So, the squirt is settling in good, it seems.” Steve commented, moving from the right side of the window to left, and reaching to the top.

“He… is.” Tony agreed. “I’m actually surprised how well he’s adjusting. He was hysterical just two days ago, Steve. Like, seriously, freaked out terrified and screaming bloody murder. And yet, today…” His voice trailed off.

Steve grunted. “Kids can be like that. He slept okay last two nights?”

Tony carefully loaded his brush. “Yeah, well.” He frowned. “Nightmare the first night. I let him
“Sleep with me.”

“And last night?” Steve prodded.

“Fine. Stayed in here, quiet as a mouse.” Tony shrugged. As he was only on the fifth chapter on his Ages and Stages book, and desperately trying not to use it like it was an encyclopedia to refer to, but rather read the whole book.

“You think he had a nightmare and didn’t tell you.” Izzy guessed.

Tony stayed quiet, not really sure how to answer. The truth was, he didn’t know. He was pretty sure he’d handled Christopher well enough the first night… but what if he hadn’t?

“You’re overthinking things.” Steve decided. “You do this too much, Tony. Geezus.” He folded his arms, and glared at him, the look ruined by the white tipped paintbrush in his hand, and the paint-splattered sweatshirt he was wearing. “You overthought the plays during your college ball days. Overthought your future, when you were laid up in hospital. Overthought the whole Daytona trip -- which on reading week is supposed to be impulse!” He shook his head. “Remember when Wendy dumped you? Three months you over-analyzed what went wrong. We all told you, she went nuts, but oh no -- it was something about you, or something you said, and then tried to analyze what it could be. Thirty-seven times you called me between two and four in the morning…”

“What Steve is trying to say here is… kids are literal creatures. If he’s upset, he’ll let you know.” Izzy concluded, his tone the same one used on a spooked dog. Carefully he painted fine lines in brown-black hue on the Ark, making the brown of the boat into wood planks. “You keep your emotions in, we all know that. He’s too young; he hasn’t learned to use that tactic yet.”

“Says the Investment Banker.” Tony muttered.

“So says the Investment Banker.” He agreed. “And lo, one should always follow a wise Investor Banker’s advice.” He changed brushes, and went for a fine yellow, and added some highlights along one side of his work. “You do know,” He added absently, “When he’s grown out of this phase, you know you’re gonna have to sand the wall down to paint over it.”

“No, I hire minions to do it.” Tony argued. “I didn’t hire this time, because I couldn’t get minions within the week. But, I could get you two.”

“Ahh, so nice to be needed.” Steve drawled.

It took the hour, but they got the painting done. Tarps were carefully rolled, paint was carefully drained back into cans, and taken out of the room lest there be accidents. And though the baseboards had to dry, and were still sitting on easels, Tony was impressed with the end product.

“I’ll leave the hammer and white nails on the kitchen table.” Steve told him. “You do know how to put up baseboards, right?”

“Well, I’ve got Youtube, if I should be in doubt.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’ll come over next Saturday with the woodfill, and fix your mess.” He decided.

Tony beamed. “It’ll be flawless.”

“HA!” Steve took the used paint brushes to the kitchen sink, and began cleaning them, the white paint drenching out from the brush to cloud the stainless steel basin. He separated the bristles, and
worked more of the paint out from top to bottom. “If it’s flawless, I owe you a case of beer. If I have to fix it, you owe me.” He gambled.

“You’re on.” Tony grinned, evilly anticipating the outcome of this bet. Eight weeks with Habitat for Humanity -- he knew how to put up baseboards that would make Home Makeover envious.

Izzy joined them, his collection of art brushes already cleaned in the bathroom sink. The paint he’d used wasn’t quite like the typical interior eggshell, and thus, with the paint cleaner he had, took less time to clean up. “You have something to remove the paint from my personage?” He poked with one of the clean brushes at Tony.

Tony opened the small cupboard above his stove, and pulled down the two plain containers of cleaner that Abby had gifted him with so many moons ago. Finding a fresh roll of paper towels, and the nail brush he kept in the kitchen, he set the cleansers, nail brush and towels on the counter. “Just dab a little bit on the towel or brush, and rub it gently on your skin.” He instructed. “It’s really powerful, so you won’t need much.”

Leaving them to their cleaning, he poured a glass of water for Christopher, and quickly diced an apple, tossing the apple bits into a bowl. His ward was firmly enraptured in the feature length film, and barely noticed when his guardian set the drink and snack down. Tony laughed quietly to himself, watching Christopher’s rosebud little mouth open and make silent “Ohhhs” as things happened on the screen.

The kid was just way too funny.

He returned to the kitchen after a few moments, content with Christopher’s distraction. “All good in here?” He asked, sauntering in, hands fisted in the pockets of his worn old jeans.

“Done.” Izzy announced. “Damn good stuff, DiNo.”

“It gets blood, decomposed body fluids and gunshot residue out.” He said in agreement.

Izzy shook his head, even as Steve groaned. “Man, seriously, you overshare all the wrong things.”

****

He’d scarcely gotten the baseboards up in time. As it was, the walls were mostly dry, at least on the surface, even if the room still reeked of paint.

The furniture was delivered by three guys. Three big guys. Three huge giant black men who looked like they bench pressed muscle cars for hobbies -- Tony had instinctively wanted to point out, he had no issue about ethnicity, but figured that announcement would fall flat and defensive. Still, what really freaked him out was that he knew, instinctively, these three guys would slaughter him on a basketball course. They were huge! Giants! The hoop had to be beneath their chins!

They were polite, totally agreed to set up without touching freshly painted walls (and the biggest of the trio gushed at the Winnie the Pooh mural), but mostly, these guys were really efficient. His new mattress and box spring was brought up in one trip. The old mattress and box spring (Steves) was taken down and out. Another trip up saw Chris’ new bed-frame and dresser surface. All that was left was the Tony’s new bed frame, Christopher’s new bedside tables, toy box, children’s table and chair set, and bookcase.

So, of course, it was in the middle of all this chaos of new deliveries that Director Vance and Mrs. Vance would come knocking at his door. Tony stared blankly as his uber-boss tucked tight against the wall as Hulk 1 barrelled past with the bookcase. Hulk 2 followed with two of the three bedside
tables, one tucked under each arm.

“Redecorating, DiNozzo?” Vance asked with an eyebrow raised. His wife, the far more prettier and socially palatable Vance in the room elbowed her husband, and pushed past. The Director rolled his eyes, but followed his spouse.

“Oh wow, Agent DiNozzo -- you’ve got something growing out of your leg? It’s big! Have you seen a doctor? I think I’ve heard about these things... these little things growing out of people’s legs... it’s called... oh, let me think... Christopher?” Jackie Vance asked with a smile.

Tony looked down at his leg in askeance. From the moment the delivery guys showed up with the new furniture, Christopher had glommed onto him, hesitantly peeking out from behind the shelter of his leg as each man came in, left and entered again. Each time one of the men so much as glanced towards the little peeping Tom, the child ‘eeped’ and hid his head behind Tony. “Fraid so.” The child’s guardian laughed. “It’s a really recent condition. But I don’t think I need a doctor just yet.” Tony jiggled his leg, and got a soft giggle.

Jackie tsked, her eyes dancing in amusement. “You sure about that? You might need surgery to get that growth off.”

Tony grinned. “Nah.” He scoffed, reaching down with one hand to grab the back of Christopher’s jeans. He heaved, and the child flew up in the air, to be caught, carefully, but caught all the same, and came to rest on Tony’s hip. The heavy yellow cast falling behind Tony, and the child now upright and facing their guests. “It’s like velcro, you know. Just got to rip the growth off. Hey, Christopher,” He bounced the child in his arms, “This is my boss, Director Vance. And, the nice lady is his wife, Mrs. Vance.”

There was no mistaking the wariness in Christopher’s eyes, even after two full days back in Tony’s care, the fear he’d be sent away was still present.

Mercifully, Jackie was a well experienced mama. “Hi Christopher! it’s so nice to meet you!” She began with a smile and a little wave. “When I learned that Agent DiNozzo had a little boy living with him, I told my little boy... And when my little boy, whose name is Jared, heard that you were moving in with Agent DiNozzo, he thought you might like some of the toys that he says he’s too grown up to play with anymore.” Her smile was warm and engaging, and she gave him that secretive look, one hand to the side of her mouth as she fake-whispered, “He’s very silly like that.”

Christopher’s thumb went straight for his mouth, and Tony huffed. “No.” He patiently told the child, pulling the hand away. “We don’t suck on our fingers. You’ll ruin your teeth.”

This made the Director bark a laugh, and drew Christopher’s attention to the man. Again, going shy, he tucked his head against Tony’s chest, and let the hand that Tony had removed from his mouth, instead reach to fist at Tony’s shirt.

Jackie’s smile softened at the shy child’s response, and she pushed forward one of the two big bags that the Vances had brought with them. Opening the bag wide, she pulled out a large Fisher Price firehouse toy, and then the figures and vehicles that went with it. “Jared thought you might like this, Christopher.”

The child was leaning forward, his balance precarious in Tony’s arm, because he was nearly in a free-fall trying to look at the new toy. As it was, Tony was grateful he was still wearing an older t-shirt -- the fabric was straining under Chris’ grip. He lowered the boy to the ground, giving his bum a light tap. “Say thank you,” He reminded the child. “And maybe Mrs. Vance will show you how that works.”
There was a half step forward. “Tank you.” He nearly whispered, but his gaze was in the right place, up at Mrs. Vance and Director Vance respectively.

“You’re very welcome, Christopher.” Mrs. Vance assured him, before administering a sharp elbow into Director Vance’s gut. “Isn’t he, Leon?” She asked somewhat archly.

“Oh... yeah. You’re welcome. And, um...” Leon looked in askance at his wife. “We, have some other things for you, Christopher. But I’ll have your...” His gaze settled on Tony, even if he was seeking some answer. Tony had no idea what he was looking for, truthfully. “Guardian,” He finally decided. “Go through the bags with you later.”

Christopher checked with Mrs. Vance and got the nod that yes, her doofus husband was correct. And yes, everything was for Christopher. “Tank you.” He repeated.

“You’re very welcome. Would you like to play with the firehouse?” Jackie crouched down, one hand reaching out to delicately touch the toy. Her expression was inviting, encouraging the boy to approach the toy himself.

Christopher looked up at Tony, who nodded. “Go ahead.” Tony encouraged the child.

Mercifully, the child’s curiosity could bear no more. And he did move closer, keeping on the far side of the toy away from Mrs. Vance, but still able to reach long and touch the toy.

“This is Eddy.” She told the child, showing him the fireman. “He is a fireman, and this is his dog Spot.” Then, carefully, she showed him the car, and how the emergency elevator worked. Chris, by this time, was on his bum, inching forward in little bumps, and taking it all in.

Vance, meanwhile, slid over to where Tony was indulgently watching. “While Jackie and Christopher play, could we talk for a few minutes.”

Tony arched an eyebrow, “Sure. But, if it’s confidential, wait until the delivery guys go. They are doing set-up to, so...”

The Director nodded, eyes straying towards where the sound of adults at work could be heard. “Never paid for assembly myself.” He admitted.

Tony shrugged. “I’m a spoiled rich kid.” He admitted. “I don’t see the point of not paying for a service if it’s offered, when my time could be better spent keeping Christopher occupied. Far better option than going nuts trying to follow poorly written directions.”

Vance nodded, “Good point.” He nodded over to the piano, “Let’s talk a little ways towards the windows, then.” He suggested. “It’s not confidential, but since you’re off this week, I thought you might use the time to think about the opportunities and decide what you want to do.”

Tony nodded, turned and walked over towards the baby grand, nestled beside the eastern facing window, his fingers gently skimming the wood as he walked up to it, the swelling warmth of fond memories filling him for a moment, before turning to face the Director.

The older man’s eyes roamed over the piano, no doubt noting small details that denoted it’s age and value. It was a rosewood Victorian Steinway, a beautiful old piano that his mother, a skilled concert pianist, had trained on. It was one of the few of her possessions that had survived his father’s financial demise. And, it was one of her possessions she had earmarked in her will for her son.

“You play?” Director Vance asked absently.
Tony nodded. “Yeah. I… didn’t have a healthy relationship with my parents, Director. But, one memory I do have of my mother, before she became ill, is of her and I sitting down at this piano, and my mother teaching me to play. I kept up with lessons after she died, and made a point of hiring a piano teacher through my tour of boarding schools and college.”

“Nice.” The Director’s eyes swept over the piano again, possibly seeing a young boy with his mother beside him on the bench, learning scales. “A good memory to keep. I suppose you’ll be teaching Christopher how to play?”

The slanted smile, and the fond look Tony tossed the boy was answer enough. But, still, “Once his arm is out of that cast. It’ll actually be good exercise for the arm as the muscles strengthen.”

“Hmm.” The Director nodded. “Well… as interesting as a discussion on pianos and pianists would be, before my wife decides to run off with your boy, let’s get to business. I spoke to you about the three teams you could take over in Spain, Hawaii and Miami. And I mentioned Gibbs offer to you of the expanded MCRT.”

Tony nodded. “I don’t know that the expanded MCRT is a good idea, now that I’m responsible for a child. If I were injured in the line of duty -- Chris falls back into the system.”

“Understood.” Leon nodded, grimacing. “Gibbs won’t like that, but it is a pragmatic reality to concern you. And one of the leading reasons why I went the political root. I was injured once, after Kayla was born. That was it. I wasn’t putting my family through that grief when I was the primary breadwinner. But before you toss it out altogether, if it is of any interest to you, talk to Gibbs about what you perceive as the problems, and see what answers you both might come up with.”

“Okay. But, that same argument can’t be applied to the team lead positions. I don’t have a potential option to alleviate the concern there.” Tony sighed, shaking his head as he went through his options. “And I don’t know that CPS would be impressed if I tried to move Christopher to Hawaii or Miami. I definitely couldn’t take him to a US military base in a foreign country, like Spain.”

“Agreed.” Vance smiled slightly. “So, that brings me to my last offers, which has grown since we spoke on Tuesday. First: over the past six years the West Coast OSP has been handling all the SI work for all of continental US. We never expected, when the office of special investigations was formed that their caseload volume would run as high as it does. They’ve recently had a flurry of work that has sent the team into Hawaii, Singapore, and the Middle East. After budget considerations, the SecNav and I are prepared to set up a East Coast OSP, and given your experience, expertise and knowledge of the east coast, and undercover work, you are being offered the position of Operations Manager, reporting into Assistant Director Granger.” Vance drummed his fingers lightly on the rosewood top of the baby grand. “Two more teams are being formed for the West coast OSP, and I’d like to see four teams formed on the East coast. As the Ops Manager, you would remain in-office, except in situations of meetings with me, an Assistant Director or SecNav.”

Tony rubbed his jaw. “There would be long-hours there. Where would it be located? I have to consider daycare arrangements for Christopher until he’s school-age, and then possibly a nanny once he’s in primary.”

“We were thinking New York.” Leon laid his hands flat on the piano top, even as DiNozzo walked around the other side of the piano and slid out the bench before sitting. “But, before you give much more thought there, here’s my personal counter-proposal, and your second option outside of the team leads. I’ve run this past SecNav and he has approved this too. We both agree, your undercover experience is exceptional, but beyond that what I’ve notice having reviewed your files is your ability juggle multiple balls, and the clarity of your reports. You have an excellent relationship with all teams in the DC, Los Angeles, and international offices, and I’ve had several Senior Field Officers or
Senior Agents in Charge come to me concerned for your future in wake of what all have seen as fallout on the MCRT.” Vance shook his head. “Frankly, I never want to be in the position where Hetty Lange calls me to discuss your future. Christ, I felt like my mother was calling me on the carpet. God awful. So. Before Hetty can reach you with whatever plan SHE comes up with -- I want to bring you in as Chief Operations Officer. That would have you reporting into me, and overseeing the investigative division, and leave the administration and political landscape in my hands. I liken the position to that of a Homicide Captain reporting into the Chief of Police.”

Tony blinked. “A paper pusher?”

Vance shook his head. “Not really. If I want paper pushed, I have The Assistant Directors like Granger for that. That man is as anal as they get. No. What I want is someone to handle the teams. Ensure their caseloads are fair, give them extra manpower, or find them the vetted specialists they need if the case warrants it. I need someone to keep an eye on the field offices and their case reports. Honestly, I’m not sure we need an office in Paris. They averaged five cases in the past six months. Rota could expand and handle that.”

Tony frowned, reaching out to the piano absently and running his left hand through a series of scales. “How involved in investigations would I get?”

“Very.” Vance leaned forward. “Essentially, while you wouldn’t be out in the field, and could structure your working hours as you see fit, meeting the minimum requirements of a 35 hour work week, and not to exceed a 60 hour work week, what I need someone who can keep tab of multiple cases and prioritizing to keep the high profile cases at the top of their tracking, and develop a better investigative operation, moving cases or people to a different team if need be. To see the problems in teams, and get it fixed. I can’t spend the time scrutinizing the individuals on teams, and sometimes the Senior Agent is too close to see a problem in dynamics. Also, currently, I sign off on all final case reports -- and in some cases, I wish I hadn’t. Some of the reports are in desperate need of re-write -- they won’t hold up in court. And perhaps it’s because I can’t give the due diligence on everything the way they require, that things like what you found with the US Bainbridge case, and the missing surveillance footage wouldn’t happen.”

Tony frowned, his brow furrowing as he considered what the director was saying. “Okay.” He ran few more scales, more unconscious than conscious of what he was physically doing, as his mind worked. “Dispatch then falls under the bailiwick of the Chief Operations Officer, I’m guessing?”

Vance nodded, fascinated with watching the process of DiNozzo’s thought processing. Actually, truth be told, the entire visit to DiNozzo’s apartment was an eye-opening experience. It wasn’t the Playboy Pad he’d always envisioned. Rather, the Special Agent had designed for himself a rather elegant and refined space, with high walls, ornate crown moulding, elegant light fixtures, and walls painted in neutral but warm colors.

The furniture couldn’t be mistaken for anything but high end, with quality being the preference over fashion. The sofa, a well tailored leather piece, with two loveseats cornering it, and a large 70” screen mounted hdtv on the wall, framed by custom mahogany cabinetry with glass doors. Reams of movies were on display behind the doors, but so too were books. Many of the books intellectual and academic materials.

The flooring wasn’t the usual parque found in most apartments, but hardwood -- maple, if Vance wasn’t mistaken. It harmonized well with the rest of the decor, and held a shine that spoke of care and attention to not damaging his floors. The piano occupied the space a dining table might have been placed, but given a relatively small kitchen, he didn’t see entertaining for dinners being a priority in DiNozzo's home.
"What about investigations run by the Assistant Directors?" Tony asked, falling into playing a few notes on his piano, absentely, and gradually drifting into playing a sonata… Chopin sonata no. 2, Vance thought. He wasn’t an expert on piano, but his daughter was in lessons, and so… his repertoire was growing. DiNozzo was good. His fingering, and sense of dramatic timing was perfect, which was disgusting seeing as the man wasn’t giving any mind to what he was playing.

"You would be read in. Any teams they need would need your ok. I need them to take on more administrative duties at the field offices, and I have some big picture projects I want them to handle."

"Hmm. And the East Coast OSP? What would my responsibilities be there?"

"Same as Hetty Lange’s duties. I’d send you to her for three months training, but...." Vance folded his arms, and glared down at his agent. "You aren’t paying a lick of attention to what you’re playing, are you?" He finally burst out grumpily.

Tony looked down at his hands, and abruptly stilled, earning a loud and sudden chorus of disappointed shouts from Jackie, and the three Hulks assembling the furniture in Christopher’s room. Cringing, Tony quickly resumed playing, switching up to ragtime tunes and mixing them up.

"Nope." He flashed a grin. "I wasn't."

Vance rolled his eyes.

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The beaming smile, and pure glee dancing in Rachel Cranston’s eyes was, oddly enough, terrifying to him. She looked the most like her sister in that moment. Her lower lip was sucked under her front teeth, as she tried to quell the wide smile, and her head shook with suppressed laughter.

“What?” Tony asked plaintively, as he walked back into the kitchen, the bedtime book read, and one little boy tucked into his bed for the night. He tilted his head forward and gave his his t-shirt and jeans a once-over, looking for some sign of mess or mishap. “Do I have something on me?”

She laughed. “No. Oh, Tony, he’s adorable!” She crooned, speaking obviously of Christopher who she had met for the first time tonight. “But, the Daddy Tony routine? Thomas the Train, done with proper English voices… I want you to know, my sister is SPINNING like a top in her grave! I swear it!”

“Hush you!” He scolded with mock annoyance. “How can you speak of your sister like that? She’s not spinning, there’s nothing to spin about!” Truthfully, Caitlin was probably in heaven, pissing herself with laughter.

She nodded, but her grin said she disagreed. “Oh, right. Sure. Nothing at all. Her partner, the eternal X-rated Peter Pan having transformed into a super-daddy for the most adorable munchkin… nothing at all for her to spin about.”

Tony rolled his eyes heavenward, and turned to walk into his kitchen. Fetching two mugs down from the upper cabinet, he poured two cups of coffee, seasoning Rachel’s the way he remembered she liked, before doing his own. “Here. Have some caffeine, and get your blood to caffeine levels back to even keel. Maybe then you’ll be rational and tell me what Dr. Cranston thinks of Christopher.”

She’d arrived a little after dinner had been finished, when Tony had been in the head with Christopher, working on teaching the kid to brush his teeth. Christopher had the mechanics down, but was too impatient to do it thoroughly. It was clearly something he’d have to work on with the
Teeth brushed, and Rachel prowling around his living-room, and Christopher prepped for bed in his jammies with the book of the night picked, Tony then introduced Rachel to Christopher before making himself scarce so that Rachel could do her thing. He didn't leave the apartment, but rather, he’d opted to finish cleaning the dishes and starting a pot of coffee, he’d put new linens on both the two new beds, and put Christopher’s clothing away neatly and with some thought to organization in the new chest of drawers. Lastly, he’d started laying away some of Christopher’s books on his bookshelf. The new toys and bags of clothes that the Vance family had donated were tossed in Tony’s room, waiting for him to go through it all.

Christopher’s bedroom was an entirely different world now, so far removed from the bachelor’s ‘office’ as it could be. The incredible mural Izzy had carefully painted was the highlight of the space, but Tony was very pleased with the quality of the stained oak furniture he’d selected for the little boy. It gave the space a more welcoming feel than just a mattress on a metal frame, and the trundle bed built into the new bed-frame meant that in a few years, when Christopher was older, he could have sleepovers in his room. Just looking over the furniture, he was glad that he’d chosen to spend more on quality, rather than on some funky “toy” bed that Christopher would quickly outgrow.

Like with the bed, he’d eschewed getting a cute Winnie-the-Pooh bed-spreads for the bed, or a lamp to sit on the bedside table, and instead, a sensible microfibre duvet with a simple blue case lay on the bed. Beside the bed, on the small child-height bedside table, a Groclock glowed softly. Thus far, Christopher waited until Tony called him in the morning, but he was sure that as Christopher embraced his new circumstances more and more, having him understand he couldn’t get out of bed until the clock was at the proper time was important. The Groclock didn’t teach time, per se, but it would certainly teach “day” and “night” to the little boy. Teaching Christopher to read time could happen gradually, later. The kid would have to learn numbers first.

But, what made Tony happiest about the room he’d hastily provided to the little boy was that it looked nothing like what the ostentatious 17th century canopied horror of his childhood bedroom. There were no monsters lurking under beds or in closets here.

At 8pm, he began to poke his head around the corner periodically, waiting until Rachel gave him the high sign that she was done before crossing Christopher’s line of sight. It was just a few minutes after his first head-pop-in that she gave him a smile and a wave.

His sleepy little boy was coloring a picture, awkwardly with his left hand, but Tony rightly read the tired eyes and slumping body for what it was. Tired as the kid was, it still took nearly forty minutes to put Christopher to bed.

Which was what brought him full circle to his unwanted personal session with Dr. Cranston.

“Uh huh. Oh, master-of-deflection -- how about you tell me how you feel about this big change in your life?” She countered.

He shrugged. “Not really that big a change,” He admitted. “I mean, to hear my teammates talk about things, Chris and I are about the same mental age.”

“HA!” She argued. “Because every emotional 3-year old sees someone in trouble, and changes their entire life to help that someone.” Sipping her coffee, she paused, and sipped again before giving a sigh of bliss. “I love how you only stock gourmet coffee. I’ll definitely do house-visits here.”

He frowned at her over his cup. “I only ever saw Cait drink tea…”
Rachel shrugged. “That was all part of her hyper healthy eating kick. I’m not to blame for that silliness. In college she drank coffee like any other self-respecting American.” Rachel took another indulgent sip, and set her mug down. “Okay, so, as you probably are very aware Christopher is a very shy little boy, with very understandable lacking experience in terms family dynamics. I can say beyond a doubt he was living without male presence in his life, and his mother was either severely postpartum, or deliberately neglectful.”

“She was probably sixteen when he was born.” He scratched his head. “Ran away at fourteen, and had been classified as missing for five years.”

Rachel winced, realizing the mother was as much a victim of things as the child. “Whatever the case may be, we agree that Christopher has not had any healthy parental experience. I’m pretty sure he self-taught many skills by way of observation. For example, he learned how to use a toilet, but didn’t know how to brush teeth. My guess is that he either wasn’t being diapered, or his diapers weren’t being changed regularly enough, so as he grew more cognizant of his world around him, he forced himself to find a solution. Were he an an older child, he would be less likely to rely on any adult for guidance or help.”

Tony winced. He was that older child. His saving grace? The staff of his parents house had instilled most of his lessons, but at eleven with such high turnovers in staff, Tony hadn’t trusted any adult in his father’s pay that crossed his path.

“Fortunately,” Rachel continued, “Christopher is only three. Most of his earlier memories are severely blunted. By the time he’s five, he won’t remember being ignored, or being hungry for days, or crying because his bum hurt from a dirty diaper. His memories of the night he was hurt will fade, and at best, he’ll remember feeling choked, but not being choked. Or that he broke his arm, but not how. All that he’ll recall will be impressions, things like perhaps as an adult, he’ll dislike having a tie around his neck because of that experience being choked.” She sipped her coffee, and put her thoughts back in order. “Instinctively he knows and accepts you as his protector, and defines you as the alpha in his world which is excellent, because if he couldn’t trust someone, we wouldn’t have a place to start from. My conclusion, we can get him past what he’s afraid of, and make him a very normal little boy in a very reasonable amount of time.”

“What about that fit he had at the foster-parents?” Tony asked, a finger stroking over the rim of his cup, as he listened and considered everything Rachel was saying. “I’m worried about daycare, or nannies, and having the same reactions. I understand the trigger can be a variable or nebulous factor. A smell. A color. A time of day.”

She waffled her head back and forth, considering the matter. “I don’t know, Tony. He’s currently shy, and overly cautious which is very unusual in a three year old. Like you said on the phone, he finds it hard to trust, but once trust is given, if not broken, it will be solid. That’s the connection you’re building right now.” Rachel chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Okay, so I do know it was a male that broke is arm, and tried to strangle him. I did try talking about how his arm got hurt, but like it was for you, it’s too painful a subject for him. He would, however, draw how it happened.”

Tony’s eyebrow arched. He’d seen the picture Christopher had been working on. Okay, maybe not ‘seen’, but certainly glanced at. “You got all that out of the scribbles?” He asked, somewhat incredulously. As far as he’d seen, it was a series of circles and sticks and funky colors.

Her eyes sparkled, “Yup. I’m a professional. Psychiatrist compared to you clumsy psychologists.”

“Dear god… it’s a Masters in Psychology. Don’t go giving me a doctorate. And, you’re a big fan of
Picasso too, aren’t you?” He retorted.

“I’d be a big fan of owning a Picasso, but prefer Renoir…” She grinned cheekily. “Seriously, I have two girls. And after years of my fridge being plastered in those scribbles, yes, I can understand their art -- especially when they explain it to me.”

Tony huffed. “You could have said he explained it from the start.”

“Where’s the mystique of the psychiatrist in that?” She retorted. “You have to learn, padawan, if you wish to compete with me.”

Tony rolled his eyes heavenwards. Sisters? Really? Couldn’t Cait have been an only child? God help him, Cait had pushed every button he had, did Rachel have to do the same?

“Next steps?” He pushed.

“Keep doing what you’re doing. Sure, it’s not the traditional nuclear family, but really, that tradition has fallen by the wayside in modern society. Give him attention, care, fun, teach him new things, make sure he’s fed and getting enough sleep. Talk to him. Listen to him.” She ticked things off on her right hand, “Encourage him. If he cries, comfort him. Empower him.”

“And if he faces what terrified him?”

“That’s going to naturally disappear from active memory.” She reassured. “As long as he associates you with safety and protection, you’ll be his knight in shining armor when faced with what he fears.”

Tony rubbed his forehead. He had a headache coming on. Shrinks did that to him. “Are you sure?”

Rachel’s head tilted forward, eyes earnest. “I have proof.” She told him. “Did he not calm down when you picked him up on Wednesday morning?”

Tony frowned. “Yeah, but...”

“He was in the middle of a huge episode. He was surrounded by EMTs, the foster parents, and the CPS agent. And you walked in and he settled down immediately. In his little mind, you can slay the dragon.”

Tony’s lip curled, thinking about that morning. Christopher’s sheer terror, his screams, had haunted his dreams since then. And Rachel thought that his memories of what had terrified him would disappear? It boggled his mind.

“So, maintain status quo.”

“Pretty much.” She agreed. “You’re going to have challenges -- every parent does. Daycare, for example. He’s not going to like being separated, but make sure you are patient with him, set boundaries and realistic goals, and he’ll be okay.”

“Okay then.”

“And I’ll have a session with him every Wednesday.” She finished.

He frowned, “I thought you said to maintain the status quo and he’d be fine in time. Now you’re saying he needs sessions?”

She rolled her eyes. “My girls are teens now, Tony. They aren’t cute anymore. I love them, but really... I can’t wait for them to grow up and go to college. Christopher is cute. I’ll babysit him on
Wednesday nights so you can do you Coach thing. I’ll get little boy cuddles and watch kiddy movies, and work out his issues. You can go throw balls around. It’s perfect.”
Spiders and Bears

Friday December 5th - 7am

Pulling into the security checkpoint to the agency’s secure parking lot, Tony knew instantly that it was going to be an epic circus of a day. He brow furrowed in consternation, watching as he cleared the checkpoint, the guard practically a giraffe craning his neck to peer into the backseat of Tony’s car. His curiosity so rampantly on display that Tony had no doubt said security guard had pounced on his phone the second Tony’s window rolled back up, and he pulled into the lot.

It didn’t take a professional detective to figure out who the guard was calling, or what the subject was about. After all, it wasn’t everyday that Special Agent DiNozzo, Senior Field Agent of the MCRT, playboy extraordinaire, showed up with a little boy happily singing away in a child’s car seat mounted in his car. Well, that and the fact that Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo was actually singing with the kid, teaching children’s poems to the munchkin.

“And the itsy bitsy spider went up the…” Tony decided stubbornly to ignore what he knew was going on in the building, and continued to sing, pausing every so often to give Christopher opportunity and encouragement to fill the blank spots.

“WARER SPOUT!” Christopher merrily shouted out.

“And down came the rain, and…”

“WASHED DA SPIDER OUT!”

He was, Tony thought with a grin, getting really good at these games. His retention for the rhymes was terrific. “Out came the sun, and dried…”

“ALL DA RAIN!”

Tony pulled to his usual spot and turned the car in, shutting off the engine once he was parked, and turning to finish the rhyme. “And the itsy bitsy spider….”

“WHEN UP DA SPOUD AGAN!”

Okay, so Christopher’s enunciation wasn’t perfect, and his ability to carry a tune needed a lot of work, but his little heart and soul poured the words out. “Good show, Christopher! We’re here.”

The kid peered up, and tried to see more from the window. “Hewe?”

“This is where I work, buddy.”

The child blinked. Work, Tony knew, was a new concept. Most of the things Chris was being exposed to were terribly new, but like any curious child, he rolled, with only a few hiccups, at the new opportunity for exploration. Opening the passenger door of his two-door Cadillac ATS-V, he sourly considered getting rid of the two door and going for a four-door sedan seeing as he now had a child to care for folding the seat forward all the time would likely get vexing, especially as Christopher became more independent. Tony sighed, putting the thought on his mental to-do list even as he reached to undo the buckles holding Chris in the child-safe seat. “Do you have your backpack?” He asked, easily spotting the vibrant and shiny Cars backpack sitting beside Chris.

Truthfully, considering they were only here today to register Christopher and give him a tour of the
day-care, neither he or Tony really needed to bring their backpacks today. But, Tony thought it best to start teaching Christopher to be in the habit of being prepared for daycare, and eventually, school.

“Yup!” The bag, fisted in the boy’s hand by the long straps would drag on the ground, and since Pooh was stuffed in there with his indoor running shoes and spare mitts, Tony took it from Christopher’s hands, and carefully helped the child put the bag on his back properly. Fetching his own bag, he deliberately and exaggeratedly did the same, Christopher’s hazel eyes watching him avidly. Much like with training the probies, it was easier to demonstrate and teach, rather than to simply lecture on how to wear a backpack on properly.

The crowd at the door was growing, Tony spared them a brief scowl, reaching for Christopher’s hand, and shut the car door. He set the alarm as he and the little boy walked away from the vehicle. “Did you like the strawberries this morning?” He asked Christopher, hoping to distract the child from the crowd gathering at the entrance. Rubberneckers. The lot of them.

The boy nodded, wide-eyed. “Yeth!”

“And is your tummy full?” He goaded, patting his own tummy. “Mine is very, very full.”

“Me vewy full too!” Christopher told him. “Cwistofer liked the scambled eggs in a sandwich too.” The poor kid had struggled mightily through the toasted breakfast sandwich, only able to eat half of it, plus his small fruit salad that made up his breakfast. His appetite was improving, as was his ability to eat, but it was by inches, not leaps.

“Good!” Tony cheered. “I really liked it too. Maybe we’ll have that again on the weekend.”

Christopher beamed. “Yay!”

“And tonight you get my very special lasagna to try.” Tony told him.

“La-sung-ga?” Christopher repeated carefully.

“Close. La-s-on-ya. You liked the spaghetti we had on Wednesday, right? The long string noodles and the red sauce?” Tony eyed the doors, very unhappy with what he was seeing.

“Yup. Getti! Me liked getti lots!” Tony helped Christopher navigate the curb, and pulled open the glass doors to the main entrance of the Agency.

“Well, lasagna is kind of like that.” He told the boy, even as he sent a scowl, worthy of Gibbs in a temper, searing around the room with the goal of lighting people on fire. “If you people don’t have work to do, I can find something incredibly smelly, ugly and strongly resembling a dumpster for you to do.” He stated sternly to the gathered crowd, some blatantly risking his ire as the took pictures via cellphones.

There was a mad scurry, and most vanished. A few, those mad brave few, lingered but kept out of his way. His wrath couldn’t touch them, seeing as they held positions of Agent in Charge, or security roles, and Tony had no power over them.

Unfortunately, the scattering didn’t happen fast enough, or well enough to ease Christopher’s growing tension. For whatever reason, perhaps it was the number of people still around, or the unfamiliar environment, or the sudden scramble of bodies fleeing Tony’s potential wrath, but Tony’s arm was practically wrenched behind himself from the moment they had stepped through the doors, a small whimper suddenly escaping the little boy huddled behind him.

“Christopher, it’s okay, buddy.” He laughed lightly, pulling the child back to front. He crouched
down, ignoring the spectators still gawking -- the obnoxious bunch -- and instead focussed only on scared hazel eyes. “Do you remember meeting Director Vance and Mrs. Vance yesterday?”

Christopher nodded.

“Well, this is where Director Vance works. This is where I work, too. In this building. And do you remember what it is I do?”

“Powice-man.” Christopher whispered. “You fine bad guys.”

“That’s right. The Director, and I, and all the other the men and women who work here, we all work to FIND the bad guys and make sure only bad guys go to jail. That means everyone here is one of the good guys. So since only good guys are allowed to work here, no one here will ever hurt you.” Tony rubbed the kid’s head.

“Good guys?” The child’s thumb was creeping towards his mouth. Wearily, Tony pulled it away, and firmly held the hand, shaking his head ‘no’ as he did so. “All o’ dem?” The child gave a visual tour of the people around him, suspicion of wrongdoing in his expression.

“Yes, buddy. All of them.” He assured the boy. “Now, come on. Next week I go back to work, and that means you’ll be at the daycare here while I’m working. Remember what we talked about yesterday? After the sun comes up in the morning, we come here. I’ll be in this building working, and you’ll be nearby at daycare where you’ll be playing, making stuff and learning all sorts of new things. When the sun goes down I pick you up and we go home, talk about what you did and learned, read books, watch movies, have dinner and go to bed. So, since all that starts soon, I thought we’d come in today and meet the people in the daycare, and see what kind of fun things you’ll be doing there while I’m working.”

The uncertainty in the child’s eyes was a little heart-breaking, but Tony forged on. Trust would come in time, he reminded himself. “After we finish at daycare, we are going to meet a very special friend of mine,” Tony continued. “And then, we’re going home for lunch. This afternoon, I have a couple of very important phone calls to make while you have your nap. And after nap, we’re going to explore the wonderful world of play-doh.”

Seriously, playtime for Christopher meant playtime for Tony. He was so glad there was only Christopher to bear witness to how excited he was to play with some of the toys out there. No way in hell would Elizabeth Paddington-DiNozzo have allowed her son to play with something so plebeian as ‘Play-Doh’.

“You no leave Cwistofer? Pwomise?” Christopher moved closer, pressing up against Tony’s inside thigh.

“Hey buddy, I won’t be with you all the time, but I will always come back for you. I might leave you at daycare while I work, but it’s only for a little while, and I’ll always, ALWAYS come back to get you before going home. You’ll always come home with me at night. And if we go away anywhere, you’ll be with me.” Tony assured him, standing up from the crouch. He captured Christopher’s left hand. “Now come on. Big day, buddy. Lots to do.”

Christopher still wasn’t happy being stared at by so many strangers, and seemed dubiously sold on Tony’s promise, but accepted he had to get moving, sticking very close to Tony’s side.

“You got a new partner there, Agent DiNozzo? MCRT’s starting ‘em awfully young, now?” Ralph, the morning guard, chucked as the little boy watched Tony take his Cars backpack and put it in a grey bin for scanning. Standing on tip-toes, until Tony granted him mercy and lifted him up to watch
from the heightened position of Tony’s hip, Christopher scrutinized the route of the bag, inside the big grey ‘box’, and then out the other side. Ralph was kind of enough to tilt his monitor so the boy could “see” inside the bag on the screen.

“I don’t know, Ralph. Might work out better if we train the probies up as soon as they get out of diapers. Less bad habits to deal with.” Tony replied, setting Christopher down as the bag emerged safely on the other side, and put his own bag through the scanner. He also unloaded his primary and backup weapons, his belt knife, and the other knife tagged to his right ankle. Every time he put something into the tray, each morning, he couldn’t help but think it was ridiculous how much weaponry he carried. But then, of course, mentally comparing his few arms to the bloody armory that Ziva packed on her body daily -- he felt instantly better. She’d required two bins just for her private collection, and a third for her own bag.

His little ward had leaned up against his leg, left arm loosely wrapped around his knee. Tony ran his hand over the kid’s head, “Okay, so this little man here is Christopher, guys.” He said to the security team in general -- and any wayward audience that was still lurking. “I’m his new guardian, and that means Chris is going to be starting at the daycare here at the Yard -- we’re just visiting and taking a quick tour today.”

“Ah.” Ralph nodded. “Well, hey there Chris! Welcome to NCIS.” Ralph, prior to his joining NCIS, had been a marine. He’d served a very long time in the marines, and it showed in a repeatedly broken nose, missing teeth, and a grizzly appearance. Thusly, his smile just made Christopher cling a little bit tighter to Tony.

Ralph chuckled, aware that the child was too young, and likely very unnerved by the strangeness around him. “Well, yer and Chris’ gear is clear, Agent DiNozzo. Better get moving before you get trampled by the morning rush. Gibbs’ already in-house. So’s McGee. David’s not yet.” He reported, as if it was a regular workday. “If you’ll just walk through the metal detector, one at a time, please.”

Tony gently prodded Christopher towards the metal detectors. “Okay, Buddy. I need you to walk right through that arch to the guy on the other side.”

Apparently, that was a mistake. Christopher’s eyes shot huge, and lower lip wobbled. “Noooo.” He moaned, tears starting. “Noo… wanna stay with you. You pmoised”

Tony blew out a breath, his agile mind making the connection to how Chris misread the instructions. The kid was a little hypersensitive about Tony leaving him. It was definitely a subject that requiring more work. But, here and now, waterworks were about to explode.

Sighing, Tony dropped into an instant crouch, aware he was doing this way too much these last few days. His thighs were killing him from all this squatting. Gathering the small boy close into a hug, he pressed a soft comforting kiss to boy’s forehead. “Christopher, believe me, buddy… you’re not going to live anywhere else, ever, but with me. I swear it!”

He rubbed the small back, as Chris burrowed into his jacket, sniffling. Beyond any doubt of Tony’s mind, his dry-cleaning bill was going to seriously escalate now that Chris was with him. “I’ll never send you forever away, Christopher. But, I do have to go to work most days, and that means while I’m at work, you have to be somewhere safe to learn and play. After you’re done learning and playing for the day, and once I’m done working for the day, we -- you and I -- go home together. No one else will ever take you away from me, and I will never abandon you. Honest. Right now, all I want you to do is walk through the arch. Then I walk through, right behind you. We each have to go by ourselves, one at a time. Honestly, I’ll be right behind you.”

Rational logic held no sway with the kid, he wasn’t really listening, he was too busy crying. He
fisted little hands on Tony’s shirt and latched on, sobbing. Helpless, Tony stroked his back, from
crown of his head to mid-back and back up. “Easy, buddy,” He said, “You’re okay. You are.”

It was, Tony realized, too much too soon for Christopher to handle. In less than a week, his world
had gone topsy-turvy, and the kid had finally hit his limit. Tony sighed silently, maybe he needed to
re-think this daycare thing right now. Maybe he needed to rethink coming back to work on Monday.

Casting a helpless look at Ralph, he got an empty shrug back. The rules were rules, and in a federal
agency, rules were not to be bent.

“Come, on Chris.” He murmured, lifting the boy up and walking away from the arch a bit. “Hey,
come on, buddy -- look at me.” He bounced the kid a bit, trying to distract him from his misery.

Not watching a clock, it felt like an hour before the kid eased up, sniffling and casting pathetic puppy
eyes everywhere. It was actually less than five minutes. Tony rifled through his pocket and pulled
out a kleenex. This, he had learned from the movies. Though, really, it was the most disgusting
parental thing he’d ever seen, short of changing diapers --- and thank the Mother, the Son and the
Holy Ghost he didn’t have to do that!. “Blow.” He instructed, setting the kleenex up at the boy’s
snotty nose.

Christopher blew. And the kleenex was promptly disposed of. Tony made mental note to start
carrying hand sanitizer everywhere he went, too. ‘Oh hell… “ He groaned silently. ‘I’m turning into
Nikki and her OCD hand sterilizer fixation.’ Man, when they said having kids changed a person,
they weren’t kidding.

“Let’s try this again.” He muttered to himself. He marched over to the arch. Setting Chris down,
Tony carefully extricated the child’s grip, and once free, promptly walked through the detector in
two long steps. He spun around on heel, and dropped into another damn squat. “Come here, champ.”
He called, opening his arms wide.

Chris’ chest heaved on two silent sobs, and his face started to crumple when suddenly, with a
strangled sob, he bolted in a full sprint straight into Tony’s open arms.

“Attaboy.” Tony pressed another light kiss to the top of the boy’s head. “See? You did it. And no
little boys, bears, or very Special Agents were hurt in the process.” Christopher truly didn’t care, he
just clung tightly to Tony, shuddering gulps of air making his thin little body shake.

“I’m not sure we scanned anything at that speed.” Frank Miller, the second guard, muttered, as Tony
gathered Christopher's weight and lifted the child up. “He mighta hit warp, there.”

Tony cast a wry smile. “Aww, come on, Miller. He’s scared. Cut the kid some slack.” He had no
idea how he was going to put his gear back on. Chris wasn’t going to be letting go anytime soon.

Frank raised and spread his hands. “Not complaining, DiNozzo. Doubt I ever moved that fast in my
entire damn life.” Frank gave him a slanted smile. “You’re in for one helluva surprise first time you
leave him for the day in daycare.”

That, precisely, was what Tony hoped to avoid. He positioned Chris so that he was standing on the
table bench, and carefully re-holstered his gun with one free hand. The belt-knife back slipped easily
back in his belt. But his backup weapon required a bit of contortion to slide it into his ankle holster,
without removing Christopher’s clinging grip. It took a great deal more contortion to put the other
knife, something he had started carrying after the whole thing with Jeffrey White. Somehow he
managed, pushing it into the holster on his other ankle. Carelessly tossing his backpack over his
shoulder, he pulled Christopher back onto his hip, and then reached for Christopher’s cars backpack
“Here.” A gruff voice came out of nowhere, and suddenly, Christopher’s bag and his own was lifted from his arm. Gibbs glanced at the teary face on Tony’s shoulder and stifled whatever he was about to say, amending it to something a little less… volatile. “I’ll carry those, you just carry the little guy. Maybe this way you can get through the building before it’s closing time.” The tone was rather mild, which Tony appreciated. There was no way finding his SFA holding a kid wasn’t a surprise. Vance hadn’t told the team what Tony’s emergency was about, only that there had been an emergency requiring DiNozzo’s leave.

Christopher, however, chose to give a dramatic sigh at that moment, and raised his hand to his mouth.

“No, Christopher,” Tony sighed himself, reaching for the wayward hand and intercepting it before it could enter the child’s mouth. He curled the small hand inside his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. “We don’t suck our thumb. You’ll ruin your teeth.” It had only been four days since he’d been a defacto parent to the kid, and already he had a whole slew of automatic reactions to the little quirks the child had developed.

Christopher typically reacted to the auto-correction with another incredibly dramatic and tragic sigh.

Gibbs snorted a laugh. He hit the call button for the elevator with a hard punch. “You’re good with him.” The older agent noted quietly, an apology in his face and tone, even if not said aloud. “Real good. Can see you’re already on his wavelength.” The Senior Agent glanced skittishly at Christopher, and then away. “So, I guess the little guy was the fire you had to race to put out, then?”

It was unusual, the way Gibbs was avoiding Chris’ direct line of sight and deliberately not engaging the kid. Gibbs usually forged an instant rapport with children, but he seemed hesitant to, or sensed it would be unwelcome with Christopher.

Tony merely took the compliment at face value. “Yeah. Mr. Christopher, here, didn’t have a very good time at his first foster home. It was a bit of a kerfuffle. Long and short, I’m his legal guardian now.” He bounced Christopher, making the child smile slightly. He was still being very sulky, head lowering to rest on Tony’s shoulder.

With his eyes on Chris, he didn’t quite catch Gibb’s immediate reaction, but the tightened jaw was hard to miss.

The elevator gave a ‘ding’ and doors opened to the bullpen level. Christopher tensed slightly, but relaxed when Tony didn’t put him down. With long strides, Tony stepped into the main floor of the office, and headed straight towards the stairs to the Director's office, ignoring the startled look McGee gave him, or the number of people that suddenly stopped to openly stare.

Ziva wasn’t in, as Ralph had said. What did that mean, though? Was she off the team, or just busy elsewhere? Vance had wanted to send her to FLETC, but the next session didn’t start until the new year. It was hard to guess -- it wasn’t like anyone called him with the outcome of Gibbs meeting their junior teammates. And, as curious as he was, he wasn’t about to ask right now.

Gibbs walked silently along his right side, close to the windows. The backpacks swayed like pendulums in his hand, while sharp blue eyes swept around and noted all the movement around him.

Strangely, Tony likened the bullpen to some bizarre version of the carnival whack-a-mole game. Heads were popping up all over the bullpen, some people coming to their feet to openly gape.
“Pretty sure that just set the rumor mill on fire.” Gibbs noted wryly.

Tony shrugged, “I do that often enough. You’d think they’d ignore my antics by now.” Christopher was tensing, as more and more people openly gawking at the sight of their own version of Peter Pan carrying a small child off to Nevernever land. Christopher’s head shifted slightly to bury his face into shoulder, hiding in the childishly simple way of “If I can’t see you, you can’t see me”.

“You got a meeting with Vance?” Gibbs asked, his face tense and jaw growing even more rigid. He was clearly nervous about the answer, which didn’t surprise Tony much. Change never suited Gibbs temper, and his soon to be former SFA announcing he was now a parent another layer to changes that upset Gibb’s apple cart.

Tony glanced at the older man, frowning at other signs of stress. Maybe there was more going on than just the changes to the team. There was exhaustion written in the lines of Gibb’s tired face. The older man looked haggard, eyes slightly bloodshot, and his coloring was off.

“No.” Tony replied slowly, wondering if the team had an active priority case which would explain the boss’s state. Not that it mattered. If they had a case, he was off on leave, and he couldn’t change that on a whim. It wasn’t like he could put Christopher on a shelf until the case was solved, and then resume taking care of the kid.

Besides, it was best the team started working without him now. It wouldn’t be long before he left the MCRT for good. So, did it matter if they learned how that goes now, rather than later?

Regardless of whether it was a case, or some other cause to the Boss’s stress levels running high, this really wasn’t the time or place for any sort of conversations. Christopher didn’t need to be exposed to their arguments, and the rest of the bullpen didn’t need to learn just how fractured the MCRT had become.

“I have to sit down with my HR rep and sign a few papers to add Christopher to my medical coverage, and update my jacket. Vance offered the conference room off of his office to do that. After that, Christopher and I are taking a tour of the daycare here at Navy Yard.”

“Oh.” Gibbs paused at the bottom of the stairs, looking up to Tony as Tony took the first step. “So yer back on Monday, then?”

Tony turned, and took back the offered backpacks. “Thanks.” He smiled blandly. “Yeah, should be, at least, that’s the plan.” He arched one eyebrow. “I trust if I’m a few minutes late it won’t be a problem? I do have to drop Christopher off at daycare before I come in, and everyone and their cousin has warned me about that. I’m to expect a nuclear meltdown.”

Gibbs frowned, rubbing his head. “Oh. Yeah.” He looked at the little boy, huddling in Tony’s arms. “You will. So, then the little guy is a permanent arrangement? You adopting him?”

There was a slight warning frost in Tony’s eyes as he stared back at his team lead. “I’ve got custodial guardianship right now. Don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but maybe, doesn’t matter, though. Christopher is now a permanent fixture in my life.”

“Oh. Well. That’s… good.” Gibbs finished, faintly. “Yeah, good.” He verbally stumbled, and then forced shoulders to straighten and voice to firm up. “You’re… I. Should I. do you want…“ Gibbs heaved a breath. “Aww, hell… do you want me to just go shoot the rumor mill and tell people straight up about the kid?”

Tony frowned, looking down at the child who was resting his head on his shoulder, fingers of his left
hand playing with buttons on his jacket, before turning his green eyes back on Gibbs. Part of him screamed for privacy, to keep his private life outside the awareness of everyone. Even the wild stories he told his coworkers were mostly exaggerated, just to keep them from examining his life closely. It was none of their business. They didn't need to know the real Anthony DiNozzo. No one did. But, Christopher needed a bigger network than just him, and if he chose to take the OSP or COO position, it might help people understand why he had left the field, and grant acceptance when he didn’t work late nights or come in on weekends like he used to. Additionally, if NCIS personnel knew of Christopher, they’d watch out for the kid if they encountered him in public. “Yeah.” He finally decided. “That would help.”

“Will do.” Gibbs seemed relieved to have something to do. “Can… look, I know you’ve got your hands more than full at home, right now but… Is there sometime we can talk? Like… really talk?”

Tony exhaled slowly. “Is there a point to it, Gibbs? I said everything I thought I needed to on Monday night.” He didn’t want to beat a dead horse, but, looking at the almost defeated look on Gibbs face, he shook his head. Regardless of anything, and even respecting the fact he might never respect Gibbs enough to work for him again, Gibbs had been a friend at an important time in his life. Losing that friendship would suck, and in future, they might have to collaborate on things. It was for the best they clear the air. “Okay. Christopher goes to bed at 8pm. If you want to come over, after that point, fine. I won’t have dinner for you, because obviously we have to eat earlier than that, but…"

“I’m there.” Gibbs promised.

“There’s no beer in my place. Or bourbon” Tony warned. The redecorating of Christopher’s room had seen Izzy and Steve clean him out of beer. And he hadn’t felt the need to stock bourbon for Gibb’s spontaneous visits in the past couple of years, there hadn’t been any visits spontaneous or otherwise to stock for.

Gibbs blinked. “Geezus… I forgot about that part of being a parent. Took some getting used to. I think Kelly was six before Shannon let me keep any beer in the fridge.” He reminisced absently, with a rueful shake of his head. “That’s okay, though. Coffee’s always been good enough for me.”

“Okay then. I coffee I do have. Later.” Tony turned, and made his way up the stairs, feeling the laser blue eyes on his back as he went. Yeah. Circus really described his life right now, didn’t it?.

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The Navy Yard Daycare was located in a separate building from where Tony worked, yet lay still inside the perimeters of Navy Yard, just off Tingey Street. It was a short walk, but despite the seasonal weather of early December, there was bright sun, and very little cloud cover leaving crisp cool air in it’s wake, but lacking the bitterness it could have been.

Together, Special Agent and ward stepped hand in hand into yet another security checkpoint just inside the doors to the building the daycare was located in. Fortunately, this was a less stringent checkpoint from what the agency utilized. For this building, Tony was required to sign and show his badge. Security matched his name and ID to what was recorded on their system, and cleared him to continue on.

Located on the second floor, the daycare was accessible by stairs and by elevator. It took up most of the floor in it’s entirety, but was designed as a large, open, and airy space, with large ceiling-to-floor windows that allowed tremendous amounts of natural light to shine into the room. The walls were neutral, but bright primary color bulletin boards were liberally displayed all over the room. Hardwood floors were underfoot for the most part, with a few areas tiled or carpeted. What caught
Tony’s eye the most though was an eye-popping bright circular carpet, with little circles forming a perimeter around the outer edge of the carpet, located beside bookcases filled with children’s books and a rocking chair.

“Wow.” Tony jiggled Christopher’s arm with a shake of his wrist. “This looks awesome, doesn’t it, buddy?”

His gaze swept under the windows where he could see a solid bank of low bookcases, filled with clear faced bins. The bins contained a myriad of toys. At the east end of the room was a series of art-easels all set low to the ground for little people, and with splash guards on ground and at mid-height of the easel. Tony, being taller than Christopher, could see the low level sinks that ran against the interior wall at the very back. “Look,” Tony pointed to the other side of the easels and a large sand-table. “You can build sand-castles!”

“And lot more!” A cheerful faintly Irish voice interjected. “Crocodiles, and lions, and anything you can imagine!” The voice was followed by a freckle faced red-headed woman with wide brown eyes and a huge smile. “Hi! I’m Fanny… and who might you be?” She popped into a crouch and addressed Christopher directly.

The shy-boy routine kicked in immediately, and Christopher resorted to hugging Tony’s leg, his little face burying into his guardian’s leg.

Fanny tossed Tony a wink, unphased by the reception. “And, gee… who’s your little fuzzy friend? He’s a real cutie!”

Christopher swayed back and forth, his head hidden against Tony’s leg. His grip, the Special Agent noted, had tightened on his bear though.

Fanny laughed at the silent treatment, moving along easily to shake Tony’s hand and compete the parental side of the introductions. “Well, you’re in perfect time for a visit, my friends. Most of the kids are outside playing right now. With the weather getting colder, we only go out for fifteen or so minutes. Enough to run off some energy.”

Tony nodded, understanding completely. Truthfully, he went for morning runs just to burn off some of his energy too.

“If you and your little buddy can come over here… you can see the play-ground.” Fanny pointed to one of the windows. Tony disentangled Christopher from his leg, instead catching his boy’s arm and leading him gently over. At the window, he lifted Chris up so he could see from Tony’s vantage what was outside.

It was a yard split between sand and grass. There were half buried tires, stepping stones painted vibrant colors, a climber unit with a lot of safety netting. Tony could see a “fort” and a set of swings. There was also tree stumps, the stump top painted the same types of colors as the stones. And there were children milling all over the place, skipping, running and laughing.

What really pleased Tony, though, was the paved paths quietly laying around the grounds -- and two children, both in wheelchairs, happily keeping up with other mobile friends.

“Wow. Looks fun.” He whispered loudly to Christopher. “Do you think you’d like to play out there?”

The child huffed a breath, looking at Tony is askance.

Tony laughed at the boy. “Maybe when we’re done looking around here, we can go down and look
around there. Sound good?”

Fanny clapped her hands. “An excellent idea!“ She declared. “Well, now… I suppose I ought to
start your tour. Let’s go by the entrance you came in, okay?”

She walked them through the little coat room, where every child had labelled cubby for their shoes
and coats. From there, she took them to the little boys loo… which Tony was quite impressed with.
Everything was carefully scaled down for a child’s easy reach. No step stools were used. And the
floors were a rubber composite, so little feet running wouldn’t skid or trip.

Fanny led them through the secondary entrance to the boys bathroom, which found them in the arts
and crafts area. Here, Tony spotted the easels again, and the sinks.. but also two long tables with
benches, and a big roll of paper mounted the table top. Pots of crayons, glues, and children’s safety
scissors sat on a small shelf behind the table. “We do our crafts here. We make special cards for
Father’s Day, Christmas, Easter, the usual. Cut and paste crafts happen at least three times a week, to
help with dexterity and physical manipulation of small tools.”

“What about kids who don’t have… a M-U-M or D-A-D…” Tony asked carefully.

“There are always ways around that.” She smiled softly. “Sometimes, it’s their favorite babysitter, or
someone like you standing in lieu.”

Tony nodded. “Okay.” And it was okay. The concept of the nuclear family that was present in the
50s wasn’t the same as today. Something Christopher would have to learn and understand as he
grew older.

“Coloring can happen any time. hence, the big roll of paper. We have no limits on that if a child
wants to draw instead of playing with toys. Painting is at least once a week for each child. It’s limited
not because of the mess it generates, we’re good with mess here, but because currently we have
twenty-three children -- and only so many paint stations. With six easels, the paint centre is open for
four days a week for each child at that ratio.”

Tony nodded, Christopher peered curiously at pictures drying on the easels. “Christopher here has
had very limited exposure to paint. What if he tries to eat it?”

“Non toxic, to start with. We make our own paint, and other than the risk of children who might be
allergic to eggs -- mercifully, we’ve had none of that come up -- it’s completely safe for snacking.”
She grinned. “Same goes for our glue. Perfectly edible.”

“And it’s all water soluble?” He continued.

“Comes out in the wash brilliantly.” She nodded, pointing to her own clothes, which were practical
and serviceable, something needed when crawling around on the ground with children.

“Okay, then. Sounds fun.” Tony gave a jiggle on Christopher’s arm. “What do you think, Buddy?”

Christopher looked confused, staring first at the easel, and then Tony.

“I think,” Fanny said, “That our little friend here needs to try painting while we talk about grown up
silly things.” She moved to the easel and clipped a new length of paper on it.

Tony smiled, understanding the distraction would pull Christopher out of his funk, somewhat, and
give them space too.. “Hey, that sounds good… wanna try, Christopher?”

Christopher was reluctant, but under the influence of Fanny, Pooh was soon entrusted into Tony’s
care, and the little boy was smocked up, and standing front of an easel. A selection of paints in the baby-food jars at the bottom trough of the easel, and a pile of chubby brushes were given to him. Christopher wasn’t a self-starter, having no idea what he was doing and having been too long groomed not to instigate actions, but Tony solved that. He set Winnie up on another stool just out of Christopher’s reach. “Here’s what you’ll do…” he coached the boy, “See Pooh?” I want you to draw him in paint, and color him. Just as you see him! Once the picture is done, we’ll put it up at home.”

Together, they drew the outline. And from there, Christopher was off -- and Pooh, at least on the paper, would never be the same colors again.

“Poor kid… those are nasty bruises.” Fanny clucked her tongue quietly, eying the fading yellow and green marks on the boy’s neck..

“Yeah. He’s getting a lot better though. Don’t know what you know, but he was abandoned, I found him with signs of being choked, a broken arm, fractured ribs, and severely underweight -- we’re working on that, but it's early days. He’s had very little social exposure, and hasn’t been growing up with a television handy to teach him his letters and numbers. Seriously, I doubt he’s had any toys, so don’t be surprised if he doesn’t know how to play with something. He had no clue what to do with Duplo until I showed him. He’s never seen playdoh before, but that’s on tonight’s agenda. Had pizza for the first time with me this last week.” Tony rubbed his head. “The reason I need daycare is…”

“Same reason all federal agents do -- their jobs get in the way!” Fanny waved his concern off. “There are always five staff on during the busiest hours… that’s 6am through to 6pm. After 6, there’s three on staff from 6 to midnight, and then two from midnight to 6 am. It’s a lot of people, but because several divisions pay into the daycare, including NCIS, we’re able to have the higher levels of staff.” Fanny grinned. “Altogether, we’ve got eighteen on staff, which allows us for a better time work balance, and the schedule rotates monthly so we’re all handle the midnight shift in due course, best of all, the kids get to know all of us. We each have something to teach them.”

Tony nodded.

“Children range in ages. We have three babies in the creche -- I haven’t shown you that. You won’t need it. Mandy is in there all day, except for her breaks and lunch. We’ve got eight kids ages one to two, and another ten kids aged three to four. We’ve only got three four year olds, because most of them start Junior Kindergarten, and there are whole day programs for those kids now. Our four year olds are the ones that come after school, and are only really here for an hour or so, though depending on the parent, we’ve had kids who are here for three hours some evenings.”

That was good to know. He’d still have to come up with a plan for Christopher when he hit primary, after all, his workday sure didn’t end at 4pm.

“Now, kids have to come with a clean pair of indoor shoes, appropriate outdoor shoes and coats for the weather. We’d also prefer they come in practical clothes for crawling around or doing crafts.” Fanny grinned impishly. “You won't have a problem there, it’s the little girls that we have issues with when they show up in really pretty little frocks. No so good for crawling about.”

“What about nutrition and snacks?” Tony asked, everything else sounding good to him thus far.

“We do have a breakfast program, but that’s for kids that overnight, or come in before six am. Morning snack is at ten hundred Lunch at twelve-thirty, afternoon snack at fifteen hundred. We will provide an evening snack around seventeen hundred, but that’s pretty light. The evening kids are fed at eighteen thirty. Drinks of water and dairy milk are available at any time, but only in the cafeteria area under supervision. We don’t have any nut milks, I’m afraid, due to the risk of nut allergies.”
Tony nodded agreeably. “Okay, now what about academics?”

Fanny laughed. “Daycare is about training our puppies to play well with one another… that said, we do work on motor skills, basic cognitive functions, numerals to ten, colours, basic patterns and their abcs.”

All that pleased Tony immensely. “So, play, socialization, motor skills and basic academic building blocks.” He summarized. “That’s everything I want for him right now.”

Fanny clapped her hands once. “Then we as a daycare, and you as a parent are both on the same page.”

Tony rubbed his head, critically examining Christopher’s blue-green Pooh. Time spent with coloring books was definitely needed. Chris lacked a sense of ‘line’. “I’m worried he’s going to react badly to my being separated from him during the workday.” He admitted.

“We are veterans in that field, here.” Fanny assured him. “Yes, he will, but it’s how you reinforce the reunion, and make the night a balance of your attention and normalcy that helps him learn you will be there at the end of the day.” She wandered over to a higher set of shelves, and pulled down a coil notebook. “We ask parents to write, at the end of the year comments, good and bad, about the daycare. I want you to see this one comment in particular.”

Tony took the book, and notice the page was dated for three months ago,

‘Elizabeth has experienced a lot of problems in the last six months. The death of her grandmother, who has been her primary caretaker during the workday, was nothing short of traumatic. We found Elizabeth sitting on the floor beside her Granny’s body. Moving her to the Navy Yard daycare was a hard decision, but the best we could do. Elizabeth screamed horribly the first time we left her, and in fact, for the first four days, every day, she had a bit of a fit. But, what we discovered after getting past that hurdle, she soon became eager to go… she made friends, amazing for a two year old… she had fun… spent more time exploring her world. learned more about people, colors, things, places, crafts -- she’s a leftie we learned, just like her Granny was. We can’t credit the staff enough for giving her the ‘push’ she needed to blossom. And we are so grateful for that. Our Elizabeth has grown greatly since joining your daycare, and it’s become one of the best decisions we have made for her.’

“This is normal. Every child experiences some separation.” Fanny assured him kindly. “And we’ll work with you to make it not a trauma, but a learning experience - he’ll learn trust. That you’ll always come back for him.”

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Smuggling Christopher back into NCIS, and down into Ducky’s lair went easier the second go around. Firstly, Christopher was a lot more confident about going through security. Sure, he still moved like the wind, but at least he moved, happily babbling about painting at daycare and the story-time they’d participated in with the other children.

Secondly, after explaining how elevators work, and encouraging Christopher push the appropriate buttons, they only went down, not up. And down had less spectator traffic by far.

But, the third thing to go far better this time: Ducky was waiting for them -- and that meant no one in their right or wrong mind was going to get in the elderly coroner’s way. “Anthony, my dear boy!” Ducky beamed as the doors to the elevator opened. He rocked back on his heels, hands tucked into his suspenders, and glasses perched low on his nose. “And, the most famous young Master
Christopher! How splendid!"

Christopher, of course, defaulted to his ‘new person’ routine, and glommed immediately onto Tony’s leg. Shy hazel eyes hesitantly peeked out from behind the fabric of Tony’s khakis. Tony smiled ruefully, dropping a hand to ruffle Christopher’s hair. “Come on, Chris… I want to introduce you to a good friend of mine.” Carefully, he pried Christopher’s fingers off the pants, and scooped the boy up onto his hip.

“Ducky, this is Christopher Robert Paddington.” Tony lightly chucked his fingers under Christopher’s chin to get a small smile out of the boy. “Christopher, this is Dr. Donald Mallard, but we all know him as Ducky.”

“Welcome to my offices, young Master Paddington. It’s a very great pleasure to meet you!” Ducky cast a sideways glance at the young man holding the child. “I’ve heard a great many wonderful things about young Christopher from our dear Rachel Cranston.”

Tony laughed silently. It didn’t surprise him a bit -- the mere idea he, Tony DiNozzo, would be in the role of parent to a young child was likely causing earthquakes and hurricanes all over the Earth. So, Rachel calling Ducky to gossip was hardly a surprise.

“Shall we step into my parlor for a bit of tea?” Ducky pushed open the doors that led down the long corridor away from the autopsy lab, steering them away from that sterile cold environment, and opting for the alternative entrance which was rarely used that would lead in behind the autopsy tables and more directly to Ducky’s office. “I’ve brought in some juice, apple and orange, for the lad…. I hope that’s alright, Anthony.”

“It’s fine.” Tony assured him. Thus far, despite the higher sugar content of juices, Christopher had manifested no allergies. “Christopher likes orange juice, don’t you?” He glanced towards the child.

A shy nod, from the small head resting on his shoulder was the only confirmation received. Eyes were half lowered, and the thumb was perilously close to the mouth. It seemed the steam engine had run out of coal, and the bouncy little boy who had left the daycare full of vim and vigor was done in. He’d had a very busy morning, Tony accepted, one full of singing at the top of his lungs, tears, painting, exploring, and meeting of quite a few new people. “Tired, bud? Go to sleep if you want to, Chris. I’ve got you.” He murmured quietly to the child.

Ducky gave a glance over his shoulder, and his expression softened in a gentle smile.

The soft sigh stood as preamble to acceptance, and tired eyes closed. The thumb strayed closer, and Tony swept it away. By the time Ducky had ushered the two into his office, pulled out a chair for Tony, and plugged the kettle in, Christopher was out like a light.

“Puir wee bairn. You’ve run him fair ragged, Anthony.” Ducky smiled down at the child.

“It’s been a busy day, yeah.” Tony agreed, moving Christopher’s limbs, and repositioning the child’s body so he lay across Tony’s lap and against his chest. “We had a bit of a meltdown this morning, and I bet that’s the big drain on his energy.”

“Ah. At the daycare?” Ducky set out two cups, and brought over creamer in deference to Tony’s preference for a spot of cream in his tea.

Tony shook his head, reaching with his right hand to drop a tiny dollop of the cream into the bottom of his cup, in true British fashion. “Security. He’s got separation issues.” Tony snorted. “Already.”

Ducky tutted. “Well, now, put yourself in his shoes, having suffered for all of his known life, would
you not be terribly attached to the first adult to show you kindness?"

Tony grinned. “Oh, I did. Gibbs slapped me upside the head, promised me a workplace where someone would always have my back, and I glommed on.”

Ducky laughed. “Ah, well, to hear it, you’ve lost that attachment in recent weeks.”

Tony’s smile faded. “Yeah.” He said softly. “I’m afraid I have. I… don’t want to really get into it Ducky, but I just…. You can only beat a horse dead once. And really, the fact they keep kicking me…..”

“Enough said, Anthony.” Ducky told him sternly. “I’m not so out of touch of what has been happening on the team. In fact, I’ve told Jethro many times since your return from the USS Reagan, that he must pull both Ms. David and Young Timothy into line.”

Tony gave a one armed shrug. “Yeah. Well. They aren’t the only ones in need of a kick.”

Ducky deftly lifted the teapot, having waited the required 3 minutes for steeping, and poured. “I do believe you’ve well administered that particular kick, Anthony. Jethro is quite beside himself right now. I warned him that black temper of his would one day extract a price he could not afford to pay, and that day has come.”

“So you know?” Tony thoughtfully stirred his cup.

The shrewd look over the rim of a cup was answer enough. For all his easygoing manners, and affable ways, no one interrogated a suspect quite like Ducky. He was so skilled at cheery chatting at getting details out of people, and when he spoke to anyone on the team, it was amazing how Ducky pulled secrets out of them without their realization that they’d lost the plot.

“It’s neither here nor there a matter of what I know.” Ducky counselled. “What’s done is done, and it’s how YOU feel about it, and see the road ahead, that is the matter at hand, my boy. For the record, however, I do believe that you have stayed in Gibbs’ shadow far longer than anyone could anticipate, and if now is your time, then so be it.” He glanced down at the sleeping boy resting in Tony’s arms, and softened his voice. “Beyond that, the MCRT’s needs would quarrel fiercely with that lad’s needs, and you must rightly guess as to who I feel should be the victor. Were you not to put the lad first, I’d be most vexed.”

Tony sipped at his tea, and let the subject die. “Well.. speaking of putting Christopher first -- I need a big favor.”

An eyebrow arched over the wire rim of the older man’s glasses. “Indeed?”

Tony nudged his chin to his backpack, which he had shrugged to the floor as he had taken his chair. “Not the kids pack, mine… front zipper, there’s a gray file.”

Nimble fingers quickly found the file, and Ducky returned to his seat, folding it open to the case report. “Ah. Am I to assume this woman is young Christopher’s natural parent?”

Tony nodded.

“Hmm.” Ducky continued perusing. “Her time of death precedes your finding of young Christopher by three days, does it not?” Ducky noted, finger placed mid the second page.

“Yup.” Tony agreed, shifting Christopher slightly as he reached for the teapot to pour a half cup more. “But, the bruising on Christopher predates her death.” He made a face. “I need you to examine
the body, Ducky. I need to know if she was the abuser, or if there’s someone out there gunning for this kid.”

The coroner hummed under his breath, reading on. He came to the end of whatever paragraph he was on and looked up startled. “Well, of course I will examine… my word, is that your big favor? Please, my boy…. I’m most pleased to put my meager skills to your assistance.”

“Hardly meager, Ducky.” Tony disagreed. “I filled out the transfer request. You’d just need to sign it and put it into the DCPD.” He stirred his cup with a small jostle of his wrist. “I’m not sure what kind of condition she’s in, but knowing anything is better than nothing, and I can trust your results.”

“Very well.” Ducky closed the folder. “Now, our dear Dr. Cranston told me that you were in need of some recommendations, for pediatricians as it were. Is this true?”

Tony flashed a quick grin. Ducks intelligence network was awesome. “Yup.”

“Well, I’ve reached out to a few of my cronies, and we all conjecture that Dr. Janice Conroy is your best bet. She’s in her mid fifties, and was head of the neonatal unit at Children’s Hospital in Boston. Her husband ran for congress, and she followed him out to DC, opening a private practice. Now, normally, Dr. Conroy has a six week waiting list, but you have an appointment with her tomorrow at 3. I told Janice that you’d probably like a recommendation for nutritionist.”

Tony laughed. “You’re awesome, Ducky.”

“Pshaw.” Ducky scoffed, pouring himself more tea. Suddenly, he froze. “Oh! Oh, my… I forgot the biscuits!”
Friday December 5th - 9 pm

Quietly, Tony eased the door to Christopher’s bedroom shut. It had been a long day in the universe. Christopher’s impromptu nap at tea with Ducky notwithstanding, perhaps it had been too much of a day for the little boy. He had been difficult to settle down for the evening, tired but cranky, and yet, resisting going to bed.

Three books, two pee breaks, one glass of water and a cuddle later, and finally Christopher’s eyes had closed and soft even breaths drifted from his lips. All that had been left to do was carry the child from the rocking chair to his bed, and tuck him in, with Pooh at his side.

On bare silent feet, Tony padded through his quiet apartment to the living room, snagging his backpack from the small foyer en route to the couch. He dropped his bone-weary ass down in the middle of the leather sofa, and directly centred to the ottoman. Fussing with the worn zipper of his backpack for a moment, Tony pulled out a score of files that Patty had sent him care of NCIS and the Director’s office. If he had nothing else to speak about Patty, he had to own up that she was incredibly efficient at her job.

Finding the scanned copies of the signed wills for the late Frank and Mariann Butti, Tony gave the wills a cursory flip through. Frank, having predeceased Mariann, his will had been executed with all assets and properties going to his spouse. It didn’t affect Christopher in any way. He put that aside.

His cell phone chirped at that moment, and Tony reached for it. ‘Thank God.’ he thought, shoulders unaccountably relaxing. He hadn’t realized how subconsciously stressed he was until this moment. Gibbs wasn’t coming -- the team had caught a case and it was going to be an all nighter at this point. ‘Huh.’ Tony looked at the bare facts Gibbs had laid out. The fact Gibbs had sent a text was amazing, all on it’s own, but he couldn’t wonder if it was also a dig on the fact he wasn’t there to help.

‘Doesn’t matter.’ Tony decided resolutely, tossing his phone to the side. ‘I can’t be pulling all-nighters when Christopher needs me here in the evenings.’ And he wasn’t regretting that, even knowing that being responsible for Christopher was a massive change in his life, but it was already far more rewarding than the bullshit he’d been putting up with at work. If there was one thing that the SCULPT program had taught him over the past few years, work shouldn’t be the be-all end-all of his existence. Work wasn’t going to comfort him when he was old and retired, not like his friends, or maybe the new family Christopher represented to him. Work wasn’t going to be at your bedside as you lay dying saying that it loved you. And, the thought of dying alone terrified him.

Either way, Gibbs not coming was a mixed blessing. Mixed in that, on one hand, another brouhaha with Gibbs was the last thing he needed, but if it was one of those rare unusual -blue-moon-buy-a-Powerball-ticket kind of meetings with the Boss where Gibbs was actually listening and contributing positively… they could have gotten their cards on the table. Resolved the issues between themselves, which would have gone a long way to repairing their relationship, even if the issues between Tony
and the junior agents were never resolved. Ah well, he could wish in one hand, and piss in the other, and he knew which would be wet.

Resolutely determined to focus on the here and now, though, Tony opened Mariann Butti’s will, and got back to work.

_I, Mariann Victoria Butti nee Grasberg, residing at 1 Garrison Road, Hingham MA, declare this to be my Will, and I revoke any and all wills and codicils I previously made._

**ARTICLE I: Funeral expenses & payment of debt**

_I direct my executors to pay my enforceable unsecured debts and funeral expenses, the expenses of my last illness, and the expenses of administering my estate._

**ARTICLE II: Money & Personal Property**

_I give all my tangible personal property and all policies and proceeds of insurance covering such property, to my husband, Franklin. If he does not survive me, all property therefore is given to my daughter Elizabeth Ann Butti, who should she survive me, in fullness. Should Elizabeth Ann Butti not survive, I give all such property to any grandchildren who survive me, in equal shares, to be divided among them as set by my executors. Should Elizabeth Ann not survive me and pass without issue, I leave the liquidated proceeds of the property to the Children’s Hospital Boston. My executors may pay out of my estate the expenses of delivering tangible personal property to beneficiaries._

**ARTICLE III: Real Estate**

_I give all my residences, subject to any mortgages or encumbrances thereon, and all policies and proceeds of insurance covering such property, to my husband, Franklin. If he does not survive me, I give that property to Elizabeth Ann. If she does not survive me, I give that property to be any children of Elizabeth Ann. Should Elizabeth Ann not survive me and pass without issue, I authorized the liquidation of my property and the net proceeds of the property to the Children’s Hospital Boston._

**ARTICLE IV: Residuary Clause**

_I give the rest of my estate (called my residuary estate) to my husband, Franklin. If he does not survive me, I give my residuary estate to my child who survive me, and the descendants of a deceased child of mine, to take their ancestor's share per stirpes._

**ARTICLE V: Taxes**

_I direct my executors, without apportionment against any beneficiary or other person, to pay all estate, inheritance and succession taxes (including any interest and penalties thereon) payable by reason of my death._

**ARTICLE VI: Minors**

_If under this will any property shall be payable outright to a person who is a minor, my executors may, without court approval, pay all or part of such property to a parent or guardian of that minor, to a custodian under the Uniform Transfers to Minors act, or may defer payment of such property until the minor reaches the age of majority, as defined by his or her state of residence. No bond shall be required for such payments._

**ARTICLE VII: Fiduciaries**
I appoint my spouse, Franklin, as Executor of this will. If he is unable or unwilling to act, or resigns, I appoint my lawyer, Teresa Homin, of Lee, Rigby and Jacobsen Law as successor executor. My executor shall have all the powers allowable to executors under the laws of this state. I direct that no bond or security of any kind shall be required of any executor.

ARTICLE VIII: Simultaneous Death Clause

If my spouse and I shall die under such circumstances that the order of our deaths cannot be readily ascertained, my spouse shall be deemed to have predeceased me. No person, other than my spouse, shall be deemed to have survived me if such person dies within 30 days after my death. This article modifies all provisions of this will accordingly.

I have signed this will this 12th day of April, 2001 in the Presence of my Witness in the city of Boston, and State of Massachusetts.

Mariann Victoria Butti
Witness
Julie Kennedy

It was, when all was said and done, a very basic simple will, and as a result very cut and dry. “Huh.” Tony muttered, reaching for the third document in the package and finding the accounting summary for the estate that Mariann’s law-firm had kept on file. He winced, Mariann had died two years ago. And in contravention to the terms of the will, someone had clearly fucked up. The house had been immediately sold, just eight weeks after the date of death, and home contents auctioned off. It went against the will, assuming the death without issue of Elizabeth, which was strange. Clearly, the sale of the family home would have to be audited, as would the auction, to see if something hinky had happened. Charming. Just another layer to the mess that was Christopher’s life.

Fortunately, the life insurances were less messed up, although little more sticky in claiming, as after Franklin’s death, Mariann had amended the beneficiary nomination to Elizabeth. “Well, Fuck. If Elizabeth had a will, I’ll eat my new Ferragamo shoes.” Tony grumbled as he crawled half across the couch to grab his cellphone from where he’d tossed it earlier. At twenty, kids thought they were immortal. They didn’t create wills.

He flipped through his contacts, found his victim and made the call. “Hey, Steve… Tony.” The sound of a dishwasher in the background assured him he was calling after dinner.

“Yo! How’s the rugrat?” Steve greet cheerily.

“Asleep.” Tony snorted. “Finally. We checked out the day-care today. Unfortunately, I had proof positive that he’s totally going to flip out when I drop him off for his first full day there.”

“The joys of parenthood.” Steve sang, “Something I will dedicate in my life to avoid. The idea of 3 am feedings terrifies me.”

Tony snorted. He wished Steve well on that, but having met Steve’s partner in life, Sydney, he knew Steve was just dreaming. Sydney sang regularly a different song altogether -- she was looking towards a family of three little rugrats. “Uh huh. Well, speaking of parenthood joys -- I need my lawyer.”

Steve’s tone changed instantly, like a different man had come to the phone. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Christopher’s maternal grandparents were Franklin and Mariann Butti, of Massachusetts. They’re dead, and left their estate to their daughter or her heirs.”
The sound of a drawer opening and closing told Tony that Steve was hunting for paper. “Okay -- do you have the law firm for the estate?”

“Yes.” Tony drawled slowly. “Here’s the thing… I think this is going to have to be forensically audited. I think some fraud has happened.”

Steve sucked a breath. “Oh. Fuck.” He sighed suddenly. “Nothing in that kid’s life is easy, is it? Okay. Lay it on me.”

“The house was sold eight weeks after Mariann’s death, in contravention to the terms of the will which said that the property fell to her daughter, or her daughter’s heirs for disposition.” Tony flipped the will back open, and read the paragraph again. “And, at that point, while her daughter had run away, there wasn’t any death certificate issued. More importantly, the paperwork indicated the mortgage was paid off, and there were no liens against the property -- the house was in Hingham Massachusetts -- I haven’t looked closely, but I’m pretty sure it’s an upper-middle class neighborhood. Average house prices should be around $500K, if I recall rightly.”

“You probably do -- I mean, you lived in the Hamptons, a bit south of Boston, but close enough to be somewhat aware of the area.” Steve’s pen flew, the skritch against paper audible. “Could we confirm any tax filings for the daughter?”

Tony frowned, rubbing the top of his head in thought. “Maybe. I’ve got Ducky examining Elizabeth’s body. If he concludes it’s a homicide, then I can request to see if she filed taxes last year, but the IRS won’t give me more than that.”


“The contents of the house were auctioned.” Tony replied. “And I have the list from the auction house. It’s… bothering me. They were a upper middle-class family. I see basic furnishings, but no framed prints of any kind, a small token of jewelry, but nothing of significance. I’m not expecting the crown jewels, but there’s nothing about an engagement ring, nothing about any good jewelry, you know, the one or two pieces most women have.” Tony rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “And nothing in these records indicate things were held out of the auction and kept in trust for Elizabeth.”

“Not cool. I wonder if they had any contents insurance, and if any claims were made.” Steve muttered. “I’ll see if I can find out.”

“Sure.. now, here’s the really fun part. Mariann amended her life insurance after her husband’s death, naming Elizabeth as her beneficiary. I sincerely doubt Elizabeth left a will, or named her up-until-recently named son anything in one if she had.”

“The insurance would go to Elizabeth’s estate. The estate would go to probate if there is no will. If there IS a will, we can contest it on grounds that she never had resource to update it after the birth of her son,” Steve finished. “Best pray for a will, bud. Probate could take years.”

“He could be graduating high-school before it’s truly resolved.” Tony agreed. “Not that it matters -- I’ve got Izzy investing fifty thousand dollars in an education trust.”

Steve started laughing, “DiNo! Your silver spoon is showing.”

“Ha!” Tony rolled his eyes, sight unseen. “I’ll have you know my education trust was seeded at $1M by my grandparents. I’m giving a pauper’s penny to Christopher by comparison. I’m just investing it smarter.” He’d been twenty-two when he’d finally wrestled his full educational trust out of his father’s
hands, at a point he hadn't needed it, and years after it could have spared him burning the candle at both ends to afford room and board at Ohio State. $50,000 when he'd been seventeen would have been a blessing.

“Snob.”

“Serf.”

“Not anymore! Everything is a leap up from serfdom for me. The job, the house, the girl...” Steve retorted back, loftily. “Okay, so pulling on my peasant boxers -- send me a copy of everything you’ve got, and I’ll get started on it. I’m going to talk to Ashwin. I think his firm does forensic accounting. If it doesn’t, I’m sure he knows someone reputable who does.”

“Cool.” Tony tossed the accounting report back on his ottoman, and pulled his computer to his lap. “After you talk with Ash, get back to me and let me know how much retainer you need for this stuff.” With phone wedged in his ear, he quickly typed a calendar reminder for the morning -- rather than couriering the documents, he’d take them to Steve’s office, and let Janis, his assistant, handle the copying.

His email, of course, pinged no sooner than he’d finished, and he found an ad for his favorite pizza place. He also found, further down and received earlier, emails from Patty. “Oh, hey, Patty emailed me Christopher’s birth certificate and the custody order.”

“That’s quick. Look, send me a copy to put in your file.” Steve. “When you get the original, keep it in your safe at the apartment. I can have true copies notarized, if needed.”

“Will do.” Tony agreed, forwarding the email immediately. “And…”

The doorbell pealed. Tony glanced at the clock on his DVD player, and then looked at the door with a frown. It was nearly 9:30pm... Gibbs wouldn’t have come over with an active case running, at least, Tony hoped not. “That’s the door. Gotta go.” He said to Steve.

Phone tossed onto the ottoman, he gave the room a quick once over as he walked to the door. Other than the Fisher Price firehouse play set still out, it was tidy enough. Opening the door, he found Patty and some guy he didn’t recognize. “Hey.” Tony arched an eyebrow. “Something up?”

“The man, a dark skinned man in his mid-thirties, about 190lbs and near six feet tall, brushed forward, nearly nose to nose with him. He wasn’t fat, but he also wasn’t in the best shape ever. Typical of a suit. He flipped open his badge identifying himself as a CPS agent. Behind him, Patty rolled her eyes.

“Little late, isn’t it?” Tony drawled stepping backwards and opening the door wider. Silently he bid them to enter. “Christopher’s already in bed, asleep. And, frankly, he needs his sleep, unless it’s urgent, I’m not waking him up. And I’m certainly not letting you wake him up.”

Tony shrugged. “That’s fine. I’m just surprised I wasn’t notified of the visit. It’s my understanding that only visitations like this are done for children at risk.”
Sawyer sneered. “Whose saying the child isn’t at risk, here? You?”

Tony blinked, surprised by the open hostility. “Did I arrest you, or some member of your family? Ex-boyfriend, maybe?” Tony leaned forward, all earnestness. “I assure you, if I did, they BROKE the law, and it’s my duty to enforce law. Nothing personal.”

The man spluttered. “I don’t…”

“Oh, please… my gaydar is not deficient. It might be regarded as top-of-the-line, actually. I’m an investigator for NCIS, and that means, I’m good at noticing little details. And, for the record, there’s nothing wrong with being gay. Or bi. Or omni. I’m not threatened by any sexual preference you or anyone else may have; I’m ridiculously secure in my masculinity.” He assured the man eagerly, eyes sparkling with glee at getting the upper hand here. He wasn’t an interrogation pro for nothing. Needling suspects came as easy as breathing. “Seriously, though, I don’t suffer from homophobia. You see, a few of my frat-brothers are gay, and I love them to bits -- in fact, I was best man at one of my brother’s wedding. Best! Reception! Ever! Held in Canada, mind you… they wanted to be legally married, you see. So, go on. Let your hair down, dude. Show your rainbow!”

Tony wandered back to his living room, not that it was disconnected from the entry hall by much. He swooped the papers off the ottoman and put them back in the envelope, and flipped the lid on his laptop, forcing the computer to sleep mode. Pausing, he glanced with a cocked head back at the gobsmacked Patty and Sawyer. “Uh. If you’re still in the closet, sorry about removing the doors.”

Patty snorted, her expression shifting from astonishment to amusement in an instant. “No, you’re not.”

He blinked at her, all innocence. “I could be. Give me a chance, Patty. You know I have to work my way up to feeling remorse. I don’t get to practice it often enough, working with Gibbs.” He smirked at an infuriated Sawyer. “Besides, being right all the time makes it hard on a guy to have regrets.”

Placing the envelope back in his backpack, he gifted Patty with a beatific smile. “Thanks for the email, Patty. And the docs. I’ve got a lawyer looking at the estate settlement -- we’re going to have it forensically audited.”

“Ah. It looked hinky to you, too.” She concluded, shoulders slightly slumping.

“Very.” He shrugged. “Do you know if Elizabeth Butti had a will?”

Patty shook her head sadly, “We’re still trying to figure out where she lived, Tony. So far, I have evidence she was doing night-school in Baltimore, but that’s it.”.

“Ah.” Tony tossed his backpack by the door, coincidentally beside Christopher’s backpack. “Well. Hopefully she did, but I honestly doubt it. As it is, probate will tie things up for years where the life insurance is concerned for the grandparents. I’ll let you know what happens.”

“You’re after the kid’s money?” Sawyer retorted. “You’re just gloating about it openly? How stupid are you?”

Tony pursed his lips, and shook his head in dismay. “Seriously? Did you do any research on me? Like, any? At all? Or did you just see Federal Agent and decide that you had to prove you have bigger balls?”

“I don’t need…”

“My assets are fully disclosed, because I’m a FIELD agent, working for a federal agency. That
means a federal cop. It’s no secret I’m a special agent with a silver spoon. Hell, I told the judge that myself when custody was awarded to me, I’m loaded. But, here’s some fact for you to chew on -- I’m worth a little over thirty million dollars, most of it tied up in investments and stocks. In liquid assets I have about a million sitting pretty at any given time, and I make about $230,000 per quarter in dividends, most of which I give to charity.” Tony dropped his ass on the arm of his sofa. “My salary is also no laughing matter. So, I don’t need anyone’s money. Especially not Christopher’s. Oh, and any further investigation on your part would have had you discover that I’ve begun to create an educational trust for Christopher and I’ve seeded it with $50,000. Patty knows this. It’s probably already in Christopher’s file, because I needed his birth certificate to get him a social security number to register the trust.”

Tony looked in askance at Patty. “Honestly? Is this going to be what I typically experience of CAS? Is this what happens in other foster homes? Because, it’s small wonder there is a common belief that the system is a failure.”

Patty took a breath in and blew it out. “Tony, please…”

“No. I’ve served in law enforcement all of my adult life, Patty. And, the only blemish on my record is that I obeyed my Director when she told us we were off duty, and she snuck off to get herself whacked.” Tony stared hard at Sawyer Main. “If you’re here, just to prejudicially pull Christopher from my custody, then be prepared for the consequences. First, that Christopher will freak out. I’ve already brought in a psychiatrist, Rachel Cranston, to start working him on his issues, but that will take months if not years before he won’t react badly. Patty can read you in on what happened with Chris last time. Second, due to the situation in which Christopher was found, and the recent finding of his mother’s body, plus the abuse that has been documented by the hospital, I’m was an inch away from having the FBI investigate. Now, having read over the sale of the property and the disposal of personal property, I strongly suspect some fraud was done, and I’m definitely going to have the FBI intervene. As I currently have custody of Chris, I have to recuse myself from the investigation. So… go ahead, pre-judge me and my care for that child, make assumptions, and then you can expect to come under examination when I give my deposition on why Christopher was removed from my care.” Tony glared hard. “Now, I’m not being a hardass because I disrespect your job. I’m being a hardass because I’m aware of the rules and regulations around your job, and I want only the best for Christopher. So, we can work cooperatively, or I can give YOUR Director a call and show what a silver spoon upbringing does when I want it to. Pick.”

“Cooperatively.” Patty stated quickly. “I’ll set up the visitation schedule, Tony. Let me know what works for you and Christopher. Obviously, not Wednesday nights -- you’re at the YMCA then.”

Tony nodded, ignoring the glare Main was tossing at him. “Fine. IF you know how to be quiet, come with me, and you can peek into Christopher’s room. Seriously, he was very cranky after a busy day exploring his new day-care. He was wound tight because he was so overtired, and despite that it took a bit of work to get him to sleep. I don’t want him woken up unnecessarily.”

His wasn’t a big apartment, two bedrooms, a living-dining-room combo, and a kitchen, and as such, Tony didn’t expect it to take long to throw Mr. Belligerent out. He sure as hell was going to bitch to the CPS DC Director, just as soon as he could reasonably do so. Tony let Patty poke around, Sawyer trailing behind her, making his own notes on his smart-phone, and taking pictures.

“Where is your firearm?” Sawyer strode up to him after they’d examined the living-room. He was practically nose-to-nose, and hostility literally rained off the man.

Tony, standing in the kitchen and prepping for the morning’s breakfast arched an eyebrow. “How do you expect to get through life using that tone on people?” He asked rhetorically. “Has no one ever
told you that you catch more flies from honey than vinegar? Geezus. Look, let me get this in the fridge.” He finished mixing the oatmeal, and dropped the cup of strawberries and bananas on top of it. Lidding it, he shoved it in the fridge.

Quickly rinsing his hands, and grabbing a tea-towel to dry, he led Sawyer back to his bedroom. “The safe is in my bedroom, inside my closet, bolted to the floor. I’ll have to open it if you want to see the firearms, because I paid extra for a safe secured by biometrics.” He pulled open the door to his walk in closet, and went to the back wall. The safe about four feet high, the security for it on the top left corner, it was bolted both to the rear wall, and to the floor, was fire-safe and while a true safe-cracker probably could get into it, in the average home robbery, not so much.

He pressed his hand flat on the panel, and waited for a count of three. The door made an audible click, indicating the scan had been successful. Divided into four shelves, he reached for a tray on the top, and pulled his handgun out. The clip wasn’t in it.

“You separate your clip?”

“Every time. Every day.” Tony replied calmly. “If, somehow someone broke into my apartment, and miraculously did manage to overcome the security on this, they’ll have to hunt for the clip -- and that could buy me valuable time. Besides, I’ve seen too many gun accidents in the course of my career caused by simple carelessness. I’m not going to be a statistic. I’m certainly not going to let Christopher be one either. When he’s older, probably around five or six, I’m going to explain guns to him, and make sure he understands he’s never to pick one up, and never to touch one with a single finger, until he’s in basic training or serving in our armed forces.”

Sawyer snorted at that. “Good luck with that.”

“I know. With my luck, Christopher will sign up for the Marines at eighteen just to get around that rule and not out of a higher sense of patriotism.” Tony said mournfully. “The best I can do here is keep the biometric system. I have a smaller gun-safe in my living room, on the bookcase, but it’s only secured by a key. The clip and backup clip are in there. I don’t carry a gun on my person while at home.”

The other man grunted, and watched with a frown, as Tony again put the gun back on the tray, and the tray pushed back on the top shelf. He shut the door and waited until he heard the beep that showed the system had re-armed. “Anything else?” He asked, folding arms across his chest and leaning against the safe.

“You aren’t qualified to be a Foster Parent.” Sawyer growled.

Tony closed his eyes and took a deep calming breath. “Look. This is just getting stupid, now. I want an answer. Why are you so against me? What have I done to you that you feel I’m a bad guy here?”

“Nothing. You simply aren’t qualified.”

Tony eyerolled. “I’m going to give you career advice. Review the case-file thoroughly before you come in with both guns barrelled. If you had, you’d know that I did all the foster-parent classes. All of them. And I excelled at it. Granted, I was under an alias and undercover at the time, but I completed the full program and exam. I am currently six months from a second Masters degree, this time in Psychology. I volunteer in the SCULPT program, and have done so as a coach to the pre-teen basketball group since the program’s inception.” He glared at Sawyer. “I have worked in countless cases alongside your agency, always with the goal of protecting children. And lastly, a Judge reviewed and signed off on me as guardian. What right do you have, alone, to condemn and witchhunt me when I’m frankly so overqualified I could be a Foster Parent three times over?”
“None.” Patty said from the doorway. “And, for the record Sawyer, you can bully and bluster all you want. I’ve just recorded this last conversation, and I’m going to send it to David Martins. You had your shot to come into this case as a fair and non-judgemental investigator, and you’ve blown it. TONY isn’t the one that hurt that little boy. TONY is the one who found and saved him.”

“You don’t know that.”

“We have video proof. More importantly, I have thirty-seven children who can all vouch for Tony’s whereabouts three hours before the child was found. I have the security logs for NCIS that show Tony was at work at six am that morning, and didn’t leave until six pm, driving straight to the YMCA to arrive at six-thirty pm. When did he find and abandon a child?”

Tony’s eyes widened. THAT was what this was about?

“He’s a single man and a federal agent. What happens when he gets killed on the job? We have a further traumatized kid.” Sawyer stood to his full height, shoulders squared.

“I’m in process of transferring of the MCRT and taking an administrative role at the agency.” Tony inserted quietly. His gut was telling him something now, and he didn’t like it. “I take Christopher’s wellbeing very seriously, but I could be hit by a bus while out getting coffee too. There are no guarantees in life. Field operatives don’t get killed because we want to die.”

The man scowled at him. “You think you know so much. Well, I’m telling you, this is a terrible place to raise a kid, a horrible neighborhood, your elevator is out of commission, and the stairs are just waiting for someone to get mugged in them. The play park near here is known as a drug-dealers paradise. And, you’re a single man. The child has no female influence in his life with you, unless they are prostitutes or college girls you pick up.”

Patty’s eyebrow was arched so high it was almost missing.

“Seriously? Are you sure I didn’t arrest a former boyfriend?” Tony gaped openly appalled.

At the same moment that Patty blurted in astonishment, “You know that I’m still recording, right?”
Monday Dec 8, 2008

Well, hell! He should’ve taken the tray when the barista had offered it after all. Gibbs glared hard at the elevator buttons, for a moment wishing the power of his glare was enough to activate it, before looking around in askance for someone, anyone, to damn well show up and help. No one did, leaving him in this dilemma, looking down at the two cups of coffee that he held, one in each hand. The cups were prohibiting him from hitting the call button with his knuckle, somehow. Or the button was defective. Damn it. What was it DiNozzo called this? Oh, yeah, a First World Problem. Logically, he knew the smart thing to do, the pragmatically intelligent option, was to set one of the coffees on the ground, press the call button firmly, and then pick the coffee up again.

Yeah. No.

So not happening.

Bending down meant admitting to himself just how damn much his knees were hurting today. Because it would hurt. There was a damp chill in the air, and a rain/snow mix in the forecast. (And as Gibbs had no intention to own up to his physical limitations, he couldn’t risk being put in a position where he had to.) So, since his knuckle couldn’t tag the button despite having done so in the past, and his pride was in the way of the practical solution, clearly he was out of options. (Because, even a slight bend to use his nose to push the button was a utterly ridiculous idea – and he was ashamed that he was seriously considering it.) Why the fuck was he the only one here? Maybe his elbow…

“Problems, Gibbs?” DiNozzo’s amused baritone was both balm to his rising temper and gasoline to his frustration.

The worst part, he couldn’t vent his frustration like he used to, because that was what got him in the mess he was currently in. Shannon had always told him his black temper was going to kick him in the ass one day. She’d been right. As usual.

“Press the damn button, DiNozzo.” He growled, and then realized something significant about it being DiNozzo that was standing beside him. “Here.” He shoved one of the two cups in his hands at the younger man. “Got this for you.”

As soon as DiNozzo took the cup, Gibbs pushed the damn button himself. “Figured you’d need a pick-me up after dropping the kid at daycare this morning.”

Tony blinked he surprise, feeling the warmth of the cup. “Uh, thanks Gibbs.”

“’It’s got that crap you like in it.” Gibbs stared resolutely at him.

Tony took a tentative sip, tasting the hazelnut creamer. “Wow – really, thanks Boss!” The elevator chimed, and the doors slid open, and with judicious use of space, Tony let the elephant get in the car with them. “So, the case on Friday got wrapped up?”

Gibbs blinked. “Case?”

“The one you got the call for on Friday?” Tony reiterated, smirking into his coffee. Apparently,
Gibbs was a million miles away. He had to enjoy it, given how rarely that happened.

The scowl that dawned on the older man’s face spoke volumes. “Took till damn Sunday afternoon to figure it all out. McGee blew outta here before I could get him to show me how to do that message thing again. Didn’t want to wake the kid up if he was sleeping.”

Tony shook his head. Geez, learning new tricks to impress him. What was the world coming to. Still, Tony grimaced internally, a weekend spent working was yet another good reason why he had to leave the team. Working extra hours, on call and whatnot was no go when you had a little boy who needed your time too. As it was, his weekend had been spent gearing Christopher with everything he needed for daycare, grocery shopping for the week ahead, and listening to Patty apologize endlessly for her coworkers behaviour. “But, the case is closed?”

“Yeah.” Gibbs echoed hollowly. “Fact is, if the answers aren’t handed to us on a damn silver plate, Ziva and McGee would starve. They struggle to identifying physical evidence at the scene, only catch the obvious, not the little things.”

The doors reopened to their floor, but Gibbs didn’t move. He was slumped back against the wall, looking somewhat pained. “I ain’t saying they don’t contribute to the team, they do. But, if it isn’t on a computer network, or requires intelligence or hand-to-hand combat, then they don’t have the complete skillset for criminal investigation. Even sending Ziva to FLECT won’t change that.”

“It comes from experience, Gibbs.” Tony shook his head. “Of course they don’t have that yet. I didn’t when I started.”

“Maybe.” Gibbs opened his bright blue eyes and stared hard. “But, it’s more than that. Nobody else on the team thinks outside-the-box like you do, the bigger picture stuff, with the small detail incidental crap that fits all the pieces together. You’d have seen immediately what we were missing, at the damn murder scene in minutes. Everything we needed to pinpoint our perp was right there, but they missed it. I left McGee to bag and tag, and Ziver to shoot and sketch, while I talked to the witnesses, and dealt with the LEOs’” Gibbs shook his head in disgust. “On Sunday, we were still no closer, so I went back to the damn scene myself, and figured it out myself. We coulda nailed this jackass on Friday afternoon….”

Tony heaved a sigh, the urge to apologize for not being there was strong, but that wasn’t the answer. Bottom line, Christopher was his priority.

“Not saying you should’a been here, DiNozzo.” Incredibly, Gibbs continued as if reading his mind, “All I’m trying to say is that McGee and David still got a long way to go to reach your level as investigators. Right now, I don’t know if they ever get there. Fact is, there is just some things you just can’t teach.”

The screeching alarm of the elevator doors being held open too long blared loud, and Gibbs released the button he’d been holding and stepped out.

Still, while somewhat backhanded, it had been a nice compliment towards his skills, if one seriously overdue. “Huh.” Tony rolled his head on his neck, feeling the relief as a ‘crack’ sounded. “Maybe you should source someone out with a background like mine, or military police, when you replace me unless you’re promoting McGee to SFA. Then maybe…” His voice trailed. “Huh. No. I can’t say that’s a good idea. I don’t think Tim’s ready to handle that pressure.”

“Don’t want to replace you, DiNozzo.” Gibbs growled, stomping past to his desk. “Don’t you get it? No. I won’t be promoting McGee up. Won’t. You’re right, he’s not ready. He sure didn’t step up when he was your SFA, and face it, you’re a lot more computer savvy than me. Besides, if I didn’t
end up shooting him first, I’d stress him into an ulcer inside three weeks.” Gibbs shook his head. “He couldn’t handle the load, like you do. Damn well can’t handle me, one on one. Doesn’t take initiative to ease my load, like you’ve always done. No way around it, I’d fire his ass inside a month.”

Tony heaved a sigh, dropping his own backpack, and jostling his mouse to bring the computer back to life. “Then, that means bringing someone new in.”

“Or you staying.” Gibbs persisted, like a dog with bone.

“Gibbs, like it or not, I’ve got a child to consider. I can’t put myself on the line when I’m the only parent he’s got. Would you?” Tony tried reasoning with the other man. “I can’t be in the line of fire at a scene, I can’t go undercover, I can’t do long-term stakeouts, I can’t work through weekends, or into the wee hours of the morning… and all those ‘can’ts’ make me a liability to this team. The MCRT needs the SFA to be flexible with his schedule and hours.” He shook his head, even as he sank into his chair. “I love what I do, Gibbs, I really do, but I can’t give you one hundred and fifty percent anymore.”

Gibbs opened his mouth, but Tony held up a hand. “Besides, I’m so damn tired of banging my head against a wall; McGee and Ziva don’t respect me as a federal investigator much less your second, they don’t follow my orders unless you’re repeating the same damn instructions five minutes after. They deliberately refuse to do what I ask, and appeal to you, and when you give them different instructions, you validate their beliefs. Even if I did do what you wanted, and we formed the larger MCRT, their behavior is not going to change and I’m afraid how it could influence anyone we add to the team… that’s dangerous for everyone in this agency if we turn out agents that don’t respect their chain of command.

Gibbs groaned. “I didn’t know they were doing that… jeezus. Why didn’t you tell… no. I know why. You didn’t think I’d listen. Look, I understand, but if you love the job, why can’t we build something that works with your limitations? Couldn’t we try?”

Tony shook his head. “Gibbs… look, I don’t want to beat this dead horse, but honestly, I believe we’ve come to the end of the line. Your call on the 27th was… the last straw. You crossed a line, and I just… I won’t take it anymore. I think leaving the team is the best thing for me, for Christopher, and for this team’s development.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Vance has tabled some great options for my career, I just need to figure out which to take.”

The strain on Gibbs face was painful to see, but the earnestness in his gaze couldn’t be missed. “I hear ya, DiNozzo, I do. I fucked up. I know it. I want to make things right again. My original thought was, if we formed up an expanded team, we could make it so y’didn’t work weekends, or late nights, or whatnot. That you can get to the daycare at whatever time you need. And I’ll beat the chain of command into David and McGee. I’ll pull my own head out of my ass. The team is a mess, things aren’t working the way I originally thought it would -- but maybe having three more on an expanded unit, like having two units in one, and that second unit would obey you, maybe if we cut our workload and the stress, and the other agents demonstrate the proper order of things… maybe that example would iron out the problems in David and McGee’s thinking.”

“Or make it worse. Then we’d have three more field agents who don’t respect me, or the chain of command. And I end up shot in the back, because my team didn’t think I was worth covering.” Tony shook his head. “It’s too big a gamble, with too high a cost, Gibbs.”

“I’ll make the new system work; DiNozzo, I don’t want to lose your input on the team. Yeah, I don’t give you nearly the credit I should’ve. That’s gonna change. You’re the best damn agent I’ve ever worked with, and I don’t like the idea of not having you at my back.”
Tony shook his head, and was prepared to gently rebuke, but Gibbs cut him off quickly, anticipating him. “Just, give me the time to prove we can make this work, DiNozzo… please? We can bring in a TAD to help lift the weight… someone that could go on an expanded team, just… give it a try till the end of year.”

There was a nearly desperate depth in Gibbs voice, something of the like that Tony had never heard before. “I have to leave by eighteen hundred to pick up Christopher. That’s not negotiable, Gibbs. And, just as I’ve already said, I won’t do any more undercover work.” He sighed. “I’ll stay on the team until the 1st of the New Year. But I offer no promises beyond that. Bottom line, field work involves risk, and I don’t have a good contingency plan for Christopher if I end up in hospital or, worse, dead.”

“I’ll have your back. Won’t risk your safety.” Gibbs swore.

Tony huffed a sigh, and let it go. He shook his head tiredly, and bent his attention towards his computer letting his body language tell Gibbs that the conversation was over for now. Instead, Tony waded through the miles of emails that had built over the course of the week. The general administrative garbage he skimmed over: a reminder on appropriate clothing for court amused him, the expense report revision on reporting mileage expense he flagged for later, and a reminder about the e-learning requirements for field agents. As Gibbs second, he had access to the team's overall status for e-learning, so Tony quickly logged into the intranet site, and pulled it up.

The urge to start bouncing his head on the desk was instant and nearly overwhelming.

“Gibbs,” He rubbed his eyes, hoping that he wasn’t developing a headache already. “Have you been doing the e-learning sessions when they are emailed to you?”

The older man blinked at him. “The e-what?”

“Right. Of course you haven’t.” Tony sighed, a hand running through his hair, ruffling it to heights representative of his stress levels. “You and Ziva are so behind on the e-learning, HR is having kittens about it. E-Learning is the online developmental training that HR started three years ago, and made mandatory last year. We’re required to complete so many sessions each year, or your field qualifications are suspended. You’ve done none of them to date, Boss. So, at minimum, you need to do three sessions before the end of this week. And three more before the end of the month or you will be mandatorily be suspended.” He sighed. “I’m going to send you three to start with; three very short, very easy ones, okay? Click on the link, and just follow the screens. You only need your mouse to do this, Gibbs.” Reviewing the seminar listing, he found three of the e-learning sessions he knew to be fifteen minutes or less, and no more, and forwarded the session links to Gibbs.

Gibbs squinted at his screen, and scowled. “Six a year?” He asked plaintively.

“Six MINIMUM.” Tony carefully stressed. “A team lead is supposed to complete ten.” Tony patted down his hair, certain he had manifested cowlicks from the glare Gibbs had just tossed him. “Look, I’ve completed twelve. McGee has ten done. I think you can get away with six, but you’re going to have to do them.”

“Fine.” The grumpiness in Gibb’s tone was so clear, Tony felt he could write a thesis on it.

“Great.” Tony enthused falsely. “And to make your suffering more enjoyable, you can be the one to arm wrestle Ziva into doing hers. I’m giving her eight to complete. Don’t tell her how many you’ve got to do, just tell her she has to do them.” And for Ziva, Tony selected several specific courses, like ‘Arrest procedures and regulations – the rights of the accused’, as well as ‘Searches and Evidence procedures’, all related to and relevant to their field work. “Boss, if she doesn’t do this, she would be
suspended or terminated. That might be grounds for Homeland to deport her.”

“Fine.” Gibbs grumped. Narrowed blue eyes skimmed over Ziva’s empty desk, and Tony internally sighed in relief. Gibbs was going to make Ziva feel his pain. Which meant, she wouldn’t be at his throat about it.

That one headache put to bed, Tony moved back to the rest of his overgrown email inbox. The team had two cases through the week, but the week prior had three that needed reports filed. McGee’s reports were all in, save the one they had apparently worked all weekend. Ziva was overdue by two. Tony pulled up his case-file spreadsheet, recorded the two new cases in, dates and timelines (using McGee’s report), and set up a reminder to harass Ziva for the two outstanding.

There were two emails from the Director to him, minor emails just confirming things Tony already knew. Like, his qualification for using the daycare, and the addition of Christopher to his medical plan. Quickly opening a browser window, Tony logged into his medical and benefits plan, and checked – yep, there was Christopher R. Paddington listed as his dependent.

Another few links checked, and he found that Rachel’s services were indeed covered by his plan for Christopher, which was even better. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to pay out of pocket for the munchkin, or wouldn’t, but that if Rachel was invoicing for her time spent as a professional, then there was a document trail through a reputable insurance provider proving that the required medical help was being provided to the little boy by a qualified professional.

And really, having already gone one round with Sawyer Main, Tony was all about the paper trail.

Logging off the AETNA website, Tony went back to his email. The rest of it appeared to be junk, and he cleared it out, and welcomed his tidier inbox. Giving a quick glance at his watch, and then Gibbs, who he hoped was engrossed in one of the E-Learning sessions, Tony took the opportunity of nothing going on to make a quick call to Boston PD.

“Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, NCIS, calling. I was wondering if you could put me through to your missing persons department. I need to request a transcript of an old case file.” He sipped as his cooling coffee, eased back in his chair, and waited. It must have been a quiet day on switchboard in Boston. He wasn’t waiting long before a brusquely voiced woman, named Lt. Kathryn West picked up the line.

“To put a long story short, I found an abandoned child a week ago, and DNA proved he is the biological child of Elizabeth Butti. Four days ago, Elizabeth’s body was found, and initial report states death by drug overdose. The medical examiner is looking closer, however. Could you send by fax or email a copy of the initial report on Elizabeth’s disappearance? “ Tony wheedled.

“Well shit, how old’s the kid?” The dismay wasn’t hidden in the lieutenant’s voice, nor was it false.

“Three, we think.” Tony tapped a pen his desk, lining it up in his fingers before scratching out a few notes on other things to do with this private search into Elizabeth Butti’s life.

“To put a long story short, I found an abandoned child a week ago, and DNA proved he is the biological child of Elizabeth Butti. Four days ago, Elizabeth’s body was found, and initial report states death by drug overdose. The medical examiner is looking closer, however. Could you send by fax or email a copy of the initial report on Elizabeth’s disappearance? “ Tony wheedled.

“Well shit, how old’s the kid?” The dismay wasn’t hidden in the lieutenant’s voice, nor was it false.

“Three, we think.” Tony tapped a pen his desk, lining it up in his fingers before scratching out a few notes on other things to do with this private search into Elizabeth Butti’s life.

“Some people just need strung up and shot.” Kathryn muttered, to Tony’s bemusement; they were on the same page in that consideration. “I’ve got the file for you. All our records have gone digital, so I’ll print these to PDF, and email them to you. Gimme your email address.”

He rhymed that off, making note of her name and time they had spoken on his notepad. This way, if for whatever reason the email didn’t come through, he knew who to contact. “Thanks, Lieutenant.”

“No problem, Agent DiNozzo. Hope you nail the bastards who hurt the kid.”
It was something Tony hoped he could do too. Hanging up the phone, he looked up as the elevator chimed, and saw McGee stumble off the elevator. That first step was a doozy, some Mondays.

Eyes flicking back to his monitor, he was gratified to see the lieutenant had been as good as her word, and the files he wanted were already there. A few deft clicks of the mouse, and he was reviewing the missing child report.

Elizabeth had been fighting with her parents about her relationship with an older boyfriend, older being relative, as the young man in question had been eighteen, to Elizabeth’s fourteen, at the time of Elizabeth’s disappearance. In fact – according to testimony from schoolmates, Elizabeth’s beau had turned eighteen the weekend that Elizabeth had run away.

He flipped through the rest of the file, making note of other things. Elizabeth’s grades had tanked the middle of that term, as had her relationship with friends; she had become more and more obsessed with ‘Mark’ during this period that she’d let go of other priorities. ‘Small wonder her parents flipped out.’ Tony thought, reading the statements. ‘But ultimatums and teens are bad mixes.’

Sketching out a few more notes, he did a quick cross reference search for any Mark’s that had disappeared around the time of Elizabeth. Strangely, none were reported. Which meant that either Mark wasn’t the boyfriend’s real name, or his absence was expected.

Absently scratching his jaw, Tony pulled up more of the investigation notes… only to close the window when Ziva David pushed her way into his line of sight, and tried to have a look at his monitor. “Can I help you?” He asked blandly, glancing at her, and then over to Gibbs empty desk. Damn. “And might I recommend a change of toothpaste, Ziva?”

“What is it you are doing?” She asked, reaching for the mouse his hand still covered.

“None of your business. You have at least three reports to submit, and eight e-learning seminars to finish.” Tony tightened his grip on the mouse. “And all those tasks are on deadlines. So, chop, chop - get to it.”

She scoffed at him. “No. You are keeping secrets from us.” Brown eyes glared angrily at him. “The child. The one you were seen with on Friday. He is yours?”

“Really, none of your business. I’m serious, Ziva, get back to work.” He gave her a quick glare before deliberately looking back at his computer screen, an implied dismissal. The fact was, Gibbs had shot the gossip mill down just like he had offered. The number of congratulatory emails in his inbox proved that. Ziva couldn’t be totally unaware. She was just trying to stir a pot.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched her nod, as if his response was an answer that filled a hole for her. “So. One of your flurries carried your bastard, and gave it to you because the child is like you, worthless? Yes?”

Wow. He looked up, gobsmacked by her beyond inappropriate audacity. Even McGee was gaping at her like a goldfish desperate for water.

“DAVID.” Gibbs growled behind her.

She spun around, eyes going wide. “Gibbs!

The fury in Gibbs’ face spoke volumes louder than his roar ever could. “You ever speak to any member of my team, or any person in this or any federal agency like that again, and I’ll have you on a flight back to Israel with my boot up so far up your ass you’ll be tasting shoe polish at 22,000 ft. Do you understand?”
“Gibbs… you misheard… I was not…”

“UNDERSTAND?” He bellowed.

“I…”

“Heard you plenty nuff, David. You calling DiNozzo’s foster-child a bastard. No kid is a bastard, no kid is EVER worthless. Every child is a goddamn GIFT. Do you hear me? If I ever hear you talking to my Senior Field Agent, or any other member of this team, or any other agent in any agency with crap like that again and you’re gone. Permanently.” Gibbs growled. “And no excuse is gonna wash. You can’t lie your way out of this. So, unless you want signed for more than the FLECT short course program right now, you’ll get your ass behind your desk and get to work, and keep your mouth closed for the rest of the damn day!”

He turned his blue gaze of doom onto McGee, “And that goes for you too. You think DiNozzo’s an idiot cause he don’t have your fancy MIT degree? Well, I don’t have one either, now do I. You gonna demean my intelligence to my face? Well? Have you looked up the requirements to serve as a Team Lead, yet? Remember, when DiNozzo served as Team Lead? He was qualified for the job. You aren’t. And at the rate you’re going, you’re never gonna be.”

As reamings went, Tony felt this was probably the most verbose and effective he’d ever heard out of Gibbs. Wow. Actually, come to think of it, Gibbs had been downright verbose all damn morning. It was like he traded in his functional mute card. This was world-ending stuff.

Tony wisely kept those thoughts to himself, instead sinking low on his chair, just watching metaphorical lions practically circle one another. Eventually, just how angry Gibbs was with her sunk through Ziva’s lizard-like brain, and she slunk back behind her desk with a small grumble of discontent. ‘Eh.’ Tony thought somewhat scornfully, ‘Ziva’s only upset that Gibbs busted her. So much for the vaunted Mossad prowess.’

With a final glare sent Ziva’s way, Gibbs settled behind his, and quiet descended upon the bullpen. Were it not for the tension that you could cut with a knife, it was kind of nice.

Tony cleared the drama out of his mind, and settled back to the digital casefile on Elizabeth Butti. He was at least four cold cases ahead of Gibbs, and eight ahead of Ziva and McGee, as it was, so he was in no rush to look at the stack beside his desk. Investigator's notes lacked the credibility of evidence, but at the same time, explained the avenue of search. There were comments about the witnesses (credibility), some research into who this mysterious Mark was, but, in general, Tony saw signs of an overworked PD with too many cases, and not enough manpower.

Tony set the file aside, and reached for the topmost of the ever growing stack of cold cases. These weren’t just the MCRT cold cases, but went agency wide. It was just random chance that any particular case hit his desk. Which reminded him, the Director had reassigned the USS Bainbridge case, he wondered if anything came of it. He paused in what he was doing, and quickly checked his email Manderley hadn’t called back in the two hour window. From what the Director sent to IA, Manderley had NEVER called back. Out of curiosity, Tony sent an email off to Alec Fawley, in IA, to see if Special Agent Greg had found the tapes or his notes about the case. Email sent, he settled down to more cold cases.

It was right after he’d read the investigator’s report, and in the beginning of building a crime scene virtual reconstruction on the computer, that Gibbs phone rang. “Gibbs.” The team lead grunted, looking up and across at Tony. “Where? How overdue?” He asked. “Okay.” Phone went down and he grabbed his jacket. “Three Petty Officers on leave have vanished. Military Police looked for them. Family of two said they were on way back over a month ago, and one of them just turned up floating
in Baltimore. Get the truck, McGee.”

Tony grabbed his jacket, and his backpack, pausing only as the instruction set in. Typically, at least of late, Gibbs sent HIM to get the truck.

Gibbs must have sent his confusion. “Done coddling him. He can do the junior agent work while he’s a junior agent.” The other man muttered quietly to his SFA. “Ziva, ride with McGee. DiNozzo, with me.”

As an afterthought, Tony grabbed the laptop off his desk dock. It was a temporary replacement for his desktop which had died a tragic blue-screened death; Tony was just hopeful the IT department would let him stay on a laptop. Having a VPN connection and doing the back office work in transit seemed like a great timesaver.

Generally, driving anywhere with Gibbs took one part patience, and other part insanity. “What do we know?” Tony asked, lifting the lid on the laptop and opening a new file once his seat belt was on, and his seat to the oh-fuck-me-bar had the right positioning.

“Three petty officers, one Mark Johnson, Richard O’Bryan and a Tanal Emmel were off on six weeks leave. They were due back two days ago and never showed. Military Police called homes, friends, and whatnot, checked credit card bills… all signs indicate that they vanished two weeks ago. Today, PO Emmel turned up floating in Baltimore harbour. He’d been shot”

“The other two suspects?”

“Not to hear their commander speak of it.” Gibbs muttered, “But they are until I find them dead.”

It was an hour drive, and in that time, Tony was able to pull together the basic bio for each man.

“I’m putting a BOLO out for PO Johnson’s car. It’s listed as a blue Ford Taurus, 2003, plate 421 EM9.” Tony muttered, as he typed out the BOLO form.

“Good.” Gibbs grunted. He pulled off the highway, narrowly cutting off a dump-truck as he did so. Tony kept staring at the computer screen, happier with what he couldn’t see.

Five minutes off the highway, and they were parking just outside the cordoned off area, a few blocks for the city dockmaster’s office. Tony put his head on a swivel, taking in the whole of the space -- for the brief time he worked in Baltimore, he sure had a lot of memories of these docks. And the unpleasant things that got dragged out of the Patapsco River.

“DiNozzo.” One of the cops called out with a wave. “Long time no see, man.”

Tony flashed a grin, ‘Garcia! How’s it going?’ He gave the older cop a clap on the shoulder. “Good to see you. How’s the wife and kids?”

“Older, and grown-up.” Garcia grinned. “Youngest is off to college now. We have a nice empty nest.”

“Nice.”

“You know it. So, this is your case?”


“Huh. We had another floater earlier this morning. Pretty girl. Hispanic. Early twenties. Broken
neck. Thought you should know in case it’s related.” Garcia watched as the truck rolled to a stop beside Gibb’s car.

Tony watched as Gibbs gave a hand-signal to McGee, before ducking under the tape, “Thanks Garcia. That’s helpful. You get an ID on the girl?”

“Not yet.” The cop shrugged. “You know how it is.”


The body was intact, if bloated with water, and the Petty Officer’s skin had gone green-grey from the long soak. Those small factors aside, the body wasn’t in bad shape. This was typically the case when remains were in the water for less than eight days, after that decomposition became highly evident. “Just take photos.” Gibbs shook his head. “This isn’t the primary crime scene. Not much we can do here. I’ll set McGee to bag’n’tag, Ziva can canvas for witnesses.”

“They had to be dumped somewhere, but not around here. Too many lights and surveillance cameras here,” Tony offered, pointing the cameras out that were surrounding them.

Gibbs frowned, doing a small turn and scanning the harbour. “Huh. Know anything about the bay’s currents?” He asked.

“Nope.” Tony smirked as he fetched his SLR from his bag slinging the strap over his neck before squatting down beside the body, absentely snapping gloves on as he did, and he carefully checked pockets, and folds of the clothes, taking photos of anything interesting that he located, and where he found it. He found a wallet in his front pocket of his cargo pants, a trio of condoms in his jacket inner pocket, and two keys for a locker of some type attached to the dog-tags around his neck. “PO Emmel.” Tony confirmed, matching id in wallet to the bloated face. He patted over the torso. “Gunshot… close range, but huh, that’s a damn odd angle.”

He glanced over to see who was closest, and opted for Ducky who was ambling his way to them, rather than an obviously grumpy McGee. “Duck, do you have a trajectory rod in your kit?” He called.

“I do, Anthony.” The older Englishman huffed and puffed a bit as he approached. “Found something odd, have you?”

“Strange gunshot angle.” Tony shrugged. “I’d like to make sure it’s what I think it might be.”

“I see. Well. My word, this is a bit soggy, isn’t it, you puir lad.” Duck dropped to one knee, somewhat awkwardly, and then snapped on his own gloves. A liver probe was administered, although the good doctor admitted, with the temperature of the river being a factor, and the body being submerged for some time, the most he could estimate was the time of death three to five days, pending an autopsy.

It was imprecise, without inserting the rod directly into the wound (but Tony didn’t want to contaminate any evidence Ducky might find on the body), but he was able to get a fairly accurate line for the shot trajectory. “Assume he’s standing.” DiNozzo mumbled.

“Yeah. That’s…not right.” Gibbs frowned. “He shot himself?”

“Maybe if he was a contortionist, I think he was wrestling with someone shorter or wrestling with someone under him for the gun, and it went off. Maybe.” Tony found himself frowning, coming to his feet and out of Ducky and Palmers way, even as he snapped a few more pictures before Ducky began to package the body up for transit. “I’ll ask Ducky to look for indications of defensive
wounds…” His gaze trailed off, eyes straying to the water in the inner harbour, mind spinning.

“Tony, quit goofing around, and move.” McGee muttered coming up behind him, stuck on tag and bag duty, as Gibbs had assigned. The younger man was scowling, waving his hand as if Tony was in his way.

Tony rolled his eyes, and exchanged a glance with Gibbs who had moved to talk to the local PD. He took a few more photos, and then an overall scene photo, and caught up to Gibbs and the PD. “Hey, the other floater -- the girl you found… how far apart were the bodies?”

“Not very.” The cop frowned. “Both found on different sides of this smaller bay. When we found her, we started searching for anymore. Hey, y’know there’s that small area just by East Lee Street, where it dead ends before the bay. Bad street lights, it’s a known drop for illegal drugs. Exchanges happen on the water, in the water, on the land, we bust that spot all the time. Probably the best place around here to roll a car up and do a body dump. It definitely explain why two fresh bodies were in the inner harbour.”

Tony hummed under his breath, wondering if there was any correlation, or if it was just circumstance. The girl a druggie, and Emmel interrupted a sale, or Emmel a drug-runner, and the girl walked into something she shouldn’t. Either way, there could be a connection. And where were Emmel’s buddies? “Could we get the coroner’s report on her when it’s done?” Tony asked, ignoring anything Gibbs might have wanted to say.

“Sure.” The cop shrugged. “I do know her neck was snapped.”

Gibbs who had wandered off to watch Ducky leave in their van, returned, his interest now peaked, and he turned back towards the pair. “Snapped?”

“Yeah. It must have been one helluva fast move. Brutal.”

Gibbs phone magically appeared in his hand, and a few buttons pressed, he turned and walked away, “Duck…” He began before falling out of earshot.

All in all, they left the harbour after Duck and Palmer took the body, and Tony led them to the point Garcia had pointed out. The drug paraphernalia was abundant, and with Ziva pulled off a fruitless witness search, it still took five hours to sketch, bag and tag this scene. Abby would have kittens. Either way, it wasn’t the primary crime scene, that both Gibbs gut and Tony’s instincts knew. Until they found that, the only evidence was on the body.

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“What do you got?” Gibbs came thundering through the bullpen, coffee in hand, and Ziva miserably trailing behind him. It was just gone sixteen hundred hours. After the dead end of the body recovery, Tony had rode back in the truck with a sullen McGee, while Gibbs and Ziva had made for Norfolk Naval base and Emmel CO.

To Tony’s weather-eye, clearly the visit to Norfolk Naval base had brought nothing new or noteworthy to light.

“Ah, not much, Boss.” McGee muttered. “The keys are to a storage unit, but his family doesn’t know which one or where.”

Gibbs stared hard. “And?”

“Emmel was last seen with his two buddies, allegedly going to Baltimore before heading back to
base. I found charges on his only credit card for some meals, and drinks at a few bars. Nothing specific. He must have been sharing a room, but I’m not sure who with, still waiting on Mark Johnson’s info.” Tony activated the screen, putting up the profiles of the three young men. “Of the three, only Johnson has a car. Still no hits on the BOLO. I called legal and they are getting us a warrant for their banking activity.” Legally, this was all they could do.

“I need more than that.” Gibbs groused.

“And we’ll all have to wait for more.” Tony replied calmly. “Ducky said he’d be up soon.”

There was a grumble, but Gibbs just headed for Abby’s lab, rather than blowing up. McGee blew a relieved breath, and Ziva slumped into her chair.

“He is like a tiger with a sore paw,” Ziva muttered.

“Bear.” Both Tony and McGee automatically corrected.

“Bah, bear, tiger, either. A large predator with a sore paw. I care not which, but I do not like this,” she said snappily. “Gibbs has been like this since you decided to leave, Tony. You need to make this foolishness stop.”

“Me?” Tony snorted, typing away at his computer in preparation of serving the warrants (when they arrived) as soon as possible. “Gibbs is always like this.”

“Because of you.” She insisted.

“Because the world spins.” Tony checked his email one more time.

“I do not appreciate.”

“Ziva, shut up.” McGee hissed uncharacteristically, “Do you want Gibbs biting our heads off again? If he catches you not working…”

Huh. McGee had some survival skills after all. Who knew? Tony kept his head down behind his monitor, to hide his smile.

His email with the warrant info arrived even as Ducky did.

“Gibbs is in Abby’s lab,” Tony offered apropos of nothing. “Let me call down.”

“Oh, alrighty, then. Though, I don’t have much to offer until the samples I’ve sent on to dear Abigail have returned.” Ducky rocked on his feet lightly. “I was reminded, during this autopsy, of a chap I knew back in Britain who was fascinated in the science of entomology. My word, the experiments he ran with cadavers were positively….”

It took the word cadavers for Tony to immediately tune out, confident he didn’t want to know whatever experimentation went on involving bugs and dead bodies. Faintly he heard McGee moan, and knew he’d made the right choice. “Abby’s Labby… you stab them, I identify the knife.” Abby said cheerily picking up the phone. “And hello, Very Special Agent DiNozzo, speaking of sharp objects, I have a bone to pick with you.”

Tony huffed. “Not now, Abs. Is the Boss there? Ducky’s upstairs to give us some info on our new case.”

“He’s on his way.” Abby said indifferently, “But, we need to talk Mister. A little birdie…”
“McGee.” Tony supplied the name of said bird.

“... told me you think you can leave the team. And that’s not on, Mister.”

“Not now, Abby. Work first, popping your delusional balloons later.” Even though it would piss her off something fierce, but he just hung up. It would piss Gibbs off more if he found Tony chatting with her.

“She won’t like that, our Abigail.” Ducky remonstrated him lightly. “It’s the smaller courtesies that makes for smoother personal relationships.”

“Ducky,” Tony warned him lightly. “I’m not inclined to have Abby lecture me about what choices I’m allowed to make about my life and career. Not now, and not ever.”

“Ah.” He stuffed his hands into pockets. “I had warned her to keep silent on both matters. Ah well.” He tutted, and then suddenly brightened, “How did young Christopher fare this morning at daycare? I hadn’t a chance to ask earlier, you see.”

Gibbs was either taking the stairs, or had left Abby before he’d called, and was off getting coffee. It wasn’t that much of a distance between the bullpen and the lab.

Tony threw down a pen, and sighed. “Oh, Christopher had the typical response to his first day of daycare, I’m told. Tears. A lot of tears. Some more tears. We arrived early, I had him playing with some blocks, meeting some other kids, and he seemed okay, but when I told him to have fun, be good, and that I’d see him after work…. You’d think I kicked a puppy before drowning it. The waterworks! I’m told it’s not new. That this isn’t unexpected, that his reaction is perfectly NORMAL.” Tony stressed the last word, to ensure everyone knew there was nothing normal about Christopher’s misery. How to feel like the biggest monster ever, leave your traumatized kid at daycare. Ugh.

Ducky chortled softly, “Fatherhood suits you, dear boy.”

“Wait, I thought this was just temporary, that you’re fostering him for a little while…. You’re adopting the kid?” McGee spit out, his filter clearly lost.

The look Ducky gave the junior agent could have fried fish. “Mister McGee!”

“I too am surprised anyone would entrust a child to someone like you, Tony.” Ziva chimed in.

“Ms. David!” Ducky was appalled.

“Sorry, Ducky, I just… misunderstood something and I was surprised.” McGee demurred.

Ziva, merely shrugged. There was no retraction coming from her.

And Gibbs thought he could reform them?

“I’m Christopher’s legal guardian as appointed by a very well known and respected judge, who thinks I’m more than amply qualified, thank you, Ziva,” Tony clarified. “I’m not his foster parent. And even if I was just his foster-parent, it doesn’t change anything. I’ve taken all the required classes, and have all the required certifications.” Granted, some were under a pseudonym.

“But, kids hate you.”

“My word!” Ducky clutched at his chest. (For a moment, Tony feared the older man had stroked.)
But, holy shit, did McGee FLUSH his sense of discretion down the damn toilet? McGee usually didn’t blunder about so much.

Tony shook his head in disgust, “Jesus Christ, McGee… I’m so utterly sick and tired of being treated like shit by you two. Gibbs wants me to stay on the team, but with your attitude I just don’t think that will work.” Tony was just as capable of ripping closet doors off and letting the skeletons spill out. “Look, we have two weeks left to put up with each other. I suggest you just leave me alone and do your damn jobs.” Tony shook his head, even as he electronically sent the last fax through to the last major bank the needed to serve.

The nice things about banks, you didn’t need to send a process server down when you wanted information, you just had to fax a legal warrant with the request. The banks didn’t argue once their i’s were dotted and t’s serenely crossed.


“Well, yes; I was just asking Anthony about…”

“The victim?” Gibbs prodded, before the medical examiner could be distracted.

“Ah. Petty Officer Emmel died approximately twelve days ago, from a single gunshot, rather close range, in an upwards diagonal that ultimately bisected his pulmonary artery. I estimate from tissue degradation that he was dropped in the water some seven days ago. As it was, he was quite deceased before he went for his bath. He would have died in less than a minute from such damage. Based on entry and exit wounds not the body, not to mention the mess it made inside the puir lad’s chest, the gun muzzle must have been pushed right up against his abdomen like so.” Ducky took a pen and using Gibbs body, demonstrated the position and angle.

“So, not self-inflicted.” Gibbs concluded.

“Definitely not. However, it was clear he was in a fight. There is extensive ante-mortem bruising on his hands, and legs, as if kicked.”

“Kicked?” Gibbs frowned.

Tony hummed under his breath. Flipping through his contacts, he looked for his contact in Baltimore at the city coroner’s office, Lionel Evans. The older man was a bit of a grouch, but nothing on the scale of Gibbs. He was certain, if Ducky contacted him, Evans would cave fast. He quickly sent the info to Ducky’s email account.

“Yes, kicked.” Ducky clarified. “Now, the bullet was a single shot, through and through.

“Either Emmel’s or Johnson’s registered handgun.” Tony reasoned.

“That’s assuming a lot.” Gibbs retorted sharply.

“Yeah. But, all three of those marines are licenced to carry. Emmel didn’t have a wife or girlfriend, so I’m running out of the usual suspects. O’Bryan is only registered to own a rifle.” He shrugged. “Either way we still need the bullet and the gun, but I’m willing to put money that it’s Emmel’s firearm.” Tony replied calmly, setting up a mail filter that would have any files the banks sent go to McGee. “McGee, I’ve sent the banks the warrants. You’ll be getting the reports. Look for something weird in their financials. Big deposits, big withdrawals… you know the drill. Ducky, there was a second body found earlier, broken neck. Can you get the autopsy report? I’ve sent the contact info to you.”
Gibbs nodded approvingly, turning his eyes to his computer.

“Of course, dear boy.” Ducky snapped his suspenders, and looked around, seeing everyone get busy. “Well, then, I’ll be off. Anthony, do give wee Christopher my regards.”

“Will do, Ducky.” Tony smiled.

“Good, good.” The old man spun about slowly, and ever so discreetly slid a folded sheet of paper into the middle of Tony’s inbox.

It was agony to not touch it, but Tony persisted, still focused on tracking the missing car, via gas receipts. It was odd, there was a fill in Baltimore… Tony made note of the gas station so he could check if they had cameras for the date and time of the transaction. Another in DC near Pentagon City….but three days after arriving in Baltimore, and strangely, on the the day before he’d found Christopher at the YMCA.

Weird. And his spider senses were going nuts. Not as reliable as Gibbs gut, but good enough.

He picked up his phone and made the calls to the gas stations for footage, even as he surreptitiously pulled Ducky’s note out of his inbox. Flipping it over, as he waited for a connection, he found himself frowning at the tox screen...clean. Elizabeth hadn’t died from a drug overdose. Per preliminary findings, she’d been beaten and strangled to death. And, time of death had her dead a full two days before he’d found Christopher…. Jeezus, had the kid been abandoned and alone on the streets of DC with a broken arm for two whole days?

What the fuck?

Chapter End Notes

To me, the recent comments have been just so funny! You’re being distracted by mild red herrings, peeps! Sorry, but true. Still, everything has a purpose.

a) Gibbs had McGee show him how to send a text, because by 9pm, an experienced parent like Gibbs knew a three-year old would be asleep. On Sunday, after closing the case, I daresay Gibbs recognized his own temper was on edge, and squaring off with Tony would be a bad-bad-bad idea. He's trying to do right, to fix things, to change his ways.

b) Sawyer? Oh, easy there, no grand conspiracy here. Just a little bit of coincidence. You'll see later. But, Sawyer does have a role to play.

c) The missing tapes from the USS Bainbridge? This was put in to showcase to Vance that Tony doesn't fluff off on cold cases. He takes every case seriously, and is willing to go an extra mile when there is a discrepancy. Vance is forming a new opinion on Tony, and because Tony was very concerned about this case, he had Tony's calls routed to him, out of curiosity. When Greg failed to call back, Vance (who is a busy man, and a demanding director) sicced Internal Affairs on Agent Manderley, because a case had been compromised, and his (Greg's) behaviour suspicious. Suffice it to say, Greg is having a very bad month. (Also, I'm not writing all this in. It's a story about Tony, not a soap opera about Greg's bad choices.) The point is, changing worldview for Vance.
In this chapter, please forgive any technical crime scene language that isn't perfect. I had half a mind to put old NCIS episodes on to get the right language, and then decided no. This is my story, and I'll mess it up my way with something a bit more original than regurgitating past canon dialogue. I'm very happy with it, and more excited that the next few chapters (three more in rough draft) are just FALLING together. You'll probably get two new chapters next week. I'm giving myself a few days off as of now (Thursday evening), to work on my other story.

Cheers!
Tuesday December 9, 2008

The second day of daycare started off worse than the first. Christopher hadn’t even made it to the door before the crying began. Truthfully, Tony wasn’t all that surprised. “Buddy, Christopher, easy… you’re okay.” He crooned to the sobbing child clinging to him like an octopus, despite lacking the extra limbs.

Carrying a sobbing child, his backpack, Christopher’s backpack and opening doors required some remarkable physical dexterity. Tony felt new awe to mothers everywhere that had crying baby, diaper-bag, toys to amuse said unhappy baby, and their own purse, yet still managed to do the grocery shopping using the baby carriage as a cart.

As it was, he was barely managing. He could be offering Christopher the sun, moon and stars; Christopher was having none of it.

“Buddy, come on… you had a good day here, yesterday, remember? You played, you learned some new songs…(so had Tony for that matter. All night long.) What’s wrong, buddy?”

“Tony no… no leab Cwistopher!” The child wailed.

“I have to go to work, Christopher. I’m not leaving you, I’m just going to work while you play here. Remember yesterday? I went to work, but I came back to take you home as soon as I was done work, didn’t I?”

“Nooooo.” The child wailed.

“I did too! Christopher! We had fun at home last night, didn’t we? Or are you forgetting that too? Did the epic battle to save Owls Home from the most terrible bubbles not happen during bath Time?”

More sobbing, less verbalizing. The eternal dance of two steps forward, with three steps back apparently began with toddlers. It shed a lot of light on past romantic relationships, that.

“Christopher…” Tony shifted the child in his arms, he crooned softly to the boy, “Come on. Munchkin. Look, if you don’t let go, you can’t go play today, and I can’t go to work, and if I can’t go to work, then I can’t get everything I need to do done today, and I’ll have to stay late, which means we can’t have fun tonight with the super-special surprise I have for us tonight.” More importantly, if Christopher didn’t ease up and Tony had to take a day, he wouldn’t be able to pick up the tickets for his little surprise, tickets that were being couriered to him at work.

“Suppize?” Christopher sniffed, rubbing his nose on his shoulder. Tony internally cringed, mentally picturing his poor coat plastered in snot. Dear God, this parenthood shit was HARD on his wardrobe. He seriously owed Nikki a fruit basket or something for the hazing he had given her.

“Yeah, buddy, a special surprise. We’re going to do something very special tonight. But, we can’t have the surprise if I don’t go to work right now, and you need to go play and learn. It’s important stuff you’re doing here, Christopher.” Tony told him softly. “I want you to learn lots and grow up smart, and that starts here, while I go to boring old work.” He shifted the child (as much as he could) in his arms, until he could point to the huge clock on the wall. “Look, see that? That’s a clock. See how the black line moves? That’s called a ‘hand’. Now, see the big red hand? It moves too. When the big red hand is on the twelve at the very top, and the little fat red hand moves onto the six, at the very bottom, that’s when we’re done for the day and can go home, together.”
Christopher’s lower lip trembled fiercely, and big teary hazel eyes were filled with sadness. “I promise I’ll be back for you, Christopher. I promise, promise, promise.” Tony swore softly, pressing a gentle kiss to the soft hair above the boys forehead.

Mercifully, Fanny waded bravely into Christopher’s trauma. “Christopher! Good heavens, it’s a relief you’re here! We’ve got special company coming to day, a bear, you see…. A very special bear, and I believe you’re a good friend of his. I need your help, Christopher. We’ve got to get ready!”

“A special bear?” Tony saw a lifeline, and took it for all he was worth. “Christopher, do you know any special bears?”

His shy little ward tucked his face into Tony’s lapel again.

Tony bounced him in his arms. “A special bear… I know a few bears. Fanny, tell me, does this special bear like, hmmm…. honey pots?”

Fanny nodded along, “Come to think of it, he really does! Very much so.”

“Okay, does he live...let me think...in seventy-two acre wood?”

“Hun’ded,” Christopher corrected, voice muffled by the fabric of Tony’s coat.

“The Hundred Acre Wood.” Tony corrected, duly, amused that while Christopher new the word, the precise word that should be applied, he had no comprehension behind what ‘a hundred’ meant. More important than understanding numeracy, though, his home address was just one more thing Tony needed to teach the little boy in the near future.

“That is the address we have for him.” Fanny agreed, smirking co-conspiratorily at Tony. “You see, Special Agent DiNozzo, with the holidays are coming, all our special friends pop in for a visit with the children. This happens throughout the month, until Christmas. And, you see, Pooh, is a particularly good friend of ours, why, he’s insisted on being our first visitor!”

“Pooh?” The head popped up about an inch.

“See, I knew you knew Pooh!” Fanny teased the boy. “But, Christopher, he’ll be here soon, and if you’re upset and crying, Pooh will be upset and crying. And there is just so much to do before he gets here. We need to get the cushions out for story time, and the chair needs to have it’s special cushion, oh, and then we need to make sure Mr. Pooh Bear has his book to read us…”

“Pooh?” Christopher wiggled a bit, and Tony gently let the suddenly curious octopus down to stand on his own two feet.

“Uh huh.” Fanny did coquettish very effectively. “Can you help me Christopher?”

Christopher gave Tony a wary look, before little eyes turned to gaze at the barren story circle area, hazel eyes turned back to consider Tony again.

Tony crossed his heart, in a silent promise.

The resulting tragic sigh was years older than it should be, utterly convincing Tony that this child was going to grow up and become an actor. “Cwistopher hulp,’ he finally decided with tragic airs.

“Wonderful!” Fanny clapped, before reaching out a hand for the child. “Come along, love, we need to carry the cushions out. We don’t want our bums to fall asleep during story-time, do we?” She led
the child away, maintaining a cheerful chatter the entire time.

Tony took the very moment Christopher was around the corner and out of line of sight to flee.

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“What happened to you?” Gibbs asked as he walked in.

“I had a small personal rain cloud fall on me.” Tony replied glumly, stripping off his overcoat and looking at the wet patch. Digging out a wet-one from his desk drawer, he made a small effort of cleaning any invisible snot-smears off the fabric, all the while making a mental note to find the dark blue overcoat in his wardrobe, the khaki just showed the marks. Oh, and under no condition was he to wear his buckskin leather. Not, at least, until Christopher became acclimatized to daycare.

“Ah.” The team lead wisely let it drop.

Tony hung up his jacket, and booted up the computer. A quick check of his email verified everything he already knew. They were at a standstill. Until they found the gun, a bullet or the car, the case was stalled. Friends and family of the victims and his fellow petty officers had offered no new leads, the gas station in Baltimore was a mom-and-pop type of station with no ‘operating’ cameras; and the Citigo wouldn’t release their footage until a warrant was served.

Mercifully, the warrant he’d requested of legal was sitting on his desk in an envelope. Beautiful. Now he just needed to get it physically served.

“Anything on the BOLO?” Tony found himself asking, not expecting a positive answer, seeing as he wasn’t seeing notification in his system. He switched to the intranet site, and set things up to have a TAD serve the Citigo and get the data they needed. No need to waste any of the team's time on such a menial task.

“Nope.” The disgust in Gibbs voice was evident.

“How goes the e-learning things?” Tony wasn’t expecting much here, after all, with an active case he expected Gibbs to blow anything outside the case off. Or blow up. One or the other.

“Working on number five, right now.”

Tony froze, craning his neck around his computer monitor, and across the bullpen to the bowed silver head. It was like stepping into the twilight zone. Or, maybe he was still in his bed, dreaming, and none of this was real.

He indulged in that last thought for a moment, before dismissing it. Flights of fantasy had never been something he could truly indulge in. Even if it was something as lame as extra sleep. Besides, repeating his morning at daycare? No thanks.

Monday had gone surprisingly well, outside of the stalemate on the case. He’d logged off after taking the case as far as he reasonably could, just before eighteen-hundred hours. Ziva had shot him a glare full of daggers, but said nothing. Tim looked stunned, flipping from the clock on his desktop to Tony like he had a nervous tic.

Gibbs, had just grunted a ‘Good night.’ And that was that.

It was so bizarre, he’d been hyper aware all night, expecting the shoe to drop in the form of a visit from Abby or Gibbs, himself. But nothing happened.
The Abby-eruption would happen, though. That was almost as certain as death and taxes. He’d spent a good amount of time considering avenues of approach, he had a secret weapon, and a plan. And the plan was brilliant! Which reminded him…. Jumping to his feet, he ensured Gibbs was engaged with the computer, and while it was too early to expect Ziva or Tim to show up, Tony knew Abby was already hard at work. He made his way to the stairs.

Two flights down, and he was sauntering into the uproar of electric guitars and way more drums than should exist in a band. The beat of the music was rattling through his body like a live wire. Oh, boy… she was not in a good mood when it was THIS loud.

Still, he had faced worse things. Bravely, he swallowed his trepidation, and walked into the lab.

Abby was in her glory. New platform boots, striped stockings, though a rather simple black dress, with just a hint of lace peeking out from under the hem. The dress a pronounced ‘v’ at the neckline. Her typical choker was paired with a modified rosary bead string, the cross replaced with a stylized black rose. The whole look made the pristine standard white lab coat appear a complete anomaly, as did the protective goggles on top of her pigtailed head.

“Abby.” He said loudly.

There was no response, but over the sheer volume and beat of the god-only-knew-who band she was listening to, he wasn’t surprised. Tony closed his eyes, seeking strength, and then moved to the remote that controlled the stereo system. He didn’t turn it off, but he did drop the volume significantly.

“Wha?” She spun about. Behind the plastic of the lab glasses, her heavily mascaraed eyes went wide. “Tony!”

“Hey, Abby.” He gave her a soft smile. “I need to talk to you about a few things, do you have a few minutes right now?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I’m not allowed to yell at you, or take away your right to make your own decisions. Ducky told me off, yesterday.” She said glumly. “And I’m only halfway through the gazillion pointless samples you guys collected yesterday -- none of them having hits for your missing marines.” The flicker of a baleful glare scraped by his features, the glare primarily aimed at a series of machines behind him.

Tony blinked. Okay, so… go the Duckman. Although, Tony had never expected anyone else to ever fight his battles for him. It left him feeling a little off-keel. “Oh. Okay. Thank you for telling me that, and I’m sorry about the samples… it’s just how the job goes. You could always get hel…” Before he could even suggest a second technician to help, her eyes narrowed and foot gave a little stomp.

“Never mind. Unrelated to all that, and I’m sorry for the millions of syringes you’re so looking forward to analyzing, can you take a very quick break? There’s something I need to talk to you about. Please?”

“But, why, Tony?” She asked plaintively, arms waving out, with an empty test-tube clutched in both hands. “I didn’t mean to make you mad at me, it’s… I don’t do change well, and if you leave that’s a BIG change. It’s a foundational change. It’s earth-shattering kind of change, and that’s more than hinky, it’s catastrophic.”

“Easy there, I’m pretty sure the apocalypse hasn’t happened just yet.” He pulled her into a quick hug. “I understand, Abby. I just don’t need another fight on my hands, right now. I’ve got too much happening already. Look, I’m not planning on leaving NCIS.” He assured her. “But, there’s a lot of good reasons why I need to make a career change, and we can talk about those later if you’re willing
to rationally listen, but that’s not what I’m here for right now.”

“But…” Abby slumped. Ducky must have left a strong impression to get past the bullheadedness she was famous for.

“But nothing, if you want to come over on the weekend, we can have dinner, and if you’ll promise not to yell or shout -- we can talk then. More importantly, I’d like to introduce you to Christopher.”

“Christopher? That’s the little boy you’ve taken in? Ziva thinks he’s yours, but Ducky said he was an abandoned child. Which is it?” She abandoned the test tubes into a stand.

“Abandoned, and likely orphaned.” Tony sighed, wondering if he’d have to have this conversation with everyone he knew. “He’s only three. And I can solemnly swear on a stack of bibles that there is no way he’s biologically mine. I may have a little black book of conquests, but sixteen year olds aren’t in it.”

“Oh.” Abby chewed on her lower lip. “And, he’s the reason you want to leave the team?”

“Yes, but no.” Tony shook his head. “Abby, you don’t see how the team treats me. How they talk to me, and disrespect me every damn day. If it was just in the office, I could suck it up, but it’s in the field, too; McGee and David question or refuse my orders constantly. Right now, I don’t trust McGee or David to have my back in the field, and I’m also not sure about Gibbs anymore. He might watch my back, but I don’t know that he won’t throw me under a bus to protect Ziva and McGee. I won’t throw my life and safety away.”

Her eyes grew teary. “No, no, no… Tony… no. The Bossman wouldn’t do that. No. You’re wrong, it’s just a misunderstanding, you have to be wrong.”

“Abby.” Tony wasn’t going to raise his voice to her, but geez, could she just listen?

“No. I can’t… Gibbs would never let you down. He’s the best of the best, the bestest. And, he made me like you when you first came here. He’s the Bossman, he never fails us. Nope, I can’t… if Ziva and Tim are being naughty then the Gibbinator will straighten them out, Tony. You have to believe that, and then you won’t have to leave the team, and all will be good again.”

“Abby.” Tony sighed, exasperated.

“ABS.” Gibbs interrupted, striding into the room. “Can I have my Senior Field Agent, back? We got a hit on the BOLO. DiNozzo, I need you to take McGee and check out the car.” He frowned deeply. “I have to sit on Ziva until she’s done two more of those e-thingys. HR sent me an email about it too.”

Abby raised an eyebrow, mouth opening, but the small head shake from Tony miraculously stopped her. Seriously, he needed to think about picking up a lottery ticket. Too many weird unusual things in one day either boded incredibly fortuitous or very bad.

Either way, Abby nodded silent understanding to keep the conversation between them, and gifted him with tremulous smile. “Okay…yeah, you can have Tony back. Just, keep him safe, Gibbs. And, Tony, dinner Saturday? Lasagna, por favor? Oh, oh… can I bring Christopher a present?”

“You don’t have to. Between me and my frat brothers, we’ve been loading him with books and toys. But, absolutely yes… Saturday, and lasagna, as the lady requests.” Tony squeezed her shoulder lightly, and followed Gibbs out of the lab.

“You okay taking McGee?” Gibbs asked, blue eyes squinting as if looking into the future but didn’t
“Where was the car found?” Tony asked, obliquely.

“Pentagon City Mall.” Gibbs gave a shudder. “Up in Arlington. Cops are watching it until we get there.”

“McGee won’t be a problem, then.” Tony would take the cops as his backup, while McGee could do that thing he did and check security cameras for their missing Petty Officers. If they were lucky, the two men still missing would be found hiding inside the mall itself, though given the mall wouldn’t open for another hour and a half, Tony didn’t have much hope of that.

The elevator opened, and Gibbs strode briskly to his desk. “Take McGee. Security cameras all around that mall. See if you can find footage.” He said, echoing Tony’s thoughts somewhat, but said for the newly arrived McGee’s benefit more than any other reason Tony could fathom.

Fetching his backpack, and gun from his drawer, he gave a nod to McGee who was still in his jacket, and had yet to boot his computer. “Let’s go.”

Coming into the mall off the I-395 S, they arrived in a conservative thirteen minutes. “Security is located across from the public washrooms, on the Metro level” Tony commented, as he navigated the car into the parking garage, and spotted the flashing lights of the DCPD parked on the Metro level of the garage. “See if you can find our two stray Petty Officers in the footage.”

McGee mumbled agreement, and wandered off in the direction of the mall. He’d have to rattle the doors until security would show up, but Tony was certain after all this time, McGee was up to that challenge.

Tony pulled out some gloves from his bag to shove in his pocket, then checking his gun, and id, he grabbed the backpack full of the tools to his trade, and went out to meet the two officers who waited patiently, coffees in hand.

“Gentlemen,” Tony called cheerfully. “Special Agent Tony DiNozzo. I understand you found our missing car?”

“Sure did,” Said Officer Reid, after a good look at Tony’s ID. “This way.” He jerked his chin up to the first ramp. “We’ve called a tow, figured you’d want the car back at the yard.”

“We will. But, I’ll have a quick look at it first, and take some photos for the casefile, then seal the car.” Tony agreed. And then he focused on more important things. “Hey, is there a Starbucks around here?”

At first glance the Taurus was immaculate. The car clearly very pampered, despite being a few years old. Which only made sense, given it’s history. Johnson had been deployed for the past few years, he’d bought the vehicle used, with a ridiculously low 6,000 miles on it just days after arriving back.

Tony used a flashlight to peer into the windows, while Reid and his partner stood about a foot behind the vehicle. Spotless. Not a stray piece of dust on the dashboard, not an abandoned coffee cup in the cupholder. Absolutely dealership ready. Huh.

He popped the lock anyway, and started dropping his markers and taking photos of everything in situ. After overview shots were done, he pulled out few a sticky-backed pocket, and a ream of bindle papers. Peeling the sticker off one sticky pocket, Tony did a quick pat-down on the passenger seat area he was going to kneel on, to get good shots of the center console, before folding that envelope into bindle paper for transit. He unfolded another sheet of bindle paper, and used it to bear the weight
of his knee, and then leaning into the car.

It was a gruelling process, to meticulously process a vehicle, even a preliminary exam. Tony started with the passenger front, checked the glove-box, the dash, the carpets, door and door pocket. He pushed the seat back, and carefully pulling out a mirror and flashlight, checked under the seat. Folded the seat back, checked seams and crevices. Then, moved to the driver’s side and repeated the process.

He checked the fuse-box; the car ceiling was carefully examined for rips, tears or signs of alteration. He then moved to the back seat, checked the back-seat cup-holders, the floor, under the carpet protectors, and carefully palpated along the seat back that bordered onto the trunk. And, that’s finally when the fun began. His fingertips came back a familiar red.

He stripped the gloves off, stuck them into yet another evidence bag and sealed that. “Any of you sensitive to blood or body parts?” He asked congenially, as he shut the car door and moved to trunk.

“Seriously?” The fresh-faced rookie partner, nametag reading Martins, asked.

“Very.” Tony took photos of the trunk, the lock, the wheel wells, and under using the mirror and flashlight again, after testing to make sure the trunk was securely latched. He’d never want it said that someone ELSE tampered with the car.

“Go get more coffee for the three of us.” Reids told his partner. “I think we’re gonna need it.”

Martins took one cursory glance at the trunk as Tony moved to pop the lid; the trunk opened easily and with a good swing up. The kid swallowed hard. “Yeah, on it.”

Reids whistled under his breath. “Jesus. That’s a lot of blood.”

The fact was, Tony knew their victim had been dead for a good week. There was a lot of still damp blood in the trunk, damp enough to transfer, which didn’t make sense. Surely it should have dried by now.

“Uh huh.” Tony just took pictures. “Sure is.” He could speculate, but until Abby tested and matched it, all he had was speculation, but instinctively, Tony was certain this was where Emmel had bled out. For certain, something had.

Flashback on the last digital image, made him pause before shutting the trunk. The whole damn thing was a crime scene, better to let Abby take it apart in the crime scene garage, then him try to take a million samples. She was still upset about the drug-point, and the hundreds of syringes that required processing.

Pulling his flashlight out, and the handheld mirror, he carefully examined the edges and crevices of the bloody trunk. More scene tags, and photos happened. God, Abby was going to kill him.

Lifting the edge of the carpet that led to the spare tire, he noticed the startling untouched steel under the carpet cover; the back of the carpet had been laminated thick rubber coating, which partially explained the blood still being damp. Tony reached for his camera, yet again and took another series of pictures.

There was a drag on the panel coming from the left corner, where the access panel was to the rear tail-lights on the driver’s side of the car; something was jammed, and that something, after a careful check, was a MEU(SOC) .45. Tony sucked in a breath. This REALLY didn’t belong in the possession of any of their petty officers, and unless it was a decommissioned piece... The MEU(SOC) .45 was a force recon or special forces gun. What the hell was it doing out of an armory
or in the field?

He shook his head. The damn thing still had a clip in. Jesus. It was like some people wanted to be caught doing bad things. Sighing, he took another evidence bag, and sealed the gun up.

Carefully, he shut the trunk. Martins had returned, a little green-faced, but with coffee. Tony gratefully took his, and quickly wrote all the evidence he’d physically removed from the car into a log. Taking a larger evidence bag, he shoved bags with the gun, and two exemplars into it, and sealed them together, then went back to his car to secure the lot in his trunk.

The tow company the DCPD had called was the same one the DCPD used for crime scene tows. Mercifully, it was also a company that Abby and the Agency approved of too. “I just need to seal the trunk, and she’s good to roll to Navy Yard.” He told the driver.

“Scuito gonna sign for it?” The burly tow operator asked, writing down the information he needed to pass on for a crime-scene tow

“Her or SAC Gibbs.” Tony agreed. He initialed where he needed to, both to release the vehicle into the man’s care, and to ensure the company got paid for the job. Giving the man a nod of thanks, Tony moved off to his own vehicle again.

Fetching everything he’d need to seal the Taurus car up for transit, he made his way back towards the police standing guard over it. Dropping the gear on top of his backpack, he quickly flipped out his phone, he called McGee.

“Not now, Tony.” McGee answered promptly.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Well, hello there, sunshine. Just to let you know, I’m having the car towed. The entire trunk is a delightful crime scene full of gore and blood, the types of which will give Abby fits of rapture.”

“Tony…” The impatience in Tim’s voice was vexing.

“I also found a weapon.” Tony carried on blithely, ignoring the attitude from his Junior Agent.

“So what?” McGee asked belligerently, “There are fifteen hundred cameras in this mall. Security has just dispatched a walk-thru to check if anyone is ‘hiding’ inside, and I’m going through the past few days history… on fifteen hundred cameras.” The younger man said grouchily.

“Uh huh.” Tony tucked cellphone between his shoulder an ear, and began marking where he’d need to seal the truck. “Did it occur to you to have the whole lot downloaded and then taking it to our offices, where we have those nifty programs that can run through those files and do photo recognition on it?”

“Of course I did. It’s downloading.” McGee huffed.

“Fantastic. Then quit whining.” Tony ordered, hanging up abruptly.

His next call was to Gibbs. “If your junior agent doesn’t get the attitude under control, I just might spank him.” Tony warned.

“Take him to the gym and just beat the shit out of him. We’re supposed to do that and call it physical training. Spanking is against company regulations.” Gibbs replied immediately. “Also, CPS might have an issue.”
“CPS has lots of issues.” Tony agreed blandly, thinking of one particular CPS agent. “I’m sending the car to Abby. The trunk is a cornucopia of evidence, most of it bloody. And, I found the gun.”

“You think it’s THE gun.” Gibbs amended.

“It’s certainly an interesting piece. MEU(SOC) .45. Hopefully, we can identify where it came from.” Tony scratched jaw with the crime scene tape banging on his wrist. Carefully, his cellphone anchored handless, Tony laid a careful layer of plastic down, over the seams of the trunk and down to the wheel wells and secured it with security tape. He’d already placed tape on the lock, and the seams of the trunk. Once the trunk was secured, he went to the car doors, and taped and cross-taped the seams. It would need cut for entry.

“Huh. ETA on getting back here.” Gibbs asked.

“The car is about to be loaded, so, probably twenty-to-thirty minutes for it. McGee is downloading home-movies from the mall to bring to the office, but I’d have to chip away at his holier-than-thou attitude to get a timeline.” Tony admitted.

“So chip.”

“You know what Gibbs, I could. But I thought this would be a great time for you to put a fire under McGee’s ass.” Tony said amiably. “Unless, you were blowing smoke.”

“Goddamn it!” Gibbs clearly bit off what he wanted to say. “I’m not blowing… yes. I will call McGee. And I’ll explain precisely where my boot fits in the scope of his reality.”

And, like he knew Tony had done it to McGee, but still had prove who had the worse social manners, Gibbs abruptly hung up. Tony rolled his eyes. More and more, his decision to leave the team looked so appealing. Almost, shiny.

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Tony was just buttoning up his pants, leaving the stall, when he spotted Ziva leaning against the wall of the men’s bathroom. “This… I won’t miss.” He told her, grimly. “This is harassment. A man deserves to take a shit in peace.”

“Meh.” She waved a hand to show her dismissal of his concerns, and the slight moue of distaste for his candor.

“What do you want, Ziva?” He asked, moving to the sink, and generously lathering his hands with soap.

“I do not understand. You have invited Abby to meet your child. You have let Ducky meet him. But, you do not wish to introduce him to us, your team?” She pinned him with dark eyes. “Explain.”

“Nope.” He agreed. “I don’t. And, my reasons aren’t any of your business.”

“Are we not important in your life? People your child will have contact with?” She sounded genuinely concerned, and completely indifferent to whatever he wanted.

Tony flicked a narrow glare at her through the mirror. “Seriously? You can’t SERIOUSLY be asking that.” He told her shortly. “You’ve called Christopher a bastard to my face. Any child of mine would be worthless, you said. And you think you’re IMPORTANT to me in any way? Outside of my due diligence as your senior field agent, no you aren’t important in my life; you are nothing to me.” He grabbed two paper hand-towels from the dispenser.
The hurt sound she made was so fake to his ears. He knew what real emotional hurt sounded like; God, the sound Jeanne had made still echoed loudly in his memories. This? No. “I thought…” She reached out a hand to touch his arm. “I thought… but you have feelings for me, no?”

“Oh, no. Not only no, but hell no.” He told her, moving out of her reach. “I watched one abusive relationship, growing up. I’ll be hell-bound before I ever willingly enter into one of my own, and that’s ALL you have to offer. I have to put up with your crap here, in my job, and I can do that, because I can dish back. But, I’ll be damned before I let myself have FEELINGS for anyone who treats me the way you do.”

He left the washroom behind in five long strides, letting the door slam behind him.

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It was just gone eleven hundred when the mall footage resulted in a hit. Unfortunately, it was less than ideal. “There, they pull in.” McGee pointed to the grainy black-and-white imagery that showed the parking garage. “Because they parked on a ramp…” He switches to another file, and it shows Johnson and O’Brien getting out of the car, Johnson’s arms waving about as he shouted at the other man. The car is locked, and Johnson and O’Brien head for the mall.

“What time is that?” Gibbs asked, squinting as he watched for every detail.

“December 2nd, just after the mall opened.” McGee checked the timestamp. “Ten-hundred hours.”

Tony made a note on the timeline he was maintaining. “And, did they go into any stores?”

McGee shook his head. “No. They went straight for the Metro.”

“Dammit.” Gibbs looked heavenwards. “Call DC Metro with the date and time. See if they can give us footage.”

“On it, Boss.” McGee replied. He was awfully docile, Tony noted. Gibbs must have really chewed him out, because in the car ride back, he’d been very sullenly quiet, yet answered all questions quickly with utter compliance and not a lick of snark. It had been a startling change in behavior.

Tony turned off the plasma screen, and returned to his desk. He transferred the timeline he’d been sketching to the case file notes, and began checking the serial number on the gun, against military inventory records. In the background, he heard McGee talking to the DC Metro.

Ziva had disappeared, likely to lick her wounds, but ostensibly for lunch. Tony didn’t care either way. He did, however, take a few minutes to file a formal complaint about her stalking him in the men’s washroom. FLETC wouldn’t address behaviour like that.

Moving on, Tony checked his email for any updates to the many irons he had in the fire, and saw the TAD had successfully served the warrant to Citigo, and had returned with the videos. Going above and beyond, the TAD had even had them run against the petty-officers ids, and behold, the image of the three Petty Officers, clearly alive, in the car on November 26th.

So, sometime between getting gas mid-morning in Arlington, and some undetermined time after that, Petty Officer Emmel had been killed. Likely in the DC area.

Tony sighed as more unanswered questions just piled up, but dutifully added this information to his timeline, and added the photos and info to the digital case file. “Got confirmation that Emmel was alive the morning of November 26th, and in the company of Johnson and O’Brien.” Tony called across to Gibbs.
He got a grunt for a response.

Lunch came, with McGee vanishing to the bowels of the Cybercrimes division, needing something special about their server that would let him do that thing he did with the miles of security data from the DC Metro.

He glanced across at Gibbs desk, unsurprised to see the other man vanished, Ziva was wearing headphones, and glaring at the screen, so likely doing one of the E-Learnings during the lull in the case.

Reaching into his desk, he pulled out the thermal lunch bag he’d earlier that morning stashed, and while one-handedly typing (and scrolling through inventories), he ate his tuna-salad wrap and carrot sticks. Christopher had a grilled chicken salad in his lunch, with apple slices but Tony reasoned if he was expecting Chris to eat his packed lunch, he should make one for himself to set the good example. Certainly, packing his meals was going to save him money.

The gun serial number hadn’t turned up in the armoury records, so it hadn’t been stolen from storage, and while it was possible the gun had been decommissioned, the owning of one hadn’t shown up in any of the Petty Officers records.

Worse, it didn’t seem, per the gun registry, that anyone owned this particular gun. Which led Tony back to the armoury records. Changing the parameters of his search, to assume the weapon had been issued to someone serving in Force Recon or Special Forces, he immediately got a ping.

Gibbs was going to love that.

The name was redacted, but a few calls, and his security clearance provided, led to one Captain David Bodnee from Force Recon who was issued that weapon some eight months ago. Currently, and as of three weeks ago, he was stationed at Camp Pendleton, in California.

What the hell?

Tony could feel a headache coming on, so Gibbs showing up with yet another coffee for him was… a welcomed surprise. “Thanks Boss.”

“No problem. Gibbs craned his neck, trying to see Tony’s screen. “You got something?”

“Gun was issued eight months ago to Captain David Bodnee, Force Recon.” Tony was pulling everything he could about this marine, a marine a good six years older than any of their petty officers. “He’s in Pendleton, presently. Just came back three weeks ago from overseas.”

“Huh.” Gibbs sipped his coffee, thoughtfully. “See if his unit ever passed through where our missing PO’s were stationed.”

“Working on it, right now.” Tony mumbled. “And yes, they did. Eighteen months ago.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Gibbs muttered. “How did that gun get in Johnson’s car, then?”

“It’s a real mystery.” Tony agreed. “We’re missing something. I’m going to contact his commanding officer and question him via MTAC.” He decided, picking up the phone.

“Good.” Gibbs straightened, and giving Ziva a cursory glance, moved back to his desk.

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Gibbs ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it as he made his way down the hallway to Abby’s lab. Everything was falling apart around him, and he just didn’t know how to fix it. McGee’s attitude with DiNozzo was symptomatic of the bigger problem, and Tony was absolutely right -- this was all on him. His stupid idea of levelling the playing field, and having all three agents compete. Fuck, what had he been thinking?

“Abs.” He called out, wandering in with one of those god-awful syrupy drinks she loved. The mere thought of swallowing a mouthful was enough to make him nauseous.

“Gibbs!” She chimed out cheerfully, glad in overalls and goggles. “Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs… my babies are still hard at work, I can’t just wave a magic wand and have all the answers!”

Gibbs smiled ruefully. Nothing changed down here. Abby was immutable. “Do you have some of the answers?”

Her responding grin was plenty answer, but she verbalized all the same, “You betcha I do!”

“The blood in the trunk represents about seventy-percent of Petty Officer Emmels blood.” She wandered closer to the open (and dissected) trunk of the car. “I’m running a few tests to confirm that it’s all his, but that won’t be ready for awhile. But, lets leave the blood for a moment. There was nothing more than a few hairs, and fingerprints through the rest of the car. The hairs belonged to Petty Officer Mark Johnson, primarily, but a few to Petty Officers O’Bryan and Emmel. About what I’d expect if I had a passenger for a long trip, or something.” She pulled up a few screens of data, showing DNA helix from the registry maintained by the military, and matching it to a helix from her own searches. “Likewise with fingerprints INSIDE the car.” She switched the screen over to something else. Two hair samples magnified to absurd dimensions. “But these are from the trunk, and these two do not belong to our Petty Officers.”

“No?”

“Nope. These two lovely little viable specimens are female.” She said conclusively.

Gibbs sighed inwardly. More complications in this case. Lovely. “Do we know who these females are?”

“Maybe. Somewhat.” Abby seemed rueful. “I have one unknown, not in any records I can find. The other...” She pulled up a picture of a young girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old, “This is Elizabeth Butti. She went missing almost six years ago. This is the last photo of her on file.” She pressed a few buttons on her terminal located in the garage. “I aged her up to twenty.”

The girl was beautiful, with golden-brown hair, wide hazel eyes, and a generous mouth.

“She was recently found dead in DC.” Abby continued. “Original autopsy had her listed as drug-overdose.”

“Original autopsy?” Gibbs queried quickly.

Abby chewed her lip. “Ducky’s doing a second. At Tony’s request.” She admitted reluctantly. “And, preliminary cause of death is strangulation.”

Gibbs blinked. “Good work, Abs.” He said, turning sharply on heel and heading for autopsy.

Abby blew a breath, and made a face. “Sorry, Tony.” She said to thin air. “Hope telling the Bossman that isn’t going to see my lasagna rights revoked.”
Tuesday December 9, 2008 - continued

“Ducks.” Gibbs barked as he blew into autopsy like a hurricane.

The older man washing his hands in the sink, looked over at the Senior Agent, before shifting his gaze to his clearly anxious assistant, Jimmy Palmer. “My dear lad, please run those samples over to Abigail? And, kindly request she expedite these samples.”

Palmer quickly and with relief grabbed the cart loaded with the samples, and scurried around Gibbs heading for the forensic lab.

Ducky picked fresh towels to try his hands, briskly running the paper through his fingers as he turned towards the Senior Agent. “Jethro, is there something amiss?”

“Elizabeth Butti. Talk to me.”

Ducky tilted his head, mouth working silently for a moment. Chickens and their eggs. “I see,” He said slowly and with great thought being put before his next words. “Jethro, I assure you, I’m doing nothing more than giving a second opinion and, resulting of that, fixing a grievous error committed by a very young coroner for the city.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes. “Why did DiNozzo ask you to do this?”

“I can’t say.” Dr. Mallard said flatly. “Or rather, for clarity, it’s not so much that I am unable to speak, but a matter of confidentiality, and that I won’t say, at least, not until such a time that Anthony makes it clear he accepts my… divulging the matter.” He stern look he through Gibbs was enough to make the other man’s gaze drop. “I regard any and all confidences that Anthony’s invests in me as a matter of ongoing trust. And, unlike others, I have long since learned my lessons, and will not break faith with that young man again.”

Gibbs closed his eyes, nostrils flaring, and fists clenching. “For fucks sake, Ducky, the girl was killed and transported to DC in our missing Petty Officers goddamn car. Her death is now case related. It isn’t a personal matter for DiNozzo, it’s now a criminal matter. And, I need to know WHY DiNozzo asked you to intervene.”

“No.” Ducky said firmly. “You want to assauge your curiosity whenever Anthony holds his cards close to his chest, but you rebel against such when the shoe is on the other foot. I am well aware of your foibles, Jethro. And while I will not cater to them, if Ms. Butti is tied to your case, then it's her life and death that matter. In that, I can offer some information, though whether she was alive or dead when her DNA was placed in the vehicle, I can not say. What I may inform you is that Elizabeth Butti died, by my estimate, on November 24th, and the cause of death was strangulation. She fought back fiercely, but was clearly overpowered, and succumbed to her attacker. Skin tissue under her nails was scraped, and some fabric fibres in her hair. Those have just now been sent to Abigail for processing.”

He pinned Gibbs with a piercing look. “The reason Anthony asked for my involvement remains personal. I will admit, the previous coroner who examined her, despite our fields deontology, concluded it was a drug overdose; Anthony had good reason to have the case reviewed.”
Ducky then sighed, moving around to put an autopsy table between them, more from restlessness than any self-protective urges, “The mistake was not a deliberate act, in my opinion. Rather, a group of assumptions and the lacking of wide experience. Elizabeth, poor girl, does have rail marks on her arms, but they are old. And, while there evidence of a very recent injection, the conclusions my young associate came to was that Ms. Butti was at worst a sex worker with a drug problem, or at very least a drug addict, and the ligature marking at her neck was a matter of autoerotic asphyxiation gone amiss. A bit radical, since the drug they found in her system is primarily contained in the brachioradialis muscle. The injection was clearly after death. Additionally, nothing was found near her remains that would create such a mark, a braided cord, quite thin, severely crushed thyroid cartilage and trachea. The markings on flesh a somewhat distinctive pattern. Thusly, it is in my opinion, her killer, being a novice at concealing a murder, and rather impassioned in the act, given the choice to use a larote rather than something more subtle like a pillow, was hoping to use narcotics as a means to confuse the police as to cause of death.”

Gibbs frown deepened, not satisfied by what Ducky was leaving out. “DiNozzo wouldn’t ask for something like this out of the blue. What’s his connection to Butti.”

Ducky’s mouth formed a thin line. “As I have said, Jethro, that is a personal matter. Whether it is connected to the case or not, it is in Anthony’s hands to divulge if he thinks best, which I believe he will. I do caution you, Jethro... if you approach Anthony in this same manner as you have done I, with such bullheadedness, then you’ll most certainly be surrendering your chances to fix recent mistakes. Tread most carefully.” He gave Gibbs a very stern look, “As much as I would like to clear up your confusion on the matter, Jethro. I stand by what I earlier said. I won’t.”

Gibbs glare upped several notches, and he marched smartly out of autopsy without another word.

“Oh dear,” Ducky sighed, reaching for his phone. “Old friend, I hope you do not burn a bridge you’ll sincerely regret burning.”

Tony had no sooner set the handset down than Gibbs stormed through the bullpen to loom in front of him. “Elizabeth Butti.” He growled. “Her hair was found in the trunk of Johnson’s car. What do you know?”

Tony held Gibbs gaze for a long considering moment, and then gave a tiny nod. Somehow, he knew Elizabeth was more than just a dead mother. If she was case related, then the case had to come first. He pressed the button on the plasma remote, and pushed the file he’d been gradually building, starting with Elizabeth’s image and statistical data.

Both Ziva and McGee jumped from their desks to watch.

“May 12, 2004, Mariann Butti filed a missing person’s report on her then fourteen year old daughter, Elizabeth. It is believed she’d run away to be with her eighteen year old boyfriend, only known as ‘Mark’.”

He clicked a few images, showing the age progression estimated by the FBI that had taken the case on the missing child. “Neither FBI, nor Boston PD found a trace of her. The case was filed cold on February 21, 2007.” He clicked again, bringing up crime scene photos collected by DCPD. “November 30, 2008, DCPD recovered an unidentified female body in an alley behind the Courtyard Marriott off 16th St. NW. Staff at the Courtyard were unable to identify her as a guest. To all appearances, it seemed like sex-hookup with autoerotic asphyxiation gone wrong, complicated because of heroin overdose. Fingerprints, however, run by the DC Coroner’s office did, matching the victim to the missing child’s report.”
Tony, then paused, taking a deep breath, and clicked again, bringing up a photo Patty had taken of Christopher at the hospital - bruising, ligature markings so red and fierce on his neck, and his broken arm before the bones had been properly set. Side by side, a picture of Elizabeth from the morgue, the ligature marks blackened in death, but so pronounced, and similar to the lines on her son’s throat. “A week ago today, December 2nd, CPS notified me during the custody arrangements that Elizabeth Butti is Christopher’s biological mother, father unknown, and that his mother had been located deceased.”

Tony gave Gibbs a flat, unhappy look. “Christopher has been abused all his life, from the what the hospital and I have determined. As a matter of closure, I requested Ducky re-examine Elizabeth’s remains. Christopher is my dependent, and therefore I have that right to request my agency medical examiner to review a family member’s case. Christopher is going to have questions, when he’s older and able to think about this. I want to have the answers. Additionally, I needed to know her cause of death, because Christopher was abused. I want to identify his abuser and bring them to justice.” He cast one more look at Elizabeth’s young dead face. “Although, that may now prove impossible.”

Blood drained from Gibbs face, leaving him looking decades older than he was. “Tony.” He said hoarsely, making connections far too fast to be comfortable. “Ducks said she died from strangulation.”

Tony closed his eyes, and let pieces of a puzzle slide into place, Gibbs demanding nature passing him as a non-issue, as it was just typical, and not worthy fighting about since he was already planning to leave. So. Strangulation. It was confirmed, then. She’d been murdered. More damning than the marks on her neck, she’d been transferred from the scene of the murder to that alley. It went beyond a crime of passion, to something premeditated when that happened. Where was Chris during all this? If he had been attacked, and that seemed likely given the markings he’d had on his own neck, then how had he escaped? Had he been knocked unconscious and presumed dead? Was he in the trunk of that car too? “Were her or Christopher’s prints in the trunk?”

“No.”

“Christopher’s hair?”

“Abby only found another female sample. And Emmel’s hair and blood.” Gibbs said watching Tony carefully, keenly aware that their working relationship was rocky at best. And, yet, he wasn’t willing to apologize for getting information relevant to the case.

‘Dead most likely then’, Tony thought. ‘And, Chris somehow escaped.’ At three years old? There had to be someone else involved, but his mind boggled at the possibilities. “I see.” Tony raised a hand, his jaw set rigidly in his face, and rubbed it over his features, completely ignoring the expectant faces around him. Instead, after dropping the hand he picked up his phone, dialing a few numbers quickly.

“Good afternoon, this is Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo of NCIS. You have Christopher Paddington in your care, at present? Yes, good. Excellent. I need to make security arrangements for him. No one other than myself, Director Leon Vance, or Steven James Adler may remove Christopher from the premises. He is not to be interviewed or receive any visitors unless I am present. Please request ID. He may be in danger.” He waited for some sort of confirmation, before signing off.

Taking a deep breath, he verbalized his theory for all and sundry. “If Elizabeth’s hair was in the car trunk, but no prints, then she was moved after she was killed. I know she died on November 24th. I know her body was found on December 1st in DC. I can’t believe she went six days unnoticed by Marriott Courtyard staff -- their dumpster is in that alley. I don’t know how Christopher came to be
abandoned in DC or when, I just know I found him on the 26th. I also know the Courtyard Marriott, where her body was found, is over six blocks from the YMCA, where Christopher was found. And, assuming he walked to the Y from that point, then he walked sometime before 8:00 pm when I found him. Someone would have seen a toddler along those roads, no matter what time the sun set.”

Tony paused. “They were both strangled. Elizabeth died from her wounds, Christopher survived. I believe something or someone interrupted the attempt on Christopher’s life. I lean towards someone, because they didn’t come back to finish the job. He escaped, and at three, someone must have helped him. I just can’t logically see it... knowing he had a broken arm; I just can’t see it any other way.”

Gibbs nodded understanding what DiNozzo was saying. “McGee. Find everything and anything about Elizabeth Butti. I want to know where she eats, where she sleeps, what kind of toothpaste she uses. I want to know her shoe size. I want everything. We need to retrace her last few days alive.”

He paused, going with his gut. “Start with Baltimore.”

McGee scurried back to his desk. In mere minutes, just enough time for everyone to settle behind their desks, and for Tony to drop head into his hands, McGee called out. “Boss, I’ve got something. It was a long-shot, but I was willing to bet the FBI wouldn’t have thought... Elizabeth had completed her GED about four months ago. She’d just started at the Community College of Baltimore this past spring and had to use her full legal name to register the GED for admittance. Her registration at the College is under Rose Butti, but her GED has her full name on it.” He typed a bit more. “The college has an address on file for her. 102 W. 39th Street, Baltimore. Apartment 303.”

“Ziva, with me.” Gibbs ordered, crapping his jacket, and then pulling his firearm about of his drawer. “We’ll call if we find anything.” He said in passing. “McGee, keep digging for more on Butti. Also, get someone on those financials for Johnson, Emmel and O’Brien. We need to find how they got that gun, and my gut says the money will talk.”

McGee nodded. “On it. I’ll run a macros search for Elizabeth, I don’t need to actively monitor it.”

“Tony….” Gibbs looked strained.

“I’ve got Bodnee in MTAC in thirty minutes.” Tony said. “Unless something significant comes of that, I’m going to pick up Christopher for a late afternoon snack here, in one of the interrogation rooms, and ask him some questions. Don’t expect much, Gibbs. He didn’t have much of a healthy relationship with his mother.” Tony’s frown was deep, “Maybe Rachel Cranston can come in, she’s his therapist. We might need her insight.”

Sorrow was deep in the blue eyes staring at him, but Gibbs said nothing, just nodded, and disappeared with Ziva scurrying behind.

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“Sir.” Captain David Bodnee stood at strict attention. “It’s an honor to speak with you, Special Agent DiNozzo. How may I be of assistance?”

Tony inclined his head in a short respectful, if silent, greeting of his own. This kid was dripping with overt innocence. Wide eyes, bright smile, the ‘look at me, I’m just a sweet puppy, scratch my ears!’ He was Force Recon. There was nothing soft or innocent under that desert tanned skin; Force Recon marines were trained for war. “Pleasure is mine, Captain.” He demurred. “Just a few quick questions, related to a case my team was is working on.”

Opening his file folder, he gave the brown-eyed, and dark-haired Captain a nod to be seated. The MTAC was an interesting system, the eight panels along the room, and multiple cameras allowed the participants to have a truly face to face meeting; better, for meetings like this, the clarity of images
allowed Tony to get the read on his suspect. “You’ve served for four years in the marines, two of them as a first lieutenant, before moving to force recon, correct?”

“Yessir.” Bodnee answered.

“Promoted to Captain eight months ago?”

“Yessir.”

“Congratulations, belatedly.” Tony read on, the profile he’d only just received, the red tape on Force Reconnaissance teams was incredibly. Now, quickly skimming Tony absentely noting that Bodnee’s unit was on the USS Bainbridge at the time the weapons there went missing. Bodnee had just started with them at that point, likely so wet and fresh from the training… huh. Interesting, but possibly just a coïncidence. Regardless of the fact Bodnee was onboard, he wouldn’t have had access to where the shipments were stored. Really, that cold case wouldn’t go anywhere without the missing surveillance tape. “You had issued to you one of the modified for field MEU(SOC) .45, serial number CO52751A90399”

Bodnee blinked. “Yessir. I reported that stolen five months ago. I was in Kandahar when it happened. That and a M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle also issued to me. Several other weapons were taken from other members of my unit. Stolen while we were sleeping. The sentry on duty for my unit was sick; no one knows when he passed out, but the replacement on duty found him. We think locals snuck in and stole food and gear, to sell for food and money. Reported it right away, sir.”

Tony noted that. “Called in or reported to your superior?”

“Both. Colonel Alexander Mercill instructed our 1st Lieutenant to call the loss in. I was there when he did.” Bodnee confirmed. “If it helps, the call was made by 1st Lt. Aiden West. He was reassigned shortly after that op.”

“Thank you. I’ll look for confirmation of that loss filing. Were the other weapons taken just in your tent, or throughout the camp?”

“Throughout, Sir. Nearly half of us… at least, those that were off-duty and sleeping. The few on duty or getting ready, or someone was too restless… those tents were missed.”

Tony made his notes, not happy with what he was hearing. “Can you also confirm if you’ve at any time met or spoken with Petty Officers Tanal Emmel, Mark Johnson or Richard O’Bryan?”

“Sir. Sorry, Sir. No.” Bodnee’s hands were pressed flat on the table in front of him. He leaned forward, blinking rapidly, but portraying all earnestness. “I am not familiar with any of those names, Sir.”

It was the frequent blinking and his hands that gave Tony pause, but it could have been just nerves, too. Bodnee, despite nearly six years of service, was only twenty-three. Facing NCIS in a serious criminal matter was nerve-wracking for even the most innocent of officers.

“Alright then. I won’t keep you. Thank you for your time, Captain.” Tony gave the younger man one of his patented smiles, the kind of smile that convinced suspects that they’d just spoken to a complete rookie airhead, and had gotten away with their bullshit.

“Thank you, Sir. Have a good day, Sir.” The overly eager Captain replied, before the signal cut off.

There was just NO WAY in hell that over-eager urge to please was real. That kind of ass-kissing newness would have been rubbed off in basic training. Ugh. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.
Bodnee needed further investigation, but honestly, Tony wasn’t sure if he was tied into this, or something else. He needed to find the record of a mass theft of weapons, including Bodnee’s. And, as Tony jotted down some quick notes, he needed to look into David Bodnee’s folio and history with a bit more care. It wasn’t a gut feeling, but an itch at the back of his neck that said there was something odd here, and that the Bainbridge was involved somehow.

‘I don’t have time for all this.’ He moaned silently in his head. ‘Crap.’ Maybe he’d get one of the TADs to start profiling him. And to cross reference who else was on the Bainbridge in Bodnee’s unit.

Yeah, that sounded good.

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The apartment building itself was nice enough. A little older, stone front facade with brick sides that showed recent parging. Sure, the trim and windows was in need of some sanding and refinishing, or a out and out update, but the building was overall a tidy and cared for structure.

Butti’s small apartment located on the third floor near the stairwell, on the other hand, was a fine example of indifference and poverty. The super unlocked the door, and with weapons drawn, Gibbs and Ziva cleared the space, room by room, watching where they stepped with care. There were signs of struggle, and broken glass in one room. To ensure they didn’t compromise evidence, they took things slow and with care.

After ensuring no one alive was in the space, Gibbs walked through and visually cased the apartment, taking in the entire space, while Ziva unpacked the equipment, and began to photograph the scene from point of entry to innermost point. There were signs of struggle in the bedroom, and living room.

Returning to the living room, Gibbs slipped on gloves, even as Ziva seemed to focus in with especial care to one window where the blinds were half ripped from the frame, and the cord torn out. “Gibbs.” She called.

He left the front door, which showed signs of forced entry, and took a look at where she was pointing.

“The window trimming, the rope for the… blinds, that is the weapon that killed the girl?” Ziva suggested. She smartly took dropped tag numbers, and took some very careful shots of things that could be removed as evidence, both close up and distant to give perspective. She also marked the window, and carefully noted the damaged unit.

Gibbs gloved hands reached out, after she had finished the pictures, and examined the raw string carefully, the snapped and frayed piece at the top of the blinds. The material was woven, braided into a tight pattern. “Probably. We still need to find it.” He agreed.

He left her to finish processing the living-room.

“This is a cowpen!” Ziva declared, lips curling in distaste and she photographed a kitchen with a sink full of dirty dishes, counters that desperately needed either wiped down with bleach or burned, an electric stove with crusted filth on top of it. And inside the oven -- Ziva shuddered, took pictures, and slammed the door closed. She moved on to the fridge, noting the photo on the door (and taking a picture of the picture), and then opening the fridge and freezer doors it to reveal the sparse contents. Few boxes of take-out, on empty shelves, and only a ketchup and mustard in the door. No milk. No vegetables, fruits or breads. Nothing in the freezer but freezer burn. “I do not understand how a
person lives like this.” She ranted, going through the cupboards to find four tea-cups, three plates, none of which matched, most with logos on them.

“Poverty, Ziva.” Gibbs bit back, collecting a sample of the frayed blind cord. The apartment wasn’t painting a good picture.

Ziva had moved on from the kitchen, and now swearing in Hebrew photographed the bathroom. Gibbs made it to the kitchen; on the fridge door he found a picture. Two young adults, girls, cheek to cheek, laughing and celebrating something. Pulling it down, he flipped it over “Rosie & Mel - Rosie’s done it - Dec 2007!”

It didn’t take a genius to recognize the one girl being Elizabeth Butti, “Rosie”, but who was the other? Gibbs pulled out his cellphone out and snapped a picture, and hopefully he’d used the right buttons to send it to DiNozzo. Damn technology had so many quirks...

“Gibbs.” Ziva called with some urgency in her voice, from the bedroom. He looked in askance at the phone. Maybe he should have brought McGee with him. How could he prove the picture was sent? Cause if he jumped down DiNozzo’s throat one more time today… well shit.

Gibbs walked into the room and heard a crunch under his feet. A broken lamp laid on it’s side, just beside the doorway. But, clearly, what interested Ziva wasn’t the glass, or blood on the glass, but the missing blind cord, lay a foot away from the lamp, partially hidden by the lamp shade which had rolled across the room. The middle and two ends of the cord saturated in brown rust-colored dried blood. “Huh.” Gibbs felt his knees creak ominously as he squatted down. Reaching out, hands protected by the neoprene gloves, he examined the cord.

The central portion had blood and tissue on it, but Ducky and Abby would confirm that. This was what killed Elizabeth, his gut said. It was also probably what put those terrible marks on Christopher’s throat. Gibbs shook his head in disgust. How could anyone try and strangle a small child like that?

His eyes skittered to the broken lamp, “There was a third person here. Interrupted the attempted murder of the kid.” He looked again at the ends of the rope, “And it was impulse. Not planned. I think we might have the killer’s blood here.”

“Yes.” Ziva agreed, carefully placing evidence tags and photographing the array of glass shards, and the lamp. “Hopefully it is enough to identify him or her.”

“Him.” Gibbs gut told him. He bagged the cord, and looked around the room. There was one twin mattress in the room, a disgusting filthy one at that, and a dog-bed, with a single baby-blanket covering it, laying on the floor at the foot of the bed. Gibbs growled lowly. Butti was one fucked up little girl if she treated her own child that way.

“That is the only sign of a child, Gibbs. I have not yet found clothes or toys for the boy.” Ziva commented, seeing where his gaze lay.

“Check the closet.”

“Three outfits, womens.” Ziva reported. “One, a uniform for O’Mulligan’s Pub.”
Gibbs nodded. “We’ll check the bar out after this.” He decided.

Gibbs activated the flashlight on the phone, and peered beneath the bed. His sharp blue eyes narrowed on lumps hidden by the bulk of the dog-bed. “You photographed that?” He asked, jerking his chin towards the poor excuse for a child’s bed.
“Yes.”

Satisfied that the investigation wouldn’t be damaged, he nearly kicked the damn dog-bed across the room and into the closet doors, so enraged by the mere sight of it. And there, where the dog-bed had been tucked against the legs of the twin bed, were some threadbare and poor quality children’s clothes. But, there was no sign, or hint of so much a ball or the fuzz of a teddy-bear could be seen.


Ziva snorted contemptuously. “The child will become nothing more than a piece of fluff under Tony. A… weak, pathetic male. Worthless.” She put away the camera, and carefully started preparing the broken lamp for evidence transport. “Tony will teach him nothing of value, and only how to take pleasure of the world.”

To say his jaw dropped would be understating the situation. “Holy jumping… for love of God, David, just stop.” Gibbs chided her. “I can’t… that is pure bullshit.”

“I speak truth.”

“No. You’re not. You’re just spewing garbage. You know what the problem is? You see only what you want to see. Never what’s really there.” He huffed at her, disgusted. This was the attitude Tony was fed up with, he was sure if it. “I don’t know how, after all this time, you can’t see behind DiNozzo’s masks. That worthless piece of flesh that you think is DiNozzo? Well, you’re dead wrong. He’s played you for a fool, running circles around you and you refuse to see it, making you a bigger fool. He told me we couldn’t shape you into an investigator, and I said he was wrong. Clearly, he wasn’t, because it seems to me that you’re a piss poor investigator when you can’t see what is RIGHT UNDER YOUR DAMN NOSE. And that’s apparently something we can’t teach you because you refuse to learn from the best!”

She froze, finally getting it. Understanding that bashing the kid, and then DiNozzo was like pouring gasoline and then lighting the match. “Gibbs, I…”

“And that kid? I have never been so proud of DiNozzo as I am right now. He’s stepped up. He never wanted kids, y’know. Felt he didn’t know what a good parent was, so how could he emulate, but there he is… stepping up and putting that child ahead of himself. He’s changed his entire world to protect that little boy, to help him heal… and you want to brand that kid as anything but good?”

“I… no… I misspoke.”

“Yeah. You did. And you’re done speaking on that subject, now and forever.” He retorted. “Seriously, unless you can get your head outta your ass where DiNozzo is concerned, then I don’t want to hear another word outta you unless it’s case related. You’ve got me now thinking that I need to change the team to get DiNozzo to stay; if this is your attitude towards DiNozzo. He’s worth ten of you, do you hear me? TEN of you and McGee both! HE’s the investigator you should be learning from, but you can’t see it.”

“Gibbs… I bring more valuable skills than…”

“You still ain’t listening! What does it take?” Gibbs turned on her sharply, voice rising in strident fury. “The numbers don’t lie, David! The number of times DiNozzo finds the missing piece of evidence, the number of times DiNozzo makes the connection we need, the number of cold cases that HE closes compared to what you and McGee do cumulatively. The number of hours HE worked when I was on my sabbatical…versus what you and McGee did. And you don’t think that
means something? That it doesn’t show his investigative skills? He’s the real INVESTIGATOR on the team. He’s not an assassin, he’s not a spy, he ain’t a marine, but I trained up to fake one really well; bottom line he’s the best damn undercover operative I’ve EVER seen.”

She looked like she’d swallowed something incredibly sour.

“Just… go do your job.” Gibbs said, shaking his head. He turned away from her, returning to the bagging of Christopher’s clothing, and the blanket. In the back of his mind, he was sure it could be excluded from evidence, and the kid might -- but probably wouldn’t - want the blanket back. “You need FLETC in the worst way possible, Tony and Vance are right about that. But, if you can’t get this stick up your ass about DiNozzo out, then maybe you’re better off on the terrorist desk or something. You’re not investigator material when you can’t even see past DiNozzo’s bullshit; bullshit he displays as a deliberate ploy to train you monkeys. You don’t see the real man, you just kick at him, antagonize him, disrespect him. I’ve let that go on too long. And the team is falling apart because of it.” Gibbs gave her a final glare. “Maybe kicking you off the team will get DiNozzo to change his mind about leaving.”

To say the younger woman was gobsmacked by the idea that it was DiNozzo who was irreplaceable was an understatement.

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“An’ then Cwistopher Robin taught Pooh how to make a snowman! An, ‘cause we don have snow, cause you need snow to make Snowmen, an carrots. Oh, and a hat! You need a special hat! But, there weren’t any carrots but Bobby said they could use his hat if we had snow…. So, Fanny and Pooh taught us to make MARS-MULLOW snowmen!” Christopher told him triumphantly.

“Marshmallow!” Tony faked awe. “Wow… do you think you can teach ME how to make a marshmallow snowman?” He asked.

Christopher’s head bobbed nearly off his neck. “YETH! We need Mars-mullows, an’ weeces pieces an’ a candy cane, an M&Ms an kisses an’ special magic glue.”

“Special magic glue.” Tony bit back a laugh. “What’s that?”

“I dunno. It’s very white, tastes yummy; Fanny said it’s cause it’s full of magic.”

“Ah. I’ll ask Fanny where we get that, then.” Tony assured the child. “So, what did you do after making marshmallow snowmen?”

“Oh.” Christopher bounced on his feet. “So, aftah, while the magical glue dwied, Pooh let us all sit on his lap, and we got a hug, and a book for Kiss-mass.” The child frowned, brow furrowed with confusion on the subject. “What is kiss-mass?”

Ah. Now there was a question that Tony was hoping to avoid for a few more days. In all the forum boards he’d read, things like Christmas was a slippery slope, if you wanted to raise a non-materialistic child. And for Tony, coming from the background he did, having seen what materialism made of his father, it was something he was aware of painfully. Still, he wanted Christmas to be something fun for Christopher, too.

So, it was one thing to talk about Santa, and gifts, and quite another to introduce theology and a moralistic meaning of Christmas in a less materialistic but age appropriate way. These were the perils of parenthood. “Uh, well, Christmas is a very special time of year, and later this week you’re going
to learn all about what makes it special. Part of it is that something very special happened on Christmas Day that people are happy about, but also, and this is the part little kids like you find fun, we give gifts to our loved ones on Christmas.”

“O-tay.” The boy said slowly, still confused and full of questions.

“Just wait, Christopher. We’re going to meet some special people this weekend, and you’ll learn all about what makes Christmas special then, okay, buddy?”

“Hmmm.” Christopher frowned more. “But, Sawah says that Santa Claus is what makes Kiss-mass special.”

Tony winced… the fat man in the red velvet suit was out of the bag already. “Sarah does? Who is Sarah?” Sarah, now to be known as the dastardly culprit letting his sweet innocent boy know about the commercial side of Christmas.

“Sawah is Christopher’s new fwiend.” Christopher gleefully informed him. The child was ridiculously happy, joyously so, the turnaround from the tragically tearful child of the morning to this gleeful boy made Tony smile indulgently at him, forgiving Sarah for the whole Santa Claus thing.

“She is?” Well, maybe the dastardly culprit could be forgiven somewhat.

“Yeth!” Christopher bounced.

“That’s awesome buddy. You’re going to introduce me to your new bestie when we go back?” He asked.

“Yeth!”

“Wicked!” Tony enthused, letting his tone convey the meaning, because the word wouldn’t make sense. He led the child through the bullpen, watching McGee’s head pop up and jaw drop as he did so, and from there, into Interrogation One. He’d set it up the room before heading down to fetch Christopher from the daycare, pleased when the site administrator had insisted on seeing Tony’s id first.

Interrogation One was ready to record as soon as the door closed. Theoretically, other than Rachel Cranston who was en route and would quietly enter into observation, no other person should be watching. It wasn’t anyone else’s business, outside of the team.

Ushering the small boy in, he scooped him up under the arms and parked him into a chair that faced the window and cameras. Then, took the chair beside him.

In front of Christopher was a plate and a plastic tumbler, as well as a bit stack of white paper sheets, and fat crayons meant for little hands. He’d left his go-bag sitting beside the table, and from it, Tony pulled out sliced celery sticks, apple slices and peanut butter dipping sauce, as well as a few triangles of cheese, and large crackers to put the cheese on. He made a plate for himself, and one for Christopher, and then poured strawberry almond milk from his thermos into the child’s cup. “Snack Time!” He told the boy.

“Yay!” Christopher bounced, reaching for an apple slice immediately.

“After snack,” Tony advised the boy, “Could you to draw me a picture of Pooh Bear and you from this morning?” He told the child. It was Rachel’s suggestion, to relax Christopher and put him into a better metal place before asking any hard questions.
Christopher nodded eagerly, around the full apple piece he’d popped into his mouth.

They munched fairly quietly, with the odd comment thrown in. One of the things Tony was teaching Christopher was to focus on his meal, enjoy the flavors, and to chew carefully. Somehow, that translated into ‘be quiet, and eat’ in the child’s head. Tony expected that as Christopher became more familiar with food, and good eating habits, that silence would fall to the wayside.

Tony mechanically ate his own snack, mind only partially on monitoring Christopher. Most of his focus was on the upcoming conversation he’d be having. It was a longshot, if Christopher recognized the women in the picture Gibbs had forwarded to him, but if he did, it could be the linchpin to the case.

The problem Tony had with it all was that it was potentially damaging to Christopher to make him go over all this again. He’d blossomed so much in just a few days, and the last thing Tony wanted to cause was any setback.

The small green light beside the camera blinked on, indicating that someone was in the observation room; likely, or at least Tony hoped that person was Rachel. It wasn’t as if he could go check, not with Christopher right beside him.

He popped his last piece of cracker into his mouth, and swallowed down a mouthful of almond milk. Then, let his focus settle back on Christopher fully. The child had polished off the apple and cheese, and was steadily making his way through the celery, but hadn’t touched the cracker.

It took patience, Tony was learning, to get a child through a meal. Even with a diminished appetite due to years of malnutrition, Christopher plodded slowly through any meal in front of it, methodically eating section by section. For his snack, he’d finished his apple first, then the cheese, now he was on celery and peanut butter. He’d finish his cracker, and then address his milk. Tony was reasonably certain the child wasn’t eating favorite items first; it was just the way he was.

His phone was on silent, but text messages still appeared on the screen, and it only took a quick glance to reassure himself that it was indeed Rachel in observation. Good.

Tony pulled the crayons down towards himself, and began to doodle blue snowflakes onto the side, while Christopher began his assault on the cracker. “What do you think of the snow?” He asked the child.

“Is cold!” Christopher gave a shudder.

“It is.” Tony agreed. “But, it can look pretty too.”

The dubious glance that came his way found Tony biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. “Drink your milk.” He said, instead, watching with a small smile as the child complied.

He pushed the basket of crayons closer to Christopher. “So, Pooh came in this morning, you said.. What did he look like? Can you draw that?”

“Pooh was weally big! Like you! He had a big wedd t-shirt an’ a gween scaff…” The child reached for the crayons. “An, he had a wedd hat with a white thing on the end.” The scribbling on the paper was fierce, now.

“Need a black?” Tony asked.

“Nuh-huh.”
“Okay, then.” He watched the art emerging. “Could you see his ears?”

“Yah-huh.” Ears were drawn with orange, on either side of a round head and a faintly triangle shaped red hat.

“Did he have boots? What about mittens for his paws?”

“Nuh-huh. No mittens.”

“Maybe he lost them.” Tony suggested. “That’s why your mitts have a string.”

Little hazel eyes widened. “Ohhh… he coulda losted them!” Christopher applied the green crayon deftly to scribble ‘mittens’ on Pooh’s arms.

“Did you ever have green mittens?” Tony asked. “I know you have red ones now, but did you have any before?”

“No. Memaw let mes have her mittens when we went places together.”

Tony nodded. “I bet those were really big.”

“Weally, weall big.” Christopher agreed.

“What about hats? Did you ever have a hat like Pooh’s?” Tony pointed to the red mess at the top of Pooh’s head -- between the ears.

“Memaw had a wedd hat. She put it on Cwistopher if it was cold.” The child plodded along, now drawing the background -- or the daycare -- as from his point of view.

“Did Memaw like Pooh?” Tony asked, holding his cellphone up as if looking at it.

“Yeth!” Christopher nodded. “Mewaw tolded Cwistopher all about Pooh!”

“That was nice of her… too bad she couldn’t meet Pooh with you today.” Tony clucked as if disappointed. “I bet she would have liked that.”

“Uh huh… but Memaw tolded Cwistopher to go hide, and she never founded me.” He gave Tony a dismayed look, his lower lip wobbling and eyes looking a bit watery. “Maybe Mewnaw losted like Pooh’s mittens?”

“People don’t get lost the same as mittens, munchkin.” Tony assured him. “I think you just hid yourself too well.” He pushed his phone towards Christopher, the picture Gibbs sent him on the screen. “Can you point to Memaw? Is she in this picture?”

Christopher froze in his seat, terror written on his face.

“Hey, hey… I’m right here, Christopher. No one is going to take you away from me. You’re safe. But I need to let Memaw know that, don’t I? So she can stop looking?”

The child dropped crayons, and scrambled across the chair and into Tony’s lap, burrowing into his jacket, and shuddering slightly. “Hers. Cwistopher don wanna see hers again. Never, ever gain. Not nice to Cwistopher.”

Tony hugged him close. Poor little monkey. “Christopher,” He spoke gently, softly to the child, taking the phone into his left hand, “Can you point to the picture of the mean lady, which one is the bad one, so I can make sure you never ever see her again.”
“Bad man hurted her. She made funny sounds, and not moving any-moh, then bad man hurted Cwistopher. Memaw save-ed me.”

“Point to bad lady first.” Tony reiterated softly. “I need to know who she is.”

There was a long hanging moment, and Tony had to keep tapping the screen with a thumb to prevent the phone from sleeping.

Finally, the head shifted, and a single eye peeked from the fold of his suit jacket. He was silent, and very still for another long moment, and Tony was worried the child was falling asleep, when a shaky index finger suddenly poked at Elizabeth Butti’s face, and retreated back against Tony’s chest. “Bad, bad, bad.” Christopher chanted, head turning so that his entire body could huddle against Tony, and his voice muffled by the bulk of Tony’s body.

God only knew what the camera microphone was picking up.

Tony wished he was surprised that Elizabeth was the bad figure in Christopher’s young life. The kid’s limited exposure, his malnutrition, amongst other little behavioral indications, had indicated that he’d been abused consistently and for a long time. And while Elizabeth’s actions were criminal in regards to her child; Tony suspected Elizabeth hadn’t had it so good since running away. Shit, the girl hadn’t even been eighteen when her child had been born; possibly while living on the streets, and definitely without any medical care. Elizabeth had been a child herself, and likely far from emotionally ready to have a child, or aware of options available to her.

“Is this other lady Memaw?” He put aside the matter of Elizabeth; she was dead, and pursued the identity of the other possible witness. “Did she rescue you from the bad guy?”

The head turned, and a single little hazel eye peeked at the phone again. And then he nodded. “Memaw.” The finger was a little more steady when it tapped on the other woman’s face. “That Cwistopher’s Memaw. Memaw pwetty. Memaw gave Cwistopher blankets, an took Cwistopher to brary to weed books ‘bout Pooh.” He rubbed his face against Tony’s jacket. “Memaw hit the bad man in the head with the ugly light thingy dat Chwisotopher was not to touch, an’ then wese took a bus, an then Memaw got losted.”

Tony dropped a kiss to the boy’s head. “Good job, buddy.” He praised, shifting his phone to his right hand, and sending a group text out, including Abby in it. The ball was now in Abby’s court to identify “Mels” aka, Memaw.

His job now was to cuddle Christopher back into a better state of mind.

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The crowd around Tony’s desk spoke volumes as to what was going on. Gibbs stomped in with narrowed eyes, and only the faintest reins on his temper. “Don’t you people have something to do?” He growled lowly.

It was gratifying to watch the herd scatter, as if recognizing a wolf was boldly striding into their flock. Sure enough, the crowd pleaser was cuddled up, asleep, in Tony’s arms. His Senior Field Agent was typing one-handed into the computer, a faint scowl on his face too.

“Find anything?” Gibbs asked, tossing his bag behind his desk. Ziva was downstairs signing the evidence in, and God only knew where McGee was.

“Christopher identified Elizabeth as his abuser, and Mels as Memaw.” Tony said lowly. “McGee is in Cyber-ville running the picture against the DMV for Maryland. The crowd was distracting him.
Bodnee had the weapon stolen from him in Afghanistan. The entire camp was raided, because one of three sentries was sick and passed out. He was present on the Bainbridge when it's armament was robbed, though. I have a TAD looking a little more closely at Captain Bodnee's service." Tony didn't let his personal feelings on that subject leak. "Not that it matters as far as our case is concerned. He has a perfect alibi. He's been in California and on base for the past six weeks straight."

Gibbs huffed, as he sank into his desk chair. "Found a broken lamp with blood on it, and the piece of rope the killer used to strangle Butti and the boy," Gibbs commented. "Abby's got those now."

Tony blew a breath. "Lamp? Long pole-style?"

"Yeah. Glass lampshade. Broke a good chunk off of it, when it was knocked off the standard."

"That must have been the stick thingy Christopher was to never touch. ‘Mels’ saved his life by hitting the ‘bad guy’ with it, and then took Christopher out of the apartment with just his pj’s on him. She apparently ran for a bus, and took it to DC. I’m checking bus listings for the day before as well as the day I found Christopher."

Gibbs grunted. Whether they liked it or not, they were at a stalemate. "How’s the kid?"

"Upset. Rachel advised I keep him with me." Tony continued tapping at his screen. "He fortunately slept through the bunch of rubberneckers."

‘He’, of course, chose that moment to mumble in his sleep, shifting slightly. Tony smiled down at Christopher, and shifted him in his lap for a better, more secure, position, ignoring Gibbs eyes on them both.

"Tracked down the bar Butti was working at. O’Mulligans in Baltimore. Six blocks from the apartment. Manager said Butti was last in on November 22nd, missed her Sunday shift, and all shifts since. Fired her for absenteeism on the Wednesday. Said she was an okay worker, bit of an attitude, could be heavy handed."

This time, it was Tony who grunted.

A lull fell between the two men, both focused on their work - Gibbs entering his case notes from the field, and Tony searching for hints of a woman and a small child with a clearly broken arm, and dressed only in pyjamas taking a bus to DC.

Gibbs clearly finished his task first, standing up and grabbing his coat and cellphone in a fluid movement. "Going for coffee." He informed Tony. "Ziva should be up shortly. Get her working on those damn e-thingys. Can’t do more on the case until Abbs has done her analysis."

Tony nodded absently, shifting Christopher on his lap, and freeing up his right hand to the phone. It amazed him what Christopher could sleep through, to be honest, but he wasn’t about to miss capitalizing on that fact.

McGee returned even as Tony was mid-conversation with Romy Hardinson, a Vice President at Greyhound. Ziva, was loitering somewhere else, it seemed.

McGee paced anxiously in front of Tony’s desk, hands fluttering.

"We’ll get you that warrant right after we narrow down day and time." Tony assured Romy, a very congenial and cooperative man. Greyhound had no issue with supplying video feed for their DC routes -- it was just there was a lot of feed. And to ensure it was admissible in court, Tony wanted a
warrant to back the video submission.

He hadn't even hung up the phone, when McGee burst out. “Melanie Sawa.”

Tony’s eyebrow arched. Seriously, hadn’t they broken this over-eager nonsense out of McGoo by now? “Sorry?”

The plasma burst to live, with the image of a driver's license for Melanie Sawa. “Mels” from the picture Gibbs had texted, and Memaw to Christopher. Tony scooped Christopher up, stood and stared at the plasma. Aged twenty-one, orphaned with two siblings, one who was in the military, and another who lived and worked in DC.

Sawa had earned her undergrad at the University of Baltimore, and was just starting her Masters degree in Social Work. Her address put her across town from Butti, with a roommate. “Call the roommate. Find out when Sawa was last seen.” He instructed McGee.

“On it.”

Geez Louise -- where was this bidible McGee coming from?

Tony hummed under his breath, staring at the image. “Where are you, Melanie?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter may not be perfect. I struggled with some aspects of it. If you find mistakes, congratulations. Consider them made in the spirit of ‘just get it DONE’!

Also. Marshmallow snowmen: https://babygizmo.com/candy-cane-snowman-tutorial/

Next Chapter: Lab Results... and is that Christopher's biological DAD we see? Hope everyone had a very Merry Christmas / Happy Hanukkah / Joyous Kwanza / Fantastic Festivus... whatever it is you celebrate, happy holidays!

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