A Little Knight Music for the Soul
by Tibbsian

Summary

LAST EDITED: JUNE 27, 2018, FOR MINOR CORRECTIONS, TYPOS & PUNCTUATION.
• Covers the abduction of the young Jax Theron and his rescue
• Introduces Gibbs’ friendship with Alex Knight which started when he was in the Corp
• Covers Gibbs’ and Tony’s first time and Gibbs’ decision to stay in the closet.

• 14 years have passed and Tony makes the decision to quit NCIS
• Covers the 18 months Tony spends away from Gibbs and his life with the KnightShade boys.

Act Three: Present-Day
• Tony’s stint with KnightShade is over and he returns to DC.
• Covers the resolution of his relationship with Gibbs after fifteen years of denial.

Notes

A Little Knight Music For the Soul is my new, standalone ‘alternate’ version of KnightShade and my favorite pairing from NCIS - Gibbs and Tony.

I wrote a trilogy, A Little Knight Music several years ago, about a shadowy organization called KnightShade, turning it into an NCIS crossover in the second and third installments. That trilogy is complete and stands on its own.

However, I had other elements I wanted to explore, but would not be able to fit them into the original stories so I decided to write a new, standalone book based on the same
characters but with some changes. Those of you who have read the original stories will be able to see these changes easily.

As usual, songs that are classics from an older generation were my muses and I used them as a nod to my other Tibbs romance series, Oldies But Goodies.

The story is completed and I will post chapters as I proof-read each one.
Author's Note: This is how I envisage Alex Knight looked like when he was in his 30s:

ACT ONE: IL CIELO IN UNA STANZA

1994 - 2014

Author’s Note:

Act One is about First Times... about the specialness of that First Time, about its ineffability and meaning to the couple involved.

For this, I have chosen Gina Paoli’s song, Il Cielo In Una Stanza (1960).

Paoli said: “I wanted to describe the moment in which you are in a bed with a woman, you just had sex, and in the air you feel a sort of magic, which you don’t know where it comes from and which immediately vanishes. In that moment you understand that you are nobody, but there's the whole world in your soul. Obviously, I could not put in the lyrics the central moment of the story, the sex act. And I started to go around in circles, talking about the rumours in the street, the walls... a spiral path in which the unsaid triumphs.”

A Jazz version by Gianni Zangarese: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zBUy1gU8k

Paoli’s preferred version of his song is the one by Carla Bruni:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJWOAYqGZyM

Italian Lyrics with a good English translation: https://blogs.transparent.com/italian/il-cielo-in-una-stanza/

Gino Paoli also composed Senza Fine which I used for Jax’s parents’ wedding anniversary dance in A Knight to Remember (A Little Knight Music Book 1).
September 1994

The Pentagon,

Washington, DC

Justin Theron was in a meeting with the DoD to finalize the setting up of a top-secret R&D facility when there was a knock on the door and the Secretary of Defense’s aide poked his head in.

“Mr. Theron, there’s an urgent call from Mrs. Theron for you.”

Knowing his wife would not disturb him in a meeting unless it was important, Justin made his excuses and left the room to take the call.

Five minutes later he was back, his face tight with tension. “I’m sorry but I have to leave. My son has gone missing in Peru.”

Everyone looked up in shock.

“What do you mean ‘missing’?” the Secretary of Defense asked.

“Jax went to Peru with some friends. My wife just told me he’s been abducted and his friend’s uncle, who had accompanied them, was killed during the abduction.”

William Norton, a three-star General and chairman of the meeting said, “Let’s postpone this until after lunch. Go on, Justin. Let us know how we can help.”

Justin hurried out of the conference room, closely followed by Andrew Knight, Theron-Knight’s chief operating officer.

“Details,” Andrew said as they headed for the elevators. He knew Jax had gone to Peru for a vacation and was due home the next day.

“Katharine got a call from Liz Fletcher, Jordan's mother. Her brother, Martin, was with the boys. Katharine said Martin was shot and killed by the abductors.”
“And the two boys?” Andrew asked. “I take it one of them is Jordan.”

“Yes, Jordan Fletcher and Hayden Langley. They’re fine. Apparently, Hayden went out on a beer run with Jax before dinner. Neither returned to the hotel. By midnight when they still weren’t back, Martin’s nephew, Jordan, reported it to the hotel manager who called the police. They were to have boarded the flight home today.”

“Where are his friends now?” Andrew asked. “Are they flying back?”

“Hayden and Jordan wanted to stay on and wait for some news on Jax but their parents insisted they return. Katharine said she agreed with the parents, and so do I.” Neither man mentioned that Jax was only fourteen and shouldn’t have been out buying alcohol, even with an adult. Then again, the drinking laws were not rigorously applied in Peru as it was in the US.

“Where are you headed now?”

“Home,” Justin replied. “I’ll talk to Katharine first then call the hotel where they were staying.”

“Let me know how I can help.”

“Why don’t you come home with me? We can discuss what the next step should be and you can help me with Katharine while I make some calls.

Katharine Theron was a striking beauty with thick, dark brown hair which she had pinned up with a tortoiseshell clip. Normally composed, with a ready smile on her lips for visitors and family, her face was now pale and tense as she watched her husband and his best friend drive up to the front door.

When she finished recounting, one more time, what Jordan’s mother had told her, Justin asked, “Are Jordan and Hayden on their way home?”

“Yes, Katharine replied. “They’re due to arrive tonight.”

“What’s the name of the hotel they were staying in?” Justin asked.

“Call Dennis Jett,” Andrew said, at the same time. Dennis Coleman Jett was the current ambassador to Peru and Justin had met him and his wife on a few occasions.

“Good idea,” Justin said and took out his cell phone.

The conversation was brief and Ambassador Jett said he would find out what he could. “We’ll put the word out and my aide-de-camp will contact you as soon as he can should I be unavailable. Do you have a recent photograph of your son to send me?”

“Yes. I’ll fax it to you.” Justin took down the fax number then said. “I’ll arrange to fly to Lima immediately. May I call on you upon my arrival?”

“Yes, yes of course,” Ambassador Jett said. “I’ll have a car meet you at the airport once you give me your flight details. You are welcome to stay with Laura and me in our home or would you prefer a hotel?”
“Thank you for offering your home. Katherine and I would appreciate that, very much, thank you.”

Justin and Katharine were on their way to the airport when Ambassador Jett called back.

“I just wanted to tell you that there’s been no report of any American tourist killed, except Martin Clarington. The police have checked the hospitals but no one fitting your son’s description has been admitted or treated. The initial reports say gunshots were heard and a vehicle driving away, leaving Mr. Clarington on the road. He was still alive but unconscious and died en route to the hospital.”

“That’s it? Don’t we even know who’s responsible?”

“I’m afraid that’s all we have at this point. If your son has been abducted, you will likely receive a ransom call. The abductors won’t harm your son if they want a ransom for his release. Mr. Clarington must have resisted or tried to protect your son and was killed.”

Justin closed his eyes briefly, even as he said, “I will leave instructions for any calls to my office to be redirected to my cell phone.”

Despite all efforts to locate Jax, he wasn’t found nor were there any news or reports. Justin and Katharine had flown out to Lima with a team of security men but got nowhere despite help from the US Embassy. After three weeks, they returned home to San Francisco, heavy-hearted but still hopeful their son was alive.

“Why would whoever kidnapped him not ask for a ransom?” Katherine asked, for the umpteenth time. “It makes no sense.”

Justin could think of another reason but decided it wasn’t likely. Possible, but not probable so he didn’t want Katherine worried anymore than she already was. He was afraid that Jax could have ended up a victim of human trafficking. At fourteen, he was a little older than the young boys the traffickers went after but he knew there were men who paid top dollar for male teenagers. He tried not to let his worry show too much but it wasn’t easy. Though he had a good relationship with all his children – something of an oddity among their friends and acquaintances whose own parent-child relationships were mostly fraught with the usual angst or outright resentments and rebellion – his with Jax had always been special. Then again, Jax had always been a special boy. He was, by nature, affable, cheerful and affectionate. Where his peers avoided hugs and, God forbid, kisses from their parents, Jax had no such reservations about public displays of affection towards his.

Katharine had said to him one evening, not too long ago, that she suspected their son was gay. When he asked what made her think that, she’d said, “Mother’s intuition. It’s more powerful than a mere woman’s.”

Nothing more was said about that. Being gay wasn’t a big deal in the Theron family, especially when Caspar, the 94 year-old patriarch of the powerful family, was himself gay and married to his longtime love who was 90 years old.

What did interest Justin, though, was his son’s infatuation with Alex Knight. Alex was Andrew’s son, one half of identical twins, and fifteen years older than Jax. Oddly enough, though they were identical, it was Alex Jax was drawn to, and not Aidan, the younger Knight twin by seven minutes.
Justin knew Alex would move heaven and earth to get Jax back - if he were around to do that. But Alex was god-knows-where and couldn’t be reached. All they knew was that he was alive. “If he was dead or seriously injured, I would know,” Aidan had assured their father and Jax’s parents several times.

By the end of three weeks in Peru without making any headway, Justin and Katharine headed home.

Back in San Francisco, Justin called on his connections in the Capitol and renewed his pleas for help. “Anything, any word, please call me,” heíd said to each one. Finally, he reached General William Norton.

“Justin!” Norton exclaimed when he heard his friend’s voice. “Where are you? Did you find Jax?”

“No, I didn’t,” Justin replied. “I’m back in San Francisco. Katharine and I arrived back yesterday. I’ve been trying to reach you but you weren’t answering your cell phone. Your secretary told me you were on vacation and to try today. Listen, could you speak to the FBI and the CIA? I’m thinking if Jax was abducted, he could have been brought back to the US. We never thought of looking in our own backyard. His friends said they carried their passports with them wherever they went, as advised. I’m hoping Mason can do something. I’m not getting any help from other quarters and I’m wondering why.”

The General gave a sigh. It wasn’t the first time Justin was mentioning the runaround he was getting from the CIA and the State department. Harold Mason, the Director of the FBI, was married to Norton’s sister-in-law and the couple were frequent guests at the General’s home. “I did mention it to Mason but I’ll talk to him again. He and his wife are coming over for dinner tonight.”

“Thanks, Will.”

“And the CIA?”

“I was thinking if Jax is still in South America, the CIA could put out its feelers,” Justin said. “Hell, put out a strong message that if the Theron boy isn’t returned unharmed there will be no more arms.”

“That crossed your mind, did it?” the General asked. “I was just thinking the same thing. That perhaps one of the drug lords had Jax taken to use as leverage.”

“If they did, why haven’t they asked for anything?”

“I suppose Carter can help with that, though with Pablo Escobar dead, ye olde CIA isn’t as involved as it was when Escobar was alive.”

“Yes, but the Cali Cartel that took over from Escobar has retained the same SOP as the Medellin Cartel and Peru is still the world’s number one producer of cocaine paste, isn’t it? Escobar may be gone but Colombia’s still Peru’s biggest customer for the cocaine base. And it’s no secret the CIA is bed with some higher-ups in Peru.”

“The Cali cartel’s domination is weakening ever since its undisputed kingpin, Vaticano, was imprisoned, but...you’re right. It’s still worth looking into. If it were my son, I wouldn’t leave any stone unturned either.”

But Jax was never found. Justin and Katherine did not lose hope, however, and the Therons were wealthy enough to keep the cash flowing so that there was always someone on the lookout for any reports or rumors that could lead to Jax’s whereabouts. Justin continued to seek the CIA’s help but
was rebuffed each time because “the CIA isn’t your personal hostage rescue agency,” Richard Carter, the CIA Director had told him. “Go hire some mercenaries.” Then quickly added, “And you didn’t hear me say that.”

All efforts drew a blank. It was as if Jax had vanished into thin air in Peru. Every rumor dissipated like mist and the investigators were met with blank stares and denials.

It would be two years before hope loomed again on the Theron horizon.

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Chapter Summary

Picks up two years after the previous chapter. Alex Knight forms the rescue team to find Jax and bring him home.

Chapter Notes

For Jax’s abduction and rescue thread, I based it on information I got from various articles and reports about the CIA's involvement in Peru, on Peru's ex-president, Fujumori, Vladmiro Montesinos, Vaticano, and the drug trade in South America, in particular, Colombia's Pablo Escobar and Colonel Hugo Martinez, the man behind the Search Bloc that eventually captured Escobar.

August 1996

“Dad? It’s me.”

“Alex!” Andrew said with relief. “I’ve been trying to reach you I don’t know how many times. Where are you now?”

“In Fort Bragg. Just got in. I was undercover,” Alex Knight said. “Deep undercover and uncontactable except by my CO. Anyway, my assignment’s over. What’s up?”

Andrew told his son about Jax’s abduction, unable to digest the fact that his son, who loved the teen as if Jax were his twin, had no idea what had happened. But of course, Alex had left before Jax was abducted.

Alex was momentarily stunned. Jax? Abducted? Two years ago and he had no fucking idea? He’d been speaking, looking and living like a Pashtun in Afghanistan’s Kandahar Province. Mohammad Omar, a mullah, was the head of the newly-formed Taliban whom the West had helped to fight against the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. Alex had been in and out of Afghanistan since the start of its civil war in 1992 but in 1994, had gone fully undercover in order to monitor the Taliban’s plan to liberate the country from its present warlords and turn it into an Islamic state.
For two and a half years, he’d had no outside contact except for periodic reports to his CO or when another operative, equally deep under cover, made contact in order to move forward the operation or make changes.

“Where is he?” Alex asked his father. “You got him out, didn’t you?” God, it better be yes.

“No. We’ve tried everything even practically banging on the State Department’s door but all our efforts have come up with nothing. Then this morning Justin got a call. The caller said if he wanted to know where Jax is being kept, that Vaticano can tell him but Vaticano will only talk to you. No one else. Not even Justin.”

“Did the caller say why Vaticano will only talk to me?”

“Only that he knows you by reputation and is willing to trust you. Who is this Vaticano?”

Alex drew in a breath then said, “Demetrio Limonier Chávez Peñaherrera. Aka Vaticano. He’s the guy who singlehandedly turned Peru into the world’s biggest producer of cocaine base. The quality of Vaticano’s cocaine base is so high it’s dubbed the Super Queen.” Alex paused for breath. “But Vaticano’s in jail. He was arrested in 1994 just before I left the US and sentenced to life in prison.”

“If he’s in jail how could he get that message out and how is he going to meet you?” Andrew asked.

“Those Central and South American criminals continue to run their businesses from behind bars. These traffickers even have cell phones in their jail cell, believe it or not. I have no doubt Vaticano knows where Jax is and just the fact that Vaticano knows about the abduction tells us it’s drug-related. Or involves the drug-traffickers.”

“If he knows then there must be others who do, too, but we’ve not been able to get any information despite the rewards Justin offered. Justin suspects the CIA’s involved somehow.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised but you haven’t heard from them?”

“We can’t get any assistance from them, not even information. They won’t even take Justin’s calls.”

“Then I doubt they had a part in the kidnapping. Oh, I don’t doubt they know what went down and if they do, they have their reasons for keeping quiet.”

Andrew muttered a curse at his end. “Well, they aren’t the only ones not talking. Justin’s thrown thousands at them but no one knows anything.”

“No one dares to talk because if they did, it’s not just them who’d be killed. Whoever’s got Jax would also torture and kill their families. Then do the same to them. Did the caller give you his name?”

“It was a woman. She wouldn’t identify herself but said she’s a friend of Vaticano. She said she would need to talk to you directly before she set up the meeting with Vaticano. Justin told her straightaway he didn’t know where you were and he’d need a few days to find out and try to get hold of you. She said she would call back in three days.”

“Well, I’m out now. I’ll get a flight back to San Francisco after this call.”

“I’ll see if there’s a plane to pick you up from our Fort Bragg office. We have planes flying in and out of Fayetteville Regional daily.”
Andrew called back ten minutes later to say there was a company plane leaving in two hours and a driver would pick Alex up from Fort Bragg in an hour.

“Great,” Alex said. “Now, give me everything you’ve got on the abduction, including everyone you and Justin have spoken to.”

While waiting for his ride to Fayetteville Regional, Alex contacted six men he’d served with and trusted with his life. Next, he called Colonel Hugo Martinez, the man who was in charge of the Colombian Search Bloc – Bloque de Búsqueda. Alex had led the team in the JSOC operation called Project Pokeweed where members from Delta Force and Seal Team Six provided training to Martinez and the Search Bloc members. In December, 1993, the Search Bloc successfully hunted down the infamous Pablo Escobar, the Colombian drug lord for whom the Search Bloc had been formed.

The media had reported that the kill shot had come from a member of the Search Bloc while Escobar’s brothers claimed that Escobar had committed suicide. But Alex knew who had pulled the trigger, sending the round into Escobar’s right ear and out the left – Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Marine sniper extraordinaire, and one of the members of his team in Colombia. In usual Delta fashion, the JSOC team had kept out of the limelight and let the Peruvians duke it out as to who fired the shot that took out Escobar. If anyone knew what was going on in Colombia and its neighbor it was Martinez, and Alex wouldn’t enter South America without first speaking to the Colonel.

As for Jethro, Alex needed him on board because he’d need cover during the infil and exfil. The last thing he wanted was to have Jax in hand only to have him killed while boarding the rescue helo. And Jethro was da man. He swore Jethro could pick off his target while riding in a rollercoaster. The man was that good. With what he had in mind following his discharge from the Army, he would need someone like Jethro by his side. That would have to wait, though. Jethro was happy at NCIS and was only answering Alex’s call for help on the rescue mission. But one day, when his plans were in place, he’d be calling Leroy Jethro Gibbs once again and then he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

But whatever those plans were, they were future. Today, Jax came first.

“When I grow up, I’m going to marry you!” Five year old Jax Theron said from his perch atop Alex’s shoulders.

“Now why would you want to do that?” Alex laughed, swinging the kid to the ground and hunkering down before the earnest face. Those electric blue eyes were going to break the hearts of a lot of women if you marry me, he said silently.

“Because mom says you’re the bestest man of all men!” Jax opened his little arms wide. “And that if you weren’t gay she would have married you.”
Alex laughed. “And what did your dad have to say to that?”

“He kinda snorted. Like this.” Jax made a sound of disgust. “Then he said if you weren’t gay he’d have to kill you.” Jax thought a moment then asked, “What does gay mean?”

“It means he likes men,” Justin’s voice sounded behind them. “Not women, not little girls or little boys like you but big boys.”

“You mean like kissing them and stuff?” Jax asked, puzzlement crunching up his face.

Stuff? Alex cleared his throat. “Hey, look! It’s late. I’ve got to go.” And waved a goodbye, leaving a chuckling Justin.

Jax ran after him. “You will marry me, won’t you? Alex? Please? I like boys, too, not girls. And when I grow up I will like big boys, too.”

Alex cast his father’s best friend a glance. “You need to talk to your kid, Jus. He can’t go around saying stuff like that.”
Author's Note: In October 1996 Gen. Barry McCaffrey--the Clinton administration's "drug czar"--went to Lima to meet with Montesinos and other top officials of the Fujimori regime. News photographers caught Montesinos, who almost never shows his face in public, attending the meeting. The pictures were splashed widely over the Peruvian press, sending a public message of the U.S. stamp of approval for Fujimori and Montesinos. A day after the meeting, McCaffrey issued a public statement that the U.S. has "confidence in the Fujimori government" and declaring that there is no drug corruption among top Peruvian officials. Source: http://revcom.us/a/firstvol/890-899/895/peru.htm

By 2000, however, declassified US documents showed both entities were aware of Fujimori and Montesino’s involvement in the drug trade. Source: http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB37/

“Where the hell were you when my son was kidnapped!” Katherine said to Alex when he arrived at the Theron’s country home in Palo Alto.

“I’m sorry, Katharine,” Alex said. “I’ve been in deep cover for several years. Just before Jax was abducted, I was sent into a remote area in Afghanistan. I was living in tents as a Pashtun goatherd.”

“You were herding goats while my son was…was….damn, Alex. Damn it to hell!” Katharine pressed her fingers to her lips, closing her eyes briefly.

“Katharine,” Justin chided gently. His wife never swore but his concern for her abated somewhat when she pulled Alex in for fierce hug.

“Katharine.” Alex kissed her warmly on the cheek then said quietly but firmly, “I will find him.”

“Oh, Alex! You do that! What’s the use of having all this money, I tell Justin, if we can’t even bribe someone to do something!”

Alex laughed softly. “I stopped by only to reassure you.” He turned to Justin, “I need to go to San Diego. I’ve already spoken to Karem. He’ll be ready to demonstrate the F31-Specter and the Bumblebee.”

“Do you have any ideas on how to do this?” Justin asked, as they seated themselves in the lounge. “I’m practically banned from Capitol Hill, accused of stalking the Secretary of State! Why the hell wouldn’t I? It’s two years and nothing’s been done.”

“I have a team ready,” Alex told him, quietly. “They’re flying in this evening.”
“Seal Team Six?” Katharine asked. “I heard they’re the go-to guys for such things but Justin couldn’t get the okay to even send in the Keystone Cops.”

“Not the current SEAL Team Six,” Alex said. “But two of the men I’ve selected were with SEAL Team Six when I was commanding the JSOC exercise in Colombia three years ago. Dad,” Alex turned to Andrew. “You don’t mind putting the guys and me up for a night or two?”

“Oh of course not,” Andrew said. “When do you think you’ll be leaving?”

“As soon as we get the information we need. I believe Jax is still in Peru. Before I left Fort Bragg, I spoke to Colonel Hugo Martinez. He’s the man who commanded the Search Bloc, the police unit responsible for capturing and killing Pablo Escobar. He said he did hear rumors of a young gringo being seen with members of Grupo Colina, the death squad run by Vladimiro Montesinos, the head of Peru’s intelligence service and the de facto ruler of the country.”

“But this Colonel Martinez is in Colombia,” Katharine said. “How can he help if Jax is in Peru?”

“Those narco-states are all interlinked by the cocaine trade and anything going down in those countries, Martinez knows,” Alex said. “Especially if it’s Peru. Plus, Vaticano’s rep called saying Vaticano knows where Jax is. Vaticano is the man responsible for producing the cocaine paste from which cocaine is manufactured then shipped to the US. Vaticano and Escobar were business associates and, apparently, so is Vladimiro Montesinos, the head of Peru’s intelligence service. Montesinos provides Vaticano with the protection and freedom to do what he does.”

“Then this Montesinos will know about the abduction,” Katharine concluded. “Have we tried asking him?”

“Ambassador Jett did reach out to his office when we were there, Katharine,” Justin said. “He got nothing that the Peruvian police and our own investigators haven’t already told us.”

“There’s a cover-up, isn’t there?” Katharine asked. “And the State Department is involved, somehow. Oh God…and the CIA. They’re both involved, aren’t they? Why? How would our son – who was only fourteen at the time – be involved in something like that?”

“We don’t know that either of them are involved,” Justin said, but his glance at Andrew belied his words. Both of them already suspected something was going on between the two entities or their investigations and calls for assistance wouldn’t have hit the brick walls it had.

“At this point, it doesn’t matter if they are,” Alex said. “We’ll carry on regardless and we’ll do it independently and quietly. Martinez said to give him a few days to gather more intel. Meanwhile the team and I will fly to San Diego and make our way to Lima from there.”

“I’ll arrange for your security clearance to get into Skunkwerkz,” Andrew said. Theron-Knight Skunkwerkz was the San Diego division that developed cutting edge weapons and gadgetry for surveillance and counterintelligence. The term ‘skunk works’ itself was widely used to describe a division within an organization given a high degree of autonomy and unhampered by bureaucracy, to work on advanced or secret projects.

“For my team, too,” Alex said.

“Will do. Tell your men to be ready to fly down to San Diego at seven a.m.”

“Alex,” Justin called out as the two men started towards the front door. Alex stopped and turned. “Whatever you need, let me know. And you and your team will be paid, of course.”
“Thank you…for the first. The second, we’ll talk after I see my men, but I don’t want anything except to have Jax back.”

After Andrew and Alex left, Justin called his p.a. and told her he wouldn’t be in for the rest of the day but could be reached at home if it was important.

“I’ve been wondering, even before Alex came into the picture,” Justin said as he put his arms around his wife. “Why we hadn’t been able to make any headway with Hillman or even Carter.” Pamela Hillman was the Secretary of State and Richard Carter was Director of the CIA. That the CIA had its fingers in Colombia was an open secret so all the more Justin had expected some cooperation from its director but that had not been forthcoming. He knew what many of the public suspected – that the CIA was supporting drug mafias in South America. The reasons were varied but the main one was for intel on the rebel factions that were hostile to the US, like the Colombian FARC's and the MRTA of Peru that was on the US State Department’s Terrorist List. But surely, with Justin’s good standing in the capital and Theron-Knight Atomics' reputation, CIA and State should be among the first to help.

Yet Carter had demurred and Hillman had insisted the State department had done what it could. Jax Theron’s abduction was still a private, not a governmental or political matter and as such, there were limits to what she could do.

“Our President intervened in the Michael Fay case in Singapore,” Justin had argued. “And that kid was a vandal who had no respect for the laws of his host country. My son is a victim, not a perpetrator.”

“We don’t even know who has your son,” Hillman had countered. “You have no evidence the Peruvians are responsible or if he’s even in Peru.”

As for Carter, all the CIA Director said was, “I don’t have the authority to order a rescue team or assign agents to a private kidnapping case.”

“That’s bull and we both know it!” Justin had retorted, unable to keep his anger from showing. “The CIA has got all kinds of operations going in Colombia. Just divert one of the teams – hell, whatever ragtag group you can get – and send them in. If it’s the cost –”

“It’s not the cost. Not monetary, anyway. I can’t order a rescue operation when I have absolutely no concrete evidence your son is in Peru and even if he is, we don’t have any arrangement with Peru like we do with Colombia. I’m sorry but I can’t compromise our current operations which, I need not tell you, are classified.”

“Damn your covert operations!” Justin thundered. “This is my son we’re talking about!”

“I couldn’t do it even if it were my son,” Carter retorted. “Now, you'll have to excuse me. I have a flight to catch.”

That was two years ago. No word, no intel, no sightings. Nada. So when that call from Vaticano’s representative in Peru came this morning, Justin was relieved beyond words but couldn’t help thinking it was two years late as Katharine had so succinctly put to Alex.

As Justin and Katharine had fought to live day after day hoping there would be some news of their son, Andrew had been tearing his hair out trying to get information on his son. Though Theron-Knight’s biggest client was the US military, Justin’s connections with the brass was stronger than
his. His forte had always been in the management of the organization. The backroom operations. Justin was the front man. The face of Theron-Knight Atomics. And if Justin hadn’t made any headway, Andrew knew he’d have less of a chance.

Alex was their last bit of hope but contacting him had been as frustrating as their search for Jax. All he’d been able to squeeze out from Alex’s commander was that he was alive but couldn’t call home because he was undercover. Not just a short stint or the type where he could go back to his hotel and make a call home. No, it had been a deepcover assignment and his commander wouldn’t even reveal which country Alex was in.

Everything had changed in a blink of an eye this morning.

That phone call from Vaticano’s lady friend, or whatever she was, had come out of the blue and given them their first break. Not just a lead. A real break. He’d immediately called Alex’s phone and when he got the usual no-signal response, had called Alex’s commander.

“Alex should be arriving at Fort Bragg any minute now,” Brigadier Austin Miller had said. “I’ll leave a message for him to return your call asap.”

Andrew had been stunned. In a good way. “He’ll have some leave, won’t he? Can you tell me how long he’ll be in the US before he’s shipped out again?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Miller had sounded amused.

“Tell me what? I haven’t spoken to my son in over two years.”

“I’m sorry,” the brigadier general said, as he remembered Alex’s father’s attempts to reach his son. “Alex is out of the military. The mission was his final one. He’d told us before he left. A pity. We tried to persuade him to stay. His career with the 1st SFOD-D was only just taking off, but he said he wasn’t leaving the military completely but would be serving his country in a different capacity. Couldn’t — more likely wouldn’t — tell me more but I wished him luck. Sad to lose a soldier in his prime — hell, he’s only thirty. No one retires at that age. Not unless he’s one of those billionaire geeks from Silicon Valley.”

Andrew didn’t say it but his son’s net worth was in the billionaire club. Alex had shares not just in Theron-Knight Atomics but also in KnightLife Inc, the family’s privately-run conglomerate.

Andrew hadn’t blinked an eye when Alex came out to him at the age of fifteen – he had been hanging around the Therons all his life after all and if there was one thing the Therons were not, it was homophobic. What did catch Andrew by surprise was his older son announcing he was entering the military instead of joining KnightLife.

“Have you told Aidan?” he’d asked Alex that day, so many years ago.

“Yes. He’s supportive even though he doesn’t understand. And he’s worried about the gay thing.” At his father’s raised brows, Alex had added, “He’s worried about the homophobia in the military.”

“And you’re not?”

“It’s not as if I’m going to announce to my team mates I’m gay, Dad. Aside from you and mom, only the Therons know. I haven’t come out to my friends either and I don’t plan to until I’m out of the military.”

“I’ll get my degree while I’m in the Army. It’s done all the time and I promised Aidan once I’m out I’ll put in my time with the family companies. If not with KnightLife then with Theron-Knight. You never know – I might just grab myself a couple of postgrad degrees as well though I don’t think I’m the nerd in the family.”

Then his son had given him a one-arm hug and lopsided grin. “Dad. Trust me,” Alex had said. “I know what I’m doing and why and how to get to my goal. But I need to do this – be in the military – first. Then I’ll get a better picture and then you and I will have lunch and I’ll tell you what I wanna do with the rest of my life.”

So Alex’s parents and his twin brother, Aidan, had given their support, driven him to the recruitment center and given parental consent since Alex was under eighteen.

Andrew Knight’s Residence;

Portola Valley, San Mateo County, CA

Andrew’s weekend home was set atop a 2.5-acre knoll in Portola Valley, ten minutes’ drive from the Therons’ Woodside residence. This evening, instead of friends whom he often invited over for dinner, his son and six men he’d never met before, were looking expectantly at him and Justin.

“Guys,” Alex began. “This is my Dad, Andrew Knight, who’s letting us crash here for the night. Dad, this is John McCaffrey. Mike Caletti…” The two men shook Andrew’s hand. “They’re Navy SEALs. Jason Wilder, Delta Force. Luis Montero, Green Beret. Joe Cipriani, also from Delta. And this is my best friend, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Marine Corps, now NCIS. These men served with me in Colombia. Our JSOC team comprised all the special operations units but these men, they are truly special.”

Andrew’s curiosity was plainly etched on his face. This was the first time he was meeting Alex’s fellow operators and noted how their profession was reflected on their persons. All of them wore a serious expression but there was also a hardness in their features and an intensity in their gazes. Like his son, they all appeared to in be in their early 30s, fit as only such men could be, their skin tanned, biceps straining against their sleeves and forearms roped with wiry sinew. Even their necks looked strong, Andrew thought, feeling a sudden need to hit the gym more often.

“Thank you all for answering my call and flying out at such short notice,” Alex said to his team mates. “Some of you had to request for emergency leave and while I won’t ask what you said or did to get it granted, I will say I’m grateful.”

“And so am I, gentlemen,” Justin added. “Whatever you need just let Andrew or me know.”

Alex gave a curt nod then clicked on the remote and a photo of Jax came up on the wall-mounted LED screen. “This is the hostage, Jax Theron, age 14 when he was abducted two years ago. Our assignment is simple – find Jax and bring him home. At all cost. Both Justin and my father had been trying, unsuccessfully, over the last two years to rescue Jax. They’ve received no help from those who could have helped, principally, the CIA and State. According to my Dad, they’d tried asking for any team experienced in SAR missions to go to Peru but were denied. That may be understandable but even requests for an investigative team were denied. We can figure out the
apathy from our government later. Right now, the priority is to get Jax home.

“To bring you up to date, Justin received a call early this morning. It’s more than what we could have hoped for.” Alex recounted the phone call then brought up a photo on the screen. “Demetrio Limonier Chávez Peñaherrera, aka Vaticano. Currently serving a life sentence in Peru though the matter is far from over. Peru is controlled by Vladimiro Montesinos even though Alberto Fujimori is the president and, from what I gleaned through my phone calls earlier, Montesinos is a CIA asset.” That brought a soft curse from Justin. “It will be interesting to see what brought on Vaticano’s offer. The woman who called Justin will be calling again in three days’ time to give us the details but we’re leaving for San Diego at seven hundred hours tomorrow to check out what equipment is at our disposal. If the lead pans out, we’ll fly out from San Diego.” He glanced at the wall clock. It showed eleven p.m. “Let’s get some sleep and meet for breakfast at oh five hundred.”

“What’s in San Diego?” Gibbs asked.

“Theron-Knight Skunkwerkz,” Justin replied.

“They develop high-tech gadgets, the type you see in those James Bond movies,” Alex said. “We’re going to see if there’s anything we can bring along other than the standard equipment.”

“Oh, we have some nice prototypes ready,” Andrew said. “You’ll get a kick out of them.”

“You mean we’re going to be guinea pigs?” Gibbs asked, not liking the high-tech label at all. All he needed was a good sniper rifle and his binoculars.
The team arrived shortly after nine and the plant was already abuzz with uniformed and colored-coated employees everywhere.

Sheldon Karem, chief engineer at TKS greeted the men with a huge smile. “Welcome back, Alex. It’s been awhile since you were here.”

“Three years,” Alex said, shaking Karem’s hand and introduced the rest of the men.

“We are very pleased with what we’ve accomplished in those three years,” Karem said, leading them through the building. “You recall the F-31-Specter? We were halfway through when you left.”

“I remember,” Alex replied. “It’s finished?”

“Oh yes, and its night vision capability is above our expectations. The images it captures is better than any drone currently available, though drone technology is still in the early stages.” He turned to the others, “The F-31-Specter is the world’s first surveillance drone and expected to go into production by Spring next year. The Terminator, a strike drone, is expected to be ready by 2000. Gentlemen, you will be one of the first outsiders to observe the F-31 Specter in action. Let’s go to the hangar.”

The hangar was exactly what any hangar looked like except instead of regular size aircraft, there were several mini ones ranging from about a foot wide to one meter. Technicians in overalls were milling around them tinkering away, some taking photographs while others typed into their laptops. Gibbs went near one and peeked at what was being entered. He had enough trouble with desktop computers and there was no way he was using one of those lap things. He’d heard you could now send letters via computers using a program called Hotmail but it needed to be on the internet. He didn’t know much, if anything, about that either. The only net he was familiar with was for catching fish, not sending mail.

“This is a very important mission for us,” Karem said. “We’ll be studying the results in detail but I can speak very confidently that you will be pleased. The resolution is fantastic. Specter will zoom in on a beer can from 60,000 feet above and give you the fine print. Its heat sensors will deliver thermal images within a building from the same height but – ahh, the pièce de résistance – it will taser your target without him knowing what hit him. Or, rubber bullets if you so prefer. Break a bone or two, why not?” He grinned. “Climb aboard,” Karem hopped on to a buggy, gesturing to Alex to take the other one. “And follow me.”

They rode the buggy across the airfield. About three hundred meters away from where they started
out, another buggy towing a meter-wide drone drove up to them. Karem hopped out. “Alex, meet our design consultants, Jordan and Hayden.

Alex shook hands even as he wondered why and how these kids were working in Theron-Knight SkunkWerkz. He looked enquiringly at Karem.

“They’re consultants, as I said. Not full-time either, though they will be with us until they go off to college. Both of you going to MIT, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, sir,” both of them replied. They were so alike they could be twins.

“Their ideas played a pivotal role in Tweety Bird’s development,” Karem said. “Rather impressive drone technology these two have come up with.” He nodded. “I foresee a long and illustrious career with Theron-Knight Skunkwertz.”

One of the boys, Jordan, Alex guessed, came up to him and said in a low, urgent voice, “You’re Jax’s friend, aren’t you? My mom said if anyone could find Jax, you can.”

“You will, won’t you?” Hayden, the other boy said, joining them as Karem moved away to the others. ”We didn’t want to leave but they made us. Our parents, I mean."

“You're the boys with Jax in Peru?” Alex asked.

“Yes.”

“I know what happened but I’d like you to tell me again. Start from the beginning of your trip – people you met, interacted with. As much detail as you can remember.”

“Okay,” Jordan said. “We can talk in the cafeteria after the demo.”

“Did you know it was the Israeli Air Force who showed drones could change the direction of a battle?” Karem asked the men.

“Yeah,” Joe Cipriani said. “They won the battle over the Syrian Air Force back in 1982, destroying dozens of enemy craft with minimal loss to their own force. Waitaminute. You’re that Karem. The man who invented those drones for Israel.”

Karem neither confirmed nor deny it but said, instead, “Our Terminator RQ-1L has been in use by the USAF and CIA since 1995 though the latter prefers smaller, unobtrusive UAVs. We expect to arm our drones by 2000. But here, this little baby, Tweety Bird –” he held up the drone aloft. We’re going to send it to the end of the plant. Over there." He pointed to the other end of the airfield. "There’s a canteen there and a parking lot. Let’s see what she sees and hears.”

“Uhh, are those feathers going to be there in the final product?” Gibbs asked the canary lookalike. “Or just for this demo?”

“What?” Karem frowned, then smiled. “Ohh. Right. The feathers. They’re permanent. You’ll see once she’s in the air and gliding.”

Karem was right. Tweety Bird lifted off and was soon soaring up over the tree tops. It looked no different from a hawk up there in the sky. It even did a few flaps of its wings. Gibbs was impressed.
“Alright, look at that,” Karem nodded towards the laptop that had been set up. “See, it’s approaching the parking lot. Let’s see the license plate…” Everyone crowded around the laptop to watch Tweety Bird focus in on a car’s license plate and saw the letters and numbers in high resolution. “Now, let’s see what stickers he’s got on his windscreen. Hmm, he’s a member of the San Diego Yacht Club and that’s a sticker for Park Place Condo.”

A few clicks of the keyboard and Tweety Bird headed off to a nearby building. They watched the drone decrease in height then Karem pressed a key and the laptop screen switched. The change was subtle but there. As the men watched, they found their view changing and at one point, could see the drone flying overhead.

“We’re not on Tweety Bird anymore,” Karem said. “Okay, watch and listen.”

One of the assistants had another laptop and called the team’s attention to a clip of the close-up of Tweety Bird laying an egg, or sort of. The “egg” turned out to be a bumblebee. The bumblebee flew off after emerging from Tweety Bird’s butt, zigzagging its way out of the lab.

“The drone gave birth to a…bumblebee?” Luis Montero asked. “But it’s not a real bumblebee. Is it?”

“Real or not, that’s what we are now,” Mike Caletti said, pointing to the first laptop. “We’re seeing through the bumblebee’s camera. How cool is that!”

“We can hear them pretty good, too,” Gibbs said, really impressed now.

Alex nodded. “Fantastic. We plan to leave by the end of the week. You can get these toys packed and ready?”

“Just give me the day and flight details. Will it be on the corporate jet or military?” Karem asked.

“Corporate,” Andrew replied. "One of ours."

“We need weapons,” Alex added.

“Oh, we have some beauties,” Karem grinned. “But that’s Sam Waverly’s division. Go see him.”

“We’ve already got an appointment at two p.m.” Andrew told them. “And I’ll make sure you have all the details and clearances for the flight to Lima. We have storage facilities at the Callao Naval Base but you’ll require clearance from the US military to use it.”

Later, back at Alex's Coronado Island house, Alex called Brigadier General Miller, his commander. BG Miller had led the JSOC forces in Colombia assisting the Search Bloc.

“You contacted your old man, Knight?” Miller asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re not calling to tell me you’ve changed your mind and want back in, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“Thought it’d be too good to be true. What do you want, then?”

“Two things, sir. First. I need help getting the latest intel on the CIA’s involvement in Peru.” Quickly, he filled Miller in on Jax’s abduction and the lack of support from the Agency and even the State department. “It just strikes me as odd that someone as prominent as the scion of the
Theron family is kidnapped in Peru and we don’t know why and out government won’t help get him back.”

There was a pause before Miller answered. “Alex, you know the CIA’s ops in South America are classified.”

“Where in the world aren’t they?”

“Agreed. So… I couldn’t tell you anything even if I want to. If I knew. Which I don’t.”

“Sir, I need something. Anything. I’m going to get Jax out and need all the help I can get.”

Miller sighed heavily then asked, “Who do you suspect has the boy?”

“I’m not sure yet but I’m going to try and visit whoever’s in the know as far as the drug trade is concerned.”

“What makes you think drugs are involved?”

Alex didn’t want to let out that Vaticano had reached out to him so he said, “Just a hunch. Which brings me to my second request, sir. I need clearance to use a storage locker at the Callao Naval Base. It’s being leased to Theron-Knight Atomics but in the US military’s name.”

“Why? No, I don’t know want to know, do I?”

“No, sir. So, can you help me?”

“Let me guess - you’re on your way to Peru and you need somewhere to hide your toys. Knight, are you going to get me fired over this?”

“No, sir. We’ll be back with the cargo before they even know we were there.”

“It bloody better be just like that.” the Brigadier General sighed. “You are well aware our State department is a strong ally of the Peruvian president and that means the US is a strong backer of Vladimiro Montesinos who, every South American knows, is the de facto ruler of Peru. If you’ve been getting the runaround by the CIA and State, you can bet there’s political shenanigans at play. Watch your ass, Knight, and whoever you’re taking with you.

“Sir, as you know, JSOC has come to the aid of US informants, even when they weren’t US citizens,” Alex said, and Miller knew he was referring to the nine Haitians exfiltrated from Haiti in 1991 following the fall of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Miller’s silence told Alex he had hit home. Then the General said, “I’ll get you your clearance but we never had this conversation.”

“Thank you sir, and no, sir. We haven’t spoken to each other since I flew out of Afghanistan.”

Colonel Martinez called Alex back soon after the call with BG Miller and while he could confirm who had Jax, he wasn’t able to give much more. “It does look like your hostage is in Peru but where, I don’t know. I can tell you who has him, at least that’s what my informant tells me.” When Alex didn’t say anything, merely waiting, Martinez said, “Vladimiro Montesinos, Peru’s head of intelligence. Not a man you want to mess with.”

“Where do I find him, and I don’t mean his office.”
“Montesinos’ hacienda is three hours drive from Lima but he conducts official business from his intelligence headquarters in Lima so it all really depends on why he took the boy.”

“Didn’t he murder two students and a professor in ’92? Or ’93?”

“1993. And built an oven in his headquarters to burn the bodies. Not just the three, of course. At least two female intelligence agents were captured, tortured then dismembered. Dozens of other people have disappeared, all presumably dead. But this boy. He is American so I don't think Montesinos will take the risk and keep him in the Intelligence headquarters. It is likely he is being held at the hacienda, if not some other private property.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. If Montesinos did have Jax, then the boy was dead, Alex thought. Otherwise there would have been a ransom. “I’m getting ready to fly into Peru. I’ll call you when I’m in.”

“I am sorry to not be of more help but I will keep my ears open and call you if I have something.”

“Thank you, Colonel.” As with BG Miller, Alex didn’t mention the call from Vaticano via this woman friend. Miller’s call came in half an hour later, the requisite clearances obtained and faxed over to Alex.

The call that came in later that evening was the one Alex needed most of all.

“You are Alex Knight?” the woman asked.

“Yes.”

“What is the name of the restaurant you went to the day Escobar was killed? It took Alex a moment then he answered, “The Restaurante Dragon Fenix in Medellín.”

“And what did you order?”

“I don’t remember everything we ordered but I liked the pork with steamed buns. I recall telling the owner that.”

The caller expelled a soft breath and said, “My name is Carmen. When will you arrive in Lima?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Okay. Call me at this number when you arrive in Lima.” She gave it to Alex then added, “Vaticano is being held at the Miguel Castro Castro Prison in San Juan Lurigancho. Now listen carefully - this is how you will get in the prison.”
Author’s Note:

The incident described by Vaticanos was reported in an article by Aaron Kesel, an investigative journalist for We Are Change, an independent media organization comprised of individuals and groups working to expose corruption worldwide (according to their website). I was able to access the article last year when I began writing this story but now the link to Part 2 where Vaticanos is relating what happened (“Pablo Escobar’s Secret CIA Connection that Made Him Billions”) is broken. I have contacted We Are Change and I will publish the link if they fix it.

As far as I know, Montesinos does not have a hacienda in Chincha Alta so I made one up for him.


ACT ONE: Il Cielo In Una Stanza

JAX & ALEX/CHAPTER 5

Throughout the eleven-hour flight to Lima, Alex’s thoughts were on Jax – Jax as a baby, Jax as a toddler, Jax the seven year-old with the irrepressible smile, Jax the pre-adolescent and most of all, Jax, the little boy who vowed to marry him when he grew up. He was sixteen now; fourteen the last time Alex saw him. He’d been all arms and legs, cheeks permanently tinged with a peach flush, light freckles over the bridge of his nose and the rest of him a golden, coppery sheen. Jax was tanned without having to stay out under the sun - a result of that unknown, exotic, ancestor mixed into the Theron gene pool back when they were still bayou swamp rats in Louisiana.

Alex wondered what he looked like now. At this age, even two years could make a difference to a boy’s appearance. The flight attendant’s voice broke into his thoughts as he told them they’d be landing in thirty minutes and asked if they wanted a last drink before they began their descent. He asked for a club soda with three slices of lime. Looking out over the Atlantic, he resumed his thoughts about Jax, about that time during a Theron dinner party when the eight year-old had sneaked downstairs. Jax had joined the guests as they were having cocktails on the terrace of their downtown penthouse and pestered Alex to teach him how to kiss “like a man”. Several eyebrows had been raised that night and mouths fell open as Jax explained that the girls in his class did not know how to kiss but big boys – like Alex – did, because he’d seen them do it on tv. “With their mouth open and with their tongue!”, he’d told his stunned audience, finishing off with, “and I want Alex to show me because I’m going to marry him when I grow up so I think I should start learning how to do it right now just like I’m going to school now to learn arithmetic and science and stuff.”

Alex had scooped him up and carried him back upstairs to his room to spare his parents more embarrassment. Later, before he left the party, he had gone up with Katharine to check on the kid. He was fast asleep, or so Alex thought, but when he bent down to kiss Jax’s cheek, the boy mumbled, “Promise me you’ll wait for me to grow up.”
Alex chuckled. “You’re already a big boy, buddy.”

“I mean big enough to marry you.”

Alex exchanged glances with Katharine who merely shrugged and said, “Que sera, sera.”

Lima, Peru

Alex and the team touched down on Jorge Chávez International Airport then made their way to the Sheraton Lima Hotel. Carmen arrived at their hotel room half an hour later, carrying a large tote bag. Her greeting was perfunctory and she cut to the chase immediately.

“This is your outfit,” she said, taking out a folded pile of clothes from her bag.

“A priest?” Alex said. “What order?”

“If anyone asks, and they likely won’t, tell them you’re Father Leonard from the Hartford Archdiocese; that Vaticano asked for you, specifically, because you’d met when he went to the US in 1992.”

“Is there a Father Leonard at the Hartford Archdiocese?”

“Yes, of course but he is currently on sabbatical.”

“And you mean Hartford, Connecticut, right?”

“Of course,” Carmen said. “There is no Hartford in Colombia.” Alex swore he heard ‘idiota’ added to her reply but Carmen’s face remained bland. Are you ready?” she asked.

“We are we going?”

“Miguel Castro Castro prison.”

Alex went to the connecting door in the room gave a knock. “It’s me.” The door opened and the men streamed through. “I’m going to see Vaticano. You guys wait here for my call.”

Carmen didn’t so much as glance at them, already heading for the door. “Hurry,” she said.

“Wait,” Alex called out and Carmen halted. “Why is Vaticano doing this? Why is he helping me?”

“You don’t know yet you flew out here anyway?” She gave her head a small shake. “It’s alright. He will tell you why.”

9.45am;

Miguel Castro Castro prison;

San Juan de Lurigancho, Lima, Peru

Demetrio Chávez Peñaherrera sat in his cell, starring at the wall. One day at a time, he told himself. One day. He knew it. Felt it. Felt it even stronger than the electric shocks that spasmed his body to the point his brain gave out and left him a jibbering idiot. One day, he would have the
pleasure of seeing Vladimiro Montesinos in prison with him. May not be here, Miguel Castro Castro, but he didn’t care which, as long as he got the pleasure of seeing his enemy’s face as he, Vaticano, walked out to freedom.

He may deserve what he got - a 25-year sentence instead of life but what ate at him was that Montesinos was still free, still running Peru using his puppet, Fujimori. But maybe his prayers will be answered, finally – if Carmen was successful in getting hold of Alex Knight.

It was with relief when his cell door grated open and a guard entered. “Vaticano, the Padre you asked for is here.”

Alex thanked the guard who told him he had half an hour.

“We better go straight into business, yes?” Vaticano said when the priest entered and the door clanged shut behind him.

“My preferred style,” Alex said. “You know why I’m here.”

“Come, have a seat.” Vaticano gestured to his narrow bed with its thin mattress. “I’m sure you know it is Montesinos, Fujimori’s Rasputin, who put me in here. That man is the biggest drug trafficker in South America and the worst evil that ever walked the earth!”

“Senor Peñaherrera –” Alex began.

“Vaticano.”

“Vaticano. There is no need to tell me how much you hate Montesinos but what has he to do with my business here in Peru?”

“Because he has the gringo boy, that’s why, and only I can tell you where to find him because I’m already in prison. The people who are on the outside dare not talk, no matter how much money you give them. Dead people have no use for money. Me? I’m sentenced to 25 years. This is Peru, not the US. People don’t get sentenced to 20 years but are out in two. Besides, everyone believes me to be insane – and I was - after Montesinos tortured me. He tortured me so badly I could not testify coherently in court! I was nothing but a shivering, salivating idiot in court and a new trial had to be ordered. And then I am given 25 years while Montesinos goes free. But now I am okay. But I let them all think I am still coca cola,” Vaticano said, referring to the Peruvian term for ‘crazy’. “I am screaming every night, that the devil is in my cell waiting to take my soul. I scream and scream until the guard comes then I beg him to call a priest to pray for my soul. Carmen, she is my cousin, and she tells the guard she will bring the priest who heard my confession when I was in the US some years ago. I never go to mass here, you see, so I would have to have met you somewhere else. Everyone knows I used to fly to the US for pleasure. And for business, of course. And so, here you are – mi sacerdote.” he smiled widely.

“Jax Theron,” Alex said abruptly. “Where is Montesinos keeping him?”

“Either in the National Intelligence Service’s underground cells or in Montesinos’ country hacienda. I believe the latter is more likely.”

“Why?”

“Because if the gringo boy is in the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional, then he is dead and I would not have bothered you. Montesinos has an oven in the SIN’s basement. Specially built to burn bodies.”
"So I've heard."

"He has tortured and murdered dozens of men and women then burnt their bodies in the oven. But I said, the gringo boy - Montesinos does not want him dead. Torture, maybe. Probably. But Montesinos wants the boy for sex."

“What?” Alex was taken aback then skepticism took over. “Why would he kidnap someone for sex? He can buy one anytime. Why go to the trouble of kidnapping an American citizen?”

“Okay, sex is not the only reason but it is the reason why I believe he is keeping the boy in his hacienda and not in the SIN basement. You see, Montesinos is a mostacero. A cabro. Maricón!”

Montesinos was gay? Alex had not read that when he pulled up what intel they had on the Intelligence chief.

“He put his hand on my genitals when we were drunk one day,” Vaticano continued, “I brush it away. I’m thinking he was too drunk to know what he was doing but he did it a second time. I warned him, then, if he ever put another finger on me, I will kill him. Then I did not hear from him for several months but I still paid him the fifty thousand dollars a month so that I can do business without government interference. One day, he calls me and demands double what I have been paying him. Double! I told him to go to hell.” Vaticano rubbed his face as he thought back to that day. “After that, my operations began to suffer. Montesinos stopped all support and I was unable to get my coca base to Colombia. Then the next disaster hit – Escobar was killed. With Escobar gone, my biggest market and ally was gone. Members of Grupo Colina, Montesinos’ death squad, were after me so I had to flee. I got caught in Colombia and that diablo, Montesinos, bribed his way into getting me extradited to Peru. Maybe I won’t live long enough to finish my prison term, that is why I ask you to bring Montesinos to justice. I cannot forget what he did to me. I want him in this jail with me and I want him to know it is ME who put him in here!

“Where is this hacienda of Montesinos?” Alex asked, bringing the talk back to the matter at hand.

“Just outside the town of Chincha Alta. South of Lima. Three and a half hours drive from here. It is a magnificent hacienda and Montesinos lives there on weekends but since the gringo boy is there, he makes trips there during the week. People have seen the boy riding in the jeep with the Grupo Colina, which is why I initially thought the boy is hidden in the SIN but Carmen has told me no, the villagers have seen the boy leaving and returning with the guards to the hacienda.”

“How do we know he is there now?”

“Because Carmen is looking out for me. She is an agent but I cannot tell you from where. Just know that I trust her information and if she says the boy is not in Lima but in the hacienda then that is where he is.”

“You have the exact location?”

“It is on Callejón San Jose. You can find it on any map because of its size but do not ask anyone in the town or the word will get out.”

“I know how to my job, Vatican.”

Vaticano gave a nod. “Of course. Pardon me.”

“How many guards?”

“Twenty, thirty. Depends on whether Montesinos is there. If he is not then only the security at the
main gate and two or three around the building. He may have more now but that is what he had when I was there two years ago. There is a full time staff, of course. There are catacombs and tunnels, naturally. Punishment rooms. All the old haciendas have them. For the slaves. Carmen does not know where the boy is being kept but if I am right, he is secured in one of the underground cells and brought out when Montesinos is visiting. Go see Carmen and she will give you an update.”

“If Carmen can tell me all this, why did I have to see you? And if Carmen knows all this, why couldn’t the investigators hired by the Therons get any information? Jax’s parents offered a lot of money. Carmen could have contacted them earlier instead of now, two years later.”

“Because she is not a calabaza. Not. Stoopid. Carmen is alive because she trust no one but me. She only talked to you because I told her to do that. Of course the word is out that the boy’s parents will pay for information but Montesinos’ reach is very wide so people are afraid to talk.”

“How did you know about me?”

At that Vaticano chuckled. “Escobar, of course. No, not Escobar himself. His people. After Pablo was killed by your people. Si, I know the credit went to the Bloque de Búsqueda and Martinez but my what you say? My gut –” he patted his belly. “tells me your team killed Escobar. I find out your name, that you are the leader and you train Martinez and his men. I learn other things, too, about you as a soldier and your family. You do not need money. You are a wealthy man so you do what you do because you believe it is the right thing to do. Me? I did what I did for money and now I do what I am doing because it is the right thing. Eh, mi padre?” He laughed again. “And why Carmen insist you talk to me face to face? Because I can identify you but she cannot. She would not know if you are who you say you are.”

“You and I have never met,” Alex said. “How do you know I am the real deal?”

“You don’t know it but I was at the restaurant in Colombia sitting behind you. This was a few days before I was captured then extradited back here. I already heard about the US forces that were in Medellin looking for Escobar, remember. You were not at the scene that day but I had already seen you and your men a day earlier with the members of Bloque de Búsqueda. I remember you because you are handsome. Montesinos would call you a churro.” Vaticano gave a short bark of laughter. A churro was Peruvian slang for a handsome man. “And second reason, Carmen does not know this – it is too dangerous for her to know – but this is the real reason that I wanted to see you. The boy is just a hook to interest you.’

“And what is this “real” reason?”

Vaticano lowered his voice and moved close to Alex’s ear, speaking softly, “Montesinos has thousands of videotapes of him bribing government officials. Not just Peruvian and Colombian but the US officials. Yes, you are incredulous? Hah! You know the ten million US dollars that the CIA paid Montesinos? For anti-terrorism intel on the FARC rebels? Some of that went into his pocket, some went to the FARC’s – oh yes, quite a traitor he is to both countries – you pay him for information on the FARC’s and he takes the money and gives it to them!” Vaticano guffawed then paused for effect as Alex moved his ear away. “Not all went to the FARC’s. Some of the millions went into the Swiss bank account of your CIA Director.” Vaticano sat back, waiting for Alex’s reaction. He wasn’t disappointed.

“You mean the current director?” Alex asked, shock registering on his face.

“Yes.”
“Richard Carter?”

“Yes! And the CIA also paid Montesinos one million towards Fujimori’s presidential campaign. This was approved by your government, your State department. So your government knows —” Vaticanco thumped his thigh with his fist. “Montesinos has this boy, Jax Theron, but they will not say anything or rescue him because then everything about the CIA, your State Department and Montesinos bribing the CIA Director will all come out. Your State department does not want it known that Montesinos is the pointman for U.S. anti-drug agencies so they kept a tight lid on everything. That is why they did not want to be involved in a rescue of the boy that Montesinos took. Just ignore it, eh, and wait for it to go away.”

“You’re saying it’s not just Carter who’s involved with scuttling any plans for a search rescue the past eighteen months but the State Department as well?”

Vaticanco shrugged. “Find the tapes and you will know the rest of the culprits. You may not agree now, but your current administration is about as corrupt as the governments south of your border.” He took a long inhale before saying. “In Peru, it is easy to silence people. The nobodies, we just kill them and leave their bodies on the streets. The important ones, we kill them, too - in their mansions lying on their Egyptian cotton sheets. But in the US, you allow investigative journalists to poke around until the truth comes out then you watch the heads roll on the national news. It is your national sport, like football. After the dust settles, no government official goes to jail because that would be embarrassing. He, or she, just steps down and goes on the lecture circuit.” He chuckled. “I think our way is more fair.”

“The CIA’s involvement in Colombia and Peru is no secret,” Alex said, wanting to bring them back to the issue at hand. “Whatever deals Carter had or has with Montesinos would be with the approval of the US State department.” Except, he reminded himself, the CIA was a civilian agency.

“Yes, but no one except Montesinos and the CIA director know about the millions paid as a bribe so that the US would leave him alone.”

“And you said Montesinos has tapes of him bribing the CIA Director?”

“Yes, maybe one, maybe more.”

“Where are they?”

“In his hacienda.”

“How do you know?”

“Because until I rejected his advances, I used to go to his hacienda regularly. He always had parties. Once a month from Friday evening until Sunday. Lots of beautiful women from all over the world. Beautiful boys and men, too, for his guests who like that kind of pleasure. We would get drunk and talk shop and fuck. I did not know he is secretly a mostacero until he tried to grab my cock that day in his study. So when we were drunk, he would boast about how he has power over all the supposedly powerful people. Not only in South America but in the US. Then he takes me to the room next door. We are on the second floor. Right at the end…it faces the swimming pool. It is an entertainment room with a wide screen for movies. He opens the door to a vault that is built into the wall. I see hundreds, no thousands! of tapes tied with rubber bands and stacked together on shelves. He takes out one stack and plays one of the tapes. It shows the CIA director and Montesinos in his study and one of his men brings in a suitcase. They open it on the coffee table and it is filled with dollars. Later the tape shows Carter leaving the room and the hacienda with the suitcase. He has cameras everywhere in his compound. You have to be careful. You will be
recorded the moment you enter the compound. He has very sophisticated technology, thanks to the CIA.”

**Surveillance cameras. First thing to go.** “That is critical information,” Alex said.

“That is not all,” Vaticano said. “There are other tapes of Carter, DEA, CIA agents with whores. And one of Fujimori receiving the money from Montesinos. A suitcase of American dollars. No trail. All there. You find them, you will bring Montesinos and Fujimori down. Of course, your own government will be implicated but –” Vaticano gave a shrug. “I think you don’t care, no?”

“No, I don’t. I’m only interested in getting Jax back but if, in the process, I find evidence of my government’s involvement in this matter, they’ll have to handle the fallout on their own. But you, what do you want? You’re a drug trafficker yourself. You don’t do anything for nothing yet you haven’t negotiated anything for the intel you’ve given me.”

Vaticano laughed. “I’m a drug trafficker, yes. But Peru and Colombia…Mexico - we are all narco-states. Nobody’s money is clean. My cocaine base is purer and cleaner than your dollars any time. What do I want? To see Montesinos in prison. Dead is okay, too, but what would be really sweet is for him and Fujimori to be in prison – in this prison – or whatever prison I am in later – because we move our prisoners around, you know – I want to see their faces the day I walk out a free man. That is what I want.”

Alex stood and extended his hand. “If your information pans out, I will do my best for you to get your wish.”

Vaticano took the padre’s hand and gave it a firm shake.

\[\text{o o o}\]

Carmen was waiting for him in her car when he walked out of the prison. “You have everything you need?”

“Yes, more than I expected. Thank you.”

Carmen started the car and they pulled away from the kerb. “Rasputin has killed people I care about,” she said, calling Montesinos but his nickname. “One of them was my best friend. All we got of her were pieces thrown onto the roadside. If he isn’t put away soon, I might be next.”

“Believe me, no one wants Montesinos more than me. The boy, Jax - he is very important to me. I have known him since he was born. I’ve changed his nappies, fed him, scratched his back to soothe him to sleep.”

“Ah, he is like a son to you.”

Alex chuckled. “No, I’m not that old. Jax is 15 years younger than me.”

“A little brother, then.”

“Sort of.

“I found out while you were with Vaticano,” Carmen said, leaving Alex relieved at the change of subject. “Montesinos is bringing guests back to the hacienda this weekend. This means he will leave his office early.”
That was another piece of critical intel and Alex thanked her. “I need the address of the hacienda.”

“I don’t know it off hand but it is two miles from El Carmen along the main road. You can’t miss it.”

“Try to get me the exact address,” Alex said. “Or, at least the nearest landmark.” He’d need it for Tweety Bird though, at a pinch, the town of El Carmen would do.

Back in the hotel, the team gathered round to work out the strategy as Alex made a call to Brigadier General Miller.

“I’ll call you back,” Miller said and rang off as soon as Alex identified himself. A minute later, he was calling Alex from the JSOC secure line. “You’re in Peru?”

“Yes, and I need some help to get out of Peru when the mission’s accomplished.”

“Alex, you know I can’t do that. You’re not under my command anymore. Hell, you’re not in the military. You should have thought of your exit plan before you went in and –”

“That was before I found out what I did. If I’d known what I do now, this wouldn’t be a private jaunt but a full-scale government-sanctioned operation.”

“What are you talking about? What did you find out?”

Alex relayed to Miller what Vaticano told him about the tapes after which Miller said, “Shit, Alex. This is the smoking gun Challenger’s looking for. Hold on.”

It was several minutes before Miller came back on the phone. “Who’s Challenger?” Alex asked.

“Senator James Challenger.”

Alex had never met Challenger but the Senator from Arizona was well-known for his willingness to challenge the rules in Washington and possessing patience and fortitude coupled with a strong sense of moral rightness. He knew, too, that there was talk Challenger was going to win the current Presidential election.

“How is Challenger connected to a kidnap case?”

“Not the kidnap case. Not the victim, that is. The perp. And I can’t say more. Alex. I’ve got orders to tell you to find those tapes and if they are verified to be authentic, you can ask for all the support you want. Hell, you and your team will be flying home first-class all the way with protection from the Embassy.”

“You got it, sir.”

Alex heard Miller cover the mouthpiece of his phone as he spoke to someone. A couple of minutes later, he was back. “Expect a call from Commander Sam Winters. He’s en route to Peru as we speak. He’ll give you further orders.”

“Orders, sir?”

“Fuck you, Knight. You’re calling me ’sir’ so yeah, it’s ‘orders.’”

“Yes, sir.”

“Winters will let you know what backup he can provide.”
“What I surmise,” Alex told the men after the call to BG Miller. “Is that JSOC has had its eyes on the political situation in Peru and something’s brewing that they can’t tell us about. Whatever, we’re on our own and Miller can only step in if we get him those tapes. Just before he ended the call, he told me Commander Winters will contact me with instructions.”

“Winters?” Cipriani asked. “You mean Sam Winters?”

“Yes. He’s here on a joint training mission. That’s the official reason.”

“If we get those tapes, we’ll already have Jax,” Gibbs pointed out.

“Why would we need Miller or anyone else then?” McCaffrey asked.

“Yeah, it’d be a quick SAR,” Montero agreed. “No one would even know Jax is gone until we’re out of Dodge.”

“Because,” Alex said. “Montesinos is expected to return to his hacienda tomorrow by early evening. By the afternoon, probably, since he is entertaining foreign guests. So, tapes or no tapes, we need to get Jax out of there before Montesinos arrives. If, for some reason, he arrives before we find the tapes, he’s going to have about two dozen guards with him. I wanted some back-up if I could. That’s why I called Miller.”

“And stumbled on to something more,” Gibbs murmured.

“Looks like,” Alex said. “Senator Challenger’s involvement points to that. Not that Miller was saying so.”

“Just Cause…Urgent Fury…Uphold Democracy.” Gibbs said, referring to US invasions that preceded the removal of the nation’s leader and the establishment of an interim government.

“You think that’s what’s happening here?” Caletti asked. "A regime change?"

“If so, we’d better get our asses outta here before the shit storm hits,” Cipriani said. “And if they’re sending Winters in, I’m putting my money with Gibbs. Winters led the invasion into Panama in Operation Just Cause in 1990 and Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti last year.”

Alex nodded. “I’m with you on that. In any case, we have to get into the hacienda and out with our
cargo before anything goes down. We’re heading out at sundown. I’m going to call Carmen for the address of the hacienda. While I’m at it, three of you scout for somewhere we can launch Tweety Bird without being seen.”

After the guys left, Alex called Carmen.

“Hey, I was just about to call you,” she said. “I have the address.”

Alex took it down. “Tell me something. Do you know where Montesinos’ library is? Vaticano says it faces the swimming pool.” With the address, Tweety Bird would be able to generate a map but not a blueprint. That would be one of the things he’d have Skunkwerkz come out with the minute he was back in San Diego.

“I don’t know but I can get a blueprint. The hacienda is several centuries old…” Carmen’s voice trailed off as she thought. “Maybe there’s a one in the UNESCO Heritage Archives. I have a friend there. I’ll call you back as soon as I can.” When Carmen called back half an hour later, she had the blueprint. “It is a recent one, too. It was filed when Montesinos bought the property and renovated it. I will bring it to you now.”

“From UNESCO?” Alex asked, surprised.

“From someone you go to for building permits and such. Give me twenty minutes then wait outside the front entrance of the hotel. I will pass it to you.”

Alex and two of the other men were waiting outside their hotel when Carmen pulled up. Rolling down the window, she handed the large envelope to Alex. “I managed to contact my informant and got the site of the library. I have marked it with an X. You can see the swimming pool from that room. It is the only room with the view of the pool from the main building because the pool is some distance away with the cabanas, the pool bar and an outdoor kitchen. According to my informant, the boy is still upstairs, in Montesinos’ private quarters. Or in the library. It is two doors away from Montesinos’ bedroom. When are you going? It has to be by tonight.”

“Don’t worry, it will be over before Montesinos arrives.”

“I will tell my informant to get out of there. Make an excuse to take the day off. I don’t want her to get caught in the crossfire if it comes to that.”

“No, it will look suspicious if her absence is noticed. Just tell her to stay away from the main building, stay in her own quarters. I take it she lives there?”

“Yes, but she is often in Chincha Alta where her family lives. I will warn her and let her decide where will be safer for her. And me – I am flying out tonight with my family. To Puerto Rico where we have relatives. It is too dangerous for me now that you are here to rescue the boy. Somehow, word will get out and a finger will eventually point in my direction.”

Alex nodded. “Okay, but one more thing – the boy. He is unhurt?”

“Whatever hurts he had has healed, so physically he is well. Psychologically, he may not be. Apparently, he refuses to wear any clothes. My informant does not know why, only that there is talk among the guards that the boy will fight if anyone tries to make him wear clothes. The only thing he wears is a jeweled collar with a chain. Given by Montesinos. He is chained to a bar…a hand rail. His ankles are also chained together so he can only take one small step at a time.”

Alex digested this as their car entered the street where their hotel was. Carmen pulled up outside and turned to Alex. “Here you are, Senor Knight. ¡vaya con Dios!”
“Thanks, Carmen. Here –” Alex took out his wallet and emptied it. “There’s about a thousand dollars here. It’s all I got with me right now. Take it.”

Carmen took it and thanked him perfunctorily.

“You’ll be alright?”

“If I get out this evening, yes.”

“When things settle down, let me know you’re okay, will you? And I’m sure the Therons will want to meet you.”

Carmen looked at him then nodded. “I will.”

10.30pm

Lima, Peru

“Sorry for getting in so late,” Commander Winters apologized, but didn’t offer an explanation. He’d arrived in Lima at 2230 hours then met Alex and the team in a house on the outskirts of the capital.

“I’m glad to see you here,” Alex responded. “Looks like I’ve stepped into more than just a kidnapping case.”

“It is imperative that we get those tapes before Montesinos arrives at the hacienda,” Winters said, going straight to the crux of the mission. “So a few of us will be going in with you. You find the hostage while my men and I search for the tapes.”

“Both are in the same place,” Alex said. “Vaticano told me Montesinos keeps the tapes in the library vault. The hostage is also there.” He pointed to the spot on the blueprint where Carmen had put the X. “We have visual from a drone surveillance.” He nodded at Caletti who’d already powered up the two laptops they’d brought with them.

“You have what?” Winters asked, frowning. Caletti turned one of the laptops around to face him and Winters’ men, the half dozen who were with him in the room crowded around, clearly impressed by what they were seeing. “Aerial surveillance? How the hell did you get that? We don’t even have anything close. Not here, anyway.”

“Just a prototype I borrowed,” Alex said. “You’ll be getting your hands on one soon.”

The JSOC men watched as Tweety Bird’s camera covered the area it flew over, slowing down as it approached a tiny village.

“That’s the hacienda,” Alex said as Tweety Bird headed towards a complex of building across the road from the village. “We’ve been monitoring it since this afternoon. No movements in and out that are significant.” The drone slowed until it was hovering over the hacienda.

“Where’s everyone?” Winters asked. “The place is deserted. You have confirmation the hostage is there?”
“According to our informant’s informant – who is an employee at the hacienda – our target is there. It was siesta time when this was recorded,” Alex said. “Worked out well because we could recon the entire hacienda without risk of getting sighted.”

“Just how big is the drone?” Winters asked.

“About three feet wide,” Alex said.

Winters whistled softly. “That’s tiny.”

“That’s a goliath if you don’t want to be spotted,” Alex rebutted. “We would have not have gone down so low or so close if it weren’t for the time of day.”

“Any visuals of the hostage?” Winters asked, knowing it was a unlikely but asking anyway. “Maybe he gets taken out into the courtyard a few minutes a day.”

“We got better. Watch.”

As Winters and his men watched, the visual split off and they found themselves zeroing in on the hacienda’s inner courtyard, and right into a flowering shrub.

“What the hell?” Winters muttered. “Is that still the drone?”

“Yes, but not the one we were viewing through earlier.” Alex gave a concise explanation of Tweety Bird and its companion.

“So we’re seeing through Bumblebee now,” Winters said by way of a question. “Where’s Tweety Bird? And who the hell gave these names?”

“Tweety Bird’s on standby somewhere. Siesta would be over by now so she had to make herself scarce. We’re entering the main building now,” Alex said as Bumblebee flew to an open window, hovered for a few seconds then entered.

“Who was controlling Bumblebee?” Winters asked.

“Us,” Alex replied. “With that.” Alex pointed to the controller Caletti had. “What you’re seeing on this laptop is historical.” He pointed to Caletti who was manipulating the joystick, clicking keys on the controller at the same time as looking intently at the laptop screen. “That –” he pointed at Caletti’s laptop. “— is real time.”

Everyone moved to crowd around Caletti. The group of men watched as a study with a large desk came into view. A library, Winters surmised as the camera panned the room and across shelves of books, back to the window from which it had flown in through.

And there was the boy. Naked and chained by a collar to a hand rail just under the window.

“Fuck me,” Winters muttered softly. Bumblebee panned the room, controlled by Caletti. “Anyone else in the room? This is the library, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Alex confirmed. “Once I got the address and entered it into the system, Tweety Bird gave us everything we needed but we didn’t get a visual of Jax until an hour ago. He wasn’t in the library earlier and it took awhile for us to maneuver Bumblebee through the house searching for him without getting caught. We couldn’t locate him so Bumblebee returned to the library to wait. Jax was brought in about forty-five minutes ago.”
“A mosquito would have been better, huh?” Winters said, half in jest. He was already amazed at the technology before his eyes. Drones had been used by the US military since the 60s, with 3,435 UAV missions flown during the Vietnam War. Interest in drones increased and in the 1990 a contract was given to Theron-Knight Atomics to develop a range of drones to be used in combat as well as intelligence-gathering. So, yeah, he knew about drones but this – this Tweety Bird and Bumblebee? They were the stuff of futuristic sci-fi stories, not here in 1996. And how the hell did Knight get hold of them?”

“Not when you have to search through a building for your target,” Gibbs said, referring to Winters’ suggestion of a mosquito versus a bumblebee. “Took us long enough with a bee!”

“ Practically took three of us to hold Alex down and stop him from rushing out and grabbing Jax right there and then,” Cipriani said.

“I don’t blame you one bit,” Winters said. “If I had what you have here, I would have gotten Jax out and on a plane back home by now.”

“So let’s move,” Alex said, standing up.

“What do you need?” Winters asked. “Nothing overt, you understand? Not until I get the okay from Washington. What I can do is provide an MH-6 Little Bird for the exfil.”

“An MH-6 Little Bird would be really sweet. We were planning to go in and out by road and have already leased three vehicles. My impression from BG Miller was that you’d only provide pre-op advice and post op support, if needed.”

“Yeah, well, let’s just say things have changed considerably since the hostage was taken in 1994. Just before you got here, I was cleared to tell you that Montesinos will be taken into custody as soon as I can send evidence of his bribing US officials. That’s what the camera phone’s for. That’s why finding those tapes is critical. If those tapes contain what you said they do, I’m to capture some shots and send them to Washington immediately. Once I get the go ahead, the local military will move in and the US military will be standing by to see through to completion of the operation.

“It’s twenty-three hundred hours now,” Winters continued. “We’ll haul ass now. We should reach the hacienda by zero three hundred hours.” “Sunrise is at zero five-thirty three hours at this time of year. Based on current intel, I envisage extraction of our target to take no more than ten minutes from infiltration, provided he is where he’s supposed to be. You -” he pointed to Alex. “And your team will get the hostage out. The Little Bird will be on standby to exfil you. My guys and I will stay and search for the tapes. We’re doing this quiet. Do not engage unless necessary but if you have to take anyone out, do it silently. The last thing we want is for an alarm to be raised before we’ve found the tapes. Any questions?”

“We have to retrieve our weapons,” Alex said. “They’re in a Theron-Knight container at the Callao Naval Yard.”

“You won’t need them. We have everything we need. If there are no other questions, the rest of the men are waiting for my call so let’s get this show on the road.”

Alex and his men started following Winter’s men to get their weapons but Winter’s next words had Alex halting. “Did I mention this op is being monitored by BG Miller and the other chiefs?”

“At MacDill?” Alex asked, referring to the Special Operations Command’s headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida.
“At the Pentagon. Justin Theron and your father, Andrew, are being appraised of the situation minute by minute as they can’t be in the war room.”
Earlier that afternoon:

El Carmen, Chinca Province, Peru

Jax stared out the window. It was such a treat – to be able to look down at the courtyard below, to the trees on the hill slopes beyond the hacienda complex. His newly-conferred ‘freedom’ was only two months old, not that he knew it. The days and nights had merged into one another since the night he was taken. He didn’t even know how long ago that was, exactly, but it felt like a lifetime.

He was now allowed to have a room above ground and allowed in the library. He was even allowed to go about naked. He was so grateful for that, never occurring to him how strange that was - to be grateful for being naked.

For almost two years, he’d been chained to an underground cell and made to wear a latex suit and a hood over his head. The suit covered him from neck to ankle and made him sweat, giving him a skin rash – which his captor would apply salve to. Before fucking him senseless. Then there’d be more ministrations to his torn skin and flesh, inside and outside his body. In the early days of his captivity, there had been beatings everyday. He was starved, given enough water to survive, then some bread or rice. And more beatings after being strung up by his arms. Going by the screams emanating from outside his cell, he wasn’t the only prisoner.

Those were the days he wished his captor would just put a bullet in his head. That, he knew, would be too quick, too easy a death if his captor wanted him dead. He knew because prisoners would be brought to his cell and tortured. Even though he couldn’t see them, he could hear them. He’d hear the protestations, the pleas, the acquiescence, then the screams. More screams, gags, vomiting. The stench of piss and shit as the prisoners' bowels loosened. Screams and more screams. He would hear the screams for days, long after the lifeless bodies were dragged out, leaving him alone once again.

Until the next victim.

Then, one day...maybe a few weeks after he was brought here...his captor, whose name he still did not know, came to his cell. He’d only come twice so far and both times were to inflict a pain that sent his body into spasms and left him with snot, tears and saliva streaming down his face and body.

“From now on you will wear only your skin,” his captor announced. “But the hood stays.” Then he’d fucked Jax, coming all over his body. “Soon, the hood will come off and I will cum on your face. You will be able to watch me. It will be such an honor, no?”

The pathetic thing was, Jax did think it was an honor, something he ought to be grateful for. And he was. Anything was better than being locked up in that dungeon wearing that rubber suit twenty-
four seven. Not long after that, he’d been taken to another part of the building. He knew it was above ground because of the bit of light that he could see at the bottom of his black hood. Not the artificial light of his cell but natural sunlight. He’d drunk it in, little as it was. Just the thought of being out of his cell was a gift. He’d been given that gift everyday since, and if the price was to be his captor’s sex slave, it was a price he was happy to pay. Yet, inside him, deep inside, remained a hope that one day he’d be rescued. One day, Alex would come for him.

The room he was taken to was, obviously a bedroom because of the bed. He couldn’t see the bed; he just felt it when he was led to it and made to lie down. Or go on all fours on it. Then, a week ago, the hood was removed. He’d had to shut his eyes until he adjusted to the light. But he was free of the hood. Progress.

His captor was Vladimiro Montesinos, he’d found out. “You are to address me as Miro. That is a great honor, you understand? To be given permission to address me like that? No one but my mother – God bless her soul – called me that.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jax had said. “Miro.” he’d quickly added. “How long have I been here?”

At first he’d though Miro wasn’t going to answer but finally he’d said, “Over a year. Not yet two. Not so long. I have had prisoners kept here for ten years before I executed them.”

Over a year, not yet two. That would make it sometime in 1996 now, since he was due to fly home in September 1994. Not a day had gone by that he did not wonder about his parents, siblings, Hayden and Jordan, wondering if they got back home safely. Not an hour went by without thoughts of Alex. Saving someone somewhere in the world except here, saving him.

“You can’t escape,” Montesinos said. “No one incarcerated here has escaped. Not since the hacienda was built in the sixteenth century. If you are smart - and I think you are - a wealthy, educated boy like you, you will adjust to your new life. Do not try to escape because your punishment will be severe. And,” he paused for effect, “You will be put in the latex suit again. I know your skin won’t like it, especially after you’ve been whipped. And your hood will go back on. So? What will it be? You decide.”

So he learned to be grateful. Very, very grateful. He now enjoyed a normal life, normal being allowed to see, to do his daily ablutions unattended, even if he was chained to the metal bar in the bathroom. Miro had had bars installed near the window in the library so that Jax could sit on the window seat but shackled to the bar. His collar was a thick black leather one, covered with gold filigree and gems – diamonds from Venezuela and emeralds from Colombia. “A gift from my late friend, Escobar,” Miro told him.

He’d asked Miro why he, and not his friends, was abducted. He was hoping not just to learn why he was chosen but Hayden’s and Jordan’s fate.

“Just your luck,” Montesinos had replied. “My men know what I like and when they spotted this chibolo, it was a piece of good luck for them because you are muy guapo and they know I will reward them well.”

“And my friend who was with me?”

“Ahhh…he, unfortunately, was killed. He got in the way, you see.”

“Martin is dead? Was there anyone else with me?”

“You are referring to your two friends? They are back in the US. They made a police report when
you did not return to your hotel but…you know how it is – our police are overworked and all they knew is that the man with you was killed. Your embassy made sure your friends flew out of Lima safely but as for you —” Montesinos had sighed dramatically and shrugged, “You are mine – for as long as I wish.”

During the week, when Miro went to the city, Jax would be allowed into the inner courtyard for half an hour each morning. The compound consisted of the main house, a chapel, the stables and staff quarters. He was still in chains and guarded, but at least there was sky overhead and at least he was naked, so for thirty glorious minutes his skin soaked up the sunshine. At least he could see birds flying past and, occasionally, the contrails of a jet overhead. When will I be on one of those? When will one of them take me home?

Today, after his morning stroll in the courtyard, he’d asked to be taken to the library. He would remain there until Miro returned. There were no telephones in the library or Miro’s bedroom, only intercom systems. Miro used a Nokia 8210 which, Miro had told him, had just been launched and that he was one of the few people in Peru who had one. Jax hadn’t bothered to tell him he’d had one before it was even released to the public.

Today, he’d been taken back to Montesinos’ bedroom some time after lunch because the library needed to be cleaned. Montesinos would be returning early tomorrow and that meant his suite of rooms needed to be cleaned with extra care and the floors disinfected the day before so there’d be enough time for the smell of the disinfectant to evaporate before his arrival.

After his dinner, served in the library since he wasn’t allowed out of Montesinos’ quarters, he settled down on the wide window seat which had served as his bed since he was brought here. There were no newspapers or magazines in the library. Just books – mainly literary fiction and politics and he’d been reading The Time of the Hero by Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas Llosa. He found his attention wandering, though. Most days, recently, anyway, he’d succeeded in not thinking about home as much he used to – which had been almost every waking minute. He’d dream he was home, that Alex was taking him hunting, or fishing, then he’d wake up incredulous at the reality of his situation, unable to believe he was really a prisoner in Peru, a sex slave with no hope of escape.

Where was Alex? Why hadn’t he come? Didn’t he know what had happened to him? Maybe not at the time since Alex was usually deployed overseas and home only a couple of days at a time. But it had been “not yet two years” according to Montesinos, which implied his captivity was close to two years. How could so much time go by without a rescue effort? He knew his parents would spare no effort to find him. And would spare no expense either. If there was anything the Therons had, it was money.

Yet he was still here, in the Peruvian boondocks with not even a dog for a companion. He’d become used to being Montesinos’ sex toy. And who the hell was Montesinos, anyway? Without tv or newspapers, he had no idea who his captor was. There were history books on the library shelves as well as biographies and books on the military and politics of South America but no mention of a Montesinos anywhere. He must have kept out any book that mentioned him, or tore out the pages, Jax surmised. Which meant he had to be someone important, not just wealthy, and didn't want Jax to know. Why the secrecy he didn't understand. Who the hell was he going to tell?

He was restless tonight, tossing and turning on the window seat for what seemed like hours. A wave of homesickness washed over him and he sat up. His ankle chains rattled and clinked. Rubbing his eyes, he peered through the open windows. The windows had decorative wrought-iron bars and were opened every day unless it rained, which had been rare since he was here. What time
was it? He wasn’t even allowed any clocks and told the time based on the shadows in the courtyard. He looked out and up at the sky. Astronomy had been a hobby of his so he estimated, based on the position of the Southern Cross, that it was around three in the morning. He heard the horses neighing in the stables at one end of the hacienda and he was sure he’d heard a soft buzz. He switched on the standing lamp next to the window seat and saw what it was – a bumblebee. Odd, to find one flying about at night. Occasionally, in the afternoon, one would fly in but just as quickly make its escape.

The one in his room, however, didn’t look like it was trying to find its way out. To his surprise, the bumblebee flew around the room then to him and hovered in front of his face. He reached out to touch it but it back away and zipped off faster than any bumblebee should. Weird.

A noise somewhere in the compound caught his attention and he scanned the darkened courtyard. Like all remote areas, the night was pitch black in a small town with little or no street lighting. The night sky over the hacienda was a thick sooty black, its sky awash with glittering diamonds but the courtyard was semi-lit by wall lamps from the walls around it. Across his window, the church tower was lit, as usual, the huge bell silhouetted against the soft golden glow.

He had to be dreaming because suddenly, at the other side of the courtyard, under the colonnade, two ninjas ran by. What was the hell? He sat up closer to peer out the window, all senses alert now. It couldn’t be the guards sneaking out of the staff quarters because they came and went freely anywhere in the compound except Montesinos’ private suite. He knew the guards often spent time in the maids’ rooms after dark and, when Montesinos was in Lima, they’d spend the night, boasting the next morning about how many times they did it. So it wouldn’t be any of the guards sneaking around at this time of the night.

Most haciendas are single story, spread out in a valley, but Montesinos’ hacienda had a second story added which he’d turned into his private quarters. There was a helipad on the rooftop, accessible by a spiral staircase in the library. There was nothing amiss that he could see but he instinctively felt something was happening. He stayed deadly still. From his peripheral vision he could see the bumble bee still hovering in the air. He turned his head to look at it. The insect seemed to stare back. There wasn’t a single sound other the whir of the bumblebee's wings. Even the crickets had stopped. Someone, more than one, was on the hacienda grounds who shouldn’t be there. He’d been listening to the night sounds for two months straight and was also familiar with the hacienda’s schedule of movements, especially when Montesinos wasn’t here. He knew when something was different. Even if he did imagine ninjas.

Then the lights went out. Not just the library’s but the entire hacienda. A power trip? It had happened before but the staff’s quarters were separate and would have some lighting, even at this hour. Yet it looked like the entire compound’s power had gone out. A few seconds later, the light in the library came back on but the rest of the compound remained in darkness. What the hell, Jax thought.

The door to the library opened suddenly and Juan, one of the two guards who were assigned to him 24/7, rushed in, shutting and locking it. Speaking in rapid Spanish, his tone urgent, he said, “Come with me. Now!” He unlocked the chains shackling Jax’s feet then released the chain tying him to the window bar.

“What is going on?” Jax asked in Spanish.

Juan pulled hard on the chain, jerking Jax forward. “Shut up and come!”
"What’s happening?" Jax asked but before he could get an answer the library door crashed open and men in tactical assault gear poured in. Juan didn’t even put up a fight, his hands going up instantly, holding his rifle aloft.

"US Special Operations,” the first man in full combat gear announced. “Jax Theron?” he asked, looking at Jax. More men poured in wearing NVGs and wielding assault weapons. Juan was disarmed and handcuffed as another man rushed in. “Jax! Thank God.” Alex pulled Jax to him, hugging him as close as his combat gear would allow. “Are you alright?”

Jax nodded, stunned. “Alex?”

“Yes, it’s me,” Alex said. “Two years late, but it’s me.”

“Take me home?” Jax asked in a whisper. Someone was cutting the collar off his neck then the chains shackling his ankles and someone else handed him a tee shirt and track pants.

“Come on, put your clothes on, and this,” Alex said handing him a kevlar vest.

“Sir,” someone called out at the doorway and Commander Winters turned. It was Mike Caletti. “There are other prisoners in the basement cells.”

“How many?” Winters asked.

“At last count, six and all of them are too weak to walk on their own. We’ll need the Medivac.”

“Call them.” A medivac had been put on standby in case Jax needed it so the medical personnel were ready to roll when the call came in. Winters turned to another man who was carrying a Sat phone.”Get Russell and pass on Caletti’s report. I want the entire compound covered. There are tunnels and hidden underground cells. Check every bloody nook and cranny."

"How are we for timing, exfil-wise?” Alex asked, ending the call with someone in DC.

“Two minutes and Shanahan says he’s a mile out.” Winters said. “Are we ready for them to roll in?” Shanahan was leading the troops from the joint US and Peruvian Forces, waiting for the green light to enter and secure the compound.

Winters took the Sat phone off one of the operatives and called the 2LT. “Shanahan, we’re good to go. Hostage is safe and –” he paused as the sound of the helicopter rotor got louder. He covered the mouthpiece and said to Alex, “Sounds like your ride is here. Go. My men and I will take it from here.”

“There is a vault here. Where is it?” Alex asked Juan in Spanish.

Juan shook his head vigorously, saying he didn’t know there was a vault here.

“Over there, th-that corner,” Jax said, pointing to the bookshelf. “The bookcase swings out.”

Winters had his men pulled open the bookcase to reveal the door to the vault.

“You wouldn’t know the combination, would you?” Alex asked hopefully.

Jax shook his head. “N-no. Sorry.” He started shaking as if he was freezing.

“It’s okay. We’re getting out of here.” Alex cupped Jax’s cheeks between his gloved hands. The boy was in shock, he guessed, not believing Alex was really here to rescue him.
“Go,” Winters said. “We’re going to blow the vault open and I want you and Jax out of here before I do that.” He looked at Jax. “Does that lead up to the roof?” He pointed at the spiral staircase.

Jax nodded. “T-the helipad is u-up there.” He turned back to Alex. “Y-you are really here? I’m not ha-hallucinating?”

“No, come on, up you go.” Alex pushed Jax up the staircase. Caletti and Wilder were halfway up on the roof.

“Shit.” Jax cussed under his breath as he stumbled on the third step.

Below him Winters was identifying himself to the Little Bird’s pilot. “Lewis, pick up our target from the roof. There’s a helipad. Target on the way up. Take Knight and his team to Chavez International and deliver them to Morey.”

Lewis already knew all this, of course, since they’d gone over the game plan several times before heading out. “If there’s a helipad on the roof then there should be guide lights. Get them switched on, if you can,” Lewis said. “I can still land without them, though. There’ll be reflectors.”

Winters had ordered a blackout earlier on with the exception of the library. Now, he barked into his comms unit for the power in the main building to be put back on.

“Light switch,” Jax said to Alex. “Tell him there’s a switch on the wall behind the staircase. It lights up the helipad.”

Someone flicked the switch and Winters’ comms unit crackled again. “Ye-ess!” the Little Bird’s pilot said as the circular lighting marking the landing spot lit up. Helipad is visible. I see you. Repeat. I see you. Hey, guys. Wave.”

Winters gave Alex a thumbs up as the latter stood on the last step to the rooftop.

“Thanks,” Alex said. “I guess I’ll know if you find the tapes.”

“Watch the news.”

The whup-whup sounds of the Little Bird told them it was almost directly above and Alex disappeared from Winter’s view. Wilder and Caletti were already at the top with Jax when Alex emerged. A burst of gunfire told them the rest of the guards had finally caught on to what was happening.

Alex saw Gibbs taking aim from the Little Bird as it was coming in to land. Gibbs fired down into the inner courtyard as the helo came in to land. Someone else was firing from the chapel’s bell tower which was slightly higher than the helipad. Since the bell tower was lit up, it wasn’t hard to spot the shooter from the helo but Gibbs had to wait for him to come out from behind the pillar.

There. The man’s head appeared and exploded a second later as Gibbs’ round hit home. As he covered for them, Alex, Jax, and the two men dashed towards the helo.

Lewis banked the helo to the right, towards the main entrance of the hacienda but couldn’t land as there was a large fountain and trees planted too close together. Several parked cars, jeeps and trucks left little room for the helo to land. The rest of the compound was taken up by the stables, staff quarters and an Olympic-size swimming pool with a row of cabanas. He had no choice but to head further down the driveway towards the gated entrance. That, at least, was clear even though trees lined the paved road on both sides. Tricky, but Lewis had landed Little Birds on urban streets enough times to make the hacienda’s tree-lined driveway a piece of cake. All they needed now was
for the rest of Knight’s team to get out of the building and Little Bird would get them out of here.

“Let’s get out of here!” Alex told Lewis as he, Jax, Caletti and Wilder clambered on board.


“We’ll pick them up outside,” Alex said, and told McCaffrey where they’d be picked up. “They’re releasing the rest of the prisoners. Winters’ men will take over from here.

“Where the hell are they?” Gibbs growled, scanning the darkened grounds. The blast that followed his words told them Winters had gotten the vault open. They had to leave. Now.

“There they are,” Caletti pointed at the courtyard below. They saw some women and men running from one building to another but as they were unarmed, they had to be the household staff. Another man ran out onto the rooftop, firing at the helo. Gibbs took him out with a single shot but more men were running out into the courtyard and firing at the helo as they chased after McCaffrey and the other two.

Damn, Alex thought. There were a helluva lot more guards than they thought. At least the blast meant Winters was on schedule and doing okay and the flashes of fire from the helo overhead told him Gibbs was giving Montesinos’ men a run for their money. McCaffrey, Montero and Cipriani ran down the driveway where the helo was making its landing, returning fire as they went.

The three men leapt onto the outboard benches and the Little Bird lifted off.

Across the main road, lights were coming on in some of the houses but the residents were clearly survival-savvy and remained inside their homes. As the helo sped away, Alex took his arm off Jax and contacted Winter.

Gibbs noticed Jax was shivering even though the night wasn’t cold and he was wearing a kevlar. He went to Jax’s side and pulled him close. “You’re safe now, Jax. We got ya and we’ll be with you all the way until we get you home.” Instead of pulling away as Gibbs expected a boy would do if hugged by a stranger, Jax nestled closer and put his arms around Gibbs, burying his face in Gibbs neck, his breaths coming in short gasps. Gibbs stroked Jax’s head, making soothing sounds until Jax lightened his grip.

“A-alex?” Jax said in a small voice. "Where's Alex?"

“He’s still on the phone,” Gibbs replied. “But he’s here. My name’s Jethro. Jethro Gibbs and I’ve been friends with Alex for some years already. He’s told me a lot about you.”

Jax merely nodded and went back to hiding his face in the crook of Gibbs’ shoulder. He was oddly calmed not just by the sound of Jethro’s voice but by his scent. An old-fashioned fragrance that reminded him of his grandfather. He knew Jethro wasn’t old, maybe Alex’s age, but there was something about him that made Jax feel safe. Like a twin of Alex. He couldn’t quite make out Jethro’s features in the darkened interior of the helo but what little he could see, told him Jethro Gibbs was a very good-looking guy. Almost pretty. But it was dark and he could be wrong. Right now, everyone of his rescuers were beautiful. He decided he’d close his eyes for a bit. Jethro’s arm went around him and held him tightly and Jax relaxed under the comforting grip.

“Cargo is safe and in the air,” Alex told the commander. “What’s your sitrep?”

“Jackpot, man. Fucking jackpot. Found the smoking gun, believe or not!”

“The one of Montesinos paying Carter?”
“Yup. Have relayed it to Washington. That’s not all. Get outta there, Knight. Montesinos and President, or should I say, soon-to-be-ex President Fujimori are about to be taken into custody. Washington wants you out of Peru before that happens. The rest of my men are rolling in with the Peruvian forces and we’ll hand the hacienda and its contents over to the Peruvian military.”

“The tapes, too?”

“We’re making copies as we speak. There are thousands of them in these damn tunnels in the wall, all labelled. Date, place and content summary. Looks like Rasputin sits in his library cataloguing them one by one. By hand. Geez. Okay, gotta go. Military’s at the front gates. Let’s grab a beer back home, Knight.”

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Washington, DC

Back in the US, Alex faced a barrage of interviews and meetings with the brass. With the tapes of Montesinos bribing not only the Director of the CIA but State Department officials as well, to say a veritable shit storm had been unleashed was an understatement.

While he was whisked away to the Pentagon upon disembarking the Theron jet, Jax had been flown to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore on a helicopter. The fallout from the discovery of the tapes was something Alex was content to leave to the powers-that-be. He had been taken to the White House after the grilling by the brass at Pentagon and the upshot of it was the plans for KnightShade was now escalated. POTUS wanted the transfer of Theron-Knight Atomics’ classified projects to be transferred to the new organization. Which projects, specifically, would be determined within the next few days. Alex foresaw his spending longer in DC than he wanted.

“Get KnightShade off the ground,” James W. Challenger, the three-day old President of the United States, said towards the conclusion of their meeting. “Lieutenant General Callahan will be liaising with you and will let you know the financing details and what contracts KnightShade will be handling as soon as it’s ready.”

So, KnightShade’s going to be another Halliburton. Alex wasn’t too keen on that. “What role, exactly, will you have in KnightShade, General? Alex asked.

The President answered instead, “That, and other details, can be discussed another time together with your father and Justin Theron.”

“Andrew has submitted the newly-registered company’s documents,” General Callahan told Alex. “So the DoD will be dealing with KnightShade Inc from now on. Theron-Knight Atomics will continue to develop the standard military armament and all top-secret projects currently under Theron-Knight Skunkwerkz will now be transferred to KnightShade Skunkwerkz. We understand from your father that you will be taking over as CEO.”

“Not for another couple of years,” Alex replied. “I still need to work out some things.”

“I know what you’re concerned about, Alex,” President Challenger said, sitting forward. “You’re afraid the government will be running your baby. Let me reassure you on that score – and what I’m about to say can be incorporated into the contract – you have my word that KnightShade will be run by you and the people you bring on board.”

That was good news. So was the surety of multi-million-dollar contracts. There was the other side, of course, and he’d have to stand firm and be ready to walk away if it was not to his liking. But in
the short time he'd been with the new President, Alex was heartened to see Challenger was a man of his word. For now, anyway, and that had to be good enough these days when most men's lasted only until the next crisis or political opportunity came along.

He needed to get back to Jax, he thought. "In that case, Mr. President, I look forward to getting KnightShade off the ground. If there's nothing else, may I be excused? I need to return to San Francisco."
Theron Residence:

San Francisco

“I’m worried about him, Alex,” Katharine said, her quiet voice filled with anxiety for her oldest son.

“Where is he?” Alex asked, as they walked to the lounge. He’d flown over from DC as soon as he could get away and then straight to the Theron residence.

“In the study, with Dr. Cohen. They should be finishing soon. Alex, he still refuses to wear clothes! That’s…that’s –” words failed Katharine and she looked at Alex helplessly. If those reporters out there catch a glimpse of him, or worse, get a picture…”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll take care of it.”

“Both Justin and your father are unlikely to make it back for the next two weeks. Those tapes are turning the Pentagon upside down and the press is driving us up the wall. They’ve been camping out on the road since Jax got back!”

“They’re still out there,” Alex said. “Security’s keeping them out. It’s okay.”

“How did you manage to get him to put on clothes for the trip home?”

“With great difficulty. In the end I told him it was a simple choice of putting on his clothes and going home or stay naked and remain in Peru.”

Katharine laughed. “He took them off as soon as he entered the house! Gave us all quite a shock. Not just his nakedness but the bruises and scars.” She suddenly covered her face with her hands and stifled a sob. “Oh God…my baby. He was beaten and…and burnt, Alex. Burnt! He’s got scars all over his body but he doesn’t care. He still insists on staying nude. Why? Why has he developed an aversion to clothes?”

“Leave that to Dr. Cohen. The trauma Jax has been through the last two years is bound to manifest itself in ways we’ve not seen in him before.”

“Dr. Cohen assured me he isn’t as bad as some of her patients and is expecting a full recovery from
him sooner than is usual.”

“She told me that, too, so if wanting to go au naturel is what he wants, let him. It could be his way of coping for now.” Alex didn’t want to tell her that Montesinos had made her son wear a latex suit. Not one you got into and zipped up like a diver’s but liquid latex, popular amongst the BDSM crowd. In Jax’s case, the latex was painted over his scabs and wounds then ripped off.

“Well, it’s not possible for him to remain naked. Dr. Cohen said it’s uncertain how long Jax will feel the need to go au naturel as you say. Already, Stanford’s out of the question. Jax is adamant about not going to college. Not yet, that is, but –”

“I’m taking him away for a while,” Alex said suddenly, cutting Katharine off.

“Oh.” Katharine’s surprise drew her brows together. “For how long?”

“Until the papparazzi have fresh prey to chase after.”

“But his therapy –”

“I’ve already spoken to Dr. Cohen. She thinks it’s a good idea. She said she’ll follow up with Jax via video conference daily and, if necessary, she will arrange to fly over.”

“She will?”

“Dr. Cohen is the head of Theron-Knight’s Health Sciences division. She can see her clients anywhere in the world if she so chooses.”

“But how can you take the time off? Justin was saying to me that you’ll be tied up with your new organization. Surely you’ll be required to be in San Diego since that’s where it’ll be based.”

“My father will handle the first phase which I’m not needed for. Whatever we need to discuss can be done via video conferencing.”

“Oh, of course. I forgot your residences are set up to run a country, if needed. Well, take care of him, Alex. He’s no longer a child. Certainly not the one you last saw before – before this happened.”

“No, he isn’t but don’t worry too much. Dr. Cohen has told me what to expect.” He may have been warned what to expect but was he ready for it? Naturally, he did not give voice to his own uncertainty.

“Where are you taking him?”

“Home to Ke Kaona.”

Ke Kaona meant The Hidden Meaning. It was Alex’s private estate on the island of Kauai. The Knights had owned Kauai since the 18th century, when the family name had been Sparapet - sparapet being an ancient Armenian word which meant Knight in English.

Sometime in the long ago, Anastas Sparapet left his homeland in landlocked Armenia and ended up in joining the Portuguese explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, in the first voyage around the world. From
there, Anastas ended up in England and became captain of a trading ship that plied England and the New World. After several years in the Caribbean, Anastas went in search of new adventure by crossing over to the Pacific. He never returned to England, having fallen in love with the Hawaiian islands and its people, and the Sparapets became the first permanent non-Pacific Islander colony on the Hawaiian islands. One brother, who had remained in Armenia, eventually left to settle in California to escape the Hammidian Massacre of 1894-1896 and began the Knight branch of the family when the Sparapet name was Anglicized to Knight.

Meanwhile, in Hawaii, the Sparapet branch of the family not only supported Kalani Pai‘ea Wohi o Kaleikini Kealiʻikui Kamehameha o ‘Iolani i Kaiwikapu kauʻi Ka Liholiho Kūnuiākea – better known as Kamehameha the Great – to establish his sovereignty over the islands in the 18th century but Antranig Sparapet, the head of the family (and Alex’s great-grandfather with a few more ‘great’s prefixing it) saved Kamehameha’s life by drinking the poison meant for the king. Whether it was by accident or not, the Sparapets perpetuated the story that Antranig had found out about the assassination plot at the last minute. Rather than exposing the plot and culprit (an opposing chief who was the guest of honor) and risk an all-out battle for which they were unprepared for, Antranig drank the poison meant for Kamehameha.

However farfetched the story may be today, at the time it was declared an act of ultimate loyalty by Kamehameha and he made Antranig, who’d survived the poisoning, a blood brother. Since Antranig, his family and crew, had settled on the island of Kauai, developing the land and prospering the local populace and not just themselves, Kamehameha the Great gave the island to the Knight family as a gesture of honor for what Antranig did.

All was well and the Sparapet family and descendants of the crew ruled the island independently until the US’ annexation of the islands in 1898. After going back and forth between the US government and the Sparapets, the two parties came to an agreement – the Hawaiian islands would be annexed, including Kauai but the island would remain the property of the Sparapet family except for 10% which would belong to the US government.

That ten percent is, today, the Barking Sands Missile Range. The Kauai Sparapets, who had changed their family name to Knight following their Californian kin, continued to govern Kauai in much the same way as any landowner on the mainland. Since the Knights owned the island, they had total control over who set up shop there. As had always been the case in Hawaii, all beaches on Kauai were open to the public with the exception of the stretch which bordered the Ke Kaona Estate. Land was not sold but leased to developers and its residents shared the island with the likes of Raytheon, Northrup-Grumman and Theron-Knight Atomics.

It was to this Kauai, still a lush, magical tropical paradise, that Alexander Tobias Knight brought Jaxon Justin Theron.

Ke’ Kaona Estate

Anini Beach, Kauai

“It’s okay if I go to the beach?” Jax asked as Kai, the houseboy, carried the bags in.

“Sure. There’s a trail that’ll take you there,” Alex said.

“You want me to come back tomorrow, sir?” Kai asked. “I should just stay and make sure you and
Jax have everything.”

“We have everything and no, you don’t have to come back tomorrow. I told you to take a
vacation.”

“But, sir, what about your food? I can prepare your meals then leave each day.” Alex’s look had
the young man backtracking. “But Lani has stocked up so you have everything you need to cook
yourself and I am on standby, of course. I will go now, Kahuna.” He threw Alex a grin and hopped
into the jeep. His cheery face scrunched into a puzzled frown as he left the estate, giving the
security guard a wave. When the boss brought guests home to stay, Kai would have informed the
rest of the house crew – fresh flowers would be in every room and Akamu, the cook, would have
been notified of the duration of Mr. Knight’s stay and the number of guests. He would ensure
everything he needed to prepare the meals would be fresh and available, and the boss’ favorite
USDA steaks flown in. If there was more than two guests, Mr. Knight would usually request for
lechon, the Filipino whole roast pig which Kai had been taught by his cousin, Bong, to grill to
perfection.

But this time the boss was going to do the cooking? Kai lived on the estate, as did the rest of the
full time staff. He, not Akamu, prepared the boss’ breakfast and was generally at his beck and call.
This would be the first time Mr. Knight gave orders that he and his guest were not to be disturbed.
No one was to come to the house without prior approval by the Kahuna, not even the maids who
did the daily cleaning.

Why? Kai couldn’t help speculating.

Alex’s Ke Kaona estate encompassed a stretch of Anini Road where two ridges of the hills sloped
sharply down to coast. Between the two ridges was a small beach, one of the numerous that dotted
the entire Anini Road. Except for this stretch, the Anini Road hugged the northern coastline from
Kalihiwai in the east to the Princeville Golf Resort on the western end of the beach. Alex had gone
to considerable expense to build his private residence here as the road needed to cut through the
hill.

The thatch roofs in the estate were made of Hawaiian pili grass and the living and dining hales
were situated on the western hill slope, designed such that they overlooked the crystal-clear waters
and rocks. On the upper level was the master suite. Further up the beach was the beachfront
guesthouse with several suites, each with its own balcony and kitchenette and connected to the
main residence by a covered walkway where the red lanterns of New Guinea Creeper hung down
and a pair of hummingbirds that came daily to drink the nectar. The estate's guests had a choice of
dining in their suite, the guesthouse's dining room or in the main residence.

The framework of the houses were steel-reinforced timber in order to withstand the hurricanes, as
they did when Hurricane Iniki battered Hawaii in 1992. Alex had been deployed in the Middle-East
at the time but his father had been at home when the storm, the most powerful to strike Hawaii in
recorded history, had hit Kauai at peak intensity. There had been some damage to the beach and the
surrounding park land but otherwise, the residences in the estate had come through unscathed.

Alex watched Jax walk to the edge of the lanai and down the steps to the beach. He followed and
smiled when the boy stripped off his clothes and entered the water. The therapy sessions with Dr.
Cohen had yielded results – Jax had acquiesced to the need to be clothed when he went out in
public.

Since there was no access to the little beach except from the house, there was no danger of the
public inadvertently wandering onto it. It was the same with the guesthouse – the beach fronting it was private. From thereon, though, Anini Beach was open to the public and popular with families because the reef, which was longest and widest fringing reef in the Hawaiian Islands, kept the water calm and clear for snorkeling and swimming.

Shower and toilet facilities were available and a beachfront bar and café, owned and operated by Kai’s parents and his sisters, kept the sunbathers and swimmers properly hydrated and fed.

Alex sat on the steps of the lanai watching Jax, his mind wandering to what Dr. Cohen had warned him – that Jax would try to persuade him into having sex. When Alex’s eyes had widened in alarm, Dr. Cohen had quickly added, “I’m not suggesting that you do. Just preparing you. He told me he kept his spirits up by thinking of you and mentally willing you to rescue him. He also said you’re his hero, from the time he was a kid until now and that he would love you his whole life.”

“I hope you told him the truth – that I’m far from hero material,” Alex had told the therapist.

“Oh, I did and he’s well aware you do fall short somewhat. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have made him wait two years before you came for him.”

“And what am I supposed to do when he wants sex?”

“That’s up to you. I’m not suggesting you give in to his demands or cajoling. Unless the attraction is mutual. If you do decide to have sex with him, listen to him. Let him set the pace.”

“Thank you but sex is not going to be part of his therapy,” Alex said bluntly.

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Two Weeks Later

Alex was thinking his idea of this little escapade for Jax was a brilliant one until he heard a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said. The door opened and Jax stood on the threshold, his silhouette filling the doorway. Alex switched on the bedside lamp. “What is it?”

Jax didn’t reply but went straight to Alex’s side. Outside, the waves lapped gently at the rocks and the moonlight rippled across the ocean. Silently, Jax got into bed, next to Alex. “Tomorrow’s our last day here,” he said.

“Yes. Did you have a good time? I know you had physiotherapy everyday and the video sessions with Dr. Cohen but –”

“My legs are stronger and I’ll be able to go to Theron-Knight for the skin replacement and rejuvenation sessions. The docs say my scars will fade in time and with the treatment they have, they’ll be practically unnoticeable in a couple of years.

“I know, they told me.” Alex glanced over, wondering why Jax was in his bed. Or maybe he didn’t want to know.

“I want you to fuck me,” Jax said quietly. He felt Alex tense up beside him so he added, “I know what I’m doing, Alex.” When silence met those words, he persisted, his voice serious but soft. Not insistent, merely sure and determined.

“Jax –” Alex began, only to be silenced by Jax’s fingers on his lips.
“Hear me out first.”

“Okay,” came Alex’s nervous response. Nothing in his training prepared him for this. As an undercover operative, he’d fucked both men and women, got what he came for then left them with a bullet between the eyes, if necessary; he’d fucked and killed without compunction. But this man, no this boy – he felt powerless against. If there was anyone on earth who could make him feel so much, want so deeply, it was Jax Theron. But after his abduction, the last thing he wanted to do was fuck him. Not when he was in this vulnerable state and not a boy fifteen years his junior, though if he were honest, the age gap didn’t bother him.

“Montesinos beat and battered my body, tortured me till I was a screaming, drooling lunatic,” Jax said. “When he was in one of his moods – maybe something irked him at work or one of the servants - he’d take out his frustrations on me. He’d order his guards to fuck me. Ten, fifteen, more sometimes. He’d eat ceviche, wash it down with a chilled chablis and watch me getting fucked. That’s what sex is to me, Alex – being treated like a circus animal. All I’m asking of you is that you show me what good sex is, what being loved sexually, should be like.” He rose and positioned himself over Alex, lips touching. “Just this once. I won’t ask for more. Just give me one night to remember, to replace those bad memories with good ones.”

How was he to say no to that? With a soft groan, he pulled Jax’s head down so their mouths came together; lips parting, tongues clashing and sliding; hungry moans fighting with desperate hands that clawed at skin and flesh.

It was rough; frantic; a jumble of inarticulate sounds trying to convey the desire that consumed them. Somehow, Alex found the wherewithal from his scattered wits to find the tube of lube in his bedside drawer and a condom. Did Jax want to be fucked or had Montesinos turned him into a permanent top? Just let him take the lead, came Dr. Cohen's words.

“Make love to me, Alex.” Well, there was his answer. “And you can put the condom away if you’d rather bareback me. You saw my test results?”

“Yes. I know you’re clean.”

Jax gave a huff. “Thank God, but Montesinos was careful. Once he saw I was clean, he barebacked me but made his men wear condoms and still had me tested every three months. That was how I gauged how long I’d been incarcerated – by those quarterly tests.”

“Would you rather I wear a condom?”

“No. I want only you,” Jax whispered. “I don’t want for Montesinos to have more of me than you can. I have to give you more. It’s the only way I can keep something of myself, if that makes sense to you.”

“It does,” Alex said. “Give me everything and anything and tell me if you want me to stop doing something.” He positioned himself on top of Jax, kissing his lips, nose, eyelids…every part of his face, doing it with a reverent gentleness and when he parted Jax’s lips once again, he allowed their kiss to take its time, to express the love he felt for this boy.

His hands and lips roamed over Jax’s body, felt the ridges of skin and flesh that told their story. Eventually, the scars would fade, the puckered flesh made smooth again, but right now, tonight, Alex would cover them with love.

And he loved the young boy beneath him. Loved every inch. When his breath fanned Jax’s anus and heard him suck in a raw, ragged breath, Alex calmed him with gentle words followed by
loving licks and laps across the puckered hole. He breathed Jax’s scent into own being, breathed in deep, long breaths then entered him with his tongue, his strong fingers opening the boy up. He tongue-fucked Jax until the latter was incoherent.

“Say my name,” Alex ordered. Jax complied. “Again. Tell me you want me to fuck you. Tell the moon, the ocean, the stars…say it!”

“Alex. I want you to fuck me, Alex. I want you inside me, on me, all over me.”

Again and again Jax begged Alex to fuck him. Again and again he was made to say Alex’s name, to articulate what he wanted Alex to do. Until finally, Alex was inside him in one long, smooth stroke; burying that hard, thick cock inside him. Piercing his body.

His heart.

His soul.

It was making love, for sure, because no one would be able to deny the love that bound the two men, one on the cusp of adulthood, the other already old beyond his thirty-one years. It was also sex, raw, unbridled passion and yearning. A yearning that went deeper than anything either man had ever known.

With each stroke, Alex felt himself being sucked deeper into Jax than mere sex made possible. With each thrust of his pelvis, Jax gave himself over to Alex totally and irretrievably.

Yet when morning broke and the sunlight streamed through the windows, both men knew it would be a long time before they tasted each other’s love again.

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This ends Jax’s rescue arc. Next chapter will take us five years later to 2001, when Gibbs meets Tony DiNozzo for the first time.
Chapter Summary

We move forward five year later, into 2001, and follow Gibbs’ & Tony's thread.

Gino Paoli's lyrics would describe Gibbs' and Tony's post-coital haze:

When you are here near me
this purple ceiling
doesn’t exist anymore…

I see the sky above us
who remain here, abandoned
as if, if there were nothing else,
nothing else in the world.

We get the purple ceiling here, at the start of Tibbs' hookup but the "sky above us"
Tony will get only in ACT 3, fifteen years later.

**Five Years Later:**

**Baltimore; MD**

**Friday, July 2001**

Damn, it was hot, Gibbs muttered as he wiped the sweat off his brow. The heatwave had been blistering in DC and was no better here in Baltimore. He’d wrapped up his investigation into the Marine lieutenant’s death and planned to get back to DC immediately after he finished the report but his stomach gave a loud growl, reminding him it hadn’t been fed since last night, just drowned in coffee. So he drove to a restaurant downtown and quietened the beast with a late lunch. He was heading for his car when he walked past a bar. A couple of men came out and the blast of cold air as the doors were pushed open was so welcome he decided to go inside for a cold drink.

It was busy despite it being four pm on a Friday but there'd always be people wanting to wind down the work week early. He ordered a beer, downed half of it in a couple of long swallows then ordered a Club Soda with lime. Enjoying the cool air he thought back to his meeting with Director Morrow two days ago.

“I want you to form a separate unit - a major crimes response team - and lead it,” the Director had said. “It’s no longer efficacious to have just you borrowing agents from the other teams. SecNav
also wants you on MTAC more often. After the attack on the USS Cole, he wants us ready to assess any other threat facing us anywhere around the globe. So you need more special agents, and ones capable of holding their own when you’re tied up with MTAC. Needless to say, this is a promotion, Gibbs. You have two weeks vacation. I want you to take it but come back with with a plan to implement immediately.”

“Why have me go on vacation if you want it done immediately?” he’d asked Morrow. It wasn't as if they didn't have a team that worked on violent and major crimes. They just weren't permanent members. Gibbs, being a senior special agent tasked with investigating such crimes, formed a team from whatever special agents were available when he caught a case. So he wasn't against having a dedicated major crimes investigation team. He was complaining about going on vacation when he'd rather start forming his team right now.

“Because you won’t go on vacation otherwise,” the Director had retorted. “Take your vacation then you get your team. Once you get the MCRT started, you’ll be superglued to the office. Despite what your impressive track record says, you’re still human. I don’t want the Major Crimes Unit starting with a burn-out special agent and MTAC unattended. I’ve got that covered for now but not for long. As I said, SecNav wants MTAC fully-manned and MCRT agents available for Joint Taskforce assignments when they come up.”

So here he was, about to drive back to DC and no idea what he’d do for two weeks apart from working out a plan – which he’d already started before Morrow even brought it up. He didn’t need to be told MTAC needed to be beefed up. NCIS had been first on the scene when the USS Cole was attacked while it was being refueled at Aden, Yemen’s port city nine months ago. Following the attack and his report combined with Stan Burley’s, ATAC was upgraded and augmented by technology not available at the time of the attack, then renamed MTAC. Based on his report and Stan Burley’s proposal for a technology upgrade if NCIS were to be able to assess future threats effectively and timely, Gibbs had gotten in touch with Alex Knight and sought his assistance to bring MTAC into the 21st century. With his aversion to anything high-tech, it meant hiring someone with that expertise would have to be a priority. If Morrow okayed his expansion proposal he’d start interviewing and hiring as soon as he returned from vacation.

He liked living in DC but he hated the summer heat. He supposed he could fly up to Alaska. He’d never been there. At least it would be cool, even in summer. The door opened and more people came in. Someone came up to the bar and ordered a lemonade. With an extra glass of ice. That had Gibbs turning to look at the customer.

Gibbs nearly did a double take but caught himself in time. The guy was young, late twenties probably, and good-looking enough to be a Hollywood leading man. Tall, too. Taller than him by a couple of inches, at least.

The man sat down at the bar and drained a third of his lemonade, added more ice, then finished that. He ordered another and did the same thing. Wiping his lips with the paper napkin provided by the bartender, he then ordered a martini. “Shaken, of course,” he added in a James Bond Sean Connery voice, then turned to Gibbs. “Heya. Hot enough to fry eggs on the pavement out there.”

“In a couple of months we’ll complaining about the cold,” Gibbs responded. “Work week over, huh?”

“Yu-up, and not a minute sooner. How about you?”

“On my way back to DC.”

“I’m Tony.”
“Jethro.” Gibbs took Tony's outstretched hand.

“Come here often?” Tony asked.

“Baltimore? Often enough.”

“I meant this bar. This particular bar out of all the other bars in Baltimore.”

“No, my first time. Why? Something special with this bar?”

Tony paused slightly then gave Gibbs a quick once-over. “It’s a gay bar. You did know that, didn’t you?”

This time it was Gibbs who paused. “Uh, no. No, I didn’t.” He looked around but saw nothing out of the ordinary. There were some women but mostly men and none of the latter were doing anything that could be construed as gay. “How do you know? And why do you see the need to tell me? Don’t misunderstand – I have no problem with gays.” Just with me...being one of them.

“Whatever floats your boat.”

“I know because it’s a favorite watering hole and pick-up joint for the gay community...and you don’t look gay. Then again, my gaydar’s never been reliable.”

“Wouldn’t be able to tell. The bar, I mean. Looks like any other bar to me.”

“It’s early. Things don’t start getting interesting till nine or ten. Of course, this being the eve of the Memorial weekend, give it another couple of hours and you’ll be spoilt for choice.”

God, that grin was hot enough to melt his insides. Gibbs coughed. “And you come here often?”

“Not as often as I would like. Being single and all...but I’m glad I came today.”

“Why?” Gibbs asked, his throat suddenly dry.

“Because I’d like to take you to bed right now. That’s part of why I saw the need to check if you knew this is a gay bar.”

Tony waited out the silence.

All I need to do is to say no. Gibbs fixed his eyes on Tony’s mouth and said, “Took the words right out of my mouth.”

Gibbs never made it back to DC that day. He didn’t make it back on Saturday, or on Sunday either.

“Hooh!” Tony blew out a breath. “You’ve fucked me out. Not complaining. Complimenting. For someone who’s never done this before, you’re good.”

Gibbs grinned, reddening, and pulled Tony to him to cover up his embarrassment. He kissed those irresistible lips, cupping the young man’s tight ass with his hands, the roughened skin catching on the fine hairs as he stroked down Tony’s thighs.

“I’m serious,” Tony said. “Okay so you were a little shy at first. I guess no one’s ever stared you in the asshole before, huh?”

“I’ve got to get moving,” Gibbs murmured against Tony’s mouth, his face still flaming at the
memory of Tony’s tongue piercing him. He’d almost leapt off the bed and had to be calmed down. But Tony was a surprisingly patient lover, never once making fun of his being an ass virgin.

“It’s Sunday. What’s the hurry? Hectic week ahead?” Tony said.

“Nah. My boss forced me to take my leave. It was stacking up over too many years so I’ve got two weeks to kill. He also gave me work to do so I want to get started.”

“Ahh. A workaholic.”

There was a short silence as both men stared up at the ceiling.

“You meet a lot of men in that bar?” Gibbs asked.

“Enough. You? Should have some great opportunities in DC.”

“Nah. I’m not exactly into that – picking guys up.”

“Attached, are you?”

“No. Not anymore. My divorce was final a week ago.”

Tony didn’t have to ask whether it was a wife or husband. He’d met, and picked up, countless men over the years and most of them had turned out to be either married, or in a relationship. To women.

“Came out to the little woman, did you?”

“No. She just couldn’t live with an ornery bastard like me. Not for the rest of her life. Her exact words.”

There was no bitterness in his voice, Tony thought. Just resignation. “Then you should be celebrating. She’s now free to find an ordinary bastard and you don’t have to pretend anymore.”

Gibbs cupped the back of Tony’s head and brought him in for a long kiss. “Instead of yakking, how about one more for the road?”

Gibbs decided he could delay his drive back to DC since both he and Tony seemed to be unable to get enough of each other. Both knew it was just sex – what else could it be since they didn’t even know each other long enough to be called acquaintances – but both knew, without articulating it, that it would be a long time before they ever met another person as sexually-compatible as they were.

Now, both were spent. Both laying on their backs, waiting for their breathing to normalize.

“Why is your ceiling purple?” Gibbs suddenly asked.

Tony chuckled softly. “Was already like that when we rented the place. My housemate is paying a larger share of the rent so he got the master bedroom. This must have been their weirdo teenage daughter’s room. I was going to paint it back to white but never got round to it. You know what I’ve always wanted, though?”

“What?”
“To see the sky from my bed. Like sleeping under the stars, except I hate camping. I hate the grass poking into my back and the creepy crawlies. When I was a kid, I used to daydream I was on a boat and the cabin’s ceiling could be opened up so the sky filled the room. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah. Sure beats a purple ceiling.”

More silence after that.

“Jethro,” Tony said quietly after a while.

“Hmm?”

“I just left my job. Friday was my last day.” When Gibbs didn’t say anything to that, Tony continued, “How about we extend this? You said you had two weeks leave on your hands. How about we spend it together. Just you and me, like we are now. Eat, fuck, sleep a little…fuck again. You can do your work when you need to catch your breath and I can just watch movies until little Jethro – well, not-so-little Jethro – is ready for another round.” When Gibbs didn’t respond, he added in a rush, “It was just an idea. I understand if you’d rather not.” He clambered off the bed. "Shower."
Tony was just about to shut off the water when he heard the bathroom door open.

“I can spend my vacation with you.” Gibbs stood next to the bathtub, speaking from the other side of the shower curtain.

Yesss! Tony pumped a fist.

“But I have rules.”

“O-ka-ay…” Tony shut off the water and drew the curtain but remained standing in the bathtub.

“No personal questions. By that I mean no questions about where we work, where we live and no last names.”

“You mean Jethro is your real first name?”

“Is Tony?” Gibbs countered.

“Uh-unh.” Tony wagged a finger. “No personal questions. By ‘personal’ I take it to mean nothing that can identify you – or me – should one of us turn out to be crazed stalker.”

“You didn’t have to put that in my head,” Gibbs muttered.

“Oops. Sorry. Any other rules?”

“I’m not out and have no intention of coming out. My private life is no one’s business but mine.”

“Coming out is always the prerogative of the gay person,” Tony agreed. “No one has the right to out another. Number One gay rule. I’m not exactly in the closet but I don’t go around telling people I’m gay. At work, I avoid conversations that might get me into trouble. So no worries that I might out you – even accidentally – should we ever run into each other after the two weeks are over.”

“This is just sex. Just no commitments, no expectations.”

“Ooh, you romantic, you.” Tony batted his eyelashes at Gibbs.

“If we ever run into each other again and we’re not alone, this weekend and the next two weeks Never Happened.” Gibbs said, his tone blunt and peremptory.

“What happens if we happen to be alone? Or run into each other in another gay bar? Or the same gay bar as Friday?” Tony asked, now wondering if spending the next fourteen days with this anal, closeted stranger was a good idea after all. “Repeat performance?”

For a minute Gibbs was caught off guard. It didn’t occur him they would run into each other again though why they shouldn’t he couldn’t say. “Maybe. I don’t know but I just want to make it clear that this me,” he tapped his chest with his finger, “you’re getting is just for now; for these two
weeks ahead. After that, we go back to our individual lives. So, you agreeable? If so, get out of the bathtub. It’s my turn. My dick is crusted over with cum.”

Tony stepped out of the tub, giving Gibbs an eye roll, and reached for a towel. “You may not have taken the words right out of my mouth but the message is not only clear, I have no quarrel with it. What we have now is all we get. Got it.”

“Any idea where we can go for the next two weeks?” Gibbs asked. “I need to get away from this heat.”

“Actually, I had that very idea and booked a room at the Timberline Lodge in Mount Hood last month. We were going in a group of four but two of them dropped out because they broke up and the third caught measles. So I decided to keep the booking and just go on my own.”

“Mount Hood in Oregon?”

“Only one Mount Hood. So you game? You want to get away from the heat, Mount Hood will do that and give you clear skies. Plus, the room has a king-size bed, which is better any time than this queen.”

“Okay, you can make the flight booking for me? When were you planning to leave?”

“My flight’s booked for Tuesday, out of Baltimore Airport.”

“You need my credit card?” Gibbs asked, not quite comfortable with handing it over to someone he just met.

“Let me get a seat first and you can give me the numbers at checkout.”

“Okay. Get that done then I’ll drive back to DC, pack a bag and be back here either tomorrow or Tuesday, depending on the flight schedule.”

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Oregon

They spent the first few days exploring Portland which neither man had been to. On the third day, they made the hour-long drive to Timberline Lodge.


“Nope. if it’s not a western or a war movie, I don’t know it.”

“Well, The Shining is now regarded as one of the greatest horror movie ever made.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Timberline Lodge is where the movie was shot. The exterior, anyway, for the fictional Overlook Hotel in the movie.”

“We’re spending two weeks in a hotel that was used in a horror movie?”

“It’s fine. Just don’t look in a mirror. That’s where the ghost manifests.”
Gibbs shot Tony a dirty look, then said. “Shouldn’t be a problem unless they have a mirrored ceiling.”

“Mirrored ceiling, huh?” Tony waggled his brows. “On my back with you deep inside me…it’s becoming my favorite position but here in Timberline, I want you on your back. I have to say I prefer bottoming but hey, seeing your face when you come is indescribable. So just look at me and don’t look up at the mirror in the ceiling.”

As it turned out, there were no mirrors on any of the lodge’s ceiling but the ceiling in their bedroom was purple.

“What’s with these purple ceilings?” Gibbs asked. “What happened to plain old white?”

“It’s just this room,” Tony replied. “It was done in a retro style by the original owners’ daughter and the present management decided to leave it as it is. The bathroom ceiling’s purple, too, but it does match the rest of the walls and the retro paintings. I kinda like it.”

“I suppose it’s better than having mirrored ceilings,” Gibbs conceded grudgingly. “Last thing I want to see is a ghost while you’re inside me.”

“Making love to you is power enough to drive all the ghosts from this place,” Gibbs said, one evening after a particularly vigorous afternoon of sex. They’d spent most of the time in bed exploring each other. No spot on their bodies was left untouched, unexamined, untasted.

Tony thought it couldn’t be possible for two people to know each other anymore intimately, physically-speaking, than he and Gibbs did those two weeks. Hot on the heels of that thought, however, came the warning that he was dangerously close to falling for Jethro. Then he comforted himself by saying it was just two weeks of great sex, nothing more. After all, they hadn’t shared any personal information, as agreed. He had no idea what Jethro did for a living, didn’t know how old he was, or what his full name was. All he knew was he had recently been divorced and intended to stay in the closet permanently. And nobody but Nobody fell in love after two weeks.

“I know it’s clichéd but I gotta ask,” Tony said, nuzzling Gibbs’ neck. “Was it good for you?”

“You in the habit of asking dumb questions?” came the reply.

Tony chuckled. “Hey, this is your first time and even though I displayed an enormous amount of restraint by taking it slow and gentle, I could be just a little too much for you to take. I mean, you may be fucking ginormous I’m not exactly packing a cocktail sausage.”

One brow lifted as Gibbs said, “Modest, much?” Before he could say anything, his cell phone rang, it’s sound muted as it was in his pants pocket - in the bathroom. He didn’t want to answer it as his cock was now in Tony’s mouth and he was being finger-fucked at the same time. The ringing stopped and didn’t resume.

He strained towards Tony’s mouth, thrusting up into the warm, wet heat, his fingers clutching at Tony’s hair.

“Want to be in you,” he ground out. Not waiting for Tony’s response, he flipped the other man over and grabbed the lube off the bedside table.

“Need more condoms,” Tony muttered.
‘There’s two left. Enough to last till lunch time.” And entered Tony’s slied-up ass in a single smooth stroke.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath. He was no virgin but ma-an! Jethro’s cock made him gasp at every first thrust. But, he was adaptable if anything and his ass not only adapted to Jethro’s size, he felt a sudden jolt of fear that he may get addicted it. To the man. To the only man he’d ever wanted to wake up next to. He’d never let any of his dates stay the night nor did he stay over at their place.

Man, was he fucked. Or maybe not yet. Two weeks wasn’t enough to get addicted, was it? He guessed it was a good thing they’d unlikely meet again. He had no intention of going out with a closeted man and remaining closeted himself for the rest of his life. He’d resigned from the BPD with no job in hand but wasn’t concerned. He lived simply and if he walked past a shop window wishing he could buy that suit, the important thing was that he could walk right past it with no problem. Versace and Armani wasn’t a good idea on a cop’s salary and he loved investigative work more than designer suits. Maybe Uncle Clive might leave him something when he kicked the bucket. I mean, he’s a billionaire! What’s a couple of millions to him?

Gibbs, at the same time, was growing increasingly panicked. This was supposed to be just sex, an outlet for his repressed desires. He’d spent his lifetime denying his sexual orientation and his happiness with Shannon – shortlived as it was – proved he could beat the gay bug. He’d had sexual encounters with men after Shannon died but they were just mutual handjobs, a couple of blowjobs, no penetration. Just two men looking for solace and release. He’d been so ashamed after each encounter he swore not to do it again. Then he would, and the guilt continued to pile up. He’d finally settled on a woman, married her, made her live to regret it then broke up. He’d done that not just once but three times. It never occurred to him to acknowledge his homosexuality. It just wasn’t done. Not for men from his generation and certainly not for a Marine.

Then he thought of an exception. Alex. Two years older than himself, Alex had gone into the military. Two opposites. He, who lived by a set of rules, and Alex, who seemed to have none yet had entered the Army. Then again, Alex was Delta Force and those guys were certifiable.

And was he any saner than Alex who he’d learnt one night, was lusting over a boy a dozen years his junior. Yet he couldn’t deny it - fucking Tony might be the best thing he’d ever done. No strings. No afters. He didn’t have to worry about introducing him to family, friends… colleagues.

He’d probably spend the rest of his life thinking about these two weeks but he figured it would be worth the agony.

When the two weeks came to a close and it was time to say goodbye, Tony whispered in Gibbs’ ear, “You were amazing, Jethro. Thank you for giving me the most amazing weeks of my life.”

“You were pretty amazing yourself and these two weeks will stay with me for a very, very long time,” Gibbs responded. "Forever."

“That long, huh?”

“You’re unforgettable, Tony, and I won’t be able to see a purple ceiling without thinking of you.” Gibbs silently thanked God purple ceilings were rare.
Gibbs exited the elevator, striding into the office towards his desk. He’d gotten space for his bullpen, three desks and cubicles ready for his new team. Three weeks had gone by since he returned from vacation but the memory of Tony’s body still sent him reeling. He couldn’t believe what he’d done – spent two weeks fucking a stranger. A man.

“Gibbs.” Director Morrow’s voice cut into his thoughts. He looked up. Morrow beckoned to him to come up.

He grabbed the report on the expansion of his role in MTAC and the status of the new unit he had been tasked with establishing. He’d had several interviews since his return from vacation – a thought that instantly assailed him with images of an aroused Tony, a Tony coming, white hot come splashing on his belly…he licking it off then kissing Tony…better stop before he met the Director with a hard-on tenting his pants.

Entering without knocking, he froze when he saw a man rise from one of the chairs in front of Morrow’s desk.

“Special Agent Gibbs,” Morrow said. “I’d like you to meet the first addition to the Major Case Response Team. Anthony DiNozzo, meet your superior, Leroy Jethro Gibbs.”


Gibbs could only nod wordlessly. Turning to Morrow, he said, “I wasn’t aware you were going to do the hiring. I wouldn’t have set up the interviews if I did.”

“No, no.” Director Morrow waved a hand at Gibbs. “I’m not taking over the hiring or anything from you. DiNozzo’s an exception. He comes highly recommended. By several people in the DoD,” Morrow added, pointedly. “Youngest member of the Baltimore PD’s major crimes squad until last month and been in several undercover operations. SecNav was the one who suggested DiNozzo would be a good fit for the agency and would benefit immeasurably under your mentoring. He can assist you in MTAC, too. Speaking of SecNav, I have a meeting with him and Homeland Security so I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.” Morrow turned to Tony. “Welcome to NCIS. You couldn’t get a better superior than Gibbs. He’ll demand more than everything you have but at the end of the day, you’ll be surprised how much you have to give. I’m leaving tomorrow for Zurich,” he said to Gibbs.

“How long will you be away?” Gibbs asked, his calm voice belying his inner turmoil at the sight of Tony.

“Back in a week,” Morrow replied, moving towards the door. “Take good care of the shop and your new special agent.”

The three men made their way down the stairs, chatting about the MCRT and the interviews Gibbs had lined up to hire the other agents.
Entering what would become the MCRT’s bullpen after seeing Morrow off at the elevator, Tony said softly, “Relax, sir. That weekend never happened, the two weeks in Mount Hood never happened. You aren’t gay and never will be. I got it. Did I miss anything?”

“Yes. Don’t call me ‘sir’.” Gibbs strode to his desk.

“I won’t…boss.”

Gibbs turned around. “Just don’t lose your focus, DiNozzo, and we’ll do just fine.”

**September 2001:**

**San Diego**

Alex stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window of his San Diego office. The last five years had seen him commuting between Hawaii and the mainland, making the five and half hour flight twice a week. KnightShade was now fully operational and President Challenger had been good on his word to give him complete autonomy with only a handful of DoD officials as consultants.

All the guys he’d brought with him on his mission to rescue Jax had come on board. All except Jethro, who had a truckload of demons to exorcise. Jethro was one of those conservative men who saw only black and white when it came to certain issues, homosexuality being one of them. But he was doing very well over at NCIS and not ready to leave.

The man had some serious shit going on in his life but Alex hadn’t wanted to ask. Getting to know what was inside the man was harder than prying open an oyster shell bare-handed to get at the pearl.

Which brought him to That Night.

It was 1991 and they were deployed in Kuwait – he with his Delta Force team and Jethro with his Marine battalion. Then Jethro got news that his wife and daughter had been killed. He was given leave to return to the US but a month after his family’s deaths, Jethro was injured in a blast resulting in him going into a coma and ending his Marine career. When Alex returned on home leave, he’d looked Jethro up and found that while his friend had healed from the blast, he was still in deep mourning over the loss of his family.

The day before Alex was to return to duty, Jethro told him he was joining NIS, the Naval Investigative Service as NCIS was then known as. Two years later, in 1993, they’d found themselves working on the joint-taskforce mission, Project Pokeweed, and their friendship had deepened. Upon their return from Colombia just before Christmas that year, they’d met up again and after several shots of bourbon in his basement, Jethro had suddenly started crying. Really loud, angry sobs followed by hand tools hurling through the air and the basement workshop on its way to being totally trashed if Alex hadn’t stopped him.

After the crying jag had subsided, Jethro opened up about the details surrounding the murders of his wife and daughter. Then he’d broken down again, burrowing his face into Alex’s neck, sobs wracking his body as Alex held him tightly. He stayed with Jethro that night, both of them sleeping in the basement on a thin mattress Jethro had dragged out from somewhere. It was like being back in Iraq once more.
Except they were in Jethro’s basement on Christmas Eve night.

Except that instead of attending the party he’d been invited to, Alex had stayed with his friend.

Except that what came after would affect Jethro more than Alex could have ever anticipated

The kiss had come naturally. Alex had held Jethro again when he heard the soft sobs coming from the man beside him. The hug had turned into an embrace and the embrace followed by a kiss. Tentative, at first, then just plain ravenous. Or desperation. Anger. Grief. Even now, ten years later, Alex could remember the taste of Jethro’s mouth and cock as if it was just yesterday.

Yet that kiss and the blowjob he’d given Jethro was all that happened as far as sex went. Alex knew if he’d fucked Jethro that night, both would regret it when they woke up. At daybreak Jethro said he had to go, and left without even having a cup of coffee, saying he’d get one on his way in to work.

He’d seen Jethro a few times after that but what they shared that Christmas Eve night was clearly to be forgotten. It was the reason why Alex didn’t do virgins. The morning-after blues weren’t worth the effort. Seeing Jethro after that night made him so relieved he hadn’t gone all the way and fucked his friend even if both knew it would be comfort sex. Because it was guilt Alex had seen in Jethro’s face the next morning. Whether it was guilt over sex with someone so soon after his wife’s death – even though it had been almost three years since she died – or guilt because it was with another man, Alex didn’t know. Not at the time.

He hadn’t seen Jethro again until nine months after the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 when Alex agreed to help with the upgrading of the Navy’s antiterrorist alert center. The upgrading had cost the Navy several million dollars, about a third of it donated by Alex personally. The brass was so pleased with the results, they renamed ATAC the Multiple Threat Alert Center – MTAC – and awarded KnightShade several more multi-million-dollar contracts.

It turned Jethro into some kind of superhero fixer but his personal life was still in shambles. Jethro had told him his current wife tried to crack open his skull with a left-handed 7-iron before storming out and filing for divorce.

Didn’t he say that man had demons to vanquish? How was it possible for a guy to get married to three women in a space of six years? Technically-speaking, it was doable but what guy in his right mind would? Perhaps it was time to look Jethro up again. He’d bring him into KnightShade in a heartbeat and fuck the demons out of him. Enough of this closeted life, marrying one female after another. Such craziness. Jethro deserved better than this shortchanging he was giving himself. He wasn’t just a sniper in the league of Navy SEAL, Chris Kyle and Delta operator Gary Gordon - the latter killed in the Battle of Mogadishu, one of the few Alex had not been a part of since he was working another operation in Bosnia at the time.

He took out his cell phone and found Jethro’s number. The special agent picked up on the second ring.

“Yeah, Gibbs,” came the gruff greeting.

“You have to start sounding friendlier when you answer the phone,” Alex said. “I’ll be in DC tomorrow. You free for dinner? I’ll be there for a week.”
“Been a long time.” Alex pulled Jethro in for a bear hug and for a moment, the two men looked into each other’s eyes. Neither gave away anything but both knew each had a ton to say.

“Five years,” Gibbs said. “You look good. Civilian life agrees with you. KnightShade coming along well?” Gibbs asked as he pulled away from the kerb. He’d picked Alex up from the Four Seasons and were on their way to Gibbs’ favorite diner.

“Everything on schedule, believe it or not.”

“With you at the helm, I believe it.”

“You ready to join us? Hell, the whole gang’s there.”

“Yeah? All of them?”

Alexs nodded. “Montero, Calletti, McCaffrey, Cipriani. Wilder’s coming on board next week.”

“That’s some team you’ve built up.”

“And I’m still hiring. More operators, and we also need operatives. Handle the spook work.” In the world of special forces, operators were the Delta boys, to distinguish them from the CIA agents, who called themselves operatives. Today term operator had come to encompass all special forces involved in direct action and operatives for those who were spies or provided intelligence for the missions. ”The boys already have their own teams – all top-notch operators. We’ve got some missions lined up that’ll test their skills but it’s the spooks I’m short of. Got a handful of CIA people but their boss isn’t happy for me to poach.”

“I’m not an operator,” Gibbs said, opening the door to the diner. “Or an operative. I’m an investigative agent.”

“They have meatloaf here?” Alex asked, scanning the menu.

“Yup, and it’s better than your mom ever made.”

“My mom never made meatloaf. My dad tried but even the dog wouldn’t eat it.”

“Well, the one here is so good you’ll be packing it to take away to that fancy hotel of yours. How much does it cost a night?”

“I get a corporate discount.”

“So, what’s that? Two-fifty a night?”

“A little more than that.” The waitress stopped at their table, pencil and pad in hand. “Two meatloafs and a bottle of water for me,” Alex told her. “What you drinking?” he asked Gibbs.

“Rootbeer.”

“Rootbeer?” Alex asked, amused. “Seriously?”

“What’s wrong with rootbeer?” Gibbs growled.

“Nothing.” Alex turned to the waitress. “You wouldn’t happen to have Tsingtao beer, would you?”

“Are you serious?” the waitress asked, rolling her eyes. “Look, Mister, we got Miller, more Miller and lots of Miller. We got Buds, too. Hell, we even got Carlsberg but we ain’t got no fancy-
“Give him a Bud Light, Janie,” Gibbs said. “And cut my friend some slack. He tips very well.”

Janie gave Alex a skeptical look. “You do that, honey.”

“Tsingtao Beer?” Gibbs asked, laughing. Shaking his head he said, “Can’t take you rich folks anywhere.”

“Hey, it’s the best-selling Chinese beer in the US. And it’s cheap.”

Janie arrived right then, plonking down the bottle of Bud Light and a bottle of water and glasses. “Food will be right up.”

“So, you’re here for a week?” Gibbs asked as Janie left.

“Yes. Got some meetings with LTG Callahan and one with POTUS.”

“So, what’s it like over at the Four Seasons?”

“Clean. Comfortable.”

“How much a night?” Gibbs asked again.

“Seven hundred. After the discount.”

“You know I can give you a clean bed for free. It’s comfy, too, and a ride downtown every morning.”

“Thank you. I stay in a hotel because it’s easy for me to get a cab to where I need to go. Can you take the morning off tomorrow? Come see our new DC headquarters. It’s next to the Naval Yard.”

“I’ve seen it. From the outside. Huge complex.”

“Official opening’s next week but we’ve been fully operational since last month. It’s just five minutes drive from NCIS. I can meet you at your office.”

Gibbs considered it for a moment then said, “Yeah, why not. By the way, how’s that kid doing? The one we rescued, what – five years ago?”

“Jax?”

“Yeah, Jax Theron.”

“Would you believe he’s joined the Army?”

“No kidding. Why?”

Their meatloaf arrived, with mashed potatoes and roasted carrots. Alex dug in, making noises of sheer bliss. “I love comfort food.”

“You were telling me about Jax.”

“Mmmh. Yeah, he continued with therapy for a year then on his 17th birthday told his parents he wanted to enlist and had his family go down to the recruitment center with him. Signed up then told me.”
Gibbs paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. “You were expecting to know earlier?”

Alex didn’t reply straightaway but downed half his beer first. “I…guess I was. I expected him to talk to me first. Not just walk into the recruitment center and sign up.” He looked out the window, visibly upset as he recollected that day when Jax turned up at his home and told him he was leaving the next day. “For Fort Jackson,” Alex said as he finished his meatloaf. “South Fucking Carolina. You’d think I warranted more than just an ‘Oh, by the way-I joined the Army and I leave for boot camp tomorrow.”

“Why do you warrant more than that? Sounded like he didn’t give him parents notice either.”

“I thought I meant more to him.”

Gibbs’s fork paused on its way to his mouth. Neither spoke for several seconds then Gibbs said, “Want dessert? If not I know a nice place that serves beer from every country in the world that brews it. Yep. Tsingtao, too.”

“Let’s go.” Alex stood and took out a hundred-dollar bill, leaving it on the table with his empty beer bottle over it.

Two bottles of Tsingtao later, Gibbs tried again. “This kid, Jax. He’s special, huh?”

“Yeah. Known him since he was born. First time I changed his diaper, he was three months old. I was fifteen. A diaper full of baby poo is something no teenage boy wants to see, much less have to handle. But I’d agreed to babysit because my sister had something come up at the last minute and asked if I would stand in for her for just an hour.”

“The Therons didn’t have a full time nanny? I thought that came with being born a Theron.”

Alex chuckled. “Of course they did but she came in only in the mornings. Katharine looked after all the kids when they were babies with the mornings-only nanny but that day, after the nanny left, a friend got into an accident and she left to visit her at hospital. Then my sis took off and I ended up with that screeching and squalling baby. I was about to call 911 when my sister calls the Theron house to check on me. So she takes me through the steps on the cordless phone and damn if that caterwauling didn’t stop just like that. I mean, no kidding – one minute the baby’s screaming so fucking loud and I can see his uvula – you know, that dangly thing at the back of your throat? Well, the minute I put his new nappy on, he breaks into the biggest goddamn smile a baby could give.”

“And that’s why you think you deserve more than a day’s notice before he ships out – because you changed his nappy.”

Alex gave Gibbs a sidelong glance.

Gibbs tilted his head, smiled, and said, “You brought the subject up. Want me to drop it, I will.”

Alex sighed. “Jax and me. We got this thing going on. Been going on since he was five.” When he saw Gibbs’ face, he held up both hands. “Whoa. Not what you’re thinking!”

“Okay, so you’re not a closet pedophile. What “thing” are you talking about? Do I need to get another round first?”

Alex called for two more beers. “Make it a San Miguel and a Chang,” he told the waitress. He
leaned back and said, “Jax had been telling everyone he wants to marry me when he grows up. Of course I just laughed and the rest of the family humored him because he’d sound so serious and determined. He was still saying that the last time I saw him before he was abducted and he said it again the day he came to tell me he was leaving for boot camp.”

Both Gibbs’ brows lifted. “I guess it’s different when it’s a seventeen year-old saying that to you. Not a laughing matter anymore.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s downright scary.”

“Well, the good news is that he must have passed his psych eval or the Army would’ve tossed him back out.” Gibbs smiled, tilted his beer bottle at Alex’s and drank.

“The bad news is that I fucked him.”

Gibbs choked and coughed. “You what?”

“I –”

“When?”

“After his rescue I took him back to Hawaii to get away from the media. It would have been bad enough being a Theron but there was that whole fallout over the CIA and State department officials accepting bribes from Jax’s abductor…”

“I remember reading about that. I called you but you weren’t picking up.”

“I shut myself off with Jax. Gave him my full attention, took him to physiotherapy, took his mind off his nightmares…and yeah, his shrink had warned me about Jax coming on to me.” He drew in a breath. “So, yes, I wasn’t taken by surprise. I fucked him because I wanted to, even against all good sense.”

“Damn, Alex. He was seventeen.”

“No. Sixteen when we rescued him.”


“A lot of things, believe it or not. You were there when we rescued him. He was a mess. His legs could hardly support him. He wasn’t just malnourished he was covered in scars and lesions –”

“I know. I was there…but I’m having difficulty making the leap between that and fucking him.”

“I know. Fucking stupid of me…but at the time…”

“There was nothing you wanted more than burying yourself ballsdeep in his ass.” Gibbs expelled a breath. “Wish I could tell you I’d have done the same thing but I doubt even I am that crazy.”

Alex gave a huff. “Hah. The great Leroy Jethro Gibbs would never be caught dead screwing a kid fifteen years his junior. Fine. You're sane and saintly.”

“Not when he’s sixteen.” Alex shot him a look and he smiled a little sheepishly. “But I did fuck a guy fifteen years younger than me.” He brought the bottle to his lips and sucked.

Alex grinned. "I'm so relieved to hear that."
“Yeah, but I met him just two months ago. He’s now my special agent.”

Alex snorted, spewing beer across the table and down his shirt front.
"You hired a guy you just met and fucked? You? Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs? Maybe not so sane and saintly, after all."

"I didn't hire him." Gibbs proceeded to tell Alex how Tony ended up in NCIS.

"I wish I were there to see your face," Alex chuckled. "So, a one-night stand...sometimes you surprise me."

"Well, it was more than one night, but yeah, I wasn't planning on seeing him again."

"Have you ever considered coming out?" Alex asked, saw Gibbs' face and said, "Forget I asked." and changed the subject. "I've got back to back meetings all week but I'd like to meet up for dinner as much as possible."

"Sure. How long you staying?"

"Until Tuesday or Wednesday."

"Do your meetings and we can meet up for dinner. You check out of that hotel on Friday and come stay the weekend with me. It's not a five-star hotel but –"

"But it's your home and I'd be honored." Alex said.

So Alex did just that. Only, what started in Gibbs' basement in 1994 was now continued in his bedroom.

"And we're not even drunk this time," Alex said, the next morning.

"Nope," Gibbs said. "Both stone cold sober."

"Regrets?"

"No. None at all."

"Sure?" Alex asked, remembering Gibbs’ morning-after reaction six years ago.

"I had a whole week to reconsider my invitation to come stay the weekend with me. I figure that gave you one week to decide, too. Am I right?"

"If you mean was I thinking about fucking you, no I wasn’t, actually. Not until I entered your basement and remembered that night.” Alex paused then said, “I need to know I’m not taking advantage of you or talking you into something you’re going to brood over after I’m gone.”

“That was six years ago. I admit that night I was looking for…needing something to mask the pain…to just help me forget, even if just for a few minutes…"
“And now?”

“And now you can relax because you won’t be flying out and leaving me riddled with guilt.”

Alex laughed. “Thank God! Because the minute you said you’d see me I wanted to do what I wouldn’t do that night and I was arguing with myself all the way from San Diego to DC – will he or won’t he? Should I make a move or wait for him? Fuck, Jethro. I’m worse than a fifteen year old on his first date.”

Gibbs laughed. “So, you’re okay with staying until you fly out?”

“If you don’t mind my taking up half your bed.”

“I don’t mind. And just for the record, you’re the only man that’s been on this bed. Apart from my wife. My late wife.”

“And Tony DiNozzo.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Nope. Didn’t bring him home.”

“But you ended up hiring him. Didn’t think you’d do something like that.”

“I told you I didn’t hire him.”

“You fucking him?”

“No! I told you - we’d agreed what started in Baltimore and Mount Hood stayed right there.”

“And you stuck to that?”

“Neither of us have even tried to renege on that and if he tries, I’ll have him transferred.”

Alex regarded his friend for a moment then asked, “So what’s it like having to work with him? Regret you fucked him? Is he one of those who think they can hold it over you?”

“Nah. Nothing like that at all. DiNozzo’s an excellent agent and he’s been professional from day one. No mention of those two weeks. Not even a hint. As far as everyone knows, we’re both normal, heterosexuals.”

“That how you want it?”

“Yes.” Gibbs swept the hair from his forehead. “No.”

“Yes or no? Or is it yes and no?”

“Second,” Gibbs mumbled.

Alex grunted. “Now you know how I feel.”

“So how about we try and fuck it out of our system?” Gibbs asked, reaching for Alex. "With each other? Forget about Theron and DiNozzo for a bit.”

They fucked, alright. Each fucked the other in more ways than Gibbs could ever imagine. On Sunday Gibbs cooked a late breakfast then they fucked till dinnertime. By eleven that night, Gibbs
swore his ass had shut down.

“Closed For Repairs,” he announced. “Come back next month.”

Alex said he’d be tied up with meetings all day Monday and was having dinner with the LTG but, “I don’t have any meetings on Tuesday so if you don’t have to go in to work early, we could have breakfast in bed.”

“Aren’t you supposed to fly back to San Diego by then?”

“My flight’s not till ten in the evening. Plenty of time to get me more of that fine ass of yours. Might even make me forget…”

Gibbs had been grinning but now the grin faded. “You know what? We are fucking great together. Literally. So why do I still feel like shit?”

Alex swore under his breath. “If you tell me you’re sorry, I’m going to kick your ass.”

Nah. I’m not sorry about us.”

“Then what? I’m a lousy fuck?”

“You’re great fuck, Alex.”

“Then why the hell are you behaving like a woman?”

“I’m sure the women would resent the hell out of that if they could hear you. Nah, I’m okay. I guess I want more than just buddy fucks. I…I still want…him. And you – you’re still waiting for Jax to grow up and marry you.”

Alex sighed. “Okay, so we’re a pair of losers when it comes to our love life.”

“And you know what, too?”

“What, too?” Alex asked, a scowl on his normally placid features.

“You stand a far better chance of getting what you want than I do. All you have to do is wait.”

Alex considered that for a moment then said, “You’re right. Unfortunately. If DiNozzo feels the same way about you, one of you is bound to make a decision – one of you will have to leave. And I bet it’ll be DiNozzo. He'll wake up one day and realize he doesn't want to lie anymore. For you or anyone. And I have the perfect solution – both of you come over to KnightShade. You two can fuck all you want, anytime, anywhere, as long as the job’s not compromised.”

Gibbs laughed.

“I’m serious. McCaffrey, Caletti and Montero have been going at each other like minks on heat. Our corporate policy – fraternization – of any kind – is fine, as long as it’s mutually consensual, and job quality is not adversely affected. KnightShade’s a place for big boys and girls. If the perp is male, the complainant is encouraged to shoot the fucker’s balls off. Less paperwork and sends a more effective warning to other would-be morons. If it’s the other way round and the perp is female, the complainant has the liberty to invite his mates along for the show.” When Gibbs’ eyes widened, Alex chuckled. “Hey, what it means is KnightShade hires grownups and all-round professionals. Be stupid at your own expense and risk.”

“I think my way is simpler and works better,” Gibbs said. “Never date a co-worker.”
“But you aren’t doing that. You fucked him before he came on board.”

“Yeah, well.” Gibbs gave a loud sigh. “I wish I could forget that.” Another sigh, then, “I wish I didn’t want it again.” It had been hell working side by side with Tony day after day. Next Tuesday would make it exactly two months. If two months had been hell, how was he going to endure a year? Two years?

8.15a.m. Tuesday;

September 11, 2001

“Welcome to use my car,” Gibbs said to Alex as they pulled up in front of the NCIS building. “Do what you need to do. We can catch a bite to eat at lunch and I’ll drop you off at the airport.”

“You sure?”

“Take the car,” Gibbs reiterated. “If we catch a case, I can ride with DiNozzo.”

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll call about lunch. I have a meeting with the brass over at the Pentagon and might run a bit late.”

Gibbs gave his friend a wave and headed for his office. As always, his thoughts went to Tony. As always, he was conflicted – Tony was turning out to be a good special agent. One day he’d be a great special agent. Tony wasn’t the one with the problem. He was. Tony was handling things better than he was. He couldn’t get those two weeks out of his mind but Tony looked like those two weeks never happened. wasn’t that the condition you imposed on him, he chided himself.

It was all he could do to keep from looking across the bullpen every few minutes at Tony. Sometimes, when the younger man was concentrating on writing up his report – clearly not his favorite part of the job – Gibbs couldn’t resist taking a surreptitious peek. How the hell did someone look better with each passing day?

He heaved a heavy sigh as he sat down at his desk and powered on his computer.

Tony was just walking in. “Morning, boss,” he said cheerily. “Sorry I’m late. Had to wait for the electrician to arrive.”

“Power problems?”

“Just switching to three-phase. The building’s pretty old and the landlord’s doing his bit to upgrade it. There’ll be a rent increase, of course.”

“Got a couple of interviews starting at eleven,” Gibbs said. “Take them to the conference room and have them fill in the forms. HR has them.” Tony trotted off and Gibbs decided he needed another cup of coffee.

He was just coming back up the elevator when his cell phone rang. It was Fornell. “Hey. What’s up?”

“Turn on your tv. Now!”
“What’s happening?” Gibbs hurried into the bullpen. On the news, he watched the footage of an airplane flying into one of the World Trade Center’s twin towers in New York City. He wasn’t sure that was really what he saw but that was what the news ticker was saying.

“A jetliner flew into the North Tower at the World Trade Center,” Fornell was saying.

“Yeah, I’m watching.” Gibbs switched channels and got footage of the plane approaching the tower then slicing right into it.” The footage was showing flames and smoke coming out of one of the towers. “…unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has just crashed into one of the towers –”

“What the –!” Tony gasped as he came up behind Gibbs. “What was that? A bomb?”

“A plane.” Gibbs switched channels.

NBC: “…we understand that a plane…”.

CNN: “This just in. Obviously you are watching a very disturbing…live shot there. That is the World Trade Center, and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. CNN Center right now is just beginning to work on this story, obviously calling our sources and trying to figure out exactly what happened, but clearly something relatively devastating happening this morning there on the south end of the island of Manhattan. That is once again, a picture of one of the towers of the World Trade Center.”

ABC: “We just got a report in that there has been some kind of explosion at the World Trade Center at New York City –”

“Gibbs!” It was Director Morrow. “MTAC. NOW!”

Both Tony and Gibbs raced up the stairs, following the Director into the dark auditorium where the MTAC missions and communications were managed.

One of the four stars was speaking, his face displaying the horror and shock of what was happening right that moment.

“It is confirmed.” It was Tommy Franks, the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Central Command. “American Airlines Flight 11 just crashed into the North Tower. The President is in Sarasota, Florida, and has been informed.” The screen went fuzzy then was restored. An announcement followed, saying the CNN and MSNBC websites were getting such heavy traffic many of their servers crashed. Morrow changed channels and someone else was saying they lost Flight 77. It was bound for Los Angeles but ten minutes after Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower, the flight controller couldn’t locate it. Its transponder had been turned off.

“We’re getting a direct feed into traffic control at Logan, Dulles and LAX,” Morrow said. He was about to add something when Tony yelled and they watched helplessly as the second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, a fully fueled Boeing 767, carrying 56 passengers and nine crew members, flew into the South Tower.

“Holy shit!” Tony gasped. “A second plane just --! was that a second plane?”

“My God…,” Morrow muttered.

It was sheer pandemonium on the streets below the towers now.

Thirty minutes later, at 9.33a.m., the traffic control at Logan International found American Airlines
Flight 77. It had deviated from its flight path to Los Angeles and had headed east, unnoticed by the air controllers. Director Morrow was fielding calls coming in and was on one call when he cupped his hand over the receiver and yelled across the MTAC room, “Flight 77 is suspected hijacked and heading back towards DC.” He returned to his call and Gibbs took his cell phone out, punching out numbers as he ran out of MTAC to make his call. He got an engaged tone and shoved the phone back in his pocket when it started buzzing.

It was Alex.

“Hey, you heard?” Gibbs asked.

“Yeah, I need to –” Gibbs heard a boom and Alex’s sentence was cut off, the line going dead.

“Alex! Alex!” Gibbs shouted. “Damn.” He rushed back into MTAC and Morrow was off the phone.

“Flight 77 was heading for us,” Morrow said in a rush. “The White House has been evacuated and –” he was interrupted by the news flash, a frantic anchor reporting that American Airlines Flight 77 had just crashed into the Pentagon. The time on the news screen showed 9.37a.m.

“Alex!” Gibbs said, taking out his phone and running out again. “Alex Knight. CEO of KnightShade. You know him?” he asked Morrow as he ran to the exit.

“Yes, of course. We have a meeting at two p.m. at the Pentagon,” Morrow said as Gibbs ran out of MTAC, a stunned Tony following.

“He's there now! He was talking to me when I heard an explosion and the line went dead,” Gibbs said. “I've got to get there.”

“I'll drive you,” Tony said, following Gibbs down the stairs. “It'll be chaotic down there. I can stay with the vehicle while you look for what’s-his-name.”

“Alex. Alex Knight.”

They had just gotten to the roadblock outside the Pentagon when Gibbs got the call from Morrow telling him the South Tower had collapsed.

“Sorry, you can’t drive in,” the security guard told Tony. All around them lights were flashing and thick smoke was rising from the side of the Pentagon that had been struck. The Arlington County Fire Department was out in full force.

Tony flashed his badge at the security. “NCIS. I’m just dropping off my boss. He’s gotta find one of our special agents. He’s in there somewhere.” Yeah, it was a lie but well, whatever it takes and whoever this Alex guy was, Gibbs cared about him enough to go looking for him. And no, he was not experiencing a pang of jealousy.

“The South Tower?” Gibbs said, sticking a finger in his other ear to block out the cacophony of sirens and wails from the ambulances and cop cars. “Wasn’t the North Tower hit first? I’m outside the Pentagon. I have to go.” He snapped his flip phone shut and said to Tony, “The South Tower just collapsed.”

“What do you mean ‘collapsed’?” Tony asked.
“Sir! You have to move your car,” another security guy said, waving them on.

“I know! I’m going.” Tony looked at Gibbs.

“The South Tower collapsed,” Gibbs repeated. “Whole thing came crashing down. Folded in on itself.” He got out of the vehicle. “I’ll be in touch. You go on back to the office and get yourself updated.” He ran towards the smoking section, trying to reach Alex again. He was about to hang up when it was answered.

“Alex? Are you okay?”

“This is Mack. I’m one of the firefighters. You’re on his speed dial.”

“Where’s Alex?” Gibbs asked. “That’s his phone you’re answering.”

“He’s injured and en route to George Washington University Hospital. Wait, you can talk to him.”

“Hello?” Alex sounded disoriented.

“Alex? It’s Gibbs. How you doing?”


Gibbs told him.

“No shit. I gotta call in.”

“You’re going to the hospital. I’m here outside the Pentagon,” Gibbs said. “I’ll head for the George Washington University Hospital.”

Alex was taken to the trauma center at the hospital and when Gibbs arrived he was told he would be able to see him only later that afternoon.

“Has his father been informed?” Gibbs asked.

“He would have been,” said the counter clerk. “A hotline is being set up for the families of the victims so Mr. Knight’s family should have been alerted. Or will be soon.”

“Thank you.” Gibbs took out his cell phone and searched for Alex’s office number in San Diego. The receptionist answered on the second ring. “Mr. Andrew Knight, please. This is NCIS special agent Gibbs calling from DC.”

“Please hold, Special Agent Gibbs.”

Andrew came on the line and Gibbs updated him.

“I watched it on the news. I’ve been trying to reach him but he wasn’t picking up. Thank God he’s not seriously injured. I’ll fly over asap and will call you when I arrive.”

Andrew didn’t get to DC that day or the day after as North American airspace was shut down. Once civilian air traffic resumed on September 13, Andrew’s Theron-Knight corporate jet was among the first to take off.

Gibbs managed to see Alex only once that day – at dinner time. He’d been occupied with the Director most of the day then a meeting with Clayton Jarvis, the Secretary of the Navy, which took
place near midnight. The nation was on full alert and the DoD alert systems were all working over
time. For dinner, Gibbs grabbed a chow mein takeaway and ate it on the drive to the hospital.

“Who is this Alex?” Tony asked as he drove Gibbs. “A friend? Marine buddy?”

“Alex is ex-Delta Force. We worked some joint-ops back when I was with the Corps.”

“So you guys still keep in touch, huh?”

“On and off. Alex is CEO of KnightShade, the private security firm.”

“Yeah, I read about that. They provide advanced skills training to the feds, don’t they?”

“And the military.”

“You miss your old life?”

Gibbs considered that for a moment. “Some aspects of it.”

“Like?”

“The gang.” Gibbs sighed softly. “I miss them. When you’ve worked on several missions together,
you become closer than brothers.”

“Where are they now? Apart from Alex, that is.”

“They’re with KnightShade. There was seven of us. Alex wanted us to set up KnightShade with
him. I was the only one who didn’t take up the offer.”

“Why not?”

The unspoken reply filled Gibbs’ mind – images, one after another, merging together, separating,
traversing the desert. Hernandez. A job he needed to do. One he needed to do alone and not
compromise his friends. Gibbs blinked, shook his head and turned to Tony. “I’m glad you weren’t
at the Pentagon when it happened.”

Tony didn’t react to the sudden change of subject. “I had no reason to be there. Not unless you
were.”

Gibbs gave a soft huff. “You gonna follow me everywhere, DiNozzo?”

“Wasn’t that the job description?”

Gibbs didn’t reply. They talked about the Twin Tower attacks. Who was behind it, why didn’t the
FBI catch it before it happened? Didn’t the CIA get any chatter from their counterintelligence
analysts and stations officers around the world? The amount of planning required to pull off an
attack of that magnitude couldn’t have gone unnoticed.

When they arrived at the George Washington University Hospital, it was packed with ambulances
and other vehicles. It was, again, one of those times having a federal agent’s badge to flash helped.

They both saw Alex briefly. He had his leg in a cast, his chest wrapped in bandages. Not just
broken ribs but deep gashes on his torso, he told Gibbs.

“Hey.” Gibbs pulled up a chair and sat down beside Alex. “This is Tony DiNozzo, my special
“Ah.” Alex’s eyes gave Tony a quick once-over before returning to Gibbs. “My father was here earlier. I’m flying back with him to San Diego in the morning but I’ll be back in DC next week. Got room for me or should I book the Four Seasons?”

“Next week?” Gibbs said. “You won’t be going anywhere for awhile, buddy, but when you can, mi casa su casa.”

Tony watched the exchange with as bland an expression as he could muster. There was nothing in each of the men’s manner to suggest there was more than mere camaraderie between them but he, nevertheless, felt there was more.

Not that Gibbs would even tell if Tony asked.

Not that Tony ever would.

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*One Month Later:*

**Alex’s DC Penthouse:**

**KnightShade Complex**

**M St, SE, Washington, DC**

Alex wheeled himself to the window of his office and stared out into the horizon. His penthouse at KnightShade Inc occupied two floors at Building C, which was along Water Street and overlooking the Anacostia and the small, private marina. Before the September 11 attacks, he hadn’t made up his mind whether to keep a permanent residence in DC and thought he’d just check into a hotel, as he’d done for years. Or stay with Gibbs.

September 11 changed a lot of things – it did for all of the US – and he decided to move his base from San Diego to DC. The two top floors of the block he was in had been tentatively earmarked for conference facilities and corporate functions. It was now a five-bedroom residence with a gym and private elevator.

When he visited KnightShade, SD, he stayed in his Coronado house and when in San Francisco visiting Theron-Knight Atomics, he stayed with his father. His home on Kauai had KnightShade’s state-of-the-art technology installed in an underground complex. Three minutes away was the sprawling KnightShade MediCom and Rehab center in Kalihiwai. He was far too busy to have more than two homes – he left that to his twin brother whose diversified conglomerate included a joint-venture with Theron Leisure and Entertainment and owned more than a dozen properties around the world.

It was now almost a month after the attacks and he was impatient to get out of the wheelchair. There wasn’t much he couldn’t do from his state-of-the-art electric wheelchair but he’d rather be up and about on his own two feet. Compared to the typical three to four months healing time for a broken tibia and fibula, KnightShade’s MediCom would be using its latest techniques to cut down the repair time to half so he should be rid of the wheelchair in another week’s time.

He could attach his KnightFone to it, watch the news on the mini screen and access his email but
instead of helping, it made him feel worse. He was going crazy stuck in the wheelchair when there was so much to do. Sure, he attended all the meetings called by the DoD and was fully involved in the mission-planning but at 35, he was at the peak of his abilities and despite his well-known placid, controlled manner, he was as antsy inside as any spec op soldier waiting for an operation’s greenlight.

Where are you, Jax, he asked. He’d tried speaking to Miller but the Brigadier General hadn’t been available. Not many people he wanted to speak to were these days following the attacks in New York and here, in DC. President Challenger was having a new department set up – The Department of Homeland Security and all the major PMCs were being rounded up to work with DHS on getting counterintelligence up to scratch so that the nation would never again be caught by another surprise attack. Alex had attended all the meetings in his wheelchair, finalizing the plans and missions with LTG Callahan that resulted from the attacks. Homeland, in its infancy, was a mess and it would take a while for it to know who the hell was whom and who was doing what.

Their entire military was now on alert and the order was out to find out who the mastermind behind the attack was. Osama bin Laden was their perp of choice but confirmation was not as yet forthcoming. Both the FBI and the CIA were facing demands to know how they could miss something of this magnitude.

KnightShade DC’s MediCom was going full steam ahead and survivors from the NYFD and NYPD had been taken there for the advanced medical technology his organization was able to offer. ‘Put Humpty Dumpty back together’ was POTUS’ order and KnightShade was ‘the king’s men and his horses’ whose task was to do that.

And where the hell was Jax? If he ever needed him – professionally-speaking - it was right now. He took his KnightFone out and called one more person who just might know where Jax was.

Before his call was picked up, however, someone entered. He didn’t turn around, assuming it was Bridget, his p.a., who was in and out of his home office several times a day. An arm suddenly clamped across his chest, startling him. His left arm instinctively came up in self-defense, his right about to strike.

“Whoa. It’s me. Don’t poke my eye out.”

“Jax!”

“O o o

“When did you get back?” Alex asked. “I’ve been trying to call you. Couldn’t get anyone to tell me where you were.”

Jax gave a soft snort. “Ah well…I was stuck in some jungle. Training just finished. You know how it is.”

“Why couldn’t you have joined the Marines?”

“Why?” Are they always available whenever you want them?” Jax asked with a crooked smile. He turned away and took a seat.

Alex looked him. Really looked. “Four years, Jax. Not a fucking word from you. Didn’t you think your family would be worried?” That I would be?

“My family knew I was fine.”
“Oh, really? Your mom just waited for that pair of uniforms to ring her doorbell.”

“My Dad called every week and each time he would know I was fine.”

“You had to have come home at least once. I did when I was in Delta and you’re still a raw recruit in comparison.”

“Well, you can congratulate me – I’ve been accepted into CAG,” Jax said, referring to the Combat Applications Group, another name for the 1st SFOD-D. “Just got the news before I flew out here.”

“Congratulations,” Alex said, unsmilingly. “Well done.” And it was, since Jax was only 21 – the minimum qualifying age for Delta Force. “Army must have worked you hard these four years.” Another minimum requirement. Then again, Jax had always been a determined, focused man. “You look different,” he said after a while.

“Older, I guess. A little wiser, maybe. And a whole lot less naïve, definitely.”

“How long are you out for?”

“Three days.”

“And how long do you plan to stay with Delta?”

Jax gave a slight shrug. “As long as necessary.”

“Well, I’m glad you stopped by. Are you on your way home to San Francisco?”

Jax laughed. “I just came from there. I stopped by to see mom and dad before flying out here. So, if you have a guestroom or a couch and don’t mind some company for a couple of days…”

Alex was glad to have those few days with Jax. They toured the KnightShade complex, talked in depth about the 9-11 attacks and Alex shared all he could about the plans for the organization in the aftermath of that Tuesday morning.

Everything seemed like normal except that Jax kept his distance – he avoided being too close, physically, and avoided eye contact except briefly.

Alex knew something wasn’t right and put it down to the adult Jax being embarrassed about his childhood crush and their brief sexual relationship following his rescue. The only thing, the right thing, to do, Alex told himself, was to let Jax be; to let him go.
Chapter Summary

After ten years of non-contact, Jax turns up at Alex's penthouse in DC.

This brings us to the end of Act I.

Ten Years Later.

Early 2011

Alex had just returned from another meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and was surprised to see a familiar figure standing at the window looking out over the Anacostia. He approached his surprise visitor as quietly as he could but knew the young man had already sensed his presence.

“To what do I owe this honor?” Alex asked. “After all these years…”

Jax turned and Alex noticed his eyes were still as electrifyingly blue as they had been when they stared down on him at Kauai in 1996. A lifetime ago, yet the memory of those two weeks were as fresh as they were the day Jax walked out on him.

“Unfinished business,” Jax replied as Alex sat down on one of the armchairs.

“That happens if you’re in the habit of popping up for a few days then disappearing for a few years, popping up again and doing the vanishing act yet again. So, tell me – how many days are you staying this time? How many years do you plan on staying away this time? Because I’m too old for these games.”

“I’m here for as long as you want me around.” When Alex’s brows went up, Jax added. “I’m here to finish…to umm…” his words faltered. Sucking in a breath, he tried again. “I’m here to finish the unfinished business, to start over. You and me. If that’s possible.”

“Just like that? The last time I saw you was when you told me you’d joined the Army. 1997. Then four years of silence followed by a token visit. Then nothing. Total zilch. You plan to erase ten years of nothing just like that? Not a single phone call. Not even a text message. You were back on home turf several times. I know because I’d be invited to one of your parents’ dinner parties and told you’d be there. But of course you’d make your excuses at the last minute. And if you’re going to insult my intelligence by saying I know how it is with these special forces, then I will tell you right now to spare yourself the trouble and me the insult. You –” Alex’s tone sharpened. “can go right out that door right now.”
Jax stood stiffly still. “I told you - I came here to finish that unfinished business and if I can’t do it – if we can’t do it in the next few minutes then another ten years wouldn’t do it.”

Alex had always considered himself a reasonable man so he said, “Fine. Sit down.”

Jax complied.

Alex regarded the man sitting across him - no longer the fresh, eager soldier that walked into this room three and a half weeks after 9/11. So much had changed since then. Over the last ten years, he’d built KnightShade into an organization spanning the globe whilst Jax had turned himself into a formidable twenty-first century warrior. Through his contacts, Alex had followed Jax’s career while KnightShade built up its covert teams and ran dozens of anti-terrorist missions around the world. All the while he hoped the day would come when the two men would resolve their issues and Jax would join him in KnightShade. Once he’d guessed the younger man was avoiding him, he’d not tried to get in touch again but quietly followed his progress through Delta. That he’d gotten no heads-up on Jax being on leave made him wonder if he’d known all along Alex had been keeping an eye on him.

To the world, KnightShade was an topnotch private military company that trained the US defense agencies in advanced defense and attack tactics, but to the insiders, KnightShade was also a top secret intelligence agency that worked off the books for the U.S. government. Its M-class teams comprised the most efficient, lethal warriors, assassins and spies you could gather and each was led by an even more deadly operator.

As was to be expected, no one but those in the need to know knew about the existence of the KnightShade M teams, and their members went about like any regular KnightShade employee, like any civilian. Even their aviation machinery – attack helicopters and Little Bird equivalents – were disguised to look like commercial aircraft.

Building KnightShade to what it was today had been tiring, given the tight deadline President Challenger had given Alex at the time; it was stressful and exhausting, when deadlines looked like coming and going unmet, but overall, he was pleased with the results and satisfied with what he and his team had accomplished. KnightShade now had over 1,200 teams of various classes based on their specialty and comprised members from every special force in the military, as well as federal agencies, including the CIA and DoD agencies such as NSA, DARPA and others.

“I’ve got it sorted out,” Jax said.

“Got what sorted out?”

“My shit. I know it’s taken longer than I thought it would –”

“No shit.”

“But I had to be sure. I had to know you want me as I am and that you can live with it…with me, as I am.”

There was a long pause and when Jax didn’t continue, Alex said, “Just what, exactly, does “as I am” mean?”

“I think it’s best I start with when I last saw you. In 2001. I know it’s been ten years but that’s how long it’s taken me to deal with what happened in Peru…and not all of it has been resolved. I mean…there are after-effects that are still with me.”

“Did you talk to Dr. Cohen about them?”
“Twice. The last time was a month ago. Yup, fifteen years and I see my therapist when I can.” Jax took a deep breath then added, “I couldn’t even talk about the things Montesinos did to me or made me do to him and to some other prisoners. I couldn’t talk about them with her…Dr. Cohen… couldn’t speak about them. I found it difficult to bring up not because it was painful – though it obviously was – but because I’d shoved those memories in so deep in my subconscious. That’s what Dr Cohen said, anyway, and I don’t disagree. My recollection of those two years is more a basket of entangled feelings warring with each other. A part of me has dealt with what Montesinos did to me but a part of me hasn’t. Or, perhaps, as Dr. Cohen said, that part of me is trying to. Whatever, I felt guilty and ashamed,” he continued, head hanging down between his knees, hands clasped. “That’s why I ran off to the army without talking to you first. I couldn’t face you. After our time at Kauai and afterwards, I needed you so much. I wasn’t just in love with you, I needed you. But I didn’t want to saddle you with a nutjob either. I told myself I’d get my shit together then see if there was a chance for us. At the time, I didn’t even know how you felt about me. I thought you just had sex with me because I asked you to and you wanted to help me…y’know…forget a bit…and I believed you thought I was just a kid –”

“You were just a kid!” Alex’s face couldn’t hide the frustration he was feeling as he listened to Jax.

“Yes, but later I thought that was how you’d always see me. That, plus my sexual issues had me deciding the best thing was for me to stay the hell away from you. It was easier than one would think. I was ensconced in one mission after another and my downtime was spent with my team mates – or whoever I happened to pick up. You didn’t try to contact me – at least, not after I left. So we lived our separate lives.”

“Yet now you’re here.”

Jax nodded. “I came to find out if I can be a part of your life. Not just as a kid, not just for two weeks, but permanently. I came to find out if there’s a chance I can be more than just a younger body, a lovesick lover, to you.”

Alex made an inarticulate sound that had Jax looking up at him. “Before you throw yourself at my feet and beg me to stay, I need to tell you more.”

“Uhh…I need some coffee,” Alex stood and went to the refreshments counter. “Want one?”

“You got gemaicha?”

Alex looked at him.

“Green tea?” Jax amended.

“That, I have.” Alex proceeded to make a small pot for Jax.

“I was saying a part of me had dealt with what I went through and a part hadn’t? The part that hadn’t is why it’s taken me this long. In the ways that mattered to the military and Delta, it was a non-issue. That’s why I wasn’t disqualified on psychological grounds but I think it will be an issue when it comes to you and me.”

He had Alex intrigued now. “And that non-issue that will be an issue between us is?”

Jax refilled his teacup and settled back on the couch. “Tell Bridget you don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the day. And I’ll tell you everything.”
END OF ACT ONE: Il Cielo In Una Stanza
Author's Note:

'Saudade'. A most marvelous Portuguese word! Certainly, one of my favorites, if not the favorite.

“Saudade is ‘the sorrow of not having enjoyed that which was there to be enjoyed; it is the vehement but resigned desire to enjoy a thing we were deeply attached to; and also the yearning to see, or be in the company of, someone from whom we have reluctantly been parted’.” Dalila L. Pereira da Costa & Pinharanda Gomes, Introduction to Saudade: Theoretical Anthology and Critical Approach; p.10

Aubrey F. G. Bell described it as a "vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, for something other than the present, a turning towards the past or towards the future" ("In Portugal," 1912)

“It is not just a nostalgia for something that was lost; it can also be a yearning for something that might have been. The feeling can be overwhelming, and the Portuguese speak of the desire to "matar as saudades" ("to kill the saudades").” Edward Hirsch; Washington Post; June 14, 2009

ACT TWO: SAUDADE

CHAPTER 14

July 2014:
Washington, DC

Tony yawned and stretched his arms. “Aarrgh!”

“What’s wrong?” Phil asked, pouring himself as mug of freshly-brewed coffee.

“Nothing.”

“Sounded like frustration to me,” Phil said. “So, how’s the old man doing? Not that he’s old, old. I mean, he’s still fuckin’, smokin’ hot for his age.”

“Gibbs is fine. I’m not,” Tony said.

“Still hot for the boss, huh?”
“You could say that.” The admission came without emotion and Phil glanced at his best friend.

“No, I’m not fine at all.” Tony’s head thudded back against the sofa and he slouched down further.

“Want to talk about it?”

Tony looked at his best friend. They’d met back thirteen years ago on September 11, 2001, when Flight 77 had plowed into the Pentagon. He’d been waiting for Gibbs who’d gone in the building to look for a friend, Alex Knight. Tony had been told to move his vehicle, the third time, when there was a knock on his window and a dark-haired good-looking man gestured to him to move to the side.

“Hey, you’re from NCIS, aren’t you?” the stranger had asked. “Met you briefly last year when we were investigating that naval officer’s death. Detective Philip McCadden.” he stuck out his hand and Tony took it tentatively.

“Hi. Yeah, I remember. I’m Tony DiNozzo. I’m waiting for my boss, Special Agent Gibbs.”

“I’m waiting for one of my colleagues. He’s in there somewhere and they won’t let me through either. Follow me. I’ve got a spot we can both wait before we start bugging them again.”

Tony brightened. “You do? Great. I’m kinda tired of being shooed away like a fly.”

They’d become acquaintances while he was waiting for Gibbs and Phil was waiting for one of his colleagues to join him. Before they’d gone their separate ways, Phil had invited him for a drink that weekend and he’d accepted. They’d become friends after that but not without grief from McGee.

Timothy McGee had been the next special agent to join the MCRT and it had taken awhile before he and the probie found a rhythm they could work with. McGee had been assigned to the Norfolk Naval Base but Gibbs thought he had potential and brought him on board. McGee was a total geek and Tony, while he knew his way around a computer and made sure he had the latest iPhone, didn’t share McGee’s fascination with, and knowledge of, the whole IT industry.

He also believed McGee was a bit of a homophobe. Nothing overt, of course. Just a vibe he felt and when Phil started popping up at his office, McGee had started making decidedly snide remarks about the T-Cad hookup. Ziva, who had joined them barely two weeks after McGee, explained the nature of bromances to him and tried to explain McGee’s attitude.

“You don’t understand – McGee is not homophobic or suspects there’s something between you and the cop. He’s just jealous. McGee sees you as his friend. You went out together for drinks and dinner. You were BFFs. It’s natural for him to feel possessive about you.”

“Abby was with us most times,” Tony pointed out.

“But Abby’s a girl,” Ziva had countered. “Detective McCadden is ALL MAN. He’s competition.” Tony had frowned. Was McGee gay? “And no, McGee is not gay,” Ziva had added. “He just sees you as his best friend who did everything together but since you met Detective McCadden, you haven’t gone out with McGee. I would be miffed, too, if I were McGee.”

Things got decidedly chilly after Tony announced Phil was moving in to help share the rental.

“I don’t understand why McGee should go all green-eyed,” Tony had said, and he truly didn’t. Since both he and Phil weren’t out, they were, as far as everyone was concerned, just best buddies and they did the stuff that best buds did – eat, drink, go to ball game, movies, etc. He did that even with Abby and she didn’t have any problems with Phil.
Then again, there was only one Abs. She was special. Not just to him but to Gibbs, too. She was the only one he’d come out to. He’d taken her out for dinner and drinks after a particularly tiring Friday last week and had come out to her.

She’d wanted to know if Gibbs knew. He’d stammered out an incoherent response, having not expected her to ask that but she’d said, “It’s alright, Tony. I won’t say a word. This is just between you and me. Besides, I know Gibbs. If he were gay he wouldn’t even tell me. Maybe Ducky…but no, I think this is one of those things that would be taboo for us. Like asking about his ex-wives. So don’t worry. My lips are forever sealed.” She made a zipping gesture across her tightly closed lips. “Until you unzip them.”

Phil’s voice brought Tony back to where they were – two gay cops in the closet sharing a house. “How long you been at NCIS now?” Phil asked. “Ten? Eleven?”


“I’ve been there, done that. Not for thirteen fucking years…but I’ve been there. So, something happened recently? Between you and Gibbs?”

Tony expelled a quick breath. He’d confided in Phil about his secret history with Gibbs and, once in a while, when his melancholy got the better of him, had found a strong, sympathetic shoulder in Phil to cry on. “No. Gibbs is very careful about that. It’s…just me. I’m finding it harder each day to continue pretending. He’s such a fucking liar! Can’t he see that? He’s been flaunting that Colonel – Hollis Mann – right in my face. And not just her. It’s like he can’t say no to any woman who makes a play for him. Doesn’t matter if she’s a material witness or a suspect.”

“Whoa. Serious? That’s a surprise. I pegged him for a professional through and through.”

“No.” Tony scrubbed his face, pulling away from Phil. “No, that’s not right. I’m not right, I mean.” Seeing Phil’s quizzical look, he added, “Gibbs would never fool around with a suspect. Or a witness. He will play to their attraction for him but it would only be to get the answers to his questions on the case. He wouldn’t go so far as to sleep with any of them though I did hear some scuttlebutt when I first joined that he’d had a fling with his senior agent way back when. A senior special agent who became our Director.”

“No way.” Phil’s jaw dropped a little. “Serious?”

“Yup. Former Director Jenny Shepard. Office romances never stay a secret. No wonder Gibbs is so paranoid.”

“So you and him. It was an aberration, then. Not just an exception? You’re certain he’s gay? He could be bi.”

“‘Aberration’. Thank you, my friend. It’s what I’ve always aspired to. Being an aberration.”

“You know what I mean. C’mon.”

“Whatever they had it was in the past. I wouldn’t even have guessed if I didn’t listen to gossip. And yes, Gibbs is gay. Trust me on that.”

“You know what? I think your boss hates being gay and he’s trying to make it go away by fucking whatever woman he can get his hands on.”

“And you never did that?” Tony shot back. When Phil hesitated, Tony pounced. “See what I mean?”
“You never did that,” Phil shot back. “And I didn’t date women…much. I got over that pretty long ago. I just had to get up and find the guts to live the way I…the way I ought to live.”

Tony looked at him long and hard. Then his face softened. “And how’s that panning out?”

“Good.” Phil nodded. “Great, actually.” He broke into a wide grin.

“You and your pet coming along well, huh?” Tony asked, referring to Phil’s boyfriend who was a vet.

“Yes. Yes, we are. Doug-the-veterinarian has asked me to move in with him.”

“He did?”

“Yes. Last night, over dinner.”

“And you said…?”

“I said yes. Tony, I’m crazy about him and he…he loves me, too.”

“Then I’m happy for you but you realize I haven’t even met him?”

“I know. I’m sorry. Every time I arrange something either you have to cancel or I do. It’s a wonder Doug is still as patient and understanding as ever but – he said he’d come right over from the airport so you’ll finally get to meet him after one year of hearing me gush over him.”

“Cool. So when are you moving out?”

“Next weekend. Is that too soon? Do you want me to wait till you find another room mate?”

“No. Next weekend’s fine. Actually, you remember that apartment you called NCIS to check out couple of days ago? The one at Dupont Circle?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I ran into our current landlord. He happens to own that apartment, too. He was going to put it on the market so I asked him how much he’s asking for it. He named me a figure that had me rushing back to pick up my check book.”

“You bought the apartment?” Phil was taken aback.

“Not yet. I just gave him a reserve fee. I’ll settle the purchase next week after my birthday.”

“You can afford to buy an apartment in Dupont Circle? After your birthday? What’s so special about this birthday? And why is the selling price low enough to send you grabbing your checkbook? It’s got dead bodies under the hardwood flooring?” Phil sniggered.

“Whoa.” Tony laughed. “You’re channeling Abby. One question at a time. No, bodies under the floorboards. Just one in a freezer next to the washing machine.”

Phil’s eyes widened. “No kidding?”

“Nope. The frozen body parts belonged to the petty officer who was sharing the place with another guy. Other one you suspected had mob connections. Long story short – the bad guys mistook the petty officer to be the lover and wanted information. Tortured it out of the guy, but not before they’d hacked off his hands. And feet.”
“And you were going to move into that house? And take me along?”

“Come on, you don’t believe in ghosts, do you?”

“I’m Catholic. Of course I believe in ghosts.”

“Well, anyway, if you’re moving in with the pet doctor, I’ll have the place to myself.”

“You got a raise recently? NCIS must pay helluva lot more than the force.”

“I didn’t and they don’t. My mom created a trust before she died. The trust paid for my college education but after that nothing. Not until I turn 38 – which is next Tuesday – at which time I can buy or lease property and the Trust pays for it.”

“Serious?”

“Very. Of course, the Trust owns any property I buy so I can’t sell it and pocket the cash.”

“Still…wow. So you’re a trust fund kid.”

O O O

I mean there’s no good reason for him to be in the closet, is there?” Phil asked Tony awhile later. “It’s twenty fourteen. Same sex marriage has been legal here since 2009. Plus NCIS is worlds away from the force. I’m not the first cop to quit because he’s gay and fed up of checking the closet lock every time one of his colleagues makes a homophobic remark. And you know what? I have absolutely no regrets. Not. A. One. Life as an openly gay man today is as close to heaven as we’re going to get for a while yet, Tony. You should try it.”

“Sounds like.” Tony stretched again. They’d fixed a salad lunch and were now splayed out in front of the idiot box, lazing away the weekend. His birthday was next Tuesday but Abby had booked dinner for them tonight at a Morroccan restaurant to celebrate.

“You know, maybe he’s not having it as easy as you think he is.” Phil proposed.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re just thinking about yourself – how miserable you are, secretly yearning for this guy and thinking you can’t ever have him again.”

“Not ‘thinking’. I know it.”

“That’s what I mean – it’s all you. What about him? Maybe he’s having a hard time having you working beside him and he can’t break his rules.”

“Won’t, not can’t.”

“Whatever. Tony, this isn’t just about you.”

“You know,” Tony mused aloud. “If I knew that sometimes, just sometimes…he wishes things could be different I think I could survive on that. For another six months, anyway.”

“Tony,” Phil went over and sat beside him. “Do you honestly want that? To subsist on crumbs so tiny even a bird wouldn’t be interested?”
“I guess not. Gibbs knew Abby had organized a birthday dinner for me this evening so of course he goes fishing. The entire weekend. He even left the office after lunch today. He’s never done that.” Tony threw up his hands. “He finds something to do every year on my birthday week. I guess I can look at it positively. Or negatively. Positively, in that he knows it’s my birthday and he doesn’t trust himself to join us in celebrating. Coz we always celebrate it on the weekend before or the weekend after, and we get good and buzzed. Too tipsy to drive so we all call cabs. And he won’t risk getting drunk in case he loses control.”

Phil laughed.

“I’m serious. Imagine…both of us in the back seat with our hands free…free to do anything…drunk enough to forget it the next morning.”

“Okay, that’s looking at it positively.” Phil conceded. “What’s the negative?”

“That he’s done the vanishing act for thirteen years.”

“Hmmph.” Phil huffed and fell back on the sofa. The doorbell rang and he sprang up. “He-ey…been waiting for you.” He pulled the disheveled blond into the apartment and gave him a kiss. Introductions, long overdue, were made and Doug went to freshen up. “Honey,” Phil said to Doug after the latter had showered and joined them in the living room. “Tony needs some love advice.”

“From me?” Douglas frowned. “What on?”

“Can I dish?” Phil looked at Tony for permission.

“Go ahead,” Tony said. “Bare all for me.”

Fifteen minutes later, Douglas set his beer down. “My wise counsel says, stop being so pathetic and start living. You said it’s your birthday next Tuesday How old will you be?”

“Thirty-eight,” Tony said.

Doug’s brows rose. “You’ve been carrying this torch for your boss for thirteen years? Thirteen?”

“Told him,” Phil said.

“Do you mind?” Tony glared at his best friend.

“I know we just met for the first time today,” Doug said. “But I feel like I’ve known you as long as I’ve known Phil since he talks about you all the time so pardon my being blunt, but are you insane? Walk. This. Very. Day, Tony. Don’t let another birthday go by without coming to a firm decision about your life. One more birthday after this and you’ll be staring at forty.

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That Evening;

A Chinese Restaurant;

Washington, DC

“No. No!” McGee exclaimed when Tony announced his resignation.

“April Fool’s Day was last month, Tony,” Bishop said wryly.
“You can’t do that, Tony,” Abby cried. “You can’t leave us! We’ve been together like…for ever! What did Gibbs say? Omigod, he must be devastated. And mad as hell.”

“Have you told Gibbs?” McGee asked.

“I was meaning to do that before I told you,” Tony said. “But he’s been gone all day so I left my resignation letter on his desk.”

“On his –” McGee’s cell phone trilled cutting him off. He glanced at the caller ID and mouthed, “Gibbs.” “Yes, boss?” he answered in a normal tone. “Yeah, okay. Umm, he’s right here. We’re having Tony’s birthday dinner with Team Gibbs. Except Ducky. He’s got a date. Oh, then we’re meeting Tony’s friends for drinks. Yes, we know but we always celebrate it on the following weekend if the birthday falls on a weekday. Are you joining us? We just got here. You want to tell him yourself? Oh, okay. I will tell him. Yes, boss. I’ll tell him. See you on Monday, boss.” He put his phone away.

“Is he joining us?” Abby asked.

“No, he’s not,” McGee replied.

“Then what did he want?” Tony asked.

“He wanted to know if you were with us and what were we doing.”

“That’s all?” Tony said. “He just wanted to know where I am?”

“Yes. That’s what he asked but he did say to tell you Happy Birthday for him.”

“Why didn’t he tell me himself?”

“That’s what I said. Sort of, but he said he already wished you this morning then he said he had to go. I could hear voices in the background so his friends were waiting for him. Then he just said he’d see us on Monday. Oh, he did say earlier, “doesn’t DiNozzo know by now he’s to be contactable at all times? That all of us are. He said your phone is turned off. That’s why he called me.”

“You switched off your phone?” Bishop asked. “That’s gutsy. So Gibbs hasn’t read your letter, then.”

“Why did you turn off your phone?” Abby asked.

“Why didn’t you call Gibbs earlier and tell him about your resignation?” Bishop asked.

“And then to turn off your phone…” Abby said. “Why?”

Tony held up both hands. “Too many questions. Give me a break. I only put the letter on his desk before we left the office.”

“You could have given it to him earlier,” Palmer said. “Gibbs only left at three, didn’t he? I was surprised. Shocked, actually. Gibbs has rarely left work before six and he’s never started his weekend early. Is something wrong, you think?”

“Dr. Palmer,” McGee said. “On the contrary, I think it’s a good sign. Gibbs needs to have a life outside NCIS and I’m happy he’s starting to have one. Dr. Taft is good for him.”

“I love it when you guys call me Doctor Palmer.” Palmer grinned.
“Nevermind Gibbs!” Abby snapped. “I want to know about you, Tony. Why are you leaving?”

Tony expelled a breath, as if releasing all his pent-up frustration. “Okay, to make it short and sweet, it’s been thirteen years since I set foot in NCIS and I’m still just a special agent. I-I’ve stagnated. I love what I’ve been doing or I wouldn’t have stayed this long. But...I need more after thirteen years, not be just a special agent.”

“But you’re a senior special agent,” Bishop pointed out.

“Not good enough. Not after thirteen years.”

“You want to lead your own team,” Bishop surmised. “I get that. Why not talk to Gibbs? Did you? Before you decided to resign?”

“But you turned Rota down,” McGee said, before Tony could answer Bishop. “And Bishop’s right. Just talk to Gibbs. You never know, he might be thinking of setting up a second MCRT. I hope he does then we won’t have to work so late or get called in too often on weekends.”

“I turned Rota down because Gibbs needed someone here,” Tony said. “I couldn’t take off and leave him in Mexico, with no one here to watch over things.”

“What makes you think he doesn’t need you now?” Abby asked. “You know he’s not one to talk about how he feels but it doesn’t need words to know he needs you, Tony. He said so himself that you’re irreplaceable. And that was from way back. After Mexico, you proved you could lead a team. Not just any team but his team. The Major Crimes Response Team.”

“Yeah, but…” Tony paused. He had planned to tell them but now he found himself vacillating. “Like I said, that was a long time ago. I feel like a pair of old shoes. He doesn’t notice them until they get thrown out – unintentionally or not, I might add.”

“I don’t feel taken for granted,” McGee said.

“That’s because you’re a geek,” Tony rebutted. “You guys live in a different dimension. Besides, you have Delilah. She makes you feel irreplaceable every day.”

“Yeah, I’m darn lucky to have her.”

“What you need is a Samson, I mean Delilah in your life, Tony,” Abby said. “You don’t have a good...ummm, significant other to go home to every night that’s why you’re feeling restless. And it’s the same with Gibbs. If he had the love of a good woman, he wouldn’t be so irascible, be so...so ornery!”

“And even if Gibbs realizes your worth – which he does,” Bishop said. “He hasn’t made you the team lead because that means he has to retire and he’s still got a few years yet before mandatory retirement. You don’t want to force Gibbs into retirement so he can make you the team leader, would you?”

Tony gave her a dirty look.

“Tony, seriously, take back your letter then go talk to Gibbs,” McGee said. “Go see him on Monday morning before you come in to work. He’s been your boss for thirteen years. Surely he deserves better than just a letter.”

“McGee’s right,” Bishop said.
“Okay. Alright,” Tony threw up his hands. “I’ll see him on Sunday night. He should be back from fishing by dinner time. If not, I will drop in early Monday morning and talk to him before we come in.”

“Yaay.” Abby gave him hug. “But no, not yaay. You’re still leaving and I still think you shouldn’t. Buutt…I think if you stop by to talk to Gibbs before you come in on Monday, you will be able to work out something that you’ll both be happy with.”

“Uhh…” Tony started then stopped. Go on. Do it.

“Look, if you guys aren’t in a rush to leave, I’ll tell you the real reason why I’m leaving.”

Leaving Gibbs a letter after thirteen years is way beneath you, Tony,” Abby said as they adjourned to the bar where Phil and Doug were meeting them.

“I guess you’re right,” Tony said. “But…damn, I can’t tell him face to face.”

“Why not?” They all asked in unison as they pushed open the door to the bar and entered. Because I would lose my nerve, Tony wanted to say. Because I would change my mind and not leave. “Because I know he will see it as ingratitude,” he said, instead. “Or even blame himself for not realizing earlier and I respect him too much…love him too much…to put him on a guilt trip.” He let his head fall back against the chair. “There’s also another reason – my mother left me some money in her will.”

“We know,” Bishop said. “You told us you used it for your college education.”

“That’s just part of it.” He explained the terms of the trust his mother had set up. “It’s not cash,” he said. “It’s a trust Mom set up which will pay for property I buy or lease. If it’s a purchase, the cap is 1.2 million. If it's rental, the cap is $4,000 a month.”

“So if you buy a property that’s lower than the cap do you get to keep the difference?” McGee asked.

Tony chuckled. “Would be nice, but no, and there's a limit, of course. I can't go buying million-dollar properties every year.”

“Still a lot of money,” Bishop said. “Leaves your salary as your pocket money.”

“Compared to the Paddington family fortune, less than peanuts,” Tony said. “But yes, enough for me to satisfy my travel bug and do it first class.”

“So as Abby said, why resign?” McGee asked.

“Just take unpaid leave,” Bishop suggested.

“Travel all you want but come back to work,” McGee added. “Take a few months off, but resigning? A bit over the top, Tony. Why the drama?”

“I can’t believe you’re leaving just because your mother left you money,” Abby said. “And it’s not the amount of money because even if she left you a billion dollars I can’t believe you’d leave us. Leave Team Gibbs! It’s going to break Gibbs’ heart!”

Tony gave a snort. Abby glared at him, both perplexed and hurt. She sensed there was more to
what Tony was telling them but what? And why was he not being totally open with them? They weren’t just long-time colleagues or close friends. They were Family.

“How much notice are you giving?” McGee asked while Abby stewed.

“Two weeks,” Tony said. “But I have a lot of leave left so I can use that in lieu of.”

“Don’t you dare, Tony DiNozzo,” Abby said sternly. “You talk to Gibbs first and you give two months’ notice – if Gibbs hasn’t killed you – then we do that whole extended farewell bash. You are not walking out on us just like that.”

“You should stay until Gibbs finds a replacement, at the very least,” McGee said.

“So you go back to the office and take back that letter,” Abby said. “After Gibbs is through with you, you won’t be leaving,” she added under her breath.

“Abs…” Tony began. “Abs, I already have another job lined up.”

All three of them looked at him open-mouthed.

“You already have another job?” Abby said, her voice dangerously low. “And you never said a word to us?”

“Abs…”

Abby got up from the table. “I can’t believe you did this. I’m leaving. I can’t listen to this anymore.”

“Sit. Down. Abigail.” Tony grabbed her arm and pulled her down. “I have another reason and I’ll tell you if you just give me a minute. Or two.”

“Tell us about the new job first,” McGee said.

“Alright,” Tony said. “My cousin offered me a job in the Paddington Group and I accepted.”

“Why did he do that?” McGee asked. “He never asked you to go work in the family company all these years. Why now?”

“Actually, he has asked me a few times. I told him I wasn’t ready to leave NCIS.”

“And you’re ready now,” Abby said by way of a question. Her face was tight with hurt then suddenly crumpled. “I guess I understand. You waited over a decade and here you are, still just senior special agent instead of team lead. And I’m being childish and selfish not wanting you to go.” She drew in a deep breath then said, “Tell us about your new job.”

“When I flew over for my uncle’s funeral last year,” Tony continued. “Crispian said he and a business associate had started a private charity foundation and asked if I would be interested in being a part of it. I turned him down. Last month he called me up and offered it again. I accepted.”

“So you won’t be a Fed anymore,” Palmer said.

“Nope. I’ll be an executive director in the Paddington Liberty Foundation.”

“What’s that?” Bishop asked.

“It’s the second-biggest private foundation after Bill and Melinda Gates’,” Phil said, coming up to
them, Phil in tow. “They have billions in endowments and work amongst special interest groups and causes. Like human-trafficking. Aside from the usual disaster relief programs, of course. Wow, Tony. No wonder you threw us over.”

“I’m Douglas Davenport,” Doug said to the rest of the group. “Phil’s fiance.”

“Oh, really?” Tony said, smiling at Doug. “You proposed?”

“Yes, I did. Over dinner and he said yes.”

Congratulations were offered and soon, the conversation reverted to Tony’s resignation and new job.

“I had already made up my mind to leave NCIS when Crispian called me up. I hadn’t spoken to him since my uncle’s funeral so I wasn’t expecting a call from him offering me a job.”

“Sounds like you should be working there,” McGee remarked. “You’re so excited. I haven’t even heard of the foundation.”

“Oh, they are very, very private,” Douglas said. “Aside from being based out of London. They hate publicity and since they don’t need donations, they don’t do any promotions or awareness drives. Not for the foundation but they do do educational programs and annual conferences to highlight certain issues to attract volunteers.”

“How come you guys know so much about it?” Bishop asked.

“Because I have been involved with their programs for third-world countries,” Douglas replied. “You heard of Médecins Sans Frontières?”

“Sure,” Abby said. “I’ve volunteered with them before I joined NCIS. The organization doesn’t want publicity for itself but for its causes. They don’t ask for money but for volunteers and I know all this because the nuns are volunteers and I still hope to get involved again one day.”

“But you’re a vet,” Tony said to Doug.

“Yes, I am,” Doug said. “But you don’t have to be a medical doctor to volunteer. I give injections, do dressing…basic stuff anyone with a bit of training can do. Plus, PLF is going to commence rescue shelters for pets in urban areas and I will be very involved in that.”

“So back to Tony,” Bishop said. “What will you be doing there?”

“That’s not decided yet. My cousin suggested I spend a few months at the foundation then see where I will fit in best.”

“Who runs the foundation?” McGee asked. “Has Crispian retired from the day-to-day running of the business and gone into charity work like Bill Gates?”

“No,” Tony said. “The foundation’s CEO is a guy called Morgan Theron.”

“From the Therons,” Douglas interjected.

“The billionaire family?” Phil asked.

“Yes.”

“You’ve met any of them?” Tony asked.
“Nope, way above my social circle.”

“The Therons’ companies rule the aerospace and defense weapons industry,” Bishop said. “We’ve dealt with them in the NSA. Very, very secretive, some of their units. But their public face is sort of like Lockheed-Martin, General Dynamics and Northrup Grumman rolled into one. It’s called Theron-Knight Atomics. The merger between Theron and Knight Systems was completed following the September 11 attacks.”

“Oh yeah…” McGee said. “They produced the successor to the Predator drone, didn’t they?”

“And other top-secret defense toys the government absolutely denies knowledge of,” Bishop added. “They have their own Area 51 equivalent but that could just be the conspiracist rumors.”

“So these guys design and build weapons that lets you kills thousands without you leaving your armchair?” Abby asked. “And you - ” she looked at Tony through narrowed eyes. “- you are going to work for them?”

“I’m not working for the Theron company or the Paddington Group. Or Knight Services.”


“Whatever. I’m going to work in the charity foundation. It’s a totally different beast. I will be helping the impoverished in third-world countries,” Tony clarified.

“Guilt money,” Abby said. “But better than nothing, I guess.”

“I can’t see you working in a third-world country, Tony,” Palmer said. “A developing one, maybe, but third world? Like Africa? I don’t think so.”

“I’m not going to Africa, Doctor Livingstone,” Tony glared at Palmer. “I’m at the management level and will be based in London. My responsibilities will entail travel to Europe, of course.”

“Can we get back to why you have to leave?” McGee asked. “Because you’re going into charity work? Or is there another reason?”

“Patience, Grasshopper. What I’m about to tell you isn’t easy because it’s very, very personal so don’t rush me.”

“Is it something that’s going to make me cry?” Abby asked.
“You kept this from us all these years?” McGee almost yelled. He was upset. Extremely so. Weren’t they friends? Best friends, even. Family! How could Tony not tell them until now?

“You waited until you were resigning to tell us you’re gay?” Bishop said. “What were you afraid of?”

“You thought we wouldn’t accept you?” McGee asked. “Tony…”

“No, not that,” Tony said. “I didn’t want to make it hard for you.”

“What do you mean?” Bishop asked.

Tony winced inwardly. This wasn’t going the way he thought it would. “I – uhh – mean that it’s not you guys I was worried about.”

“I know,” Palmer said. “You’re worried about Gibbs.”

“Gibbs?” McGee said. “You were worried about Gibbs?”

“I would, too, if I were gay.” Palmer sucked hard on his drink. “Just imagine…you know how he gives you one of his death-ray glares? If I were gay I’d be thinking he wants to crucify me or something.”

“He never struck me as homophobic,” Bishop said, frowning. “Why do you think he would have a problem with you being gay?” she asked Tony.

“So you kept this from us for over a dozen years because you were afraid of Gibbs’ reaction?” McGee said. “Why not just tell us and leave Gibbs out of it? It’s not like we wouldn’t respect your privacy or your wish to keep your sexual orientation quiet.”

“I told Abby last week,” Tony said. “I wasn’t ready to come out to everyone just yet so I talked to Abs first. I knew she’d be okay with it since she’s got a lot of gay friends.”

"You knew?" McGee's eyes narrowed at Abby. Everyone else's were on her already.

"So what if I knew?" Abby said. "Told to me in confidence."

McGee's feathers backed down. "Of course. I guess. You're right." Then he charged back at Tony. "You knew Abby wouldn’t have a problem with it yet you kept it from her until last week? You two have been together from the start of the MCRT,” McGee asked. Something wasn’t adding up but he couldn’t figure out what. “And you still weren’t sure about the rest of us right up until today.” The disappointment in his voice was palpable. “I guess we should be grateful you’re telling us now.”

“If I only came out to you and Bishop but not to Gibbs, you’d be keeping a secret from him. We work in the same room, facing each other, interacting face-to-face everyday. And you know Gibbs
has eyes and ears at the back of his head. I didn’t want to burden you with that, worrying that one of you might accidentally out me. We wouldn’t be able to focus a hundred and ten per cent on work if you were carrying my secret around all day, every day, year after year. And you know that’s what Gibbs demands. Our total concentration.”

There was a brief silence as the others absorbed this.

“Look, things may be much better now than they were when I was a rookie with the police force,” Tony said, “But some things just stay with you and having seen homophobia up close and in my face makes it just a tad difficult to be honest and open. I’m sorry I kept my sexual orientation from you guys for this long but I hope you can understand. I –”

“I understand, Tony,” Abby cut in. “I know what you and other gay people go through because I’ve seen it happen to my gay friends so I wouldn’t judge you and tell you what you should, or should not, have done. I want you to know I love you and always will… but – but…” and she broke down. “Why do you have to go? To leave?” Her tears tore at Tony’s heart but there was no way he could say more and not betray Gibbs.

McGee sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m being an ass. Okay. Your being gay aside, you have to go see Gibbs and tell him about resigning. You have to tell him face to face. For our sakes because I don’t want to be at the office when Gibbs reads your letter and he’s not expecting it. And… Tony. You’re still the Tony who’s my… friend, gay or straight. I won’t pretend to say I understand how you feel because I don’t but I do understand how difficult it must have been for you to carry that burden for so long. So if I contributed to that in any way, I’m sorry.”

“You’re the best, Tim,” Tony said, giving McGee a one-armed hug.

“And you should know I’m perfectly alright with you being gay,” Palmer said. “And I’m so glad you’re out. So. You going to tell Gibbs on Monday? About your resignation, I mean. Not about being gay. Or are you going to come out to him, too?”

“No. Listen up, people,” Tony said. “Gibbs is not to know. Please, just do this for me, ok? And don’t make me have to explain why. Just accept that that’s how I want it.”

“You mean keep it from Gibbs forever?” Palmer asked, swallowing heavily. “Uhh, I don’t –”

“Until I’m ready,” Tony said emphatically. “Just let me do things at my own time and I promise I’ll tell you when the time comes.” He turned to McGee. “And before I forget, I’m letting you move into my apartment if you want.”

“Are you serious, Tony?” McGee said, his face brightening then falling. “What rental are you expecting?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” McGee asked.

“Nothing?” Abby and Bishop echoed.

“You have a house, not an apartment,” McGee pointed out.

Tony told them about the Dupont Circle apartment.

“You bought that?” McGee asked. “I guess you have the money to do that now. And you seriously want me to move in there? Tony, Delilah and I can’t afford to live in Dupont Circle. We’re
planning to get married in a couple of years and are saving up for a home.”

“I’m not charging you rent. I’m asking you to house-sit for me.”

“House-sit?”

“Yes.”

“When and for how long?”

“I’m flying out to London next week. My flight’s booked for Tuesday – my birthday - so you can move in any time after. I’ll be away for two years so you’ve got two years rent put away for your own home.”

“You said you’re flying off next Tuesday?” Palmer said. “Tony, you have to tell Gibbs face to face.”

“I will.” Tony promised. “Sunday night. I’ll go over to his place.”

“And remember to tell us what his reaction is once you leave,” Abby said. “The minute you’re out of his house, you call me.”

“Send us a group voice message,” Bishop suggested.

After the group broke up and everyone left for home, Tony called Abby.

“Abs, could we talk? Tomorrow? I can go to your place or you come over to mine.”

“Yes, sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“About the real reason I’m leaving.”

“Oh. You mean you lied to us earlier?”

“No. All that’s true. I just have one more thing to get off my chest but I wanted to tell you. Not the rest.”

“Okay. I’ll drop by your place. I need to do laundry first and some cleaning. Is one o’clock good?”

“Perfect. I’ll handle lunch.”

**Next Day at Tony’s house**

“I’m afraid to hear it, Tony,” Abby said. “At least it’s not about your health…like you have the Big C or something…because you’re taking up another job so it can’t be about your health.”

“It’s about my being gay,” Tony began.

“Oh my God, you’re HIV positive?” Abby’s eyes went saucer-like. “Oh, Tony...but there are good drugs nowadays and –”

“I don’t have Aids!” Tony’s own eyes widening. God, he was going to miss Abby! “It’s not about me. I mean not just me. It…umm..it involves Gibbs.”

Abby’s eyes remained wide. Straightening herself up, she said, “Okay, hit me with it.”
“I want you to hear me out first. No interruptions until I’m done otherwise I might chicken out and change my story.”

Abby held up her hand. “Promise.”

“I’m leaving because I’m in love with Gibbs and I don’t want him to know,” Tony began. Abby merely gaped at him, open-mouthed. “That’s why I hid my sexuality from you guys. Not because I don’t trust you but because I didn’t want my…feelings for Gibbs to come under scrutiny. And you know you’d all be watching once I told you. I couldn’t risk it. Gibbs would sense something was up.” Abby was still gaping at him so he continued, “I’ve been in love with Gibbs for years but I did a pretty good job hiding it, I must say, because you know the boss, he knows everything before we do. Even when it’s about ourselves.” He paused. “So it isn’t just that after thirteen years I haven’t moved up anywhere, it’s because I need to move on. To get a life. If it were just about a promotion, I would have talked to Gibbs ages ago, but it’s not. It’s about me needing to get over a yearning for something I can never have.” The words spilled from his mouth as if he were afraid if he paused, he’d never say what he’d been wanting to for so long.

He wanted so much to tell Abby about his fling with Gibbs that weekend a lifetime ago; the two weeks they’d spent when nothing existed except the two of them. He couldn’t, of course. Phil’s words returned to him, ‘This isn’t just about you’. No, that would out Gibbs and he didn’t have the right to do that. That left Tony no choice but to leave, to get as far away from Gibbs and NCIS as possible.

“I’m going crazy where I am, Abs. I need to go away. To get back the life I lost…because loving Jethro the way I do, I can’t ever meet someone else to have a real relationship with. Not unless I make a complete break.” Abby’s eyes welled at Tony calling the boss by his first name and saying it so tenderly.

“It’s not that I fell in love with him at first sight. I fell in lust at first sight, yeah. Oh hell, yeah. But love? I loved him little by little, a day at a time…everything we went through – my almost dying from the plague…I heard him, you know. I was drifting away…I knew I was losing the battle and felt my spirit being pulled out of me…then I heard his voice telling me I would not die. Commanding me. And I just obeyed.

“Then remember how I saved him from drowning? Or when he left us for Mexico? That nearly…” He dropped his head into his hands.

“Tony –” Abby’s voice cracked. She reached for his arm and squeezed it.

“And when he got shot and nearly didn’t make it…if he’d died…oh God, Abs.” He picked up the paper napkin on the table and blew his nose. “Now you see why I need to leave? I know Gibbs cares about me but…”

“He loves you,” Abby said, but she knew it wasn’t what Tony meant.

“Yes, he does, and I suppose you could tell me half a loaf is better than none.” But I’ve had the whole loaf and I can’t go on living on crumbs.

“No, I’m not going to tell you that,” Abby said. “That would be insulting. If half a loaf was livable for you, you wouldn’t be leaving.”

“Well, that’s it. Off my chest. And this stays between the two of us, right?”

“Of course.” Abby chewed on her thumbnail. “What are you going to tell Gibbs?”
“That I need a change and when Crispian offered me a position in PLF, I accepted.”

“Will Gibbs accept it? He won’t suspect something’s wrong? You know Gibbs. If his gut tells him you’re hiding something, he’ll interrogate you.”

“Which is why I didn’t want to tell him face to face. I hope you can see why now that I’ve told you everything. You’re my closest friend next to Phil and I couldn’t leave without telling you the truth.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that. Leave, I mean. I do understand how you feel but…I’m sorry but I can’t help thinking of Gibbs, too. This isn’t just about you. Gibbs not feeling for you the way you feel for him doesn’t negate the fact that he’s going to be hurt. And when Gibbs is hurt, he gets mad.”

“Abs, if I see him, talk to him, it’ll just make things…complicated. I can’t bear it if he feels sorry for me because he can’t give me what I want.”

“Feel sorry for you? Tony, he will whack your head right off its perch! He’ll yell at you and tell you to stop this nonsense and get back to work. Besides, you promised us you would tell him face to face.”

“I will.”

“Promise? Double promise?”

“I’ll try, okay? The reason why I wanted to talk to you in private is because I can’t – don’t want – to lie to you, to keep stuff from you. Our friendship means a lot to me. So I hope you will understand my reluctance to confront this issue with Gibbs. Abs, I would just die of embarrassment if he suspected why I’m leaving. I already feel so stupid.”

“Yes, you would. Well, since we’re doing this confessing thing, I’ll confess that I had harbored wishful thoughts of you and Gibbs becoming an item. Don’t look so shocked. I did suspect you could be gay and that you had feelings for Gibbs but you’ve kept your personal life so secret that it was hard to tell. You’re the only one with a secretive love life. McGee introduced us to Delilah early in their relationship and so did Palmer with Breena. We just assumed you had a lot of girlfriends and weren’t ready to commit to one. Even Gibbs, secretive as he is, didn’t hide the fact that he was dating Colonel Mann and before that, some redhead who’d pick him up or drop him off at work. And there was that brief stint with Allison Hart whom we all detested, remember?”

“How could I forget,” Tony muttered. That one particularly stung because they all knew Gibbs hated lawyers. Yet he’d fuck one but not me, his special agent whom he’d, by his own admission, spent two mind-blowing, unforgettable weeks with.

Abby looked at him, her eyes moist but her control still intact. Tony was her closest friend and she wanted nothing more than his happiness. And she understood where he was coming from, too. “Tony, you have to do what you think is right. No one has the right to tell you what should do, not in this instance. McGee and the rest don’t know all the facts but I do. Now. So, you do what you believe is right for you and you have my support.”

“Thanks, Abs.” He gave her a hug. “I’ve been planning this since last year when I went to London. Being away just those few days gave me some breathing space. I can’t lie and say I didn’t miss him even though it was less than a week but I also got the chance to see that there’s a world outside my Jethro/Tony bubble; that there’s a life out there I have not had a chance to know since I joined NCIS in 2001. I was only 25 years old then, Abs. I’m thirty-eight now. I can’t live the rest of my
life pining away for Gibbs. That’s pathetic, even for me. So wish me well and let me go.”

“I do wish you well, Tony. But there’s one thing that’s bugging me – how does someone fall that deeply in love with another person – as you have with Gibbs – if they’ve never even had a personal relationship? You’ve only been superior and subordinate. You weren’t even friends before Gibbs hired you, much less lovers. So how did you end up in love with Gibbs in the first place?”
At the crack of dawn, Monday morning, Tony parked his car a few meters down the road from Gibbs’ house. He braced himself for the inevitable confrontation. He’d dropped Abby home after their talk yesterday then headed for the office to take back the letter when he lost his nerve just as he turned into the Navy Yard. Much as he agreed thirteen years deserved better than just a single page resignation letter, none of them, except Abby, knew the real reason he was leaving. And Abby hadn’t known the half of it. Until he’d told her how he’d picked Gibbs up in Baltimore. The jist of it, not the details. Not the sexual ones.

Like him, Abby wasn’t often at a loss for words. After he’d told her, she remained silent for so long he got worried. “Hey, you still conscious? Or have you fainted with your eyes open? I had a classmate who used to fall asleep and snore with his eyes open.”

“Whoa, Tony. No wonder you kept this all these years. And you were right to do so. It would have changed how we saw Gibbs. And I kinda agree with his decision to keep it quiet, too. Sad for both of you, but perfectly understandable. And don’t you worry. No one’s ever going to know. Not from me.”

God, he would miss them so much. But then, life was about choices and as far as his life had been, it had never let him have his cake and eat it, too. Anyway, he’d turned his car around and gone home instead of taking back his letter.

Then early this morning he was struck by a pang of conscience and decided he would go see Gibbs after all. He’d tell Gibbs the letter on his desk was a mere formality. He’d tell Gibbs then take the rest of the day off.

It was just a couple of minutes to six so Gibbs would be leaving for work soon, if he hadn’t already, but when he drove up the house, he saw Gibbs’ truck parked some ways up the road. Gibbs always drove his truck to and from work, using the company-issue Dodge Charger only when he went out in the field.

He trudged up the front path and grabbed the door handle, only to have the door yanked open before he could turn the handle.

“What are you doing here?” Gibbs asked, not looking happy to see Tony at all.

Before Tony could answer, a pair of nylon-encased legs and feet in black pumps came down the stairs.

“Oh.” Dr. Samantha Ryan gave Tony a quick smile. She had been in the midst of buttoning her blouse and put on her jacket hurriedly, the lacy edge of her bra peeked out between the blouse’s buttons. “DiNozzo, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yes. Good morning, Dr. Ryan.”
“I’m sorry, I have to hurry.” Dr. Ryan gave Gibbs a peck on the lips and squeezed her way out between the two men.

“Uhh, me, too,” Tony said. “I just came by to tell you I’m taking the day off. Uhh, something urgent came up.” He turned and hurried to his car before Gibbs could even say anything.

_Well, if he had any doubts about leaving, they were now gone._

He drove home in a daze. Anger, hurt and more anger warred in him. Most of the anger was at himself. Dr. Ryan was clearly very comfortable in Gibbs’ home and not at all put out at being caught leaving his house at six-fucking-a.m.... **What the hell have I been doing all these years if not wasting it!** Well, this is it, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. I am not going to fucking care one iota anymore what you feel or don’t feel about me; I don’t give a flying fuck who you’re fucking; I don’t even care that you’re such a lying bastard coward still fucking women! From now on, you are out of my life and mind. You don’t get to go there anymore.

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Back in his apartment, Tony grabbed a beer from the fridge, downed it in anger then went to take a shower. He was just drying off, still muttering angrily, when he heard the doorbell. Fuck. He bet it was Gibbs. It wasn’t.

“Sir!” Tony said with surprise when he opened the door. He could hardly believe it when looked through the peephole and saw who it was. Thomas Morrow. Past Director of NCIS and now the Under Secretary of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

“I’m sorry for dropping in on you so early and unexpectedly, DiNozzo,” Morrow, said. “I tried calling but your phone wasn’t on.”

“I’m sorry, it, uhh, ran out of battery. I’m charging it.” It was a lie. He’d switched it off in case Gibbs called. Or McGee. Or Bishop. Abby. He couldn’t handle any calls this morning.

“May we come in?” Morrow asked.

“Sorry, of course.” Tony opened the door wide and gestured for the two men to enter.

“This is Mike Brennan,” Morrow introduced. “Mike’s from the CIA’s SAD/PAG.” Special Activities Division, responsible for covert operations, and PAG, Political Action Group, responsible for covert activities related to political influence, psychological operations, and economic warfare.

“Hi, Tony DiNozzo.” Tony extended his hand. “But you know that already. Have a seat. Would you guys like coffee? I was about to make a pot.”

“Coffee would be nice,” Morrow said. “But why don’t you put some clothes on first?”

It was only then that Tony realized he was holding on to a towel. Covering up his privates. He ran into his bedroom, emerging a few minutes later dressed in shorts and a tee shirt.

“I’m uhh, sorry. I didn’t realize I was...uhh...” Tony started the kettle, got the pack of coffee from the freezer and proceeded to spoon the grains into the French Press pot. “I’m off today that’s why I’m not dressed for work.”

“Relax, DiNozzo,” Morrow said. “This is your home. You can go naked any time.”
“What, may I ask, brings the Under-Secretary of the OIA and the CIA’s ulta-covert division to my humble abode?” Tony asked, bringing the coffee and three mugs to the table. He wasn’t kidding. Thomas Morrow, as Under-Secretary of Homeland Security's OIA did not make visits to lowly special agents. Even less would he visit said agent with a CIA operative in tow. Tony did not know Brennan but he knew of the secretive unit Brennan was with. SAD’s Political Action Group was responsible for carrying out covert activities related to political influence to support US foreign policy. He knew the unit used agents of influence or, in the case of a major operation, involved paramilitary units from SAD’s Special Operations Group. PAG operatives took care of jobs that, if they went south, the US government could, and would, deny all knowledge of. They provided the 'plausible' in "plausible deniability".

All of which made Tony wonder if it had been a mistake to open the door.

“We have a favor to ask of you,” Morrow began. “You are free to turn it down, of course. No repercussions. You have my word.”

“Why is it that when those words are appended to the request, I get a bad feeling?” Tony asked.

“Have you heard of the Caucasian Emirate?” Brennan asked, ignoring Tony’s remark.

“Vaguely,” Tony replied.

“It’s a militant Jihadist organization active in southwestern Russia who, we believe, is trying to infiltrate the UK and Europe,” Brennan said. “Our intel is sketchy but we already have our hands full with ISIS. Our latest chatter indicate that the Emirate’s leader, Rustam Kasarov, has proclaimed his territory a caliphate and himself as the Emir Muaza. The emirate’s leadership has been shaky since the death of its last leader, Magomed Suleimanov and Kasarov is seeking to align his organization with ISIS in order to strengthen his hold. At the same time, he’s doing some fundraising around Europe to fund terror attacks.

“We need someone to go undercover and find out how successful Kasarov has been in raising financial support. He’s been investing in the stock market apart from the usual human trafficking, drugs and prostitution. We know about the illegal businesses but we do not have a good enough handle on the legitimate ones. That’s where you come in.”

“Me?” Tony asked, startled.

“Yes, you,” Morrow said. “We want you to go undercover and find out what you can about Kasarov’s activities.”

“Why me? I’m not a spook. I’m a Fed. I investigate crimes after they’ve been committed and I’m not experienced in hunting terrorists. I told you, I investigate, interview suspects, write reports. In fact, I’m not even a Fed anymore. I just resigned.”

“When?” Morrow asked.

“Today. Effective. Today was to be my last day but I decided not to go in. I’ve already emailed Director Vance.”

“What has Gibbs got to say?” Morrow asked. “He thinks very highly of you.”

“Hmmph. Well, I decided it was time for a career change.”

“You got something lined up?” Morrow asked.
“Yes, actually. I’m leaving for London tomorrow to join my cousin’s charity foundation.”

“The Paddington Liberty Foundation?” Morrow asked.

“Yes, how did you know?”

Morrow and Brennan exchanged looks.

“What?” Tony asked, looking at the two men.

“Things couldn’t work out better than this,” Brennan said.

“Why not?” Tony asked suspiciously.

“Because that’s exactly where we wanted you to go undercover in,” Morrow said. "The Paddington Liberty Foundation."

“What? Does Crispian know?”

“No, he does not,” Morrow said.

“And he will not,” Brennan added. “This is a Homeland Security-SAD/PAG operation. In other words, top secret. Very top secret. So top secret you can't even tell your late mother.”

"That's not even remotely funny."

"I wasn't trying to be."

“DiNozzo,” Morrow said, cutting in. “Clichéd as it may sound, your country needs you. Yes, you because of your connection to Crispian Paddington. We suspect the Caucasian Emirate has infiltrated certain companies in UK and Europe, as well as Russia. Being from Chechnya, the members do not all look like your typical Arab terrorist. Some are redheads, some even blonde. The only thing they have in common is that they are Muslims and they hate America.”

“And how is my cousin involved in any of this?” Tony asked. “You’re not telling me you suspect him of being a terrorist, are you? Or a terrorist-sympathizer.”

“No, we’re not,” Brennan said. “But we suspect his organization has been compromised in some way and we’re trying to confirm that. Meanwhile, we need someone to stick close to him and you are that person.”

“And you want me to play James Bond,” Tony said. “License to kill and all that. Do I get an Aston Martin?”

“It’s very unlikely you’ll see any ‘action’ as it were,” Brennan said. “Ninety-nine per cent of the time you’ll be attending charity functions and diplomatic cocktail parties. If you do see any action, it likely means your cover is blown and we’ll have to recall you.”

“You want me to attend cocktail parties…” Tony said. “And report what, exactly? Whether I had my martini stirred or shaken?”

“DiNozzo,” Morrow began, his tone grave. “This is not going to be as easy as it sounds. Say yes, then we’ll give you the details and have you properly briefed. So, what will it be?”

“How long will this assignment be?”
“Two years or so,” Brennan replied.

“If I say yes, when do you want me to start? I told you I leave for London tomorrow. The CEO of the foundation is expecting me next Monday. I was going to do some sightseeing, buy some suits, before I reported in for work.”

“Say yes and we’ll take care of everything,” Brennan said. “Leave PLF to us. You’ll report in when you’re ready.”

“But –”

“Yes or no, DiNozzo?” Morrow asked.

“Say yes and it’ll be private jet travel, a ridiculous wardrobe allowance, a penthouse suite, a personal assistant, and two and a half times your last salary,” Brennan said. “Hell, DiNozzo, I’d take it if I could but Paddington’s not my cousin.”

“Private jet, did you say?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Brennan replied.

“A big clothes allowance?”

“A ridiculous clothes allowance.”

“And a penthouse?”

“Yup.”

“How about a chauffeur?”

“Your bodyguard doubles as chauffeur.”

“Bodyguard? Why would I need a bodyguard?”

“Just for show,” Brennan said. “Your cover is that of a wealthy playboy cousin of British billionaire, Crispian Paddington. You live hard and play hard and you now want to pay back for your privileged life by volunteering full time with PLF.”

“And how do I explain all this to my boss, Morgan Theron?”

“It’s okay. Morgan’s one of us,” Morrow said.

Tony’s brows shot up. “He is?”

“Yes, or no, DiNozzo,” Morrow said, his patience running thin.

“Just one more question,” Tony said.

“What?” Morrow snapped.

“Shoot,” Brennan said at the same time.

“What kind of private jet?”

Morrow threw up his hands in exasperation and stood. “I’m serious, DiNozzo. Your help is needed. You likely won’t know how crucial your help is until it’s all over.”
“I hope I can do whatever it is you need me to do.”

“Someone with your skills and experience? Piece a cake, as they say.” Morrow smiled and headed to the door. “To answer your question, I believe it’s a Gulfstream.”

“Then it looks like I better take one for the team.” Tony said seriously.

“Excellent,” Morrow said. “I need to get back to the office. Brennan will take you to KnightShade.” He gave Brennan a nod and was gone.

“What’s KnightShade?” Tony asked.

“The organization that will be your handler,” Brennan said. “Pack a bag – just your basic personal paraphernalia like books, music, skincare, enough clothes for a week.”

“Isn’t a handler a person?”

“Yes, but in your case, the team at KnightShade will look after you and get you operationally-ready. After that you’ll be assigned a handler.”

“Do I have to sign anything?”

“We’ll do all that at KnightShade.”

“Where are they?”

“San Diego.”

“San Diego! But I’m supposed to be in London.”

“You will. Eventually. Look, just go get your bag or else I’m taking you as you are.”

“You’re taking me to San Diego?”

“No. I’m taking you to Langley. Someone from KnightShade will accompany you to their West Coast headquarters in San Diego. Now get moving, DiNozzo. I haven’t got all day and neither do you. Your flight to San Diego is scheduled to leave in –” Brennan glanced at the time on his cell phone, “Two hours.”

“I gotta let Abby know.”

“You gotta let nobody know. Nobody but nobody knows where you go and who you’re with from this moment on, got it? I thought I made that clear. You’ll be issued a new phone, corporate email, bank account, everything will be new and you are not to contact anyone from your old life.”

“But it’s not going to be a secret I’m working at PLF plus you just said I’m going to be a wealthy playboy with all the frills. I’m bound to end up in the gossip rags, especially since I’m Crispian Paddington’s cousin and an American. The media’s gonna love me but my friends from my old life, as you put it, are going to see all that.”

“Yes, we know but they won’t be able to contact you. Not until you contact them and you don’t get to do that without clearing with us first. We’ll be managing your public profile and monitoring all your communications. Nothing gets to you or from you without us clearing it first.”

"This is worse than prison."
"Now, you're close." Brennan grinned and gave Tony a shove towards his bedroom. “Get packed. I’ll be waiting downstairs in the car. You got ten minutes.”

“Tony DiNozzo?” the deep voice at the other end of the line had a slight drawl. Low and sexy as hell, Tony thought, wondering if the face matched the voice. It usually didn’t. “Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Jax Theron. From KnightShade. You’re supposed to meet me in San Diego.”

“Yes, I’m supposed to fly off in a couple of hours. I’m in the middle of packing.

“Destination’s changed. I’m arranging for you to meet me in Bermuda.”

He’d wanted to ask questions but something in that deep voice that told Tony this man was used to having his orders obeyed. Like Gibbs. Except he always argued with Gibbs. “Uh, okay. Brennan’s waiting downstairs in the car. I gotta go. I’ll see you in um, Bermuda, then.”

Brennan was waiting impatiently tapping on the steering wheel of his car when Tony came out the entrance.

“Tried you long enough,” Brennan said when Tony got in.

“Got held up by a call from Jax Theron. Said he’s from KnightShade. You know him?”

“He’s the head honcho at KnightShade. For the special ops teams, that is. He’s going to be your handler. You’ll take your orders from him. He's also on the Board of Directors of PLF.”

“And according to him, I’m heading to Bermuda and not San Diego.”

“That’s what I was told, too.”

“What can you tell me about this Theron guy? If he’s already in PLF why do you need me?”

Brennan gave Tony a look. “We also have a guy sitting in the Oval Office giving the okay to black ops. Why do they need my Director? Or Morrow? Besides, Jax is not involved in the day-to-day operations of PLF. It may be Theron money but only Morgan Theron, his cousin, works there.”

“So Jax heads KnightShade?”

“Ax T. Knight is the numero uno. Alex manages the business side of the company and Jax oversees the rest. Both come from moneyed families but they couldn’t more different from your typical billionaire tycoons than these two. Story is, Theron was abducted when he was 14 years old by the head of the Peruvian secret police. Knight had just come out of Delta Force when he was told about the abduction. He got together a team of ex-spec ops guys and went in after the kid. Brought him home.”

“Was he hurt? The kid. Jax.”

“Psychologically and physically,” Brennan replied. “Sick bastard, that Montesinos.”

“I vaguely remember reading about that. It was in the 90s, wasn’t it?”

“Yup. 1996 thereabouts.”
“Where’s this Monte guy now?”

“In prison. The rescue set off a chain of events that led to the arrest and imprisonment of the Peruvian president, not just Montesinos. It’s a long story tied up with the cocaine trade.”

“Oh yeah, now I remember. You guys were involved in it or something.”

“Or something.” Brennan muttered. "Believe me, heads rolled. Carter was quietly removed and replaced by my current boss.”

“State was involved, too, weren’t they? Big scandal, that. From what I recall. I was still in Ohio U at the time. So Theron now works for his knight in shining armor?”

“You could say that, but the two families go way back. Theron is from the Theron family. The defense contractors? Multi billionaires?”

“No shit. And he’s going to be my handler? Why is he doing this if he’s one of those Therons?”

Brennan shrugged as he maneuvered his way through the downtown traffic towards Reagan International Airport. “Like I said, the abduction screwed with his head. His brothers and sisters work in the family company but in the hotel and entertainment industry. Jax chose to go into the Army, became a Delta Force operative like Alex Knight was then was transferred to KnightShade under a JSOC program. He’s been hundred percent with KnightShade for a few years now. He and Knight are a couple.”

“A couple?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. Gay as a pair of butterflies.” Brennan chuckled. “Mariposas.” He chuckled again. “Rumor has it Jax had been infatuated with Knight since he was a little kid. Jax, not Knight. Went into the Army like Knight; became a Delta Force operator like Knight. Then three or four years ago came back home to roost. Been inseparable since.” Brennan gave a small headshake. “Weird, these KnightShade guys.”

“Huh.” Tony felt in the inevitable pang of envy. “Why this change from San Diego to Bermuda?” he asked, deciding a change of subject was needed. “What’s at Bermuda?”

“I dunno but you’ll find out soon enough.”

“What about you and Under Secretary Morrow? Am I suppose to check in with you guys everyday or what?”

“We got no involvement in this, DiNozzo. You never saw us today, you never talked with us today.”

Tony nodded. “One of those, huh?”

“One of those.” Brennan nodded. “Morgan Theron’s in Geneva for a conference. That’s why your schedule was amended. Instead of you kicking your heels in London, they decided you might as well get your KnightShade orientation started rightaway.”

“What KnightShade orientation? I’m in the Paddington Liberty Fund, not KnightShade.”

“Yes, but the mission is being run by KnightShade. PLF just happens to be your undercover vehicle so as far as Jax Theron is concerned, you are a KnightShade operator for the duration of your assignment.”
“But –”

“Look, Theron runs KnightShade the way he wants. If he said you’re going on a KnightShade orientation program then you are. You don’t like it, take it up with him. I’m only here because we needed Under Secretary Morrow to recruit you. I went to Morrow, he went you and voila! you’re in.”

“I need some info on Theron and his team. I don’t want to go in blind.”

Brennan chuckled, making Tony suspicious when he was merely curious before.

“What?”

“I don’t know much about KnightShade. Nobody outside of the organization does and no, there’s nothing I can tell you about them that you don’t already know. Just wait till you get there, okay? If there was anything you needed to know now, you’d already have been told. Okay, we’re here,” Brennan said, as he pulled up outside Reagan International’s Terminal C. “See that lady? She’s from KnightShade. She’ll take over from here.” Brennan and Tony got out of the car and Brennan introduced them. “Tony, this is Ms. Lydia Ramone, your KnightShade escort. She’ll be accompanying you to Bermuda. Whatever questions you have about KnightShade, Ms Ramone will be happy to answer to the best of her ability. Of course, she might have to kill you after. Right, Ms. Ramone?”

“You always were a funny one, Mike.” Lydia shook Tony’s hand; they said their goodbyes and good luck to Brennan. Tony could still see him chuckling to himself as he pulled away from the kerb.
When I created KnightShade in 2003 (I didn't plan on publishing it and only did so after I wrote DiNozzo! in 2011) I was not aware of the ancient Sacred Band of Thebes - an elite fighting unit made up entirely of male lovers. You can imagine my delight when I found out!

KnightShade has female operatives, of course, but M31 is entirely male, entirely gay, and all are lovers to each other.

Sunrise Sanctuary:
Southampton, Bermuda

Sunrise Sanctuary, Bermuda, was, as Lydia told Tony, one of the LGBT resorts managed by Theron Leisure. There were several Sunrise Sanctuaries scattered over the globe, as was its sister-resort, Sunset Sanctuaries. Sunrise Sanctuaries, Lydia said, catered to the gay employees of Theron and KnightShade whereas Sunset Sanctuaries were for the Lesbian staff. Transgenders were welcome at either, as were bisexuals. The Sunrise and Sunset Sanctuaries were always adjacent to each other and shared the restaurants and sports amenities. In Bermuda’s case, the two Sanctuaries shared the three restaurants and the private beach but each had its own giant hot tub/jaccuzi that jutted out over the ocean. While there were no hard and fast rules, the respective Sanctuary guests quickly got to know which amenities were shared and which weren’t.

“No Sanctuaries for straight employees?” Tony asked.

“Yes, of course, there is - two but they’re in the Bahamas and Colorado. They are part of the main hotel and resort division. The LGBT Sanctuaries are more a personal venture of our CEO, Alex Knight, and Jax Theron, one of the directors of Theron Inc. You have heard of them, haven't you?”

"That's like asking if I've heard of Microsoft." Tony chuckled. "Right. Jax Theron. The man I’m here to meet. Tell me about him."

"Jax is thirty-three years old, and one of the best operators we have. He commands the entire KnightShade special ops division and is the CO of his own M team, M31. All the teams in KnightShade are named after deep sky objects – the M and the number are based on Messier numbers."

“M31 would be the Andromeda Galaxy,” Tony said. Lydia gave a nod. “Any particular reason?”

“I’m not certain but I’ve heard that it’s because KnightShade is so covert and its spec ops teams are
so black they’re like the deep sky objects compared to the usual special operations teams in our DoD. But, as I said, that’s what I heard. It’s not on any operating manual.”

“I’ve never been to Bermuda,” Tony said. “Just Puerto Rico, which is an entirely different thing, I know. So where, exactly is the Sunrise Resort and why does Mr. Theron want me to start my orientation here instead of San Diego? Not that I’m complaining. Just curious.” He took off his sunglasses and enjoyed the scenery along the South Road which they were traveling on. The flight had taken about two hours and they landed at Hamilton at four p.m., Bermuda time.

“Fabulous coastline,” Tony remarked. “Makes me think of shipwrecks, gold bullion and pirates, except that would be inaccurate, wouldn’t it? Bermuda’s out of the way for old Captain Kidd and Blackbeard. But I digress.”

Putting his shades back on, he turned and smiled at Lydia, “Continue, please. Jax Theron and his band of merry men.”

“That’s a very apt moniker, actually.”

“What?”

“Theron and his band of merry men. Have you heard of the Sacred Band of Thebes?”

“I don’t suppose it’s a rock band?”

“The Sacred Band of Thebes was an elite fighting unit in the Theban military in ancient Greece. Circa fourth century BC. It comprised 150 male lovers because it was believed the bond was made stronger if they were lovers which, it was believed, led them to watch other’s six. Even at the cost of their own lives.”

“No kidding.” Tony drew in a breath as he wondered what the hell he’d signed up for. “So Jax has a lover in the team as do the rest?”

“Uh…it’s not quite the same as the Sacred Band. Not exactly.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, in the Theban unit, the lovers are paired up. It’s not quite like that in M31.” When Tony tilted his head quizzically, Lydia said, “They, umm, watch each other’s six. All eight of them.” She gave him a sidelong glance then added with a note of resignation, “They fuck each other, alright?”

Tony stared at her wondering how she could say that with a straight face.

“Right,” he responded with a straight face. “Anything else I need to know before I meet the Sacred Band of Theron?”

“Jax goes about naked.”

“Excuse me?”

“He doesn’t like wearing clothes so when he’s home or in his office, or a resort like this, he goes nude.”

“And the rest of the team?”

“From what I’ve heard, they do, too, but only occasionally. And before you ask, the team lives
together. All KnightShade M teams live together. The non-M teams are regular teams not unlike any military team. Some M teams, however, have transgender operators though they are mostly operatives – spies. Spooks. They do extremely well as they conduct their assignments often undercover as drag queens and rentboys. Only a small number of transgenders are operators and the cross-dressers keep their cross-dressing to after-work hours."

Tony didn’t say anything. He just looked at Lydia Ramone, thinking she had to be pulling his leg.

The driver of the car they’d ridden in dropped them at the entrance of the resort and reminded Lydia that the KnightShade Homecoming Queen would be crowned tonight.

"Is that what I think it is?" Tony said as he and Lydia got out of the vehicle.

"What?"

"The KnightShade Homecoming Queen?" Tony stressed the last word.

Lydia looked at him, hesitated, then said, "The gay guys have a contest every year where they dress up in their finest and compete for the title. Winner gets a $50,000 wardrobe voucher redeemable at participating stores worldwide and three days of 5-star treatment at the resort." She told Tony to get into the golf buggy then called someone to say she and DiNozzo had arrived. "By the way," she added. "All gay newbies have to participate." She caught Tony’s expression and quickly said, ‘I don’t think you’re included. You’re not full-time but if you’re interested–”

"Thanks, but I’ll pass," Tony said. He wasn’t even going to wonder what he’d look like in a sequinned gown.

"Hey," Lydia said. "Your reaction is exactly what we’re aiming for. No one’s going to expect a drag queen in an all-male gay strip joint to be a special forces operator capable of twisting your head right off your neck like a bottle cap. Every one of those guys in fuck-me stilettos is a weapons expert, handles plastic explosives like it’s play dough and half of our best assassins are transgenders with a love for cross-dressing. Underestimate them at your own peril."

The golf buggy took them across the stretch of seafront property until they came to a giant chalk-white egg jutting out of the cliff over the rocky shore. half of the egg was overhanging the crystal-clear waters crashing against the rocks below while the other half was embedded in the cliff.

“What the hell is that?” Tony asked as they stopped in front of the oval structure. “Is it an alien pod? I mean this is the Bermuda Triangle, right?” He stepped out of the buggy and walked around the curved wall of the “pod”. “It’s got a glass roof. Isn’t that dangerous?” He looked up at the curved glass that covered the top third of the pod. Before Lydia could reply, a door slid open and a man walked out. Not naked, Tony noted, but clad in swimming shorts and a tank top which showed off his muscles. He was also impossibly pretty despite the air of toughness around him.


“Where does Lydia go from here?" Tony asked. “She mentioned this is an all-male gay resort.”

“Oh, she’ll be heading back to the Sunset Resort. It’s next door to us on the other side of the resort. Her team’s vacationing here until the end of the week.”
“Lydia’s an operator?”

“Yup. Team lead. Been with us since we began back in 2001. We as in KnightShade, I mean. I joined KnightShade a few years later.”

To Tony, Nick looked like a college kid so how long could he have been with KnightShade?

As if he knew what Tony was thinking, Nick said, “I’m older than I look and I’m not pretty inside.” He led Tony up a short flight of steps and through double doors that slid back to reveal the oval glass-domed room overlooking the Atlantic.

“Wow,” Tony whispered in awe. “It’s like something out of a James Bond movie.”

“Then I’m the villain, I guess.” The familiar deep voice sounded behind Tony and he turned around. His grey-green eyes met a pair of blues reminiscent of the aquamarine coral seas rather than your run-o-the-mill grey-blue ones.

Jax Theron was not what he expected. Instead of a suave, well-groomed man, Tony got a scruffy, bleary-eyed – even if those blues were still electrifying – beach bum in jungle print board shorts and a tatty olive green tee shirt. He hadn’t shaved in days. Not that Tony could criticize. He hadn’t slept much himself since he made up his mind to leave NCIS, to forget about Gibbs, to recover his life. He looked like week-old dog shit but there was something about being a billionaire dog crap and just plain ol’ regular. The former somehow managed to still look appealing.

“Hi. I’m Jax Theron.” Aqua Eyes smiled and held out his hand.

"Hi. I thought you'd be naked. I mean, that's what I was led to believe."

Jax gave a wry smile. "Tom spoke to me." Seeing Tony's questioning look, he clarified, "Tom Morrow. Told me to go easy on you on your first day." He led Tony to the bank of white leather sofas. “Lydia briefed you on the flight over?”

Tony turned from the curved glass wall of the pod. “Yes, she did. Is that safe?” He looked up at the half-circular glass roof. “I feel like I’m in a snow globe. Sans the snow. Is this structure hurricane-proof?”

“Yes, it is,” Jax said. “The egg-shape stays very sturdy in Cat 5 winds because the winds wrap around the curves and slide off. When it rains, the steel roofing slides out to cover the glass.” He plucked a remote control off the wall by the doorway and spoke into it. “Rain!”

“And there was darkness,” quipped Tony as the steel casing started to slide up and over the curved glass until it covered the glass ceiling and lights automatically segued on.

Jax spoke again into the remote and the steel casings started their slide back to return them to daylight. The double doors slid open and a slim young man entered with a trolley. There was a champagne bucket on the trolley and plates of sandwiches and other finger food. He pushed the trolley next to the sofa where Jax was seated and left as silently as he’d arrived. “Let’s talk.” Jax took a bottle of ice-cold water from the champagne bucket and tossed it to Tony. Opening one for himself, he said, “So. Any questions you need answered before you hit the ground running?”

“Oh, just a million or so. How about we start with why I need to go through what sounds like a Navy SEAL Bud/s program? I’m not doing anything that’s going to require those kinds of skills. I’m a trained federal agent. I’ve been through FLETC and I’ve been in law enforcement for fifteen years.”
“It doesn’t matter if you’re a twenty-five year vet or a five-minute old rookie. If you’re part of KnightShade, you have to be operating at our physical, mental, and psychological level. Even if you’re the houseboy.”

“That kid who brought in the trolley?” Tony asked, still assimilating his surroundings.

“Yes. It’s a requirement if you work in the KnightShade’s M teams, and a requirement if you work for me, personally. Bono, the young man earlier, lives with us; goes where we go. He can’t flinch at the sight of a weapon or happens to be there when someone gets his neck broken or throat slit. Most of the places we go to aren’t secured like this – where we can stroll around buck naked and take a nap without our weapon within reach. Bono has to know how to break a man’s – or woman’s – neck as efficiently as he wrings a chicken’s.” Tony looked unconvinced so he added, “It’s a customized program. You’ll survive and when we’re done with you, you’ll be packing muscles, not skinny arms and legs and a flabby beer gut like you have now.”

"I do not have a beer gut." Tony instinctively sucked in his stomach. Okay, so he had skinny legs but at least they were shapely and not bowed and he had strong, thick wrists even if the biceps were non-existent. The flabby belly was another thing, though. He was no longer the slim, young twenty-five year old Jethro took to bed. He knew he’d let himself go over the years, too unmotivated – even depressed, at times – to keep up with his daily exercise regimen. The early morning runs had given way to sleeping past his alarm and barely making it to work on time. The weekends had been movie and junk food fortified with pizza and washed down with beer. Phil, who was a helluva lot more health-conscious, moving in had prevented a heart attack waiting to happen, he was sure. Still, he hadn’t picked up from where he left off in his fitness routine so it was a rather pudgy thirty-eight year old who walked into the KnightShade. He waited a beat then asked, “Do you really go buck naked in your home? Even when you have visitors? Like now?”

“You are not a visitor and I'm not buck naked,” Jax replied. “We’ll be here for the rest of this week then head for London. Morgan should be back by then and I want you to hit the ground running.” He turned to Nick and asked, “Are the rest on their way back?”

“Should be here any minute,” Nick replied.

Jax nodded. “Take DiNozzo to his room. We’ll commence once the guys are back.” To Tony he said, “Go freshen up and I’ll see you in the games room when the rest are here.”

“The codename is Operation Silverwing,” Jax said, as Tony’s orientation commenced. “There are two parts to Silverwing and your involvement may be in both Silverwing I and II. For now, you’re being read in only on Silverwing I.”

“Need to know, huh?” Tony said.

“Absolutely. All the way. You’re already aware that you are not to be in communication with anyone outside of KnightShade privately.”

Tony’s mission briefing had began as soon as the rest of the team returned from wherever it was they went to. On the lower floor of what he’d come to simply call ‘The ‘Bermuda Oval’ as opposed to ‘triangle’, was a bank of monitors and computers on one side of the oval room and an oval conference table on the other. Nothing out of the ordinary. A large flat screen descended and he was taken through a description of the mission – it’s purpose and goal, Tony’s AOR and the resources at his disposal.
Jax hadn’t bothered to put on any clothes for the briefing but the rest of the team were clearly used to this. Tony assumed he was expected not to be distracted either and, to his credit, acted as if being briefed by naked team leaders were also part of his everyday experience. Which automatically brought on a visual of a naked Gibbs conducting a debriefing in the NCIS bullpen and required every bit of self-control he possessed not to laugh.

“For the duration of your assignment,” Jax continued, “which is likely to be about twenty-four months, your communications will be closely-monitored and totally controlled by KnightShade. If you need to contact anyone not in the need-to-know, you need clearance from me and all incoming and outgoing will be controlled. As you were told, all private attempts at contacting you will be blocked.”

“That’s kinda unreasonable,” Tony protested. “I need to let one or two people know where I am and that I’m alright.”

“I understand. Abby and Phil, am I right?”

“Y-ess. How did you know?”

Again ignoring Tony’s question, Jax said. “You can email them from the PLF email address that you’ll be given once you settle in. You’ll also be given a list of what you can divulge. It’s a short list. Effectively, you will be given links to official press releases which you can send to Abby and McCadden. And anyone else you wish but you are not allowed to give them your residential address or your cell phone number. Should anyone outside of KnightShade wish to contact you, they will do so via the Paddington Liberty Foundation. Your physical training program will take six months after which you will go on the road with M31. Where we go depends on what’s developing during those six months.”

“You are to renew your friendship with Crispian Paddington. Even though you were the best of friends when you were kids and spent every summer with your cousin, you lost touch after the death of your mother. Because your father didn’t get along with your mother’s family, he refused to let you spend anymore holidays with them. We’ll set it up so that your friendship will be restarted and you’ll pick up where you left off, even though it’s thirty years later.”

“What do you mean set it up?”

“We’ll fill in those details when the time comes. In any case, you’ll be in daily contact with Crispian, possibly staying with him in his London apartment.”

“And when will this be? Once I arrive in London or after my training program?”

“We’re still working out the details. You’ll know when we do.”

“And what’s my objective in getting close to Crispian?”

“Find out how close he is to his Russian friends and business associates. We need to know how close Crispian is with regard to the personal side of things. We want you there when they bring in the Russian whores, we want you there if any of those end up more than just a paid fuck.”

“But why me? Why not you? You’re already in PLF. Why not Morgan?. Hell, recruit Crispian’s personal assistant. You can plant any experienced operative in his organization. Why me?”

“Come on, the reason’s simple and obvious. You’re his cousin. You’re family. Nobody will question your presence or why you go everywhere Crispian goes. Morgan may be my cousin but he’s a business executive with no experience in this kind of work whatsoever. You may not be
experienced in international espionage but you’ve done enough undercover work not to give yourself away. That said, it isn’t that dangerous an assignment. You’ll unlikely discharge your weapon or have to break any necks. Just look like you stepped out of the pages of GQ and do some PR work while you feed us Crispian’s goings-on.”

“That’s all? You’re paying me to live like a billionaire just to spy on my cousin?”

“Yup.”

“And what are we looking for, specifically?”

“Whether Crispian is being used to fund the Caucasian Emirate. Rustam Kasarov wants to be a world-player in the terror game. He wants to play with the big boys – Al Qaeda and ISIS. He needs money – and lots of it – to do that. We want you to get whatever information you can get – even if it’s just gut feel, anything that sticks in your mind – and feed it back to us.”

“You think Crispian is being cultivated?”

“Yes, but whatever’s being planned, he isn’t aware of it.”

“And we can’t bring him into our confidence? It would make things helluva lot easier, you know.”

“Your cousin grew up pampered and coddled, and had his soft-boiled eggs broken for him.”

Tony laughed at that but it was true.

“I’m serious,” Jax said. “He has two soft-boiled eggs three times a week and his butler breaks them into a small bowl, adds a dash of soya sauce and pepper and serves it to him with toast fingers.”

“You’re serious? About the soya sauce?”

“Yup. He picked it up when he visited Singapore. That’s how they eat their soft-boiled eggs over there.”

“Yuk.” Tony scrunched up his face.

“Crispian may be business-savvy but he’s naïve in many areas,” Jax said. “If he knows what we’re doing, he’ll give it away in the blink of an eye.”

Tony thought about that then sat back. “Okay. Makes sense. But I won’t really know if my intel is worth anything or not. You could be wasting a lot of money, you know. I don’t wear off-the-rack.”

Jax smiled. “Tony DiNozzo. We know more about you than you know about yourself. We know why you quit NCIS and why you stayed as long as you did. We know when and where you and Leroy Jethro Gibbs’ had your first and last fuck. In fact, I can tell you Gibbs’ reaction when he arrived at work and read your resignation letter this morning.”
Earlier that Morning, Washington DC time:

NCIS, Washington Naval Yard

“Did you all get just a letter, too?” Gibbs asked quietly. McGee and Bishop exchanged glances, unable to respond, the oh-fuck! expression unmistakable on their faces. “You got a problem with your hearing or your tongue?”

Bracing himself, McGee said, “Uh, no, boss. Tony broke the news to us on Friday. You’d left early and we thought you’d be coming back but you didn’t so he left the letter. He told us he’d drop by your place and talk to you.” Damn it, Tony. You were supposed to tell Gibbs face-to-face!

Gibbs glared at him. “What’s your Rule Number One, McGee?”

McGee sat at his desk, mouth working like a grouper. “Uh, um…mine? I’m not lying to you, boss. Tony only left his resignation letter after you called to say you wouldn’t be back to the office. It was a quiet day and…uhh, you decided to go fishing with Fornell and Dr. Taft over the weekend.”

“You’re telling me DiNozzo never mentioned to any of you that he was resigning?”

“Yes. I mean, no, he didn’t. We only found out at dinner on Friday. When you called. Tony didn’t even tell Abby. You can ask her. She was pretty upset.”

“So were we, Gibbs,” Bishop interjected. “And McGee did tell Tony he should talk to you face to face.”

“We all did,” McGee added. “Tell him to talk to you. He assured us he would. Obviously he didn’t.”

The memory – still fresh – of Tony’s face this morning when he came by - flashed through Gibbs. That look of utter hurt and betrayal. But what the hell was Tony expecting? They’d agreed what they shared back in Baltimore – a fucking lifetime ago! – would not be brought into their professional relationship. And both of them had kept their word. So what if he’d decided to date women? It was safer than hooking up with men and getting quickies in an alley. In an instant, another image flashed past – he and Alex Knight entwined in each other’s arms, his cock buried deep in Alex and vice versa. You’re one screwed-up Marine, he chided himself silently. Living a fucking lie of a life.
Knowing there was nothing he could add to the conversation, he got out his cell phone and called Tony. For the third time. The call went unanswered. “I’ll be at Abby’s.” He got up and strode out. That proved as fruitful as his questioning McGee and Bishop so he stalked out, his mood getting fouler as the hours went by.

A few days later, he went down to Abby again but just as he reached the entrance to Abby’s lab when his phone vibrated. It was Alex Knight.

Gibbs and Alex had continued their friends-with-benefits over the years and if there was anyone whom Gibbs could confide in, it was Alex. The latter had given Gibbs a listening year whenever one was needed but mostly, they just fucked. And even that hadn’t happened until after he’d met Tony.

Alex was based on the other side of the country, in San Diego, but was in DC often enough, albeit only a few days at a time and their arrangement worked fine for both of them. In the years following the 9/11 attacks, Alex had been based in DC so they’d met up often. Gradually, as KnightShade's Hawaii base came to take over more of the West Coast's responsibilities, he’d begun to spend more time there.

“How long are you going to be in town for?” Gibbs asked when he picked Alex up at the airport.

“A week. Flying out Sunday night.”

“I can take some time off,” Gibbs said.

“Time off? What happened to the Gibbs I knew? What happened?”

Gibbs sighed audibly. “Tell you later.”

When Gibbs had been shot early this year, it was Alex who arranged for his transfer to KnightShade’s Medical Command - MediCom - and given him a new knee as well as corrected his eyesight to 80% better than 20/20. All KnightShade M-class operatives had had that operation and outside of KnightShade, the first person given super eyesight was a banker, Isabella Beverley, on whom British eye surgeons tested a refined laser technique using technology originally developed for spy satellites. What was the British prototype, KnightShade perfected. “Because I’m bribing you to come over to KnightShade,” Alex had said to Gibbs. “We’ve got more where that super vision technology came from. I guarantee you, you’ll be impressed.”

It was also Alex who came and stayed with him in the private MediCom suite while Gibbs had been warded there. Tony and the rest of the team had visited regularly but being in charge left Tony with too much to do to visit Gibbs for long, though he did still visit everyday. The visits weren’t exactly comforting either because of the long, awkward silences broken only by Alex’s intervention.

Alex had started off giving Gibbs and Tony privacy but stopped when Gibbs asked him not to leave whenever Tony came by.

“Why? I thought –” Alex had started to say.

“It’s…complicated,” Gibbs said, cutting Alex off.
“Well, du-uhh.”

“You know why so just humor me, alright?” Gibbs had asked.

“Yes, only for so long. Don’t you think it’s time the both of you faced the big fat pink elephant in the bullpen?”

His best friend had been right, of course, but Tony had never been an easy subject. All he knew was that he needed Tony to be there. With him. And with Tony suddenly gone, he felt sucker-punched. “So, what’s happening over at the five-sided mausoleum to bring you out here again?” Gibbs asked.

“Nothing earth-shattering. SecDef wants a few things, SecNav’s not going to be left out and KnightShade has to get the ball rolling. Wanna go to Australia for a week?” At Gibbs’ questioning look, Alex added, “KnightShade’s in talks with the Aussie military to start a training facility in the Northern Territories. We’re bringing ex-SAS, ex US special forces and raising the level of the Aussie military’s operational readiness in the face of the growing terrorism threat. Thought you might like to see some ‘roos and koalas.”

“While you’re stuck in a lecture room and schmoozing the local brass? Thanks, but I’ll pass. We’ll do a vacation when you can get time off. I thought you’re worse than me. I thought I was the workaholic in this relationship.”

“I’m only opening the talks, got a couple of meetings and that’s it. But if you don’t want to fly all the way there for just a week, I understand.”

“We got one week here.”

“Guess that will have to do.”

Gibbs stepped out of the elevator into the elegantly-appointed lounge of Alex’s penthouse at the KnightShade Complex. The 180-degree view of the capital spread out around them.

Unlike him, Alex had grown up surrounded by wealth and even wealthier friends and his lover, Jax, came from one of those families whose wealth was too out of Gibbs’ realm to even grasp. From what Alex had shared with him about Jax, the young man was much like them in many ways. Apparently, those two years incarcerated by Peru’s Rasputin had impacted Jax to such a degree that you wouldn’t be able tell he came from money. Jax, it seemed, placed a higher value on personal freedom than on money. He’d be happy living out of a shack than a mansion as long as he had the freedom to go wherever he pleased, at any time he wanted. Which only made Jax’s decision to join the military all that more strange, because if there’s one thing you can’t do in the army it was your own thing at your own time. In any case, Jax sounded like a man after his own heart and he wondered, for the umpteenth time, what he looked like now.

He recalled a conversation he and Alex had had some months back -

“You gotta understand Jax,” Alex said. “Everything he does is to facilitate his freedom to live as he wants. He joined the army because he wanted to be in one of the special operations unit. He wanted that because he wanted the comfort of knowing he could take care of himself in a fight. So why not just take up judo or krav maga, you might ask.”

“Yeah. Why not?”
“Because his dream since he was a kid was to work with me. KnightShade Inc as you know, deals in private security services and more. Jax was preparing himself to join me eventually and…” his words trailed off.

“And what?” Gibbs asked. But Alex had demurred and told him they could talk about it the next time they met. Perhaps tonight he’d be ready to talk about it.

Maybe tonight he’d not only understand Alex’s relationship with Jax but his own struggle over Tony.

“You want to go out for dinner or order room service?” Alex asked as Gibbs put his bag in the closet.

“You’ve got room service here? In your office complex?”

“We’ve got two excellent restaurants downstairs and I can have the food brought up.”

“I saw a Starbucks, too.” Gibbs grinned.

“Anything to entice you over to KnightShade. You should be doing more than chasing bad guys at your age, you know. If you’re afraid of being bored at KnightShade, let me assure you at KnightShade your life is just beginning when others are retiring.”

“Is that right off your advertising slogan?”

Alex chuckled. “So, what’s happened to make you tire of life? Hey, I recognize ennui when I see it and you, my friend, have got it written all over you. What’s happened?”

“Order dinner first and let me take a shower. Then we talk.”

“O     o     o"

“So you dragged your feet until he threw the towel in,” Alex concluded after Gibbs told him about Tony walking out after thirteen years, leaving him only a brief letter of resignation.

“No. Not exactly. I told you we only have a professional relationship despite my feelings for him.”

“I beg to differ because it’s exactly that – you refused to consider anything else but to carry on in denial until DiNozzo came to the inevitable conclusion - which is that any hope of a future with you, romance-wise, is doomed. So he makes the only sensible decision – get out and get over. Get out of there and get over you. I would have done the same thing years ago, not wait until I’m confronted with the inevitable proof that you’re one tight-assed bastard. Because anyone who loves man-ass as much as you do has no business fucking women.”

Gibbs had told Alex about Tony turning up at his house early this morning and seeing Samantha Ryan coming down the stairs. “Sam was –” he started to say but faltered.

“Was what? Another lie? Like Colonel what’s-her-name? And whichever female you’ve been fucking in-between my visits?”

“There was no way I could have a relationship with my subordinate.” Gibbs’ statement was firm and unequivocal. “And he seemed happy enough with things as they were.”

“And you know that how?”

“I know because not once did I have to pull him aside and tell him to get his head back in the game.”
DiNozzo’s been nothing if not professional. I told you that before.” Gibbs looked away before he added, “Which is why I’m mad that he didn’t give me the courtesy of a face-to-face. Am I being unreasonable? He just props an envelope with his one-page resignation notice on my table then takes off? Not even a phone call?”

That did sound strange to Alex and he said so.

“So you agree I’m not being unreasonable.”

“Did he say anything to his colleagues?”

“No. They are as surprised as I am. I spoke to Abby, our forensic scientist. She and Tony are close so I figured she could tell me what’s behind Tony’s decision to quit without a word.”

“Could she?” Alex asked when Gibbs didn’t continue.

With a sigh Gibbs said, “Not really. Just said Tony’s mother had left some money for him in a Trust which he could have access to only when he turns thirty-eight – which he will tomorrow. And Tony decided he wanted to do some traveling. That’s all.”

“Did you try calling him?”

“Of course. He’s not picking up.”

“Did you go to his apartment?”

“Of course. He wasn't home. Or if he was, he's pretending not to be.”

“If DiNozzo were to come back…say, you manage to locate him and you ask him to come back. What will he be coming back to? Will there be anything for him to come back for?”

Gibbs remained silent. Alex let him be and went to make some calls. Gibbs heard Alex speaking to what had to be an operative judging by the tone, then to someone else in a low voice. Jax. He could hear the smile in Alex’s voice, in the ‘I love you’, ‘see you soon’. When he finished, Gibbs was standing at the window looking out at the Anacostia and the small, private marina belonging to KnightShade.

Alex came up behind him and put his hands on his shoulders. “You know the old saying ‘If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it’s yours. If it doesn’t, it never was.’?”

Gibbs turned around. “That’s what happened with you and Jax?” he asked as Alex drew him close.

“Uh hmm.” Alex pressed his face into the crook of Gibbs’ neck. “And it can be the same for you and DiNozzo. Just make sure you’re ready for him when he comes back.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” Gibbs responded. “If he comes back.”

Alex lifted his head. “You want me to believe that Leroy Jethro Gibbs is going to just give up?”

Gibbs stared at Alex but the latter didn’t back down. Instead a knowing smile hovered on Alex’s lips and, in the end, broke through Gibbs’ defenses.

“Okay. You got me there,” Gibbs said. “Tell me what I can do. But first, I want to know what’s up with you and Jax. What's this about him fucking his entire team and you're fine with that?”
Alex recounted to Gibbs how Jax turned up, again out of the blue, at KnightShade and how they’d been together since.

“He came back three years ago?” Gibbs said. “And you’re only telling me this now?”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said. “I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t know how long he’d stay. I didn’t know if he could. Jax had a lot of unresolved issues resulting from his ordeal in Peru. I needed to give him as much time as he needed. Especially since he had come back to me to do his healing. I’m sorry if it makes it look like I was just using you for sex while I nurse the man I love back to health but—”

“Stop.” The monosyllable was softly spoken. “You don’t owe me an explanation. I just thought you would have told me…since we’ve been fucking each other this whole time. Does Jax know?”

“About you and me? Of course. I told him as soon as he told me he was back for good.”

“What, exactly, did you tell him?”

“That we’ve known each other since our days in the military, that we didn’t start sleeping together until 2001. The week before September 11.”

“And what did he have to say?”

“He asked me if I was okay with sharing you.”

Gibbs’ eyes just about bugged out. “What?”

Alex laughed. “He’s seen your photos. Thinks you’re the hottest silver fox on two legs. I told him I’m fine with sharing but you might not be.” Alex regarded his friend for a while before adding, “Jax explained to me about his sexual issues—the reason why he left me. He told me about needing to have sex with the men in his team, with his desire for sex with more than one man, his voyeurism…how he considers it an issue of trust and his form of fidelity. He only fucks within the team and never cheats on them. If he ever fucks you, you can be sure his team is fine with it.”

Gibbs heard Alex out in stunned silence. Then said, “And how do you feel about it?”

“You’ve got to know the M31 guys to understand. I didn’t, at first, but three years with them practically living with us, I know each of them pretty well by now. I can see they need each other in every way. Fucking each other is not just a form of recreation, it’s therapy.”

“They fuck each other? Not just Jax?”

“Yes. They sleep together in the same room. M31 has its own super-size bedroom in San Diego, DC and Hawaii. All eight of them sleep, work and fuck together. It’s not something I can, or want to go against Jax about. I either accept this is life with Jax. Or walk away.”

“And you chose to stay.”

“My relationship with Jax is more than sex. I don’t have the usual middle-class America’s hangups about sex. It doesn’t mean I’m fine with cheating because cheating is not about sex. It’s about fidelity and trust, as Jax says. If Jax wasn’t fine with me fucking you, I wouldn’t.

Gibbs didn’t know what to say.

Alex grabbed him by neck and pulled Gibbs to him. “Relax, Jethro. Jax is the way he is. I still want
you even though I'm in love with him. I just wouldn’t fuck you anymore if Jax and I had a conventional relationship nor would I look on kindly to Jax fucking anyone else but me. But Jax and I don’t have that. Loving and living with Jax means accepting him as he is and he, in turn, gives me the same privileges.”

Gibbs was still frowning. This was alien to him. He didn’t think he could handle Tony fucking someone else if they were a couple.

“It doesn’t mean he or I can have sex with anyone we want. This freedom to do so extends only to the M31 team and only if I want to. And I haven't fucked any of them yet. You, Jax has accepted because of our history together, because you’ve been in my life long before he entered the picture.”

"Yet. You said "yet". About fucking his men. You mean you plan on fucking them at some point?"

Alex shrugged. "Perhaps. Probably." The visual of Nick Monterey's delectable bubble but filled his brain and he smiled. "Definitely. At some point."

It took Gibbs the rest of the week to come to terms with Alex’s relationship with Jax, and it was not until the day before Alex was to fly back to Hawaii that he had a conference call with Jax and Gibbs saw how the gangly sixteen year old had developed into a six-foot-four man with an Olympic swimmer's body.
“Tony!” Crispian clasped Tony’s hand. “Welcome to London. Where have they put you up at?”

They were at Crispian’s office in Westminster, having flown in from Bermuda a couple of hours earlier.

“I’m in a unit in Chinatown,” Tony replied. He’d been pleasantly surprised by the location, having expected to be staying in the suburbs. Instead, the apartment, which the English called a ‘flat’, was a cozy two-bedroom in a bustling area of Soho where every block seemed to have a Chinese restaurant.

“Are you happy with it?” Crispian didn’t seem to think Tony would be. “I can have you moved to one of our condominiums.”

“No. No, I like it.”

“Well, you are welcome if you change your mind. I’m usually tied up during the day and evenings so if you move over, we could catch some time together at breakfast.”

Remembering that was his brief – reinforcing his relationship with his cousin, Tony accepted.

“Actually, I will take you up on that offer.”

“Wonderful. Just let Janet, my secretary know and she’ll organize it.”

“Thank you.”

So, it’s good to see you, Tony, and I’m very pleased you decided to join PLF. It was my father’s hope, you know, that you would one day join the family company. I know this is just a two-year contract but I hope you’ll like it well enough to come on permanently after that.

“It’s certainly a possibility. Let’s see if I have something valuable to contribute first.”

“You do, or I wouldn’t have offered you the position. Look, I have a meeting starting in an hour but let’s try and do dinner tonight. I’m off to Hong Kong and Beijing tomorrow for a couple of weeks so it’ll be nice to catch up over dinner.”

Crispian’s secretary knocked on the door and came in to tell him his appointment had arrived.

“I’ll be on my way, then,” Tony said, rising. “I’ve been told an appointment with the tailor has been made for me.”

They said their goodbyes and Tony stepped out of Crispian’s office to find a slim gentleman wearing horn-rimmed glasses greeting him.

“Good morning, Mr. DiNozzo. I’m Bono, your driver.”

“Haven’t we met before?” Tony frowned. “You were in Bermuda, weren’t you? The houseboy.”
“Yes, sir. If you’re ready, I’ll bring the car round to the front.”

“I’m ready. Where are we going?”

“Savile Row, sir. They dress Mick Jagger, Andy Warhol and Jax Theron, amongst others.”

“Jax owns suits?” He grinned as he pictured Jax strolling into a cocktail function stark naked. Only a week or so had passed but he definitely was adapting to his new lifestyle. *The things I do for my country, eh, Under Secretary Morrow?* He was still chuckling when Bono drove up to the front of the building and hopped out to open the door for him.

The session with the tailors took about two hours since Tony was like a kid let loose in a candy store and an empty basket to fill. He confirmed with Jax that PLF was picking up the tab then placed himself entirely in the hands of Messrs. Gerald and Hawkins.

By the time Bono met him outside with the Daimler, Tony was feeling a little giddy. Yet as the luxury car sped him past Buckingham Palace and down The Mall past St James Park, he couldn’t help feeling something was missing. He knew what that was but *I’m not going there.*

“Is Bono your real name?” Tony asked.

“No.” Tony waited for Bono to tell him what his name was but the young man didn’t. After several minutes of silence, Bono said, “Boniface Brzeczyszczcykiewicz.”

“Come again?” Tony said.

Bono repeated his name. "It is a Polish surname. Would you like me to spell it for you?"

“Uh, no need. Thanks. I believe you. Where to, next? Or I guess I should ask Jax.”

“You have a physical fitness test at our medical center. That’s where we’re going now. Tomorrow you have a session at the gym at ten.”

“What physical? I just had my physical a couple of months ago.”

“You’re going to be assessed by our KnightShade physician. We have a more stringent standard to maintain. The results from your physical taken when you were with NCIS have been transferred to KnightShade but Dr. Chen will be running other tests.”

“You said “our” KnightShade physician. You’re employed by KnightShade and not PLF?”

“That’s right. I’m a KnightShade operative. I’m from the HUMINT division and based in London though I do crossovers to Europe.”

“And why is an operative from the Human Intelligence Division driving me around?”

“My duties. I’m your chauffeur, bodyguard, and personal assistant, for the duration of your assignment.”

“For two years?”

“Yes, though I may be told my services aren’t required for a certain period. During your BASL program, for example.”
“What’s a bassle program?”

“B-A-S-L. Basic Air, Sea, and Land. It’s KnightShade’s modified BUD/s program which you are required to undergo before we take you on a mission. That is, unless you’ve already qualified.”

“Like if I were a SEAL or a Marine.”

“SEAL, yes. Marine, not quite, unless he’s from Force Recon. We get CIA operatives all the time. Every mission has at least one, in fact. The one going in with a KnightShade team is required to complete the BASL program successfully.”

“And if he fails?”

“He can still be a part of the mission, depending on the nature of it, but he will not be inserted with the team. He’d be sent separately. If at all. For example, if the mission’s in Africa, he would be required to pass BASL but not if it’s Singapore or the Philippines, unless it’s Mindanao. They’re a bit of a handful down south.”

“And what is involved in this BASL program that I’ll be required to complete?”

“Following your Physical Fitness, you’ll undergo endurance training at our East European training center. It’ll be much like BUD/s training on Coronado except it’s freezing cold at this time of the year in Transylvania.”

“Excusez-moi, but did you say Transylvania?” Tony went goggly-eyed at Bono. “Bram Stoker’s Transylvania?”

December, 2014

Kelemen Alps;

Transylvania, Romania

“I’m going to kill Thomas Morrow,” Tony muttered to himself as he completed the last few feet of his four-mile run. He’d been in Dracula country for six months and all he wanted now was to get out of here. Preferably to some sun, sea and sex. Instead, Jax had woken him up a few days after his arrival to tell him he was commencing his training program immediately. Bono had packed his bags, driven him to Heathrow and dumped him, saying he’d see him in six months’ time. And he wasn’t even flying private. Instead he’d been put on an RAF plane in Northolt, a Royal Air Force station 2 miles outside London, and flown with a bunch of scruffy men whom he learnt, later, were SAS.

The US military has had a presence in Romania and Bulgaria since 2005-6 when U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement with the two countries. A year after the first US troops arrived at the Mihail Kogălniceanu commune, KnightShade began construction of its East European training facility in the Keleman Alps, in Eastern Carpathia. It was to this facility that Tony was brought up to KnightShade’s level of operational readiness, physically and mentally. Out went the belly flab and love handles, in came the muscle-strength and stamina. While the exercise regimen and training did not turn him into a muscle-bound Mr Universe, it did leave him ripped and lean.

If only Gibbs could see me now.
The Romanian countryside was beautiful – meadows and rolling hills a brilliant, rich green, snow-clad mountains in the distance, and picturesque farmhouses – and red-roofed fairytale castles. Or Dracula’s, as Abby would insist, even though every tourist by now knew that Bram Stoker had never set foot in Romania nor did he name the infamous bloodsucker’s residence so the Bran Castle, touted as the Count’s castle was pure tourist brochure bull.

Despite the rigorous training and, at times, torturous conditions, Tony found himself enjoying his time with the KnightShade men in the Romanian facility. All of them had gotten their training in San Diego and some were about to be posted to Hawaii to lead the advanced training program that was run by KnightShade’s Kauai-based facility. Kauai???. They had an advanced training facility in Hawaii but sent him to Transylvania? What was wrong with these guys!

By the time his program was coming to an end, it was cold enough to have frostbitten balls. Hayden Langley, one of the KnightShade R & D scientists, had given him a cock-and-ball-warmer before they left Bermuda. It was like an electric blanket shaped like a sock except instead of electricity, it garnered his body heat and multiplied it to provide warmth to his genitals. Sorta like using solar power, Tony surmised. It worked like a dream and he couldn’t help thinking it would have made a great Christmas gift for Gibbs. He knew Gibbs hated DC when it snowed too much and hated it when it got too hot.

Gibbs. God, he missed him. Did he do the right thing leaving NCIS? It had been a long time since he allowed himself to ask that question. KnightShade had kept him too busy to think about anything but the next test, the next run, the next swim, the next parachute jump though he enjoyed those. Not the night jumps, though. He hated the night exercises as much as the mock interrogations. Mock. Huh! the KnightShade paramedics had to be called in after one such interrogation and he’d had to sit out the rest of the month’s course. At first, he’d been so grateful for the respite but by the end of the week he was so bored stuck in the small medical facility in the camp that he was begging to get back into action.

He’d received emails from McGee and Abby over the last six months and they had made him miss the team terribly. Yesterday, he’d received another from McGee:

Hey, Tony,

First off, I’ve sold your car like you told me to and have deposited the money in your bank account.

How’s it going with you? Your last email didn’t tell us where you were heading to next but it sounds like you’re having a great time. Glad as I am for you, I’m not having that good a time as you. We all aren’t. Not Abby, not Ellie, not even Palmer who does his best to be invisible when Gibbs is around.

If you thought Gibbs could be a bastard at times, I wish you could see him these days. I feel like throwing in the towel myself but I feel sorry for the new guy if I weren’t around to run interference.

Yup, Gibbs found a replacement for you. Finally. He must have gone through twenty candidates that I shortlisted for him. We did have an experienced SA who was a senior trainer at FLETC. Alex Quinn. I thought she was settling down rather well but last week she upped and quit. Some problem she was having with her sick mother but Bishop and I think the real reason is Gibbs. Tony, he’s become impossible to work with. Nothing anyone does is good enough. Gibbs has always been an exacting and demanding boss but never like this. I think he’s feeling the loss of his senior special agent much more than he will ever admit.
Anyway, Torres, the new guy that joined last month, is having some difficulty getting used to working in a team but he possesses a resilience that was lacking in the others and is determined to get through to Gibbs. I’m thankful for that because I don’t want to have another probie quit on us. Even Director Vance is concerned. He stopped me the other day and asked if Gibbs was alright. I didn’t know what to say because I felt that Gibbs wasn’t okay but I didn’t know what was wrong either. I asked Abby about it and she just shook her head and said she was late for an appointment and took off. I suspect she knows something and maybe Gibbs told her because, you know how it is between them – like father and favorite daughter.

How about a more newsy email from you next time? And send us some pics of you in your new suits. All you need is a Walther PPK and you’d look just like Bond. Before I forget, your cell phone number is no longer in use. We called and texted but zilch. Since you are getting our emails, send us your new number.

Uh oh. Gibbs is back. Gotta go.

Tim and gang

Tony heaved a big sigh. There was no denying it – he missed the gang. A lot. He’d missed Ziva David when she quit but he’d not been as close to her as he’d been with McGee and Abby. Ms. David had been one tough cookie with a chip on her shoulder the size of Mt Rushmore. Tony had become closer to Bishop in the two years she’d joined them than the eight years Ziva had been with them. But he had a lot of respect for her mad Mossad skills and would let her have his back any day.

Tony was just powering down his laptop when his KnightShade-issued cell phone buzzed. It was Jax.

“Pack up your gear. Expect your pickup two hours from now.”

Tony heaved a sigh of relief. He’d had enough of walking through miles and miles of snow, sick of the food, sick of the hard bed and freezing cold showers. Yup. There was no hot water in the dorms. The Four Seasons KnightShade Transylvania wasn’t. No wonder Jax wasn’t here.

“Where am I going?” he asked Jax.

“Somewhere warm.”

Oh goody. “You going to be there?”

“Am already here. So’s the team. See ya.” And he was gone.

Tony rubbed his hands together in excitement. About time I got some some sun, sea and sex. These M31 guys sure know how to live it up. Hotpods in a luxury resort, a penthouse in one of London’s glossy glass and metal towers overlooking the Thames, and now some trendy, beach resort, he bet. Jax was there so it’d be some place like St Tropez.

O O O

Segou,

Republic of Mali;

West Africa

I’m definitely going to kill Morrow, Tony muttered to himself as he trudged through the arid, sandy
land. For a minute he even wished he were back in DC, under the glare of Gibbs, battling his unrequited, unending need. He would not even complain about the orange walls.

Mali was one of the most impoverished countries in the world and the average worker's annual salary is approximately US$1,500 – less than half what his Savile Row suits cost. The towns were so remote, the surroundings so uninhabitable that for Tony, it came to symbolize the bumfuck capital of the world, the uttermost end of the earth as National Geographic described it – Timbuktu. He’d thought it was a fictional place. A metaphor. It wasn’t. It was right here in Mali, west Africa, on the southern edge of the Sahara.

And his plane was landing right there – Timbuktu International Airport. The flight had been a noisy, uncomfortable six hours on a military transport plane. He couldn’t believe it when he climbed on board with two dozen soldiers from the US and British forces and one of them asked him, “Your first time to Timbuktu?” Tony had laughed, thinking it was a joke. Guess every town in Africa was Timbuktu, he told himself.

Then they landed and there it was, in big bold letters – AEROPORT DE TOMBOUCTOU.

And he, Tony DiNozzo, who had half a dozen tailored suits from Savile Row waiting for him in London, was here.

*Piece a cake, Morrow?* “You’re SO dead,” he muttered under his breath.

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When you ask a kid in Mali what he wants to be when he grows up, he’s not going to say a cop, a fireman, or an astronaut. No, the career choices are limited. It’s a choice between bandit, robber, terrorist, or victim.

No wonder he’d been given a series of shots the week before his BASL course ended. When he’d asked what the shots were for, he’d been told Vitamin B12 and other good stuff to build up his body’s immune system. They didn’t tell him they were also for Diarrhea, Typhoid, Malaria, Hepatitis A, Yellow Fever, Zika, and freaking Meningitis which was common during the dry season. They didn't tell him if he experienced gut discomfort or pain, he could have a tapeworm in his intestines.

"Adam removed a three-meter long tapeworm from a Nigerian last year," one of the KnightShade operators on the flight told him. Three meters? That was like almost ten feet. He was sure Adam was exaggerating.

“Why am I here in the ass end of the world?” Tony asked, the minute he emerged from the plane and found Nick and Adam waiting for him in a jeep.

“Part of your orientation,” Adam replied as Tony climbed into the back of the jeep.

“I already completed my orientation in Bermuda.”

“That was all theory. Now’s the practical. To be convincing, you have to have hands-on experience working with PLF’s medical services. The majority of our work in this field is in Africa and the Indian subcontinent.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” Tony squeaked. “I don’t have any medical training beyond what I was taught during the BASL course.”

“That’s good enough,” Adam said as Nick started the engine, calling their base at the same time to
let Jax know DiNozzo had been picked up. “You’ll be filming, taking photos and writing reports. When your assistance is required, you’ll help.”

“Like what type of assistance?”

Adam shrugged. “Whatever.”

“And how long will I be here?”

“Three weeks. Relax. It’ll be a piece a cake.”

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For a 2016 report (with photo) on a 9 feet long tapeworm removed from a man in Singapore: http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/tapeworm-was-112-times-patients-height
Meanwhile,

**NCIS: Washington, DC**

Gibbs glared at his computer screen. The morning started out shitty, as usual. They weren’t making any headway with the investigation into the dead petty officer and it was now three weeks of no leads.

“DiNozzo!” The name, yelled out in a frustrated tone, had the entire bullpen looking up in puzzlement. Heads popped up like gophers on the other side of the dividing wall. Halfway on the stairs, Director Vance halted and looked over, equally puzzled, before resuming his way up.

Gibbs, face red as a result of that unguarded moment, slumped down at his desk and covered his head with his hands. A moment later, he muttered a soft curse and shoved back his chair. Standing, he grabbed his weapon from the drawer, slamming it shut. “I’m taking the rest of the day off,” he said abruptly and stalked out, leaving four bewildered faces.

“What’s up with him?” Nick Torres, their new colleague asked.

“I don’t know,” a now-worried-looking McGee said. “He’s never done this before.”

“What? Walked off in a bad mood?”

“No, that he does,” Bishop interjected. “A lot. Just been worse since DiNozzo left.”

“And what’s with the yelling out DiNozzo’s name?” Torres asked, still frowning.

“Habit, I guess,” McGee said. “Tony’s been with the team since it was formed. That’s like thirteen years ago. He was Gibbs’ first hire when he formed the MCRT.”

“No, Tony told me it was Morrow who brought him in,” Bishop said.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” McGee said.

“So, the calling out for DiNozzo thing,” Torres said. “That’s kinda weird, y’know. That’s not a habit. That’s an obsession. How many times has he done that since DiNozzo left? At least once a week, right?” When both McGee and Bishop stared back at him, he added, “Yeah, well, it took Gibbs three months before he got me and Quinn on board, you said. You won’t believe the number of agents Quinn sent Gibbs.”

“How do you know?” McGee asked. He was worried about Gibbs, too, but didn’t want to make too much of it.

“Quinn told me before she quit. She said they’d walk in all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and leave crying, tail between their legs.”
“That’s an exaggeration,” McGee said.

“Is not.” Torres shook his head. “By the time Gibbs went through them all, they told Quinn nothing would induce them to work with him. I was the only one who survived the interrogation. Yup, you got that right – interrogation. And that only because of my undercover experience. Gibbs could have a second job as a Russian Mafia enforcer. Which brings me back to DiNozzo.”

“Jealous, much?” Bishop asked, one dark brow lifted.

“What? No! Of course not,” Torres protested. “Why would I be? From what I hear, DiNozzo’s just a clotheshorse with a taste for the perks a job can give. Obviously, being a Fed doesn’t bring many though his taking thirteen years to realize that…well, he can’t be all that sharp. Know what I mean?”

“What you mean,” Bishop said. “Is that you’re getting all green-eyed over the thought that Tony was Gibbs’ blue-eyed boy.”

“Hey-hey-hey,” Torres held up a hand. “Might I remind you I’m still here?” he jabbed his finger at his chest several times. "Four months. Four. Quinn didn’t last two.”

“He’s right,” McGee said to Bishop.

“And Tony’s a tough act to follow.” The sound of Abby’s voice had the trio turning around. “Torres, I think you’re doing exceptionally well. Gibbs is very hard to please when it comes to work.”

“When it comes to women, too,” Torres said. “I heard from one of the other agents he’s been married four times?”

“Three. The first one wasn’t a divorce. His wife died.” It was Palmer, joining the group.

“Err, guys,” Abby said. “We’d better not huddle here gossiping about Gibbs. You know how he just creeps up behind you.”

“Yeah,” Palmer agreed. “How about we go try out that new sandwich place that opened up just this week?” He turned to Torres. “And I’ll tell you about how jealous DiNozzo was over Stan Burley. Now, if there ever was a Gibbs’ blue-eyed boy, Burley was it.”

“No. Tony was,” Bishop said. “And still is.”

“Bishop’s right,” Abby said. “Gibbs said so himself – Tony’s irreplaceable. That’s why he’s been so…so…” she waggled her hands, at a loss to describe Gibbs’ mood. “So lost.”

“It’s going to be a miserable Christmas,” McGee said as they all got into the elevator.

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As part of Gibbs’ rehab following his GSW last year, he’d been ordered to see a therapist. Director Vance had been told by SecNav to ensure Gibbs got back into shape not just physically but psychologically. To make Gibbs acquiesce, Vance had told him therapy was a prerequisite to his returning to work. Gibbs had grudgingly given in.

He’d also told Gibbs that SecNav was considering him as Vance’s successor following his retirement at the end of next year. Finding a suitable replacement wasn’t an easy task in this age of global terrorism. Vance’s successor didn’t only need to have experience in special ops and/or
counterintelligence, he or she needed to have a deft hand dealing with the press and the brass over at the Pentagon. While Gibbs fulfilled the former, Vance couldn’t see Gibbs willingly attending meetings with the DoD brass or dealing with the press whenever there was an incident involving the Navy. Nor could he see Gibbs schmoozing with the higher-ups at cocktail functions. DiNozzo – now he was a prime candidate for grooming to be the next Director. Unfortunately, DiNozzo had quit before he and Jarvis could think about it further. So it was back to Gibbs.

“Gibbs doesn’t want it,” Vance told Jarvis. “And he said he won’t change his mind. We’re going to have to look elsewhere. Outside NCIS.”

“I want to try and see if we can lure DiNozzo back from wherever he is. Have him return as Assistant Director of NCIS. Give him a couple of years understudy and –”

“Couple of years? I can’t, Jarvis. I’m supposed to retire at the end of 2016. I can’t postpone it. Our schedule – my family, that is – is set for us to be in San Diego by January next year. That’s only a few months away.”

“Explain the situation to Jackie,” Jarvis said. “How about six months? Jackie can go over first, settle the kids then you join them six months later. DiNozzo’s a quick study and he’s not bullheaded like Gibbs. He’ll slide smoothly into your chair before you even know it.”

“DiNozzo’s gone to work for a charity foundation run by his billiohnaire cousin. He lives in London now.”

“Still, we’ll see how persuasive I can be. DiNozzo would be the ideal Director, Leon. Not only has he been trained by the best for over ten years, he’s got undercover experience, counter-terrorism, and he’s got the kind of connections none of us have. He’ll be able to do a lot for our European bases. We don’t have anyone with that range of ability. Not even Gibbs.”

Vance agreed but the doubtful look persisted. “Say DiNozzo’s agreeable,” he said after a moment. “I’m not sure if Gibbs will take orders from him.”

“Leave Gibbs to me,” Jarvis said. “By the way, is he seeing that therapist Dr. Taft arranged for him?”

“As far as I know, yes. How regularly, that I don’t know. Do you want me to find out?”

“No, I will speak to Dr. Taft myself. I hear he and Gibbs have become very good friends.”

January 2015

SecNav would have been very pleased to know Jethro had agreed to meet with Dr. Grace Confalone even before his discharge from KnightShade MediCom last year.

His first meeting with the therapist had been inconclusive, Gibbs refusing to commit himself to regular sessions.

“Either way,” Confalone had said that initial meeting. “You’ll be talking to a confidante. You’re a Catholic, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But not really practicing. I don’t go to church. I don’t believe in papal infallibility and I don’t have crucifixes in my house. And that Baby Jesus creeps me out. But I’m a believer and I read my Bible when I’m in the head.
“Pardon me?”

“The toilet. I keep reading material there like everyone.”

“I know what the head refers to. I was asking about your choice of toilet-reading material.”

“Bible’s just a book. Paper, glue and ink. It’s what I do with the words that counts.” Gibbs had shrugged. “Religion doesn’t have a place in my life. God does but not organized religion.”

“Well, therapists are like priests. Patient and penitent confidentiality. God works through people most of the time. Unless you’re going to sit and wait for an exclusively divine miracle.”

“Might take one in my case.” Gibbs had snorted. How could he tell his friends, tell anyone, that in those moments when he knew his lifeline was about to snap, that it wasn’t an angel with wings but Tony who had come to him, that he’d seen Tony’s outstretched hand and heard Tony’s voice commanding him not to give up. And that it wasn’t the Tony he’d been used to. That the Tony that had spoken to his psyche didn’t only look different, he sounded different. And he couldn’t tell Confalone that it was a Tony that made him ache all over again for something he couldn’t have.

Still, he’d refused to have regular sessions but Confalone had stressed that if he changed his mind, she would make time for him even if it was on short notice.

Upon recovery he had been discharged from KnightShade MediCom and Life had returned to normal. The KnightShade MediCom doctors had given him some new breakthrough drugs which not only expedited his healing but had increased his overall strength. When he asked what the drug was, he’d been told it was a proprietary drug that KnightShade’s Medical R&D had created and not available to the public. Gibbs concluded it would end up killing him instead but Alex had allayed his fears, telling him that it wasn’t experimental, just too expensive to make so it was available only on a restricted basis.

“Why are you giving it to me, then?” Gibbs had asked.

“Because I’ve still got my eye on you,” Alex had said. “I want you in KnightShade so I figured showing you what we can do – and do do for our field operators – will entice you across.”

While physically Gibbs had healed completely due to KnightShade’s miracle drugs – which Alex reminded Gibbs was classified – he was still hounded by his inner demons. Christmases had depressed him all his life since Shannon and Kelly were killed but the last one, barely a month ago, had been the worst. For once, he’d accepted he couldn’t carry on the way he had been the last three decades. Pretending one was straight, or bi, worked only if you were determined to stay in the closet with no plans to settle down. It got harder if you meet someone special.

And Tony had been that, and more. So he’d caved and called Confalone.

Confalone had been delighted to hear from him and assured him that yes, it was past midnight but she was awake. “Look, Gibbs. All you do is tell me whatever you want and I’ll just listen.”

“You mean you’re not going to give me your two cents?”

“Well, not two cents. It’ll be two hundred. Dollars.”

“Two hundred?” Gibbs scoffed. “I wouldn’t even pay two cents.”

“My going rate is three hundred dollars an hour but if you’re serious about this then my rate will be one dollar per session and each session need not be limited to an hour. You can take as long as you
want, for as long as I’m available and if need be, I’ll reschedule my patients.”

“Why the special treatment?” Gibbs asked, curious.

“Because, first, I don’t take on patients unless they want my help. Second, I’m doing Cyril a favor because he’s a very good friend and personally asked me to help. Third, you happen to be very special to another close friend to whom I owe a debt. My life, in fact. So whatever he asks of me, I do. To the best of my ability.”

“This certain someone have a name?”

“The guy who footed the bill for your stay at the KnightShade medical center. Alex Knight.”

Gibbs gave a low laugh.

“You have friends in extremely lofty places, Special Agent Gibbs. KnightShade MediCom is a very exclusive private facility which takes in only certain military patients and the intelligence community. I’m impressed.”

Gibbs had rebuffed both Fornell’s and Taft’s efforts to help him get over the trauma of getting shot and nearly dying. Just the thoughts of those moments when he lay on the operating table were enough to catch his breath even now. But the mention of Alex’s name cleared away all lingering doubts and ambivalence.

“Therapy isn’t for mentally ill or weak people,” Confalone said. “Alex merely told me you might like to air a few things on your mind and hear from someone neutral.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all. Cyril’s a little more concerned but that’s understandable. He’s had several patients who died on his operating table and while all of them—most of them,” she amended, “were resuscitated, as you were, all of them needed therapy. No, they wanted therapy. Something…a fundamental shift…had taken place, and with their new lease of life, they wanted to make sure they didn’t fuck it up, to put it in the vernacular. All I do is help you process some things, Gibbs.”

“Sounds good to me.”

So seven months after Tony left NCIS, and had completed his Basic, Air, Sea and Land course at KnightShade, Transylvania, Leroy Jethro Gibbs commenced therapy.
Early-February 2015:

Mali, West Africa

“Credibility,” Jax had told him when Tony had asked why the hell he needed to be in Africa. “You can’t just be a good-looking suit. You’ve got to know what you’re selling and they won’t buy if you come across as a fake.”

The “they” were the Russians. Tony would ultimately end up in Europe and Russia, offering PLF’s humanitarian aid but first he had to show he knew what it was like to provide assistance to the impoverished. He had to walk the talk.

One of the PLF medical officers had met them when they finally arrived at Bandagiara, a small, prehistoric-looking town and urban commune in the Mopti Region of Mali. From there, they drove to the sandstone cliffs where the Dogon people lived.

“Why aren’t you here?” he’d asked Jax in the call earlier.

“Because I’m needed elsewhere,” Jax had replied. “Okay, gotta go.” And hung up without another word. Why the hell should he miss Gibbs? Jax was a pretty good substitute.

“Why the hell isn’t Jax here?” Tony asked Nick as they drove out of town towards the hills where the Dogon villages were. “I thought he was here.”

“He’s back in Hawaii,” Nick said. “He never stays in one place longer than a few days cos he’s running several ops at any one time.”

“Why Hawaii?”

“That’s our second West Coast headquarters. We’re moving our training facilities from San Diego to Hawaii and the R&D to DC. The DC office is enormous. The staff use golf carts and electric scooters to get around. You'll get to see it. Eventually. We’re a pretty fun place to work in – if you discount the killing. And once we get delivery of the TKZ 747 jet, Jax will be able to monitor the ops in mid-air and just about follow us anywhere, provided it has a runway long enough.”

“He’s having his office in a plane? A jumbo jet?”

“More a command center than an office. Two of these jets are currently being custom-built. One for KnightShade and the other to replace the current Air Force One. With those two in the air – you can run the country and government without having to touch down.”

“Aw, come on. It’s gotta land at some point.”
“Yup, but it can fly over 2,000 miles non-stop and it can be refueled mid-flight. And – listen to this – it can land on the water.”

“No way.” Tony’s eyes went wide. “There’s no such jet.”

“There is now but not for the Air Force and the public is unlikely to ever see it. It’s the kind of stuff TKA, that’s Knight SkunkWerkz, produces. If a nuclear bomb hits the US, the Pentagon and White House transfers over to TKZ I and II. TKZ I being Air Force One.”

“Two jumbo jets aren’t enough to house the US government.”

“Oh, didn’t I mention there’s the KnightRay I and II?”

“What’s that?”

“Nuclear megayachts. Huge motherfuckers. We got one in the Pacific and the other in the Atlantic. It’ll fit everyone that’s needed to keep the US running in the event of a nuclear war.”

“Whoa.” Tony breathed out. “And here we are in sunny Mali, ass-end of the third world.”

“Look at it this way,” Nick said, pulling Tony close. “You’ll appreciate everything else when we’re outta here. And –” he waggled his brows. “There’s no cable, no tv, no nothing where we’re headed. Just open sky and land…back to nature with nothing to do after dark but fuck. And don’t tell me you aren’t gay - which we know you are from your profile - because I saw how you were drooling at us back in Bermuda.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re going on about,” Tony said. He'd wanted to add not only was he gay, he hadn't had sex since he left DC so it would be more likely he jumping Nick's bones than the other way around. “And what the hell is that?” he asked when the cliffs and conical roofed huts came into view.

“Welcome to the Cliffs of Bandiagara,” Adam said, grinning at Tony. “Home for the next week or so.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Tony said. “I’m not expecting the Four Seasons but this is ridiculous.” The jeep pulled to a halt outside a small squarish mud hut with a conical thatched roof and the men hopped out.

Tony looked up at the steep cliffs. High up, near the top of the cliffs, were shrines and hollows cut into the rock. “Look, this is personal but I believe that what’s in the Indiana Jones movies stays in the Indiana Jones movies.” Neither Nick nor Adam responded so he took a deep breath, railed at Morrow once more and added Brennan to the litany of curses.

He was introduced to the town’s elders and given a tour of the village. To his surprise, he found himself quickly absorbed in the history of the commune, believed to have started several hundred years BC by a race of red pygmies, the Tellen. The Tellen either interbred with the Dogon or flew away to another planet, Tony suggested, since one of the beliefs was the Tellen possessed flying abilities. “Imagine that,” Tony said, “You hear buzzing and look up – and there you see an army of red pygmies flying overhead. Woohoo!” He grinned at Nick. “You’re right. It isn’t so bad. Pretty interesting, actually. And no, I wasn’t drooling.”

Nick merely winked and said in an undertone, “The only reason I didn’t jump your bones in Bermuda was because Jax said I was to keep my dirty little paws off you.”

“Why?” Tony asked.
“Cos you needed to focus on your new role. Well, you’ve graduated from the BASL course – with flying colors, too – a-a-and,” he drew out the word as he batted his impossibly long lashes, “Jax isn’t here.”

“Oh ho…the possessive type is he?” Tony waggled his eyebrows. “Doesn’t want my dirty little paws on you either?”

Both Nick and Adam laughed this time. “Nah uh.” Nick shook his head. “Jax is a totally equal opportunity guy when it comes to us. He fucks us all and we’re free to fuck anyone, any time. Only rule is that we get suited up every time. No exceptions. Except with each other.”

“Did you say fuck anyone?” Tony asked. “So you guys aren’t exclusive?”

“No,” Adam replied. “Never been. Though lately there’s been some discussions on that. Except Nick here – he’s gotta have his monthly quota of nameless fucks.”

He sounded slightly disapproving and that got Tony curious. “I take it you’d rather he kept it within the team?” he asked.

“You could say that,” Adam muttered under his breath. “Not all of us are insatiable for anonymous cocks.”

“Hey!” Nick protested, curling an arm around Adam’s neck and pulling him in for a wet kiss which Tony noticed the surgeon did not resist. “And don’t forget my weakness for silver foxes.”

“Keep your ex-boss away from him,” Adam warned.

“Why?” Nick asked, curious.

“He’s unbelievably hung,” Tony said.

“Oh fuck…” Nick said in a breathy whisper. “You got me hard already. I’m going to hunt this silver fox down once our mission’s over and I’m going to avail myself to Leroy Jethro Gibbs. No way I’m going to let that pass me by without a taste and more, size queen that I am.”

“Uh huh.” Tony said and further conversation was curtailed by the PLF personnel telling them the patients were ready.

Much of Tony’s time was spent dispensing medication supplied by the Foundation, assisting with injections and working alongside members of Médecins Sans Frontières. There were meetings on the management plan PLF had drawn up with World Monuments Watch following a grant from the foundation to help preserve the historic sites followed by visits to said sacred sites.

The BBC had a team come over to shoot a documentary and Tony was interviewed briefly, at first, then on the team’s final day of shooting, the interviewer, a woman well-known for her political interviews, followed him around for the entire day, capturing scenes of him helping to build the huts, handing out food and assisting with medical aid. Tony swore he vaccinated at least a hundred kids and babies by the end of the day.

“It was only thirty kids,” Nick told him.

“Felt like a hundred,” Tony muttered.
It may have been only two weeks but by the end of that, Tony couldn’t wait to leave Africa and not return. Reason? Female Genital Mutilation. FGM was common especially among the tribal communities but even in the urban towns, PLF doctors and nurses attended to patients almost on a daily basis.

There were three types of FGM, he learned to his horror. Type I was removing the clitoral hood, Type II was the removal of the clitoris as well as part or all of the labia and Type III was excision of part or all of the external genitalia (clitoris, labia minora and labia majora). In the Dogon commune, Tony only encountered Type I, the idea itself enough to make him lose his appetite, but towards the end of their second week they’d moved to the city and the other two types came in to the clinic. The first time Tony saw a Type III on a fourteen year old girl, he fainted. Embarrassing, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. He’d started hyperventilating, felt his anal muscles flutter and before he could say anything, his body just gave way under his legs. Who could blame him, he railed at Adam when he came to an hour later and was able to speak.

“Did you see that girl?” he asked Adam, still wanting to gag at the memory. “Her vaginal opening had been stitched up, leaving only a tiny hole the size of a toothpick so she could pee and for her period! What the hell? And you say this is their culture? Where does respect for another culture end and our humanitarian sense begin? We give millions in humanitarian aid but we don’t do anything to stop this barbaric practice?”

Nick’s solution was to take Tony out the next day and challenge him to a barefisted fight in the empty hall of the PLF administrative building in Bamako.

An hour later, bloodied and spent, Tony thanked him. Weird as it may sound, the fight did get Tony’s frustration and anger out of his system. Frustration not just over the futility of his anger against the female circumcision, over being stuck in this hot, dry as a corpse’s cunt, godforsaken country, but also over his inability to forget Gibbs after all this time. He’d left NCIS seven months ago yet every night, when they sat outdoors and it felt like he’d left Planet Earth and Gibbs, and his NCIS family. This was what he thought he needed, wasn’t it? To get away as far as possible from Gibbs? Well, he sure was now, yet not a day went by when he did not think of him. He didn't have to wonder what Gibbs would feel about female genital mutilation.

The February night sky was dominated by the huge, bright Sirius whom the ancient Dogon priests had said possessed a companion star, invisible to the naked eye and from where the first beings arrived to Planet Earth. While he could marvel that the primitive Dogons knew something the Western astronomers discovered only in 1862, it didn’t excuse the barbaric practice of female circumcision.

That night, on their hard, uncomfortable bed, Tony let and Adam make love to him. Afterwards, Nick held him.

“Wherever he is, whatever he did, we’ll help you forget him,” Nick said, nuzzling Tony’s neck.

“Huh?” Tony said groggily. “Who?”

“Jethro.”

“The guy’s whose name you called out when you came,” Adam said, grinning. “Must be one helluva guy to have you calling out for him when two hot guys are fucking you.”

“And,” Nick added. “We aren’t just hot. We’re super, burnin’, scorching ha-awtt, man!”

○ ○ ○
“This what Adam meant by piece a cake?” Tony snapped angrily as more bullets flew.

They were in their third day of their recon along the Niger/Mali border when they came under hostile fire from suspected insurgents, including from the Al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and ISIS. Three KnightShade operators were seriously wounded and Nick scarcely made it back to the team when he’d moved out to retrieve one of the operators who was shot in both legs. Five soldiers from the Niger Army were killed and another four injured before US and US-backed reinforcements arrived.

Nick and Tony arrived back at the KnightShade camp in the outskirts of Bamako bloodied with an assortment of injuries but none serious. Tony reamed Adam a new one as the latter tended to his injuries while Nick sang Phil Collins’ Just Another Day in Paradise’. His KnightFone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket. He listened then put it down, giving a loud whoop. “Woohoo! Get packed! We off to Monte Carlo. Ten days R&R. Jax is meeting us there with the rest of the gang.” He grabbed Tony by the cheeks and planted a wet kiss on his lips. “I can’t wait to show you a mini Nickathon.”

“What’s a mini Nickathon?” Tony asked Adam after Nick dashed off to get packed.

“Less than ten but more than five doing Nick in a single session.”

**The French Riviera**

“Aahhh...this was more like it,” Tony thought as he soaked his aching body in the pool's Jacuzzi. Monte Carlo in February had to be the best place to be in. The days were mild, the nights were cool and it was everything Tony envisaged it to be, though anywhere outside the African continent worked for him after his Mali ordeal. The villa they were in belonged to Jax’s family and was in Villefranche, half an hour’s drive from Monte Carlo. It was the same property where the 1957 movie, An Affair to Remember, had been filmed and it blew Tony away with it’s view.

“Wow! It’s exactly like in the movie! I remember this staircase,” Tony exclaimed. “Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr stood right here. On this very spot at the top of the stairs. Even the flowers are the same!”

Jax and the rest of the M31 team had joined them and that gave him an opportunity to get to know more about KnightShade and the other M31 guys. Bono had brought a couple of suits for him and for now, life was perfect. If only Gibbs would stop intruding into his thoughts.

Yet he knew, with an excruciating certainty, that he would trade all the luxury in the world for a simple life with Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

“What’s bugging you, DiNozzo?” Jax asked one day as Tony went out on the patio that overlooked. “Homesick?”

“Do you?” Tony rebutted. “Ever get homesick?”

“Every damn day,” came the reply. “Even when I’m at home.” Jax drew in a breath then said, “You know the word ‘saudade’?”

“No.”

“You ever had that acute, overwhelming yearning…that homesick feeling deep in your gut until your whole being aches unbearably? And I’m not talking about a bout of food poisoning.”
“Yes.” The monosyllable was a mere whisper and Tony turned away to gaze at the blue of the Mediterranean, his thoughts four thousand miles away.

“That’s what saudade is. It’s a Portuguese word - and the only word in the world – that can capture that feeling, that lingering pain that eats away at your psyche. Roy Campbell, a South African satirist, described it as “a sort of home-sickness which can even be felt at home, that otherwise indefinable fusion of yearning with satisfaction, pain with pleasure, and resignation with unattainability.”

“Good enough description for me,” Tony said, quietly.

“So who is it you’re full of saudade for?”

Tony turned around and leaned against the balustrade. Behind him in the distance, a cruise liner had docked and dotted around the Bay of Villefranche were the water toys of the rich and famous – sailing yachts and cabin cruisers of every size, megayachts belonging to dotcom billionaires.

With Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat as his backdrop, Tony told Jax about Gibbs. The latter did, after all, already know Gibbs was the reason why Tony resigned from the agency.

“Gibbs, unlike you, does not believe in dallying with his agents, to use an old-fashioned term.”

“I do not dally,” Jax said. “I may fuck all of them but I do not fuck ‘em and leave ‘em.”

“You must tell me more about that before we leave.”

“I will, but you first. Didn’t you and Gibbs talk it out once you saw you were going to be working together?”

“We already worked out the rules before that happened. Before we even spent the two weeks at Mount Hood. We both liked the idea of anonymity so it was purely first names only and we didn’t ask questions like where we worked or what we did for a living. It was meant to be nothing but two weeks of uninterrupted sex.”

“And it was obviously good.”

“Exceptionally good. Best sex I’ve ever had and that’s saying a lot because Nick and Adam –” Tony gave a huff. “They’re pretty unforgettable.” There was a pause then he said, “It was hard, the first few weeks. Seemed to me that I was the one having difficulty pretending we’d never met before. Gibbs. He was like…made of stone. I was struggling to contain my feelings while he – he…I guess it really was just sex for him. Eventually I got a hold of my head and pulled it out of my ass. By the time we hired the other members of the team, I had everything under control. If that was how he wanted it then that was what he’d get.

“I loved the work but I hated the pretense. Then again, that was my decision. Nothing to do with Gibbs. I’d been in the closet since I realized I was gay and I really hadn’t thought of coming out when I met Gibbs. I mean, I would, one day, but there was no specific date, you know?”

“Why didn’t you come out when you were in NCIS?”

“I didn’t want Jethro to worry that I might inadvertently out him.”

“Then you must have felt something more than lust if you were that concerned for him.”

“Well, it did become more than just physical attraction. Working with the guy day in, day out,
Gibbs being so totally focused on the job and demanding the same from us, it didn’t leave much room for a social life. No,” Tony inhaled sharply. “What it did was make me realize physical attraction had evolved into love. By the time I made my decision to resign, I was already panicky inside. What if I didn’t have the guts to leave? What would I do? I didn’t want to go back to being a city cop so the other only other alternative was the FBI but Fornell, he’s the head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, is a close friend of Gibbs and that thought alone would make it hard for me to forget him. I had some savings. Enough to last me six months or so since I didn’t have to pay for the utilities and maintenance of my apartment.

"Because your trust fund took care of that."

"Yes. I was going to travel, bum around a little but then I got the call from Crispian offering me the job at PLF. I thought that was a piece of luck – it paid well, got me out of DC and sounded interesting. Except, you deranged fuckers appeared out of nowhere and put me through hell and I’m…” he stopped, at a loss for words.

“Still not over him,” Jax finished for him.

“Yeah.” It was nearly inaudible but Jax heard it loud and clear.

“Then you should go get him.” When Tony gave a disgusted snort, he added, “Your Jethro is undergoing his own metamorphosis. By the time you finish this assignment, I’d say he’ll be ready to accept who and what he is. And ready to complete what you both began thirteen years ago.”

Tony frowned at him. “I didn’t know you knew Gibbs.”

“I don’t know him personally but our file on him is more extensive than you could imagine, as is yours.”

“You have a file on Gibbs? Why?”

“Because we have a file on every family member, friend, fuck buddy, even your pet goldfish. Gibbs and Alex, our boss, have been fuck buddies on and off since they met while Gibbs was in the Corp.” Tony stared at Jax, his eyes wide with disbelief. “They’re just that,” Jax said when he saw Tony’s reaction. “Fuck. Buddies. And only when Alex is in DC. We live together and we’re based on the West Coast. You won’t ever have to worry about Alex being competition – even if your Jethro pulls his head out of his ass and comes out of the closet. Alex is mine. And our stories aren’t all that different. Alex waited fifteen years before we got together.”

“Sounds like a story I want to hear.”

“Another day. I think Nick’s waiting for us.” Jax looked up at the upper floor of the villa where a bare-chested Nick had whistled from and was now waving enthusiastically at them.
“What’s he injecting Nick with?” Tony asked Jax as Adam depressed the plunger of a small, slim syringe filled with a light blue liquid into Nick's thigh.

“Heckyll and Jekyll’s love potion,” Jax replied, calling Hayden and Jordan by their nicknames. Unlike the other members of KnightShade’s covert teams, Hekyll and Jekyll were not from the military or the alphabet agencies but were MIT graduates. They'd gone through the BASL program and, like the rest of the M31 team, kept to a daily workout schedule which kept them fit and, when not on vacation, ate about 3,000 calories a day, as opposed to the 5,000 of the the field operatives.

The ‘love potion’, Tony learned, was an accidental discovery. Hekyll and Jekyll were working on something to control adrenaline surges in the cyborg soldiers, the latter in itself a whole different subject altogether and one Tony knew McGee, himself from MIT, would love.

“So,” Jax explained, “while the initial tests failed to produce the results they wanted, they noticed, on the other hand, that the drug enhanced libido and increased the intensity and length of orgasms. Their test subjects, when injected with the drug, began to jerk off, grabbed the nearest female, or male, depending on which way they were inclined, and proceeded to fuck them. Not make love, you understand, but raunchy, animal fucking. The other scientists had to sound the alarm and put the subjects in restraints.”

“And you’re injecting Nick with that?” Tony asked, horrified.

“The drug’s been reworked since those early days. It’s very safe now and they’re coming out with an oral and topical version soon. But today, he’s asked for the subcutaneous injection. It works fast, is more potent and leaves him completely relaxed afterwards.”

“What he’s omitted,” Adam chimed in, “is that it also works on the brain, testosterone level and the central nervous system to increase the arousal and pleasure level several times higher than a normal male. In addition, the drug automatically compensates for this overload once orgasm is over and brings the body back to normal through a gradual process so that he doesn’t suffer from a heart attack.”

“Uh huh.” Tony was still uncertain. He’d never needed stimulants to get aroused and no one had ever complained about his erection. He had always been up to the task and – a thought suddenly struck him. “And this drug is for the top? What about the bottom?”

“Oh sorry,” Jax grinned. “The one Nick just got is for bottoms. Blue. They’re still working on the Green – for the tops.”

“Ready in about four to six months,” Hekyll called out from Nick’s side where he was busy sucking on Nick’s nipple.

“The Blue Dream, as Nick calls it,” said Jax. “works on the nerves around his entire genital area, from the reproductive organs through to the skin. Just finger-fucking him can make him come. And since his body is being primed so that he can come half a dozen times in a single fuck session,
you can see why it’s important that he also comes down gradually and falls into a sort of dreamlike state.”

“Uh huh.” Tony nodded. He looked over the man laying on his back on a double sunbed. They were on the covered patio next to the infinity pool and the day was bright and cool. Nick was flushed, his lips parted, pupils huge and dark with arousal. The men surrounded him, each one taking on a different part of Nick’s body.

Jax was seated nearby, observing the ritual with fixed interest. To Tony, it seemed like a ritual rather than a gangbang in progress. He could see Jax was aroused and actually, so was he, his own cock hard and leaking. Despite his obvious arousal, he felt detached. His body was responding but some part of his mind was holding him back. He wondered why then sighed because he knew the answer. Sex with Adam and Nick in Mali had slaked his thirst somewhat but it didn't take an MIT genius to tell him what was missing despite the number of hot, sexy male flesh around him.

And the naked man next to him was one helluva of a specimen for the male human species – tall and lean, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. Jax Theron was sleekly muscled and hairless except for a faint, dark stubble on his jaw. His cock was beautiful, long and thick, its huge bulbous head, cut and glistening with precum which he’d smeared over the silky skin. He’d do Jax in a New York minute. Except he knew he wouldn’t. Not today, at any rate. Today, in the bright clear sunshine on the French Riviera, for some insane reason, he wanted Jethro. Jethro kissing him, sucking on his nipple…Jethro’s cock, so huge and thick it made him gasp at every first thrust, plundering his ass, fucking him until nothing else mattered in the world. Jethro and his dingy basement, the scent of fresh sawdust and strong black coffee – he yearned for that a million times more than the paradise he was in right this moment.

He’d had other lovers since that day thirteen years ago. Some were great, others just quickies which he eventually gave up on, deeming his own right hand could do as good a job and with a tenth of the hassle. Since Mali, sex had been fun, regular, hassle-free...and cathartic. It went a long way to bring his equilibrium back to normal so he had no problem understanding why Nick needed so much of it. The seemingly cheerful, happy-go-lucky guy killed people like people swatted flies in summer. But under that cheery exterior, Adam had told him, Nick suffered every kill. The easier the kill, the worse Nick felt. Then only a shot of Blue Dream and getting gangbanged worked to settle him. He was their coldest, most dispassionate killer. On the outside only. Which was why, Adam had said, the entire team was so protective of him. It was easy for Tony to see that the KnightShade men clearly had a very special bond with each other. Their fucking could get hard and rough, as he’d observed, yet afterwards they always kissed and cuddled in a way you wouldn’t expect hardened men to do. Then again, if it was good enough for the Theban warriors, he guessed it was good enough for M31.

The problem was, great as the sex was with them, it was still as empty as fucking faceless, nameless strangers. What he wanted was KnightShade sex. With Jethro. What he wanted was his cake and eat it, too.

He hadn’t been away from DC even a year yet it felt like a lifetime. He missed Jethro even more with each passing day. Disgusted with himself, he went to lay down on one of the sun beds. The citrus-gardenia scented air and soft breeze made him sleepy. Jax pulled his deckchair next to him and leaned over to give him a lingering kiss. Despite being surprised since Jax had not shown any sexual interest in him before, Tony opened his mouth and let Jax deepen the kiss.

Jax climbed over onto Tony’s sun bed and enveloped the older man in his arms. There were no words spoken, just firm hands gripping Tony’s arms, cupping his jaw, fondling his balls. Then before he could fully process that this was Jax Theron, who had kept himself relatively aloof from
Tony, was folding his legs up against his chest and pressing his face against his balls and his butthole. The sensation of hot, wet tongue against his anus was delicious. He closed his eyes and asked for more. Jax plunged in deep and Tony gasped. In and out Jax’s tongue played with Tony. A thick finger slid in, the tongue laved around his rim then a second finger, covered with lube, joined the first.

He felt himself being stretched at the same time as his cock was swallowed up by Jax’s mouth. He clutched at Jax’s hair, short but still long enough for Tony to grip.

“God…! Fuck me, Jax.”

“Only if you promise not to call out Jethro’s name when you come.”

Tony gave a soft, embarrassed laugh. “I promise.”

As Nick was being fucked by his team members, Tony was fucked by Jax but despite his promise, it was still Jethro’s name that spilled from his lips as his come spewed over his belly.

Later, Jax held him and they lay on the sun bed watching the KnightShade men going a second or third time with Nick. From where he was, Tony could see Nick’s body coated with the thick, white come the men had shot out. Even now, Hayden and Jordan were ejaculating on Nick’s face as Adam and Chai double-fucked him.

Jax saw Tony watching transfixed at Nick being double-penetrated and said, “It’s the shot they gave him. It also makes his anal muscles more pliable. You want to try it?”

“No!” Tony’s reply shot out more forcefully than he intended. “Those aren’t wiener they’re stuffing in his hole.”

“No, but Blue Dream will loosen you up first. Your anal muscles becomes like a woman’s cervix dilating during labor. The drug dilates your anus in addition to heightening your pleasure. Sometimes, like when he’s just returned from a tough assignment, one that almost gets him killed, he needs more than just us M32 guys. I have to call in reinforcements.” Jax chuckled. “Yup. Our Nick will need twenty to thirty men before he’s satisfied, then he’ll sleep for thirty-six hours straight and wake up refreshed.” At Tony’s stunned expression, Jax added, “it’s okay. He loves it, he needs it, and –”

“Doesn’t it damage his uhh…you know.”

“If it did, you think I’d allow it? Adam’s a trauma surgeon and he’s especially protective of Nick. Actually, we all are. He’s the youngest in the team so we all look out for him. We would never allow anything to hurt him in any way.”

“I believe you but I think I’ll stick to just regular sex, thanks.”

“You still hooked on him.”

“On whom?”

“Jethro.” Jax pinned his aqua gaze on Tony. “Must be helluva fuck to make him so unforgettable.” When Tony didn’t respond, he said, “Or it’s more than just sex. You want out of here just say so.”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then you have to focus on the here and now a hundred and ten per cent, DiNozzo. Once our
R&R’s over, your part in our operation commences. You don’t have room for error. Lose focus for even a moment and one of us can end up dead. Most likely, you. So either you put him out of your mind or I put you on the next flight back to DC.”
Chapter 23 takes us back to 1998, Tokyo.

Before Rain Waterstone, there was Quinn Masterson. And before Quinn Masterson, there was Akisame Nakayama.

He liked being called Rain as it preserved that connection to his roots but being an American now, Quinn Masterson was a nice, solid Anglo-Saxon name. There was a time, when he was a child, that he would not have passed for a Quinn Masterson, but as he matured, his Caucasian genes came to the fore and while there was a slight tilt to his green eyes that would hint at Oriental roots, Rain Waterstone was the poster child for the Pan-Asian metrosexual.

He was also an assassin.

1998: Tokyo, Japan

The lady screamed when her dog leapt out of their car and ran across the street, almost causing an accident and getting squashed by a bus. The boy dashed out and plucked it off the road, returning the be-ribboned dog to its owner, hoping for a reward that would make up for the loss of his day’s earnings when he was robbed earlier. Ani-san would punish him and he didn’t think he could take another beating. The Russian’s lady invited him to join them for lunch, saying they were heading for Ameyoko, a busy market street that ran along two railway tracks.

The kid readily agreed since he hadn’t eaten since sunrise and then it had been a piece of mochi and a cup of matcha.

“You want to take this dirty street kid to lunch with us?” The man growled in a gravelly voice.

“Viktor.” The lady looked sternly at the man. Wife, then, not mistress, the kid concluded. “Don’t frighten the boy. Come,” she said to him. “You deserve a reward for saving my precious Lapochka but first, some food. You do not look like you have enough to eat. So thin.” She squeezed the boy’s skinny arm.

“Are you alone here?” Viktor asked him. “We can’t just take him with us,” he said to his wife. “What about his parents?”

The boy started shaking his head. “No, I am alone. It is okay, I can take you to Ameyoko. I can
Irina smiled at her husband. “See?”

Viktor harrumphed. “Look at how dirty he is. The restaurant won’t let him in.”

“Is okay,” the boy said, grinning at the prospect of a good meal. “Many shops with tables outside.”
He couldn’t tell the man he was running from the Yakuza. That would surely have him chased away. Everyone knew the Yakuza weren’t to be fooled with.

Having lost the argument to the lady, they all piled into the limousine. A Japanese man in the car greeted the Usmanovs but cast the boy suspicious glances. The kid ignored him and climbed in after the lady. He listened as Viktor and the Japanese man discussed politics, the imminent changes coming to Russia and a young Lieutenant Colonel in the KGB named Putin who was likely to take over from Yeltsin.

The boy didn’t understand, or care, about politics but his ears pricked up when they talked about Viktor having flown in on his private jet. So, the man was very rich.

And just what the boy needed to get out of the clutches of the Yakuza. But how?

In the end, it was the wife who came to his rescue. They had dropped the Japanese man off at his hotel but not before he warned the boy in Japanese not to hustle his Russian friends or he’d send the police after him. The kid had assumed a meek demeanor, bowing his head several times and assuring the man he would do no such thing. When the man said goodbye to the couple, he turned to give the kid another warning look only to receive a tongue stuck out of a cheeky face as the limousine pulled away.

“Viktor, we have to help this poor boy,” the lady said to her husband as he instructed the driver to take them to Ameyoko.

“Yes, listen to your wife,” the kid silently told Viktor.

She put her hand lightly on the kid’s arm. “What is your name?” she asked.

“Akisame Nakayama.”

“What does it mean?”

“In English? Akisame means rain that falls in the autumn. Nakayama is the name of a town in Yamagata Prefecture where I was born. It is famous for its waterstones.”

“Water stones?” Irina asked, not knowing what they were.

“Yes, the stone used for sharpening knives.”

“Ahh. Tochil’nyy kamen.” Irina nodded. “Yes, yes, sharpening stones. Akee what?” she asked, trying to recall the the boy’s name. “Your name?”

“Akisame. Ah-Kee-Sah-May. but you can just call me Rain,” the boy said. That is what the tourists call me.”

“Rain. Yes, that is easier to remember.”

“What is your name?”
“I am Irina and this is my husband, Viktor.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” Akisame said formally with a small bow. “You are Russians?”

“We were born in Russia but emigrated to the United States twenty years ago.”

“So you are Americans now but you continue to speak Russian.”

“Most of the time we speak English but with my husband and family, I like to speak in Russian. How is it you speak English so well?”

“Because he’s a polukrovka,” Viktor said. “Look his features. Green eyes. Japanese do not have green eyes or sharp noses like this little urchin. “Where are your parents?”

“My mother is not here,” Akisame replied, not elaborating.

“And your father?” Irina asked.

“I do not know who he is, but I was told he was an American soldier.”

“See,” Viktor said with a note of satisfaction.

“Why are you not with your mother?” Irina asked, taking in Akisame’s not-too-clean clothes and the holes in his dirty sneakers. She noted the fading bruises on his face and sighed. “Street children,” she murmured softly. “You find them in every country.”

“My mother is dead. I grew up in the orphanage.

“And you learned English in an orphanage?” Irina asked, her tone disbelieving. “I think even better than me.”

“An American lady came three times a week to teach English,” Akisame said. “She said I was her best student but she has returned to America.” He didn’t add that he’d also honed his English by way of the many English-speaking johns who’d loved his pretty mixed parentage looks.

“So you’re still at the orphanage?” Irina asked.

“This looks good,” Viktor interrupted, looking at the menu of one of the many little restaurants squeezed together in the narrow, busy street of Ameyoko. “Let’s eat here.” He pulled a wooden stool out from under the table and sat down. “Saké. That’s what I need.”

Since the names and descriptions of the dishes in the menu were in Japanese, they had Akisame translate and explain a few dishes and do the ordering. The boy’s stomach rumbled loudly in anticipation.

It was a shock to Viktor and his wife when Akisame offered himself as a thank-you. “I give you ten years of my life,” he said to Viktor. “I will be your servant, bodyguard, chauffeur…when I am older, I mean. Until then I can do odd jobs like taking care of your car. Or the lovely lady’s dog. I can work in the kitchen, the garden. I know how to create beautiful bonsai. Summer and winter, my bonsais are beautiful.” The only beautiful thing in my life. “I work for you…anything. You keep me like…like that pet that belong to your lady except I work.” Akisame looked at the shitzu that was eating off a plate Irina had fished out of her voluminous handbag. The plate had a picture of the dog and its name, Lapochka, with a smiling Irina. She wasn’t smiling now but was looking
at her husband with a horrified expression.

“It’s a good deal,” Akisame said earnestly.

“Ten years of servitude in exchange for…what did you say?” Usmanov asked him.

“Food, clothes, house. I am a good worker. Ten years I give you. Just…do not beat me or fuck me.” Akisame heard a gasp and quickly apologized to Irina. “I beg your pardon. I forget my manners.”

“Viktor…,” Irina tugged at her husband’s sleeve, shocked by Akisame’s proposition.

Ten years must be like forever to someone your age,” Viktor said, patting his wife’s hand reassuringly as he spoke. “How old are you?”

“Twelve last month.”

“What are you running away from? Your pimp? And surely anyone else who buys you would only use you for the same thing.”

Akisame’s expression had changed, then, but this was his chance. Maybe his only chance so he could not fail. He’d not reported in, as expected to, and Ani-san would beat him again. He looked imploringly at Irina, hoping she had a soft heart, unlike that ugly crone whose house he lived in. She had no heart and that she was equally evil with the other children, all belonging to Ani-san who pimped them out, was no consolation.

“If you take me,” Akisame said to the lady. “I will take care of your pet…and you. Do you have children?”

Irina paused before quickly nodding. “Yes, three. Two boys and a girl. They are a little older than you.”

Akisame nodded. “It is fine. I can take care of them, too.”

“You are asking us to employ you?” Viktor asked. “You know we live in the US, not Japan?”

“Yes, I know,” Akisame replied. “No papers. Just take me.” He cast his large, green eyes at Irina. "Please. All I ask is food and a place to sleep and I will work very hard."

Viktor gave a low laugh. “This boy has chutzpah, Rina.”

“Viktor –” Irina clutched at her husband’s arm. “We can’t just leave him. It is obvious what he’s had to do to survive.”

“Picking kids off the street and taking them out of the country. I don’t think that’s legal, Rina.” Viktor’s voice was sarcastic.

“And that has stopped you before? Do something good and perhaps God will forgive the not-so-good things you have done.” Viktor chuckled so Irina added, "If there’s one thing I admire about you, it is that you can do anything as long as you want it. And I know you want to make me happy. Saving this boy will make me very happy so you will arrange it, da?"

All it took was a phone call from Viktor and things were set in motion for Akisame to accompany the Usmanovs back to the US.
“You are going to be an American citizen, you will have an American name,” Viktor told Akisame. “It will blend in and not stick out like Rain Waterstone or Akisame Nagasaki.”

“Nakayama,” Akisame corrected Viktor. “I understand. If I keep my Japanese name, it will be easier for the Yak- I mean the authorities - to find me,” Akisame said. Though why would they bother? He was a nobody. A spawn of a Japanese whore and a white American soldier.

Viktor had shown him a long list of first and last names and he took the ones he liked. Then chose a combination of two from his shortlist while blindfolded and that was how Quinn Masterson came to be.

However, while he was Quinn officially, to his family and friends he was Rain. Rain Waterstone. The rains that fall in autumn. It spoke to him of a time and place where he would be cooled by the rain, the turbulence washed away, leaving him clean and at peace. Such a place did not exist for him yet but he kept that dream place in his heart and spirit, knowing one day it would come true.

One day, he would be more than just a bastard half-breed.

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Viktor had Quinn taught about weapons and self-defense from the time the boy set foot in the US. At sixteen, he became Viktor’s youngest bodyguard, then at eighteen his youngest enforcer. Every billionaire, the Russian ones, anyway, never left home without their entourage of security personnel, their cleaners and, in the case of the Mafia, their enforcers. Viktor Usmanov was now a respectable businessman not just in the US but around the world. He never quite shed his dubious roots, though, so he still kept a secret stable of enforcers that did his bidding as, and when, needed. He groomed Quinn to become one, not just a good one but his best. Irina continued to have a soft spot for the beautiful Japanese-Caucasian boy who looked as delicate as a dragonfly’s gossamer wings. She had started to tell her husband to stop using Quinn as his personal hitman and to give him his freedom. "To go to university," she'd said. "Teach him a trade but not one that involves killing!"

But Quinn was too good for Viktor to let him go so he came to a compromise with Irina - "I will let him learn whatever he wants but he stays with me. I need him. In his free time he can pick up a trade or do part time studies."

That seemed to work and everyone was happy, but when Quinn turned 22, he asked Viktor to release him from his bond. As promised, he’d served Viktor for ten years and it was time to stretch his wings.

Viktor hadn’t been surprised by his decision, which surprised Quinn. He’d expected Viktor to balk, to use Mrs. Usmanov as a reason for Quinn to stay but he didn’t except to say, “I am sorry to lose you, but I understand. Still, perhaps I can call on you should I have need of your services.”

“Of course, Mr. Usmanov.”

“And you will promise me this – you will not harm my family. No matter what the reward.”

“That I will never do,” Quinn assured him.

“And if you ever need anything, call me. Mrs. Usmanov will be extremely disappointed if you needed help and did not call us.”

“I promise.”
"And you keep it. You don’t need me to tell you that in your line of work there’s always someone who wants to topple you and be number one. I’d rather you retired from the job, not go independent but –"

“But it’s time the little piggy left home.” Quinn smiled. “If it does make you feel better, I will be working towards retiring as a professional hitman. May take a few years but I will leave it.”

“And you know I have resources in many places. Friends in the right places, too. You get yourself in a bad place, you call me. I’ll get you out. Understand?”

With that promise Quinn left the Usmanov household and began to set himself up as an independent assassin. Within five years, he had earned so formidable a reputation that if any of the other hitmen knew he had accepted a job, they would make sure to steer clear of the contract. In the world of contract killers, trust was non-existent but some were foolhardy enough to compete for jobs, or were always waiting in the wings to steal it away. After all, it wasn’t as if an assassin who lost a hit could go to the Bureau of Consumer Protection and lodge a complaint. But when a hit was associated with Quinn, they all stayed faraway unless word got out that the Dragonfly had declined the job.
Rule 3: "Never be unreachable" - If you're an NCIS fan, you'd probably know the lists differ and some say rule 3 is "Don't believe what you're told. Double check". I've opted to go for the first one.

December, 2015

NCIS; Washington, DC

It was nearly Christmas – the second one without Tony – that the team heard from him.


"I still don’t get why he’s not communicating with you via his cell phone like the rest of the world," Torres said. "Whoa," Torres exclaimed when he saw the photos Tony had attached. "You were right about DiNozzo imitating James Bond. Except for the jaw fuzz."

"And the horn-rim glasses," Bishop added.

"Omigawd!!" Abby came rushing up to the trio. "Did you get Tony’s photos?" Then she saw them and squealed, "Doesn’t he look just fab? The professor meets James Bond look is super cool!"

"He’s older than I expected," Torres remarked.

"Not that old," Abby said. “Late thirties. Has Gibbs seen these?"

"Seen what?" Gibbs asked, striding into the bullpen.

"Tony, boss," McGee said. "He emailed Abby and me some photos. Wanna see?"

Of course he did. “Not now, grab your gear. We got a dead Marine in Norfolk.” Powering off his computer and taking out his weapon, he asked, “He’s still alive, is he?"

“The Marine?” McGee asked. “You said he was dead.”

“DINOZZO!,” Gibbs growled. “Is DiNozzo alive?”
“Why wouldn’t he be, boss?” McGee asked, perplexed by the question.

“Because I haven’t been able to reach him. It’s been eighteen months since he left.”

"Actually, sixteen,” McGee said. "Tony left in July last year."

"Well, we do get an email now and then…” Bishop started to say then stopped, Gibbs' thunderous expression not encouraging more conversation. She grabbed her backpack and started out with Torres.

“Tony’s very much alive, Gibbs,” Abby said. She wanted to tell Gibbs more, that she had spoken to to Tony on the phone twice, but he’d made her promise not to let Gibbs and the team know about the phone calls. She didn’t like having to lie by omission but could understand he needed this complete break in order to get back his equilibrium. He’d promised he would return, that he would see Gibbs again “one day, when I’m ready.” So she’d kept up her bright cheery countenance and said to Gibbs, “And he’s looking as he’s never looked before. You wouldn’t recognize him if he walked in here today. His hair is all different, expertly-cut, he’s wearing horn-rim glasses and beard fuzz. I’ll send the photos to your cell phone.”

“If he’s emailing you, why can’t he be reached by cell phone?” Gibbs asked as they caught up with the rest.

“Exactly what I said!” Torres interjected as they waited for the elevator.

Abby’s grin collapsed into a frown. “I don’t know. I emailed to ask why but he never replied. I’ve only gotten two emails since he left.”

“That’s already a year and a half, Gibbs said? Torres asked.

"Sixteen months," McGee said.

“Mmm, yeah. Tony left last July. He flew out on his 38th birthday, if I'm not mistaken,” Abby said.

“So what did his email say?” Torres asked as they entered the elevator.

”Nothing specific. Just that he’s having a good time, making adjustments and his colleagues are great. Nothing about how to reach him by phone. He didn’t even reply to my asking if he’d changed his number because the one he had when he was here is dead.”

“It is odd why he won’t give us his new number;” Bishop said. “It’s not as if we’re going to call him everyday.”

“And there are sixty billion chat messages sent via Whatsapp and Facebook every single day worldwide,” Torres said. “Sixty billion! In the US alone, we sent eight billion text messages Every Day. As Abby would say – it’s hinky DiNozzo won’t let us have his cell phone number so we can keep in touch by Whatsapp like the rest of the world.”

“At first I thought he’s involved in some undercover job,” Abby said. “Like the time Director Shepard had him do? But when I saw how upset you were when you found out Tony had resigned,” she looked at Gibbs, “I nixed that idea. Because if he were merely undercover you’d know, right, Gibbs? And you wouldn't be a - a - you know…”

“And I called the Paddington Liberty Foundation,” McGee said, before Abby could finish. “They did have Tony listed as an executive director but he was out of town when I called and they weren’t at liberty to tell me where but would take a message.”
“Or,” Torres said, holding the elevator open as everyone stepped out. “DiNozzo figures he’s no longer with NCIS and so no longer has to observe Rule Number 3.” Everyone halted and stared at him. “What? McGee taught me that the very first day I stepped into the bullpen.” He let the door shut and hurried after Gibbs. “So it’s very possible, isn’t it? That he sees himself as freed from your rules?”

“You don’t know Tony like we do, Nick,” Abby said, glaring at him. “There’s a reason why Tony’s not letting us contact him by phone and it’s a good reason. Nothing to do with discarding Gibbs’ rules. So we’ll let his emails suffice, infrequent as they are.”

“So you really think he’s gone undercover, huh?” Torres asked.

Before Abby could answer, Gibbs rounded on her. “Why are you following us?”

“Oh, I’m meeting a friend for lunch at The Yards.”

“The Yards is that way.” Gibbs pointed in the opposite direction.

“And so it is,” Abby grinned. “I’m right, you know,” she said to Gibbs in an undertone. “It’s not like Tony to cut off a line of communication that’s the norm these days. You know Tony better than all of us combined so trust your gut. He’s got a good reason…whatever it is.”

Abby watched her colleagues, her friends, her family, get into their vehicles and bit her lip, her thoughts on Tony and why he had not called her. The others she could understand but her? Tony had confided in her the true reason for his leaving NCIS so why was it he had not called her at all? Emails were for work and other official communication. Friends and family texted and called.

He needed a headslap, Gibbs told himself. He preached constantly about keeping total focus on the job yet here he was, unable to concentrate on their latest case because all he think of was why Tony wouldn’t let them reach him by phone yet would email photos of himself. Their inability to locate Tony ate away at him. His own helplessness was driving him crazy.

“Anything you can tell me, Duck?” Gibbs asked his ME, forcing his attention back to the dead Marine.

Ducky peered up at Gibbs. “You know what my response is, Jethro.”

“You’ll know when you get him back to autopsy,” Gibbs said in unison with Palmer. He straightened up and turned to the others. “Torres and Bishop, you question the crew members, McGee, you’re with me. We’ll talk to Sergeant Holloway’s superiors and pay a visit to his family.”

The investigation went routinely and the questioning done, the team headed back for the office but instead of going up to the bullpen, Gibbs told McGee to handle the case. “You’re leading the investigation, you debrief the team and fill me in. I’ll see you in the morning.”

McGee frowned after Gibbs. Something was bothering the boss but it would be pointless to ask him what it was. Even though he was glad to be given the chance to take the lead in the investigation, he couldn’t help the niggle of concern. He’d ask Delilah about it tonight. She had good instincts and insights into people though he knew, already, what she’d say – that Gibbs missed Tony.

“Yeah, Gibbs did say Tony was the best agent he’d ever worked with. I mean, one of the best,” he’d told his fiancee one evening.
Delilah had smiled and said, “You are the best, Tim. But no, I don’t mean that. Gibbs misses Tony more like…like…”

“A favorite pet?”

“Uh, actually, more than that. Much, much more.”
Chapter Summary

References Season 15 Episode 1.

ACT TWO: SAUDADE

CHAPTER 25

One Month Later.

January 2016

“Turn this damn bird around!” He pressed the gun to the pilot’s head, not even thinking how dumb that’d be if he shot the pilot. “I said – turn this bird around!”

“I can’t do that,” the pilot said.

“We are not leaving them behind!”

“We are not leaving them! Not leaving Gibbs! McGee!”

Torres awoke with a start, heart thumping and his bedsheets damp with his sweat. “Damn!” he muttered, still breathing hard. The same nightmare had been waking him since he left Paraguay two months ago.

Left Gibbs and McGee behind.

He knew what they would be going through. He knew because he’d been there, done that and the scars to show for it. He got up, showered, changed and arrived at the office shortly after six.

Bishop arrived a few minutes later, followed by Abby who looked like she hadn’t slept either. None of them had been able to sleep more than a few hours each night. He and Clayton Reeves had stayed back every night going over the case, revisiting their own past operations in the hope that they could help give them an idea. He knew if they didn’t get Gibbs and McGee out soon, they likely wouldn’t even have their corpses to recover. They’d be dumped in the Paraná for the crocs to finish off.

The team had entered the bullpen this morning, worry and anxiety etched on their faces. Then they’d finally gotten a lead when Ducky brought their attention to a handstamp on Zachary Brooks, a known drug mule, who was now laying on Ducky’s table. Palmer had identified the handstamp as Club Mouth’s. He and Reeves brought the club owner, Mickey Clark – who’d shot Brooks - in for questioning and he passed Clark’s burner phone to Bishop.

“Only one overseas number in it,” he told her.

“Well, shouldn't take long to trace it. Abby, since you’re here.” Bishop handed the phone to Abby.
Less than five minutes later, Abby said, her voice troubled, “Houston, we have a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Bishop asked.

“The international number that our guy’s been calling has a blacklisted IMEI,” Abby said, referring to the International Mobile Equipment Identity number which every mobile phone has. “I can’t trace it.”

“Well, there’s gotta be a way to find out who Clark’s been calling,” Torres said.

“There is,” Bishop said, tabbing the numbers on the burner phone. They waited as the call went through. "Uh, hello? Is anyone there?"

Four thousand, five hundred miles away in Paraguay, McGee couldn’t believe he was hearing what he was hearing. "Bishop?"

“McGee?” Bishop said, not believing her ears. “Uh, are you okay?” Beside her, Torres and Abby stared, open-mouthed.

“Put it on speaker!” Abby cried. “McGee? Is that really you?”

“Please tell me I’m not hallucinating right now,” McGee said, gripping El Jefe’s satellite phone.

“You’re not,” Bishop said. "Tell us where you are. We're coming to get you. What's your status? Is your position stable?"

“No. Negative,” Gibbs answered.

The sound of Gibbs’ voice set Abby off again. “Gibbs! Are you alright?"

“We need an exfil ASAP,” Gibbs said, ignoring Abby.

“Paraguay military can have a chopper airborne in an hour, but...”

“No buts. We need it by 2100,” Gibbs snapped.

“What happens then?” Abby asked.

“Get the chopper.” Gibbs said tersely then added that the chopper was to pick them up on the top deck of the vessel.

“How are you gonna make it to the top of the ship without being seen?” Torres asked.

“And exfil without getting shot at?” Bishop interjected.

“That’s our problem,” Gibbs replied.

“Just get the chopper!” McGee reiterated. “We’ll pull the coordinates from this sat phone.”

When the call ended, McGee said, “Boss, it’s times like this – not that this has happened before – but...I want to go home so badly I’d cheer even if Tony was back there waiting for us. I’d be happy even with Tony as team lead.”

“That desperate, are ya?” Gibbs smiled. A trifle weakly but still, a smile. He didn’t add that he wished Tony would be there waiting for them, too.
“Jax.” Tony’s voice was fraught with tension and the M31 leader immediately looked up from his laptop.

“Yeah?”

“Gibbs. And McGee, one of our agents. They’ve been captured by the Revolutionary Armed Council rebels in Paraguay. I’ve got to call DC but the email says they managed to speak to them and, in short, Gibbs needs an exfil before 2100 hours Paraguay time.”

Jax went over and read the email for himself as Tony made the call to DC. The email, from one of the team members, Nick Torres, said that their boss and McGee had been imprisoned by terrorists in Paraguay for two months already but there was a chance of escape provided a chopper could pick them up by 2100 that same day but the Paraguayan military could only get a helo airborne in an hour and it would be way past 2100 by the time it got to Gibbs and McGee. Torres added that he didn’t know why he was telling Tony since there was nothing Tony could do even if he read the email today, which he likely would not.

“Torres? It’s Tony. I got your email.”

“Tony! You what?”

“Get their location,” Jax interrupted. “I can have a chopper on the way in twenty minutes.”

“Tony?” Torres called out.

“Yeah, You’re on speaker. I just read your email. Do you have Gibbs’ and McGee’s location? I can have a chopper pick them up before 2100.”

“How can you –”

“Do you have the damned co-ordinates?” Jax snapped.

“No. The GPS on the sat phone they were using is disabled.”

“This is Jax Theron,” Jax said, taking the phone off Tony. "Can you force a firmware flash?"

Torres passed the phone to Bishop even though it was on speaker. “Uhh, yes,” Bishop answered. "But it'll take at least an hour to upload over satellite and we don’t have an hour plus another hour for the chopper to be ready.”

They heard Torres murmur something about Tinder and Jax said, “That’s it! You can push a dating app onto the sat phone which will force the GPS update.”

“You’re right,” Bishop said. “We used the Hit That app to track down Mickey Clark and can do the same with the sat phone belonging to the Jefe that McGee and Gibbs are using.”

“Do that now while I arrange for our chopper,” Jax said. “Call us back as soon as you have the coordinates.” He swung around, taking out his KnightFone and tabbed a number. “Hekyll, we need to locate a couple of targets. Location – somewhere in Paraguay. Targets have a sat phone but GPS is disabled. Targets are NCIS agents and NCIS is going to push a dating app onto the sat phone to force the GPS update. I want you to do the same as a confirmation. Narrow in on known and
suspected Revolutionary Armed Council bases. We have up to 2100 hours Paraguay time to get the targets out. I’m going to get the chopper ready. We need the coordinates now.” He ended the call then made another to KnightShade’s Asunción office.

Tony, meanwhile, was yelling into his KnightFone. “You waited two months to tell me Gibbs and McGee didn’t make it back? What the hell? Where’s Bishop?”

“She’s busy setting up a profile on the dating app,” Torres said. “And don’t go yelling at me. It’s not like we’ve been sitting on our asses for two months and have time to think about you. McGee and Abby emailed you before we left for Paraguay and guess what? They still haven’t got a reply. You were the one who left, DiNozzo, so we don’t owe you shit.” With that, Torres slammed the phone down.

Five minutes later, Bishop called back. “We got ’em. They're in a side channel of the Paraná River. NCIS Asunción can get a chopper to them in 20 minutes.”

Jax took over the call. “I already have a chopper on its way. ETA thirteen minutes. My team is in contact with Special Agent Gibbs as we speak.”

“Uh, who are you?” Bishop asked, glancing at Vance who was standing behind her in MTAC.

“Jax Theron. KnightShade. Please inform Director Vance that my boss, Alex Knight, will be calling him any moment now.”

“We have a chopper on its way already?” Tony asked when the call ended. “How?”

“KnightShade has bases in every South American country and we’ve been keeping the RAC in our sights for awhile,” Jax replied. “If we’d known about Gibbs earlier, we would have gotten them out in a matter of days. We’d gotten confirmation of uranium being smuggled into Paraguay by the RAC but only got the location of where it’s being stored – an old cargo ship – yesterday. A assault team was to go in at 0400 tomorrow in a joint-op with the Paraguayan forces that’s why we had a chopper so close by. It was reconnoitering the target location when I called in.”

As rescues went, this one was smooth and relatively uneventful. 2100 hours was the time McGee had set for the alarm to go off, which would trigger the mass evac from the cargo ship. With this intel, KnightShade’s joint op with the Paraguayan military was brought forward. As Gibbs and McGee climbed on board the chopper, the KnightShade team, CIA operatives and Paraguayan forces moved in.

Gibbs’ and McGee’s homecoming was a teary one, with hugs and squeezes, and a somber-looking Torres. Gibbs made a mental note to ask him about that another day. Tonight they were all meeting at McGee’s and Delilah’s. He wouldn’t join them. He needed to be home. Alone. The two months of starvation and torture had impacted him in a way nothing else had in the past. Something had broken in him yet something had also broken free.

And he needed time to think about that.

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END OF ACT TWO: Saudade
Author's Note:

Act 3 picks up two months after the end of Act 2 and takes us to the present day and the final leg of this story. Paraguay has changed Gibbs, but if the changes can give him another chance with Tony, then Paraguay would have been a kind of wonderful.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=979jgSeQWTA

All you have to do is touch my hand
To show me you understand
And something happens to me
That's some kind of wonderful
Any time my little world is blue
I just have to look at you
And everything seems to be some kind of wonderful
I know I can't express this feeling of tenderness
There's so much I wanna say
But the right words just don't come my way
I just know when I'm in your embrace
This world is a happy place
And something happens to me
That's some kind of wonderful
I know…

Present Day; March 2016

Washington, DC

It had taken two months for McGee’s and Gibbs’ wounds to heal and they’d be carrying some of the scars for years, if not a lifetime. Vance had ordered both of them to take leave but they went against their doctor’s orders and turned up for work.

At least both men had agreed to go for therapy and, to Vance’s surprise, Gibbs had even sounded like he wanted to talk to Dr. Confalone. He knew Gibbs had started seeing Confalone while recovering from his GSW last year but Gibbs had balked, then. Not this time. This time Gibbs even turned up at Confalone’s office early to wait his turn after McGee. At least, that was what he heard McGee telling the rest of the team – not that he intended to eavesdrop.

Gibbs was looking a little gaunt after his ordeal and Vance knew he was going home early most
days. He’d given up nagging Gibbs to stay home and rest up properly, understanding the need to be active, to have a purpose, and being ordered to take leave only drove men like them crazier than they already were. So he told himself to be content that Gibbs was leaving work at five, sometimes earlier, and that some days he came in at noon. He’d asked Gibbs yesterday if he and McGee were still seeing Confalone and he’d said they were.

The phone call he’d received from Alex Knight, CEO of KnightShade Inc, had filled Vance in on a few things and he’d come away with the assurance that Knight would be keeping an eye on Gibbs. He didn’t know much about KnightShade other than that it was more than just a private military company with strong ties to the DoD – which had explained Under Secretary Morrow’s call a couple of hours after Alex’s. Morrow had urged Vance to make sure Gibbs took the required medical leave and attend Dr. Grace Confalone’s therapy sessions until she was satisfied to have him discharged. Easy for you to say, Vance grumbled to himself.

“I know that’s a near-impossible request to fulfill,” Morrow had said, “But try your best. I’ll keep a discreet eye on him.”

“Three times a week,” Gibbs replied when Vance asked if he and McGee were seeing Confalone. “Now it’s twice a week. By the time McGee and I are done she should be starting on her own therapy.” Both men had laughed.

Leroy Jethro Gibbs happily going for therapy twice a week and joking about it. Vance shook his head as he went to his office. Would wonders never cease.

March 2016;

Gibbs’ Home

It was a chilly Friday evening and Dr. Cyril Taft and Tobias Fornell were coming over for dinner. Neither of them were in a relationship so except for the occasional date, the two men spent their weekends with Gibbs. Taft had enough room in his house at Chevy Chase so some weekends Gibbs and Fornell went over and stayed the weekend.

Tonight, however, it was dinner at Gibbs’ and Taft had prepared his specialty – honey soy spare ribs. Fornell had brought a peach cobbler. Conversation revolved around the usual – medical emergencies, dumb perps and dumber victims, the latest politically-incorrect jokes and their plans for upcoming vacations.

“Are you…feeling okay?” Fornell asked Gibbs when the peach cobbler was served.

“Gibbs threw his friend a glance. “Why? Do I look sick? Didn’t even complain about the food – which is great, by the way.” He nodded at Taft. “You’re leaving the leftovers, aren’t you? Will take care of my dinner tomorrow.”

“You’re welcome, though I thought we were going over to Fornell’s,” Taft said.

“You are,” Fornell said. “I’m ordering satay from that Malaysian place down the road.”

“I hate those little bits of meat on a wooden skewer,” Gibbs grumbled. “Takes a hundred of them to fill me up.”

“There’s other stuff and you’ll like it. Nothing like that crap we tried in that fake Asian restaurant. Remember that?”
“Don’t want to,” Gibbs muttered.

“Back to Tobias’ question,” Taft said to Gibbs. “I know you’ve recovered from your ordeal in Paraguay. Physically, anyway. You dealing with the psychological effects?”

A question like this was guaranteeing him a glare and a growl so when Gibbs said, “I’m still seeing Confalone. I think I’m doing pretty good,” Taft raised his brows at Fornell then said, “So something else bugging you? You’ve been rather preoccupied. Actually, you’ve been that way since DiNozzo left. The new guy not working out?”

“Well, we know the new girl didn’t,” Fornell said.

“Who’s that?” Taft asked. “The blonde one?”

“No. The brunette,” Fornell replied. “Alex Quinn. And I was about to ask her out.”

“You were?” Both Gibbs and Taft asked at the same time.

“Yup. I called but she said she was on her way to Florida. Moving in with her mom. The old lady moved there but isn’t faring well. Anyway…anything bothering you?”

“You know,” Taft cut in. “You’re not much for conversation at the best of times but Tobias is right. The last year or so, you’ve…shut down. Then the Paraguay incident…and we’re just wondering, y’know? If we can help.”

Gibbs looked at him. “Shut down? Me?”

“Yeah. Well, not totally. Not like catatonic…”

“Huh.” Fornell snorted. “He is catatonic when it comes to talking about himself. Look, I know you’d rather have your nails pulled out than talk about your feelings and other shit, but Jethro, we’re your friends. Cyril saved yours and you? You saved mine after Diane died. Now, if there’s something bugging you – and I know there is – talk to us. To Cyril if you don’t want to tell me. Just know that you have friends who care.”

“Why did DiNozzo leave?” Taft asked, moving the subject away from Gibbs a little.

“You said he came into money and decided to become a bum,” Fornell said. “Doesn’t sound like the DiNozzo I know.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Taft concurred.

When Gibbs didn’t respond, Fornell said, “Well? He got fed up of waiting on you?”

“What?” Gibbs frowned at him.

“Waiting for a team of his own to lead,” Fornell clarified. The guy had been waiting over a dozen years. Seems to me he stayed longer than most people would.”

“Have you heard from him?” Taft asked.

“Nope,” Gibbs replied.

“Not even a text message?” Taft again.

“Nope.” Gibbs again.
“Did you try to call him?” Fornell this time.

“Not after the first time when I found his resignation letter on my desk.”

“See,” Fornell said to Taft. “DiNozzo would not do something like that. You don’t know the guy as well as I do. I’ve known him since he joined NCIS and believe me when I tell you he would not just up and leave without talking to Jethro, without trying to get Jethro to talk him out of it.”

“Why?” Taft asked, curiosity aroused.

“Because DiNozzo craves his approval, that’s why. And something must have happened to cause him to quit.” Fornell stood and went to the fridge. “You two have a fight or something?” He took out a beer and sat down.

“It’s been nearly two years since DiNozzo left,” Gibbs pointed out. “Why are you asking this now?”

“Because the last time I asked, I nearly got my head snapped off!”

“Same here,” Taft added.

“And now – now is post-Paraguay,” Fornell pointed out. ”You’re not the same Gibbs I used to know and frankly, I kinda like this new Gibbs. Keep him around longer, will you? Permanently would be nice. So, what is the deal between you and DiNozzo? Don’t tell me you’ve both have been carrying on a gay torrid affair behind everyone’s back?” Both he and Taft started cackling away like a a pair of mad chickens.

Gibbs was spared from responding when his cell phone vibrated and clattered over the dinner table. He grabbed it like a lifeline, frowning at the unknown number. His breath caught momentarily as he thought it might be Tony.

It wasn’t. It was the George Washington Memorial Hospital. “Yes,” Gibbs answered. “Yes, I am.” He listened for awhile then said, “Tell him I’m on my way. Yeah, got it.”

Fornell said to Taft as Gibbs talked on the phone. “I was just kidding.”

"Who knows?" Taft said. "The guy's got more secrets than the Vatican."

The call ended and Gibbs stood. “You’re partly right, Tobias. About me, anyway. I’m gay. Have been since forever. It’s the reason for my three divorces. And if you’ll excuse me, I have to see a friend at the hospital. He started for the door but Fornell, grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Wait just a minute. Did you just tell us you’re gay?”

“Yes.” Gibbs pulled his arm free and went to the door.’

“HEY!” Fornell yelled. “You can’t just leave after a bombshell like that!” But Gibbs had already exited and shut the door. “Don’t just stand there gawping like a goldfish,” he snapped at Taft.

Bethesda Naval Hospital

Gunnery Sergeant Bruno Chastain had been Gibbs’ close buddy during their time in the Corps. Eight months ago, Bruno had been diagnosed with liver cancer. According to the nurse, he had been warded two months ago. The prognosis wasn’t good. He wasn’t expected to make it to
Christmas, which was only two weeks away.

“Hey.” Gibbs touched the arm of his friend but there was no response.

“Give him a few minutes,” the nurse said to Gibbs. “He’ll awaken. But he tires easily so bear that in mind.”

Gibbs and Bruno had been close back in the Corps but had gradually lost touch once they were out. He hadn’t even known Bruno was living in DC until he got a call from him last month. Gibbs had visited his friend at the hospital and saw Bruno was a mere shadow of the man Gibbs had served with. Once again, he thanked God for the blessing of good health. He knew he was in excellent physical shape with a body a man twenty years younger would envy and he’d never even caught a cold in his adult life. He, of all people, knew better than to take his health for granted.

From that first visit, he’d seen that the man was lonely and needed to reach out to someone, anyone who’d once shared his life. He’d googled Gibbs and found out Gibbs was with NCIS and contacted him.

Gibbs had been back to visit a couple more times since then. Work, as usual, took over his life and he hadn’t found the time, or the inclination, to return to the hospital. Since Tony left, he hadn't had much motivation to do anything. It was one more change he was going to have to make. If he had been blessed with good health, he ought to do more with it than be tied to the bullpen at NCIS. Or to the what-ifs.

His near-death situation on the operating table only served to make him more determined to live life to the full, even if he was at the stage in his career where he had to leave field work to the younger guys. That was fine with him. He just didn’t want to be a manager shackled to his desk. Besides, KnightShade had given him super eyesight and a good-as-new leg. If he wanted, Alex would give him more and he'd be operationally-ready for anything. No, it wasn't his age or his body slowing him down.

Vance had broached the subject of him succeeding him as Director but he had been adamant.

“You know I’m not the right person, Leon,” he’d said to Vance. “It’s a political job and you know the last thing I’m capable of is ass-kissing the brass and making nice with the press.”

“You’re too old to go out in the field and your GSW injury left permanent effects. That’s a fact.”

“I’ve still got some years left. When I start panting after chasing down a perp, I’ll retire. Promise.” He'd been told to keep his KnightShade enhancements quiet so no one outside of the MediCom team and Alex knew about them.

“Jethro.” The name came out as a weak whisper. “Thanks for coming.”

“I’m sorry. I should have come sooner and more often,” Gibbs said.

Bruno waved away the apology. “You’re here now. That’s all that counts.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

“Yeah. I want you to take over my houseboat, the Semper Fi. I know it’s a big favor to ask you but I figured you love boats and fishing and…” Bruno paused to take a breath. “…and the Semper Fi is a beauty. Just take a look, stay for a week or two and if you really don’t want her, you can sell her. Keep the money. I got no one to leave it to.”
“You want me to take over a houseboat?”

“She’s a beauty, really. Bought her when she was an aging fishing trawler and gave her a complete makeover. She’s turned from an old crone to a supermodel, if you know what I mean. She’s docked at the Gangplank Marina. Head down to the Marina office and talk to Hal Benson. He’s the manager and he’s expecting you. He’ll have you fill in some forms and log you down as my tenant.”

“Wait –”

“Let me finish…don’t have much time.” Bruno took Gibbs’ wrist, the grip weak yet the urgency came through. “Leaving her to you so if you don’t wan’ her, you can sell her after I’m gone. But I hope you’ll keep her. Go take a look. She’s at the end of Pier K22. It’s the weekend. You don’t have to go to work, do you?”

“No.” Gibbs sighed. A houseboat? “I’ll go see the Semper Fi tomorrow morning. If there aren’t any problems at the marina’s end, I’ll take care of her.”

“Thank you, Jethro. I wouldn’t do this to you if I didn’t know you’d like living there. You once told me you’d like to build a boat and live on it when you retire. You remember?”

“I remember. It’s still my plan.”

“And now you got yourself a houseboat. Lots of opportunity to make additions and renovations if you fancy doing that. But I think she’s a beauty just as she is today. Anyway, go see it then let me know.”

Early next morning, both Fornell and Taft were at Gibbs’ house with a bag of bagels with lox and cream cheese. When Gibbs came downstairs, coffee was already brewing and his two friends were watching him.

“What?” Gibbs snapped. “Have I grown a pair of horns?” He poured himself a mug of coffee and sat down, digging into the bag and taking out a bagel. “I gotta go see a boat. Wanna tag along?”
ACT THREE: SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL

CHAPTER 27

Author's Note:

The Semper Fi is based on a mix of ideas I got from checking out houseboats created from old fishing vessels and barges in general:

http://www.riverthames.co.uk/cms/shared/display.php?path=9538

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2370752/Yours-just-1-7m--Thames-penthouse-old-coal- barge.html

ACT THREE: SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL

CHAPTER 27

Gangplank Marina:

South-west Washington, DC

A houseboat is a boat that you can live aboard in but is not connected to the marina sewer and is movable. Meaning, you can take it out for your fishing trips. A floating home, on the other hand, is fixed permanently to the dock and is connected to the sewer and to the marina’s power supply.

The Semper Fi was a real houseboat. An old fishing trawler, as Bruno had said, but what was docked at the Gangplank marina bore little resemblance to the original purse seiner Bruno had bought from a Maine fishing port. Bruno had given the engine a complete overhaul, rebuilt the boat so that it looked like a floating house. Numerous flowerboxes and hanging planters covered it so that by the time he took her out from Portland, Maine, for the voyage to DC, the Semper Fi looked like a floating flower shop.

She was 120 feet, within the marina’s maximum of 124 feet but was moored along the T-bar at the end of the pier. Bruno had been best buds with the marina owner and had been the second live-aboard resident (the first being the marina owner) so he’d been allowed to moor his houseboat at the end of the dock. Only the event barge, where the Thursday cocktail evening and Sunday Coffee Morning were held, was docked at the end of the piers.

“You’re serious?” Fornell said, clearly struck by the houseboat with its wooden clapboard exterior and masses of winter blooms hanging from pots. “Your friend’s giving this to you?” He gawked at the two-story home with a roof deck. “It’s huge. It’s a fucking yacht.”

“And it moves?” Taft asked. “I mean, can you take out like a real boat? Not one of those floating thingys you see in Lake Union, Seattle?”

“It is a boat,” Gibbs said. “And yeah, you can take it out. Bruno took her all the way from Portland,
Maine, and according to the marina manager Bruno took her out to the Chesapeake once a month on fishing trips.”

“Cool,” Taft said. “I’d like that,” he added. “Let’s check out the inside.”

“Hi there.” A smiling man in a hat greeted them as they approached. In his hands was a pair of gardening scissors and a bagful of cut off stems lay beside his feet. “Can I help you?”

“Permission to come aboard,” Gibbs said, holding out his hand. “I’m a friend of Bruno Chastain. Jethro Gibbs.”

“Yes, Jethro.” The man stood and waved them on board. “I’m Douglas Davenport. Bruno told us about you. My husband and I are Bruno’s neighbors. Our home’s that one.” Douglas pointed to a floating house on the next slip.

Fornell extended his hand to Douglas. “Hi, I’m Tobias Fornell. This here is Doctor Cyril Taft. Did you say your husband?”

“Pleased to meet you.” Douglas shook hands with them. “That’s right. Phil and I got married seven months ago. He’s a cop. I’m a vet. My clinic’s near The Yards, next to the Naval Yard. Phil and I are taking care of the Semper Fi for Bruno until he’s discharged but…” Douglas’ voiced trailed off.

“But it doesn’t look like he’ll be coming back,” Gibbs finished for him. “I just saw him yesterday. He didn’t look good.”

“No. He isn’t expected to make it to the end of the month. Hey, what are we doing? Come on inside. Phil should be back soon. He’s taken the dogs for a run.”

The interior of the Semper Fi was as warm and inviting as its exterior was oddly interesting. It was all wood and glass, giving the old boat a contemporary look yet managed to retain its patina of age to lend the entire dwelling an air of coziness and livability. Gibbs had been aboard old vessels that had been maintained only to keep it sea-worthy and not as a home. The Semper Fi was not only a home, it was obviously a well-loved one.

There was what Douglas called the solarium, at the bow. It was a decagon, Gibbs realized, with half constituting the solarium and the other half merging with the dining room and galley which had sliding doors opening out to the narrow length of walkway on the starboard side. The solarium half of the decagonal room had five windows of wood and glass, giving them a hundred and eighty-degree view. Blue-toned rugs lay on the floor and bright prints hung on the wood-paneled walls. The sofas were blue and there were blue and white scatter cushions with a few canary yellow ones for contrast. Gibbs took off, exploring on his own.

“What the hell?” Fornell said, looking around him. “How does a retired Marine afford a floating luxury house like this?”

Douglas chuckled. “It didn’t look like this when Bruno bought it for a eighty thousand dollars fifteen years ago.” He showed them an old sepia photograph of the Semper Fi in her seine-haul fishing days. “Looks nothing like that now, does she?”

“No shit,” Fornell said, looking around. “Must still have cost him a bomb to redo this whole thing.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t have been able to afford it if he didn’t do it himself.”

“He did all this?” Fornell asked, awed. “The flooring and furniture?
“Every piece of timber,” Douglas said. “Every screw, nail, engines. Overhauled everything except the hull which he repaired and reinforced. Put in heating under the floorboards just five years ago, renovated the bathrooms and bedrooms. Even the window frames were replaced. Sawed, planed and inserted piece by piece. Added the roof deck for entertaining, bought the furniture secondhand, though, and Christie over at Pier D made the cushions. He leased it out for fishing trips and cruises. Helped pay for what he put in over the years.”

“Hey, these are Hesham Abrishami prints,” Taft said, looking at a couple of colorful framed artwork on the wall. “I have a couple in my home, too. I wanted that one,” he pointed to a landscape print featuring a group of musicians, “but it was a limited edition and sold out.”

“That was a gift,” Doug said. “My husband and I gave it to him for his fiftieth birthday. We knew Bruno liked contemporary art. He’s got a David Hockney in his bedroom and that’s Arthur Melville’s A Scene in Tunis.” He pointed at another print hanging in the kitchen.”

“I don’t get it,” Fornell said. “How did Gibbs end up having a friend with a houseboat like this and collects contemporary art –”

“Just prints,” Douglas pointed out.

“Doesn’t matter,” Fornell said. “How does Gibbs end up getting all this?”

“You’ll have to ask Gibbs that,” Douglas said.

“How big is this thing, anyway?” Fornell asked.

“It’s almost three thousand square feet of living space,” Douglas said. “And Bruno has a workshop at the stern. As you can see, he kept the Semper Fi at peak condition so you’ll find his workshop is fully-stocked with all the necessary tools. The kitchen’s fully equipped, too. He loved to cook and I swear his gumbo is muah!” He kissed his fingers. Gibbs came up to them just then and Douglas said, “You’re with NCIS, aren’t you?”

“Yup.” Gibbs nodded.

“Bruno told us about you and the days back in the Corp. Are you going to take over the Semper Fi? Bruno was saying he hopes so. Said you don’t just love boats, you build them.”

“I promised him I would,” Gibbs said. “I’m here to do the paperwork.”

“Oh, that’s great! By the way, you know my husband, Phil. McCadden. With the Metro Police.”

“Detective Phil McCadden?”

“Yes. He’s now Captain of the Special Tactics Branch.”

“Yeah, I know Phil,” Gibbs said. “So…you guys are married.”

“Yes. Last November. I’ve been living in the marina for five years now but Phil was sharing a place with Tony. One of your special agents, I believe.”

“Yup. Tony.”

Turning to Gibbs he said, “Getting to work will be a breeze for you. Bruno has a small speedboat, like everyone of us on this pier. I take mine over to The Yard’s marina and walk to the clinic. Seven minutes. Would be five for you. No traffic snarls. Just hop in the speedboat and you’re at
“Hey.” The new voice had everyone turning around. Phil McCadden stood on the threshold, grinning. Behind him, two dogs were busy wrestling with each other. “Special Agent Gibbs. And Special Agent Tobias Fornell.” He stretched out his hand to Taft. “Phil McCadden. Metro PD. And you are?”

“Cyril Taft.” Both men shook hands.

“So you’re taking over the Semper Fi?” Phil asked Gibbs.

“Yes.” Gibbs looked up at the spiral staircase.

“Cabins up there?” Fornell asked.

“The master cabin and ensuite,” Phil said. Plus one guest cabin. Guest bathroom’s downstairs, though, and the laundry unit is back here next to the workshop and games room. The wheelhouse is above, next to the master cabin which has sliding doors on the starboard side so you look out at Hains Point.”

“Nice,” said Fornell. “We’ll take it.”

“Reserved the guestroom already, huh?” Phil asked, giving Fornell a wink.

The master bedroom on the second level and had French doors which opened out to a verandah. It was big enough for the kingsize bed, a couple of small armchairs and a desk.

“Ensuite’s here.” Phil opened a door which revealed a compact shower stall, sink and toilet. “This door,” he opened another door. “was added by Bruno so the second bedroom could share the bathroom. As you can see, everything’s wood. He did everything, short of chopping down the tree.”

Fornell gave a low whistle. “Your friend knew how to live well,” he said to Gibbs. “The master bedroom could give a 5-star hotel a run for its money.”

“Oh, Bruno was very particular about his creature comforts,” Phil said. “The guy may be in jeans and a ratty tee shirt all the time and all his socks have holes in them but he insisted on his home being not only visually therapeutic but had to feel good on the skin, too. You won’t find any quirky designer stuff, but what he has is good old-fashioned sturdiness, reliability and, he emphasized, “feels damned good to sit and lie on. Try his couch and you’ll know what I mean. Bruno loved the solarium so much, he slept there on the couch most nights instead of the cabin upstairs.”

“You need this, Jethro,” Fornell said in Gibbs’ ear. “Hell, if you don’t want it, I’ll buy it off your friend.” He asked Phil, “What would something like this be worth on the market now?”

"Just under two mill," Phil replied.

"Two million dollars?" Fornell's brows shot up, "Jethro, if you don't accept this gift I will shoot you myself."

“How about we check out the roof deck?” Doug said. “Like most of the floating homes, the Semper Fi has a roof deck but hers has a small covered area right in the center so you can get out of the direct sun if you like.

“Make sure he talks to us about you-know-what,” Fornell hissed at Taft as they all followed
Douglas.

“What?” Taft hissed back.

“You know what! The gay thing!”

“Oh. That.”

“Yes, that!” Fornell paused then said, “If you tell me you knew all along, I’ll throw you overboard.”

“This is really cool”, Taft said when they got up to the roof. The covered area was like a wedding tent, open on all sides with a blue canvas covering over some tables and chairs.

“Party area up here, cozy nookie nook downstairs,” Fornell said. “When can I move in?”

Doug laughed. “Bruno’s one of the lucky ones. He’s been here since the marina opened, that’s why he’s got such a prime slip. All the end slips are taken up by the marina office barges, not by private owners though when Phase 3 opens, there’ll be more piers added and most of them will be live aboards. The developer’s overhauling the sewage system and increasing power; there’s already fiber optic internet so dock fees for the new slips will be higher, though by how much hasn’t been announced.”

“This piece of floating property is worth a lot,” Phil said to Gibbs. “There’ll be a long line once it becomes known it’s up for sale – if it comes to that. My estimate is that the Semper Fi is worth two point five million if you convert it into a floating home.”

“Excuse me?” Gibbs said. “Did you say two million?”

“Yes.”

Gibbs looked upset so Doug quickly said, “Everything you see on it today, Bruno built himself. Well, he did have some help from another ex-Marine buddy who runs a construction business but yeah, most of what you see, Bruno built it himself.”

That was probably why he didn’t want to sell it, Gibbs thought. Anyone could see the home had been lovingly built. At that moment, Gibbs knew it had been the right thing to do – accepting Bruno’s gift and taking care of it. Besides, it would help take his mind off Tony. He was still processing his last session with Confalone about how Paraguay had changed him and needed a breather before tackling the issue of coming out.

“Oh, by the way, did Bruno tell you the house comes with Toni?” Phil asked.


“Yup. Bruno’s dog.” They all turned to look at the two dogs who were sitting quietly next to each other.

“Which one?” Gibbs asked.

‘This black and white beauty.” Phil ruffled the dog’s head.

“He’s named Tony?” Gibbs sounded distressed and Fornell frowned at him. So much for taking his mind off Tony, Gibbs grumbled to himself.

“Toni with an ‘i’. She’s a girl. Purebred Portuguese Waterdog. Very intelligent.”
“Actually, speaking of Tony, have you heard from him?” Phil asked.

“No,” Gibbs replied curtly. “Have you? You should have. You were best buds and shacked up together.”

“Got a couple of emails. Said he was settling in well, very busy…traveling a lot with the PLF – that’s the Paddington Liberty Foundation, not the Palestinian Liberation Front.” Gibbs’ glare had Phil grinning. “But of course you knew that. Anyway, that was all. Haven’t spoken to him and he hasn’t called.”

“Isn’t that unusual? For him not to call you even once?”

“Yes, it is, but I got the emails and the photos so I figure he’s just busy, you know? It’s not as if we were in a relationship together. Then it wouldn’t just be unusual, it would mean we broke up.”

Fornell was looking at the two men, his eyeballs doing the tennis match thing.

“You’re right,” Taft whispered in his ear. “We need to talk about this gay thing. You ask him when we get out of here.”

“Hell, I will. You ask him.”

“Okay, we’ll do it together.”
On the Road to Richmond.

London

Tony’s thoughts, as the English countryside flew past, was on the last twenty months since he left NCIS. His life had changed in ways he’d not quite imagined. Not just his circumstances but he as a person. More, accurately, he as a covert agent. Being part of an organization that was shrouded in secrecy for the most part had been an eye-opener and that not counting the M31’s team fucking each other or their team leader’s penchant for going butt naked whenever he could. Talk about living la vida loca. No, it was what KnightShade had done for him – or should that be to him – when it came to handling not just your everyday perp but terrorists whose pastime was lopping off your head.

“You cut his throat before he even knows you’re there,” Jax had once told him during a training session. As a cop and a federal agent, he’d been proficient with his weapon and killed in the line of duty. Gibbs had taught him to carry a knife wherever he went and had taught him how to use it to defend himself but KnightShade had trained him to kill with his bare hands, not just with a knife, and to do it without hesitation. Killing a man with a gun was bad enough. Killing a man by breaking his neck with your bare hands was another. Killing him by slicing a man’s throat from ear to ear …you needed to be trained not to puke afterwards.

The old Tony DiNozzo would not have been able to break a man’s neck much less cut his throat. The Tony today carried his knife sharpened and ready and his hands were toughened and callused. And one more – the one he had most difficulty with – not hesitating to kill a woman if it was necessary.

“You don’t get to choose, DiNozzo,” Jax had hissed at him after slamming him against a wall, knocking the breath out of him. “You’re not in some fiction novel where the good guy doesn’t kill women and children.”

“Ch-children?” Tony had cracked out.

“Yes. Children. Nine, ten-year-olds coming at you firing Uzis. We had men who were ambushed once in the DRC and once in the CAR. Central African Republic. Several were wounded, ten KnightShade men dead, and this gang of kids come streaming out of the back of a truck with their Uzis. We had to take them out from our helo. Pray you never have to do that because yeah, it fucks up your head. Forever.”

Tony had been so shaken by that revelation he was tempted to quit because, well, Mali was on the same continent as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, which used child soldiers. Who’s to say Jax wouldn’t get into his head to send him there for a stint?
Absently, he rubbed the calluses on his fingers as they went past the English houses with plum trees in bloom and smoke rising from stone chimneys. Calluses. Gibbs came immediately to mind...the feel of Gibbs’ calluses scraping the inside of his thighs...the rough skin against his lips, over his cock and balls...the callus on his index finger as it entered him.

He discarded those thoughts with a mental headslap. He knew lately, he hadn’t been totally focused on the job and wasn’t surprised their team leader had noticed. Before they’d flown out of Nice a year ago, Jax had told him to sort things out or ship out. But he didn’t know how to do that. How to get Gibbs out of head.

Going back to DC and admitting failure wasn’t an option so he’d pulled himself together and thrown his whole weight behind his assignment. If he couldn’t even handle this cushy job where all he had to do was follow Crispian around and report on him, then he deserved to be booted back to DC.

So though he still wondered why he had to go through all that KnightShade training just to be Crispian’s tail, he no longer voiced his complaints. On the contrary, he’d immersed himself in the mission. If his brief was to get close to his cousin and prevent him from being used by the Caucasian Emirate, then by God, he would do that!

Jax and the rest of the M31 team had left for their various assignments once their R & R in Monte Carlo was over and the team had stopped by Zurich for a few days en route to back to London. That was when he’d gotten news about Gibbs and McGee’s capture. It had taken every ounce of self-control not to fly to Paraguay with the rescue team Jax dispatched. He’d actually asked for permission to go and had been denied. His assignment was not over yet and, on the contrary, was at it’s most critical point.

“We need that info on Saidullayev,” Jax told him tersely. “And we need it now, DiNozzo. We’re digging into her background as deeply as possible so you do your part by keeping your eyes and ears open. And your head out of NCIS.”

And so he’d refocused on the job and let the KnightShade team do theirs. Needless to say, Gibbs and McGee were rescued from Paraguay though both were in a bad state.

“They’re being looked after,” Jax had assured him. “Won’t be much longer, DiNozzo. We’re consolidating all the data we have on Kasarov, close the Paddington hole, if there was one in the first place and you should be able to make your way home in a couple of months.”

Tony had been relieved to hear that. For the past year, he had accompanied Crispian on all his overseas trips and joined him at every social event and business conference. Morgan traveled with them on some, if PLF had business in the same city, in which case Tony found himself straddling two bosses.

This evening, Crispian had invited him to join him for dinner at a well-known restaurant in Richmond, nine miles south east of London. As soon as they arrived and had met the other guests, Tony ducked into the restroom and called Jax to relay what he’d learned on the drive to Richmond. Crispian, he reported to Jax, had moved his super model girlfriend, Varya Saidullayev, into his penthouse and when she was in Paris she stayed at his hotel at the Place de la Bastille.

“We know they’ve been seeing each other for six months already,” Jax said. “Keep an eye on her. Get me the names of the people she sees daily or on a regular basis. I want visuals, too. She’s on our watchlist and could be a honey trap”.

“One of the guests is Viktor Usmanov, a business associate,” Tony said. “I’ve met him a few times.
The man’s always accompanied by bodyguards. This evening was no different – Usmanov met us at the two-Michelin star restaurant in Richmond with two bodyguards, his wife, Irina and two friends. Crispian brought Varya Saidullayev and Morgan, your cousin."

"I’m sending you photos of three men," Jax told Tony. “They’re suspected ISIS sympathizers. Our intel has ISIS planning an attack in London. Imminent but no dates or location. MI-6 has two of the three men last seen in Hamburg in September last year and Beirut last month. They could be in London already. M31 is already in London working with MI-5 and MI-6. Keep an eye out on them. Last seen in your vicinity a week ago."

"You mean we're up against ISIS and the Caucasian Emirate?"

"That's how the dice rolls," Jax said and ended the call. o o o

Dinner was a long, delicious affair of seven courses, served in the three Michelin star restaurant’s private dining room. Surfeit with both food and wine, Tony excused himself and made his way to the restroom again. Or the loo, as the Brits called it, though he did wonder if there was a posh term for a toilet in a three Michelin star establishment.

He was just coming out of the loo when a bearded man walked past him. The Arab men tended to look the same, what with their beards and keffiyehs but Tony was able to recognize this one. His first instinct was to follow him but he couldn't just leave without telling Crispian and going back to do that would mean losing the target. Just then, one of Usmanov’s friends entered the passage leading to the loo. Tony pounced on him.

“Oh hey. You’re Quinn, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Tony. I was seated at the other end of our table.”

“Yes, you were.” Quinn smiled.

He was about to say something but Tony interrupted. “Could you please tell Crispian I had to leave? I met someone I need to talk to before she flies off in the morning and Crispian’s busy discussing some business contract with Usmanov. I’d rather not interrupt.”

“Sure. No problem. I’ll let Crispian know.”

“Thanks.” Tony rushed down the passage without a backward glance and hurried down the stairwell he’d seen the Arab go down. Taking out his KnightFone, he called Jax and reported it. “It’s the one called Kadduri.”

“Stay on him. The team’s on its way and we’ll find you. Do not engage unless necessary. If you do, make it silent.”

“I’ll call in with my location. Oh wait, you can track me on my KnightFone.”

Jax had already cut the call. He activated Tony’s audio-visual comms unit and in a few seconds had Tony on his KnightFone screen. In the room with him, Nick and Staz immediately logged on and the rest of M31 was alerted, as was their counterparts in MI-5, the British equivalent of the FBI, and MI-6, their equivalent of the CIA.
Tony caught sight of Kadduri hurrying through a door. It led into what had to be the restaurant’s store and there were a couple of guys stacking and taking stuff out. They didn’t pay Tony any mind and he hurried through as he saw Kadduri open a door at the far end and vanished. He took out his KnightFone again and called Jax. “I’m following him up the road. Looks like he’s going to cross it. That’s Hill Street. He’s crossing over and heading into Ormond Road.”

“I know. Don’t lose him.”

“How do you know? I haven’t crossed the –” Again, Jax had hung up. “— road yet,” Tony finished lamely.

He hurried across and into Ormond Road, a narrow street of what looked like residential townhouses on the right, and a sprawling brick factory or warehouse on the left. He followed cautiously, keeping to the right of the street so he could be taken for a resident if Kadduri happened to look behind him. Kadduri did but Tony deftly went up onto the steps of the townhouse and acted like a resident rummaging in his pocket for his house keys. He gave Kadduri a couple more seconds by pretending he couldn’t find his keys and took out his phone instead. Putting the phone to his ear, he casually turned around. The street was dark except for the lamps at the front of each house but he saw Kadduri slip into another alley. He followed.

He peered round the wall into the alley and Kadduri was unlocking a door that led to the side of factory. There was a row of dumpters between Tony and the back door and he used them to cover his approach. He heard Kadduri say something in Arabic, heard laughter then the door slammed shut.

“It’s me. I –”

“Team is ten minutes out. Wait there and watch the exit.”

How did Jax know he was at a door? He knew the KnightFone had a camera like all smartphones but he hadn’t been videoing his tailing of Kadduri.

He spied what could be a hiding spot between two garbage bins further up a couple of feet past the door. If anyone came out, he would have to turn the other way to get out of the alley and Tony would be able to follow without being seen.

He was heading for the bins and was just at the door when it suddenly opened and a bearded man – not Kadduri - stepped out. Tony saw the alarm on Kadduri, saw the man reach into his coat and Tony was on him in an instant. Before the Arab could sound the alarm, the blade in Tony’s hand had done its job. Arterial blood sprayed out covering Tony’s hands in a liquid blanket of red as more gushed out onto the gravel and cement. He dragged the body to the other side of the alley where he’d seen a more large dumpters. He hauled the dead man across then up to toss him into the bin but the blood made his hands slip and the body banged against the dumpster. Tony’s eyes followed the ball that bounced off the dumpster’s edge and rolled a few feet away.

Crap. His knife had been so sharp he’d nearly decapitated the man. Nearly. The dumpster finished the job. Going to the severed head, he picked it up and tossed into the dumpter to join its body.

He’d just turned when someone came up behind him, followed by at least a dozen men in assault gear.

“DiNozzo! It’s me, Nick.”

“About fucking time,” Tony muttered. “Kadduri’s still in there. Unless he left by another entrance
but I don’t think so. One of the men, Middle-eastern, came out and uhh, collided with me.”

“I know,” Nick said. “Get out of here. There’s a van outside near the start of Ormond. Get inside and wait for us. Go!”

Tony made his way to the van. Before he could bang on the door it opened and a KnightShade op, Dante, threw open the door and pulled Tony in. He thrust a backpack at Tony. “Change of clothes. There’s a bottle of water and some towels. Clean yourself up. You’re a mess.”

“We just going to wait here?” Tony asked.

Dante was talking to someone – sounded like the assault team – so he held up a finger to Tony. “Chavez! Ready to move. Truck’s here.”

A moment later, three more men piled into the van. Nick, Chai and another operator Tony hadn’t met. They waited for the truck to move off then the van followed.

They got out onto the A307, Petersham Road, where it continued on until a field came into view.

“We’re not taking custody of him?”

“Not our turf. The Brits will give us our turn at them, don’t you worry. For now, looks like we’ve scuttled their plans for London. It’s a start.”

“Where are we going now?”

“Me and the boys, back to Hawaii. Maybe a stopover at DC and San Diego first. You did good back there. Your training paid off. You dispatched one of the tangos with no problem. Could have been better, but… good enough considering.”

“Where are we going now?”

“A moment later, three more men piled into the van. Nick, Chai and another operator Tony hadn’t met. They waited for the truck to move off then the van followed.

They got out onto the A307, Petersham Road, where it continued on until a field came into view.

“Out!” Dante ordered. “Helo’s picking us up. ETA Three minutes.”

The men got out, clambered over the wooden fence and ran across the field. Tony could already hear the distant sounds of the helicopter’s blades.

Later, speeding across Richmond towards London, Tony asked what happened to Kadduri.

“In the truck with MI-5. With his two accomplices,” Nick replied.

“How could it have been better?” Tony asked. He thought handled that incident rather spectacularly.

“You could have broken his neck instead of decapitating him,” Nick said. “Always aim for a clean, not just a quiet kill when you’re in a high-density or residential area. But hey – it’s okay. Cleaning crew’s taking care of it.”

“So, am I going back to the US with you?”

“You have to ask Jax.” Nick's tone was clipped and Tony could see the tension in Nick's eyes. The playful sex-hungry young man had metamorphosed into a steely-eyed, focused professional.

Tony called Jax and asked where he was being assigned to next. Jax was adamant about him finishing his assignment where he was. “We’re digging up everything we can about Varya Saidullayev and Kasarov,” Jax said. The latter has been on our radar for awhile but nothing sticks
out so far. Saidullayev is an unknown but still a suspect. I want you on her tail as much as possible.”

Back in London, Tony apologized to his cousin for his disappearing act and told Crispian he ran into someone whose support would be needed for PLF to extend its services further into Asia. “I didn’t want to keep him waiting as he was already in his limo so I got Quinn, Viktor’s friend, to let you know.”

“No problem,” Crispian said. “You could have just called.”

“I was going to but my battery had run out.”

It was a helluva weak excuse but his cousin wasn’t put out by it and he decided it was best to let it be. The lying irked him. More than the close-quarter kill he’d executed just hours earlier. Lies required more work. Lying involved continuous work, having to remember what you lied about earlier and what you were going to lie about next. The kill earlier was over and done with. Someone else was cleaning up after him but the lies around him, his job at PLF, getting close to his cousin just to spy on him…it all seemed endless and did not sit well with him. His years with Gibbs had, ironically enough, taught him that trust was crucial. As far as his professional relationship with Gibbs had been, he’d trusted his team leader without reservation and Special Agent Gibbs had never betrayed that trust. As Jethro, though, the lie he’d made Tony live for over a dozen years had been unconscionable yet he knew he was equally to blame. He could have walked out of NCIS anytime but he’d stayed. Conversely, life with Jax and M31 was an open book. Lying was part of the job if you wanted to survive but among themselves, their internal and external lives were constantly on display. No lies among them.

The little lies he was living now were for a good cause; for his country. But damn if he was going to live the rest of his life with the one Jethro had made him live. He resolved, right there and then, to confront Jethro and ask him, pointblank, if there was a chance at all for them; he’d ask to stay at KnightShade permanently and not return to NCIS then the problem of fraternization wouldn’t be there. He’d tell Jethro he was willing to do anything, give up everything if it meant they could be together and not lie about it anymore.

He knew Jethro still desired him. He’d seen that look in his boss’ eyes several times – before the spell was broken by the customary Gibbs bark, “Gear up! Dead Marine.” He knew, in his own gut, that Jethro still harbored thoughts of those two weeks at Mount Hood but over the years, he also came to suspect that the physical attraction had developed quietly in the background into something more – professional respect, admiration and affection.

It was the professional respect that had stopped him from hitting on Jethro. The boundaries had been clearly drawn before Tony stepped into the bullpen and he’d been too much of a professional to break them. Which made him equally responsible for living the lie as long as he had. So, yeah, he was mad at Jethro but he was even angrier with himself.
Meanwhile, in Washington, DC

While Tony was slitting Kadduri’s throat a continent away, Gibbs was working in his houseboat. A week ago, he’d moved into the Semper Fi as soon as he’d seen to the marina’s paperwork. Bruno died three days after Gibbs moved into the houseboat. Gibbs, Phil and Doug were by Bruno’s bedside when he passed away. Gibbs organized the small, private funeral then spent the rest of that weekend alone with his thoughts. And Toni for company.

Another week passed and this weekend he had Taft coming by for lunch. Fornell was stuck on a new case and hadn’t seen the light of day in over a week.

To his team’s surprise – and not a small bit of worry – Gibbs called in to the office and told McGee he wouldn’t be coming in on Monday and would see them on Tuesday. Then he called Confalone.

“You think there’s another one of these houseboats or floating homes available?” Taft had asked when Gibbs entered the solarium.

“Nope,” Gibbs replied. “You could put your name down for a slip when Phase 3 starts in October. The marina will be expanded and a more piers will be added. But you better hurry if you’re serious. Tobias said there’re only half a dozen slips left.”

“Tobias?” Taft’s brows shot up. His surprise was comical to see.

“Yup. He didn’t tell you? Came down and signed up. Put down the reserve fee.”

“That little fucker. When?”

“Yesterday. Said all he had was an hour and he wanted to get that out of the way. Hey, where you going?”

“Be right back.” Taft was still muttering to himself as he strode down the pier towards the marina office.

When he’d moved out his house and got rid of stuff he didn’t need, Gibbs had got professional cleaners in and a small but reliable renovation company Ducky recommended to get the place into a rentable state. Another reason why he’d had no qualms about moving into the Semper Fi was that the free-standing workshop at the stern of the vessel. He’d found Bruno’s hand tools and they’d been high quality, expensive ones. Very few people used hand tools these days, most going the power tools route.

While he loved boats and the water, he’d never lived in a boating community and had looked forward to the experience. He discovered, within a few weeks of moving in, that the marina’s live-aboard community was a very close one and everyone knew each other. The thing, though, that he
appreciated and valued, was that the rules every boat owner knew, still applied. No one boarded your houseboat or floating home unless invited on board or given permission. No one locked their doors, though if your were a floating home, your windows were often right beside the pier so your visitors rapped on your windows to get permission to come aboard. If no one answered, you did not step onto the floating home’s pontoon, or patio. Gibbs didn’t know if this rule applied to all floating home communities but that was how it was here at the Gangplank Marina.

“Well?” Gibbs said to Toni who was curled up beside him on the couch. “We’ve been together about a month now. I’d say we get along pretty well, don’t you?”

Toni lifted her head, gave Gibbs’ hand a lick then settled back down. Like the typical black Portuguese Water Dog, she had a chest of white curls and her four paws were white as well. She followed Gibbs everywhere, even to the head, until he got her to learn that that was one place he expected privacy besides the space being too small for a man and a dog.

He scratched Toni’s head. “What do you say it’s time to end the charade my life has been?” Toni looked up at him. “Yeah, well…Dr. Confalone’s coming over tomorrow. Yes, she agreed to come here. I’m going to tell her, then.” Toni heaved a big sigh and repositioned herself. “Yeah, I know Tony’s gone. No, not you,” he said when Toni immediately lifted her head. “You know what? If Tony came back and I mean came back to me, I’d have to change your name.” He ruffled the dog’s head and pulled on a ear. “Or maybe not. I can see McGee having fun ordering you around and letting Tony think McGee meant him.” He chuckled at the thought.

A few minutes later, Taft returned with a big, satisfied smile on his face. “Got the last slip. Next dock third slip. Directly opposite Tobias. "Heh! Cantina Marina’s got a Mexican buffet on. Let’s go. I’m starved. And you can listen in when I tell Tobias I’m moving into my own houseboat next door to him!” He chuckled gleefully.

“Thanks for meeting me here,” Gibbs said to Grace Confalone, handing her a mug of coffee. He sipped his own and settled down on the couch in the solarium. It was a clear, sunny but cool day and all the windows were opened. Sunlight streamed in from the skylight and the briny air blew through as halyards clank-clonked in the distance. Gibbs shooed Toni off the couch but pulled a cushion off onto the floor for her. She promptly laid down on it, propping her chin on Gibbs’ bare foot.

“No problem,” Confalone responded. “I don’t usually do this but then, you aren’t my usual client.”

“Is that good or bad?”

Confalone laughed. “Neither. Interesting, for certain.” She took a sip of her hot coffee. "I'm flying off to LA tomorrow but I'm free today so I'm all yours.

“And I appreciate your agreeing to meet me on a Sunday,” Gibbs said added.

“Whatever works for you, Special Agent Gibbs. My orders were to make you top priority. You may not realize it, but you have friends in very high places, though I would have done it, anyway.” They drank their coffee in companionable silence for a few minutes before Confalone said, “So…what’s on your mind that’s important enough for you to see me on a Sunday?”

It took Gibbs a minute or two before he answered. Confalone, like all therapists, was used to waiting for the patient to open up. “My time in Paraguay…” Gibbs said, finally. “It changed me. A lot. We already talked about those changes, I know. But there’s something I haven’t told you and I
He took another swallow of coffee, stared out the window at his neighbors going about their usual morning tasks, then finally turned back to Confalone. “I’m gay. Knew I was gay after I joined the Corps.”

Confalone’s usually-expressive face betraying no emotion except clinical interest.

“I never intended to come out,” Gibbs continued. “Didn’t see the need to. It wasn’t anybody’s business. Just mine. I didn’t see how it would be anybody else’s business that I was attracted to men, not women. I still don’t.”

There was a long pause and when he didn’t continue, Confalone said, “But?”

“But Paraguay made me realize my staying in the closet did affect someone; someone I cared about – still care about. I realized my wanting to keep my homosexuality a secret, my living a double life, it…it was hurting that person. I never thought about that, never considered his feelings. Or if I did, it was fleeting and my rationale to carry on as is was that it was how he wanted things, too.

“Then I realized I was wrong. Those days and nights in Paraguay when I was too weak to do anything but lay on the floor, too weak to swat away the rats that started nibbling on my ears…McGee killed them.” Gibbs laughed softly. “I – I started thinking what a fucked-up life I’ve been living. I saw my mortality staring at me in those beady rat eyes and I started to think about what I’d do differently if I had another chance at my life.” He drew in a deep breath and let his head fall back on the couch. Overhead, through the solarium’s glass ceiling, he saw a plane traverse the morning sky, its contrails leaving a white path across the blue expanse. “One other thing I realized in Paraguay – McGee had a reason to survive. He had Delilah to go home to. Delilah’s pregnant. Twins. What did I have apart from my desk in the bullpen? More solitary nights in my basement?” He made a harsh scoffing sound. “That’s what my life amounts to after all those hours I put in at work.” He shook his head then looked at Confalone. “Don’t get me wrong. I love what I do and I want to keep doing it for as long as I can but…”

When Gibbs didn’t continue, Confoalone said, “Almost all my clients say the same thing after a life-threatening crisis. None have ever told me they wished they’d spent longer hours in the office, done more overtime, came in to work on more weekends or public holidays. And I tell them, it’s not too late to make changes as long as you have breath.”

Gibbs grunted. Said nothing for several minutes then, “I had difficulty coming to terms with my same-sex attraction. I guess that’s common in my generation?”

Confalone nodded. “Very. Many are still in the closet. Married to women. Two, three kids, white picket fence, retriever…the whole suburban America deal.”

“Yup. That’d be me. Except my wives – all three of them – left me. In one of my really low points, I’d be thinking it was good Shannon and Kelly died. It spared them the crap they’d have endured otherwise. I mean, can you imagine if they were alive today? And Paraguay happened and I decided to come out, decided I didn’t want to live a lie anymore? I would have destroyed them. And if Shannon had lived, we would have had three or more kids. She wanted a big family.” He drew in a huge gulp of air then shot up to his feet, startling Toni.

He refilled their mugs, nuked them for a minute then returned to the couch. He gave Confalone her coffee and said, “I’m going to come out. At work. I’ve already come out to Fornell and Taft.”

This had Confalone raising her brows. “When was this?”

“A couple of weeks ago, just before I moved into the Semper Fi.”
“How did you feel about that? Coming out to them?” She wanted to know the two men’s reaction but that would have to wait.

“A lot more anti-climactic than I thought. At least for me. I think Cy and Tobias haven’t gotten over it yet.”

“And you’re planning to come out at work.”

“Yeah.”

“You said earlier that your staying in the closet did affect someone. Some you still care about. Is this the reason for your decision to come out now?”

“Yes.”

“And what would you gain from coming out? What would this other person gain?”

Gibbs took his time thinking about that; about how he’d say what had been on his mind since his return from Paraguay.

Confalone waited patiently, studying the houseboat’s solarium and the dining alcove with the kitchenette behind. Or was it called a galley? The houseboat was too homey-looking for its tiny kitchen and dining area to be called anything else. It was a pretty room. More feminine than she expected for a Marine as its owner. Unless that owner had been a female. She’d be surprised if Gibbs left it the way it was. As a woman, she was bowled over by the flowers and plants that covered the vessel and could imagine when Spring and Summer came. Already the plants were budding and in a few weeks the boat would be one huge floating garden. The solarium’s wood floors were offset by blue-and-white sofa covers and the bright canary yellow cushions brightened the room further. But yes, it wasn’t quite what you’d expect a tough, grizzled Marine to have. Then again, her experience as forensic psychologist had taught her not to be surprised anymore.

“How about you tell me about this person first?” she asked. “It’s your concern for him that’s made you decide to come out, after all. Tell me about your relationship.”

“We don’t have one,” Gibbs said. Again, Confalone’s brows shot up. There was no way he could tell her about this without telling her who he was talking about so, sucking in a breath and expelling it, he said, “That ‘someone’ is DiNozzo. My ex-special agent. He resigned two years ago.”

Confalone blinked but otherwise remained quiet and still. It was a good thing she’d packed last night because she knew she’d be here for a few hours, not just one.

“I met Tony by chance back in 2001. I was in Baltimore working a case and stopped by a bar for a drink. We started up a conversation and he…uhh, invited me back to his place. I didn’t know it was a gay bar until he told me. In short, I did go back to his place and…I had sex with a man for the first time. I mean going the whole way. Before Tony, I’d had some encounters with other Marines but just handjobs…oral…never the whole way. I wasn’t ready for that and even thought I’d end up being celibate. In the end, I just did it with women and we know what a disaster that was – I resented needing them to keep up with the lie and they hated me for my emotional unavailability.

“Sex with Tony was…more than I expected. I was afraid of how it made me feel yet I knew I didn’t want that weekend to be all there was. So when he suggested we spend my two weeks vacation together, I agreed. Those two weeks…I can’t even begin to describe it. I loved every
minute of it but I was also scared spitless. I said I knew I was gay when I joined the Corps but it was Tony who showed me I’d never be anything but gay. But I couldn’t…y’know…couldn’t live that way. I’d been raised to believe it was a sin. I was torn apart inside by guilt so before Tony and I left for that holiday, I had him agree that it was just a two-week hook up, that we would not pursue it beyond the two weeks, that we would not try to find each other and just…just forget each other.” He drew in another breath and hung his head between his knees, hands clasped. Beside him, on the floor, Toni looked at him and whined.

“And Tony ended up joining NCIS?” Confalone said. “How did that happen?”

Gibbs told her. “It was okay at first. He assured me he hadn’t forgotten our agreement and assured me he respected my decision to stay in the closet. We carried on that way for years – both of us pretending we’d never met before, both of us pretending to be straight. Then, one day, out of the blue, Tony resigned. Just propped his resignation letter against my monitor. Didn’t even tell me face to face.”

“Did you confront him?”

“I was going to, but he’d left DC over the weekend, apparently. I haven’t heard from him since. My calls to him went unanswered, he sent an occasional email to the team but my name was never included.”

“Sounds like he’s following your agreement to the letter.”

Gibbs grunted. “It wouldn’t have hurt to talk to me. Not acknowledging our prior relationship at work didn’t mean complete incommunicado. And if he was planning to resign…he should have talked to me. Things could have been different from thereon.”

“Let’s say Tony comes back today,” Confalone interjected. “And he wants to pick up from where you left off fifteen years ago, can you do that?”

Gibbs looked Confalone in the eye and said. “Yes. That’s why I’m here talking to you. I want to come out. To my team, my friends, my peers. I no longer want to live this lie. I survived Paraguay. And I’m going to make that count. I’m going to find Tony. I don’t know where he is but I’m going to find him and make things right with him!”
Monday Morning, Abby's lab;  
NCIS, Washington, DC

“Gibbs, you know I can’t tell you stuff that’s been told to me in confidence,” Abby whined.

“I know, Abs, and you should know I wouldn’t ask it of you if it weren’t that important to me,” Gibbs said.

Abby chewed on her thumbnail. “Okay. How about this – you tell me why you need to know then I’ll decide if it justifies breaking my promise to Tony.”

Gibbs nodded. “Fair enough. Did Tony tell you he and I met before he joined NCIS?”

"Okay, that makes it justifiable." Seeing Gibbs' perplexed expression, she clarified, "If Tony hadn't already told me that, I wouldn't be able to talk about that. But since he has you can now ask me anything and I'll answer to the best of my ability."

"How long have you known about Baltimore?"

"He told me a few days before he left. No details. Just that you two met in a bar and hit it off."

“It was a month or so before he came on board,” Gibbs said. "I was as surprised as he must have been when Director Morrow introduced us and said Tony was going to be the first member of the MCRT.”

Abby laughed. "Yeah, he mentioned how shocked you both were when you entered the Director's office."

Gibbs hesitated, then dived in. “Abby, I’m gay.”

Abby blinked. “Say that again.”

“I’m gay, Abs. I’ve come out to Fornell and –”

“You came out to Fornell?”

“And Taft.”

“And Taft? So I’m third?”

“Fourth. Dr. Confalone was first.”

“Fourth!”

“Abs. You want to listen or what?”
“Okay, okay. I’m the fourth person to know. What else have you told other people that you haven’t told me?”

Gibbs was losing his patience.’You knew I was gay. You just said Tony told you how we met.”

"Yeah, but he didn't tell me you were gay. He just told me you both hit it off really well and he felt as if he’d met his soulmate. I thought that was clearly an exaggeration because, you know, you guys are like chalk and cheese. But I guess opposites attract and -"

“Listen” Gibbs grabbed her by the shoulders. "Look at me. Did Tony tell you why he left NCIS? The real reason?”

“Real reason? Like what?”

“Like did he leave because of me?”

Abs just looked at her boss blankly. “What do you mean?”

Gibbs blew out an exaggerated breath. “Look, if you don’t know it’s okay. I’ll go ask McGee.” He turned to leave but Abby pulled him back.

“No, you’ll not. McGee doesn’t know anything and I won’t tell you anything about Tony unless you start dishing first.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Tony is my best friend, Gibbs. I won’t betray his trust.”

“He may be your best friend but he’s the man I’m in love with.”

Abby gaped at him. Dumbstruck. Eyes wide. Then, “Omigod… Omigod. Omigod. Omigod. Gibbs!” She hugged him then tried to make him admit they’d been carrying on a secret affair all these years under the team’s noses.

“You know me better than that, Abs. Now, where’s Tony and how do I contact him?”

“I don’t know his new number. He called me shortly after he left just to say Hi but told me he would no longer be using his mobile phone because he was being issued a new phone and a new number. But Gibbs, before he left he told me he wanted a complete break…from you.” Gibbs’ heart plunged. Abby bit her lip, hating to see Gibbs hurt. "He said he needed to move on with his life and not stay, hoping for a miracle that was never going to happen.” Abby’s eyes watered. “I’m sorry, Gibbs, but Tony was hurting. He’d reached his limit. He loved you so much and never stopped hoping things would change…until...he realized you’d never change and either he did or you’d both die as you are.”

“That’s no longer the case, Abs.”

“No! It isn't. You've done the unthinkable! You came out...to those that matter.” A hopeful note crept into Abby’s voice. "And now you need to tell Tony."

“I need to find him first. I just hope I won’t be too late,”

"Can't be that hard. You're Gibbs. You can call Crispian and he'll talk to you."

 o o o

At the same time…
“Hi, Tony. it’s Bono. Where are you?”

“Just got back from lunch. Why?”

“I’ll be dropping off your security badge. Will you be at the hotel? If not, I’ll leave it at the front desk with Aline.”

“We’ve got nothing on until dinner with Viktor and the Japanese,” Tony replied. “I’ve got some reports to work on for my meeting at PLF tomorrow so I’ll be here. Come on up.”

“I’ve got Pierre waiting in the car so do you mind if I drop it off at the concierge and have it brought up to you?”

“Sure, no prob. Just leave it with the front desk. "They'll bring it up.”

“Don’t forget it. You need to wear it when you go into the PT Allianz building tomorrow and keep it round your neck as long as you’re in the building. Security’s been tightened after the blasts last month and if you don’t have your badge, you’ll likely get stopped and I’ll have to go down and clear you.”

“I hear you.”

Half an hour later, Bono stopped the car at the top of the Rue de la Bastille. “Wait for me. I won’t be long,” He said to the driver. “Go over to Pierre, the hotel concierge. He’ll let you wait at the entrance.”

“Oui,” said Pierre. I know Pierre but if you don’t see me when you come out, I’m just making a round. Wait there.”

Bono shut the folder he was running through and slung his backpack on. As he stepped out of the car, Tony’s security badge fell out of the folder. He hastily picked it up as cars behind them began to honk. He quickly put the lanyard over his head and shut the car door.

He hadn’t had time to have lunch so he ducked into the hotel’s café, situated on the ground level at the corner of the hotel - and ordered a large coffee and a chicken croissant to go. The café was packed with tourists and locals alike as it was on the Place de la Bastille where the famous prison once stood and the blue-tented alfresco seating was bustling.

As Bono waited for his order, Tony was pouring out a cup of tea for Crispian and a second one for himself. They’d just had a wonderful lunch and Tony was wondering if he’d have time to visit the Musée d’Orsay.

“I suggest you do that tomorrow,” Crispian suggested. “Thursday. The musée doesn’t close till 9.30pm.”

“Yeah. That would be great. Then how about we run through these projections and plans for the South-East Asian expansion?”

“Of course,” Crispian said. “By the way, congratulations are in order. I proposed to Varya and she said ‘yes’.”
“Well, congratulations, indeed. When’s the big day?”

“I was thinking a Fall wedding in my country estate but Varya is insisting on a small, private ceremony. Simon – you’ve met him – he’s going to be my best man. Varya's left for an undisclosed location until the wedding day.”

Tony frowned. “How long is that going to be? I can’t imagine her being holed up for that long. What about her job?”

“She quit before she flew out. Everything’s still hush-hush and the only reason I’m telling you is to ask if you will be Simon’s back up in case something untoward occurs on that day. You don’t have to do anything – the wedding planner will handle everything. I just need you to be on hand. I would ask my cousin but my relles will not be able to keep this quiet and before you know it, the media would have gotten wind of it. Varya made me swear our wedding will not be in the news. We’re not even telling our guests. The only people who will know the date and the venue will be our wedding planner, Simon, Varya’s best friend, Busana, who will be her maid of honor and, of course, Varya and myself. Everyone else will be told bare essentials until they’re onboard the plane.”

"Onboard what plane?"

"Guests will be flown to the venue where Varya and I will exchange vows. They won't be told where, just to be available for an extended weekend."

“I would be honored to stand in, cuz, but how will you be able to keep the details from the guests?”

“Apparently, I’ve been assured it can be done. According to Varya, we will send out invitations inviting the guests – it’s a very small gathering, by the way – just a hundred or so. I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“Okay. Let me know earlier than your guests, won’t you? I do live in DC, you know.”

“Of course, I will. And thank you for accepting. Varya will be so thrilled. Look, I’m going to take a shower then we can go through the reports and proposals.”

No sooner had Crispian entered his bedroom than a loud boom rang through the air. Their room shook and a thick cloud of dust and debris burst through the windows. Every window pane had been smashed and both Tony and Crispian were covered with fine, grey dust.

Tony’s ears were ringing and he blinked away the dust in his eyes. “Cris? Cris! Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Crispian replied, emerging from his bedroom, dazed and tottering on his feet.

Tony wiped away the trickle of blood than had run down the side of his face. A piece of glass must have cut him. If so, he was incredibly lucky not to be more severely injured.

“What happened?” Crispian asked.

“Explosion,” Tony said, even as the wails of sirens could be heard and shouts were coming up from below. He went to look outside the window. Their suite was on the fourth level with a balcony overlooking the square. Scores of people were now crowding the hotel’s café at street level and smoke was billowing out.

The hotel’s smoke alarm had gone off and Tony told Crispian they ought to get out. “Looks like the explosion occurred in the café below. We need to go see if anyone is injured.”
Just as they were about to open the door, there was a loud knock. “DiNozzo! Are you there? KnightShade operators. DiNozz – oh, hi,“ the bearded man with an assault rifle grinned at Tony and Crispian. Two more men, similarly-togged, were behind him. “C’mon. We gotta haul ass. Follow me.”

Crispian hesitated. “Do you know these men?” he asked Tony, not at all keen on leaving with the disreputable-looking bunch. “And why are they carrying guns?” he hissed. “This is a hotel. In Paris.”

“Mr. Paddington, I’m Chris Mayberry. My men and I are from KnightShade. We have orders from Jax Theron to evacuate you. There was a bomb explosion at the café downstairs and –” Another explosion rocked the building. People were now rushing out of their rooms in panic. “Hurry. There may be more bombs.” Chris and the men shoved Crispian ahead.

Tony was already hurrying down the corridor to the stairs. “Move your ass, cuz! I mean ’arse.'”
Back at NCIS.

Washington, DC (six hours behind Paris)

9.30am, Monday:

“Bomb blast in Paris, Gibbs,” Torres said, just as Gibbs returned to the bullpen from Abby’s lab. McGee and Bishop joined Torres at the LCD screen but Gibbs merely grunted and carried on reading the reports the team had submitted this morning. There was always one bomb or another going off these days and the news channels would be putting it on an endless loop with the same reports but with next to no updates.

“Whoa.” Torres whistled at the scene they were watching. “Six Japanese dead, eight Germans, fifteen French and seven Americans. ISIS has taken responsibil —”

“Shush! Listen!” McGee said, his voice urgent. He grabbed the remote from Torres and turned up the volume.

“…early reports say the number of confirmed dead in today’s Paris bomb blast is forty-one. Among the dead are eight German nationals, six Japanese, fifteen French and seven Americans. The rest of the dead have yet to be identified and will take days to confirm their identities. The radical Islamic –” the camera switched from the news reporter to the entrance of the hotel’s café where paramedics were carrying out another casualty. The victim, a male, was bloodied from head to toe and an arm had been torn off at the shoulder. A lanyard slipped off him and fell out of the stretcher. The camera zoomed in on it before someone scooped it up and pushed the cameraman away from the scene.

The visual switched back to the news reporter and just then Abby came bouncing into the bullpen. “Hey, guys. I got free tickets to my favorite band. Who wants to go with me. Oh no. A bomb? Where?”

“Paris,” Torres answered.

Then an image of the security badge was flashed on the screen and Team Gibbs looked in horror as the cameras zoomed in on the victim being carried out the stretcher. A familiar bloodied face filled the screen. Gibbs felt as if all the air had been sucked out of him. It was Tony, all bloodied, lying on the stretcher, being rushed into the waiting ambulance.

“…A lanyard fell off a victim who has been confirmed dead. The name on the lanyard the victim was wearing says ‘Tony DiNozzo’ and the name of the company the security badge is for is the Paddington Liberty Fund, a charity organization run by British billionaire, Crispian Paddington. Though paramedics say the victim was wearing the lanyard when he was retrieved, his identity is yet to be confirmed…we spoke to an employee from the Mr. Paddington’s foundation but he was unable to say, at this time, whether Mr. DiNozzo has been accounted for –”
Abby was crying, McGee and Bishop were shell-shocked but Torres said, “It’s not confirmed, Gibbs. The dead guy could be carrying DiNozzo’s badge for a reason.”

“He was wearing it!” Abby cried. “Why would he be wearing it if it isn’t Tony?”

“Come on, Abs,” Torres took her by the shoulders. “Did the dead guy look like Tony? I dunno since I never met him.”

“It looked very much like Tony,” McGee said. “The Tony after he left, that is. The new Tony.”

“What do you mean ‘the new Tony’?” Gibbs asked.

“Well, old Tony’s hair was different, for one,” Abby said through glistening tears. “Old Tony didn’t wear glasses and old Tony was…heavier. New Tony has longer, styled hair, wears horn-rim glasses and is leaner – exactly like the victim. Unless there’s a Tony doppelganger going around wearing a security badge for the organization Tony’s working in and with Tony’s name, that body there is likely Tony’s!” With that, she flung herself on Gibbs. “Is that Tony? Gibbs, what do you think? If that was Tony, you’d know, wouldn’t you? Your gut would tell you, right?”

But for once, the man she’d looked up to and depended on was unable to reassure her. His gut had failed him because it was twisted up in knots.

“It does look very much like Tony,” Bishop agreed. “Even with all that blood on his face but maybe it’s just a likeness. He’s been gone almost two years. Losing weight and a pair of glasses can change a man’s appearance drastically.”

“Show me the photos, McGee,” Torres said.

“Bishop, call Paddington’s office,” Gibbs told her.

“On it.” Bishop hurried to her desk.

McGee brought up Tony’s photos on his computer and Torres conceded the likeness. “But –” he held up a finger. “We are going to assume it isn’t Tony until the identity has been confirmed.”

Gibbs was now holding Abby. “Torres is right, Abs.”

Abby sniffled. “Why is it my optimistic streak fails me when it comes to the people I love getting hurt? I can’t lose Tony, Gibbs. You can’t lose Tony.”

Gibbs had tried calling Alex only to get an answering message. He’d have to wait like everyone else. “Torres is right. It may not be Tony.” He didn’t know if he was telling Abby or himself. For once in his life, the tough Marine wished he had someone’s shoulder to cling to but he pulled Abby off him and tried calling Alex again. Again the phone was engaged. He tried five more times then stopped.

“Gibbs, I can’t get through the Paddington number,” Bishop said. “I tried the Paris hotel, too, and it’s also engaged. I’ll keep trying London.”

“Going to the head,” Gibbs said as he left the bullpen.

After taking a few minutes to compose himself, he tried Alex again. This time he lucked out.

“It’s not Tony,” Alex said without even waiting for Gibbs’ question.

“How do you know?” the words rushed out of Gibbs’ mouth.
“Jax spoke to him. He’s on his way to London with his cousin as we speak. I was just about to call you.”

“Why was the victim wearing DiNozzo’s security tag?”

“We don’t know that yet. They’re just accounting for survivors. KnightShade had some agents in Paris and Jax dispatched them to get DiNozzo and Paddington out. Call coming in. I have to go, Jethro.” And the line went dead.

Gibbs tried calling Alex later but the calls went unanswered. Finally, just as he turned out the lights in the solarium and climbed up to his bedroom, his cell phone rang.

“Hi.” It was Alex. “Sorry, I wasn’t able to take your call earlier. Anyway, DiNozzo is fine. He’s back in London. I’ll give you his phone number.”

Gibbs took the number down then asked if Tony was returning to DC.

“I don’t know,” Alex said. “I’ll ask Jax when I talk to him next. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Gibbs thanked him and rang off. He checked the time. It would be 5.30am in London right now, not that he cared. Tony could wake up and take the call just for scaring them all half to death. But his call went unanswered, to Gibbs exasperation. After three more times, he gave up. He'd talk to him later in the morning. All that mattered right now was that Tony was alive and unhurt.

Following the Paris bomb blast, Tony and Crispian had been flown back to London. There had also been some missed calls from Gibbs but he'd deliberately not returned them. Instead, he'd texted Abby and told her he was fine, not to worry, and to let everyone know. Crispian had asked if he wanted to go to the Caribbean with him and Varya and he'd accepted the invitation. Then Morrow called and told him he would be returning to DC as his assignment with Silverwing I was over.

“I’m glad to know you’re alive and well,” Under Secretary Morrow said. “And I’m sorry about Bono. His being on the scene and getting killed caused a bit of confusion seeing as he was wearing your security badge when the blast occurred. His looking like your twin didn’t help either.”

“Has his family been notified?”

“Yes. KnightShade is taking care of that.”

“I spoke to Jax when he called to tell me about Bono. Crispian and I were removed from the hotel immediately following the blast and flown back to London. He’s pretty shook up, sir, and I’ve been staying close to him since we arrived home. Sir, I spoke to Jax because Crispian is leaving for Turks and Caicos day after tomorrow with Ms Saidullayev. He invited me along with some other friends but Jax told me my stint was over until further notice. Is that right?”

“Yes, DiNozzo. I’d like you to fly back to DC. I need to debrief you and discuss a couple of other things.”

"But I could find out more intel on Varya," Tony protested. "Crispian said some of Varya's family members would be joining them. We will be able to track them and see if anything pans out."

"We already know who they are and we already have people on the island waiting. They'll gather the intel we need."
"So, is Ms Saidullayev who she says she is?"

"Just get yourself back home, DiNozzo, then we'll talk."

"Yes, sir. When do you want me back?"

"On the next available flight."

There were seats available on a British Airways flight, leaving Heathrow at five that evening and Tony booked it. He hadn’t spoken to Jax or any of the M31 team since he got into London and when he’d asked Morrow, the latter had said Jax had already been apprised of Tony’s recall to DC. As for Gibbs, he would decide what to do after he got to DC.

"Jax isn't flying back to DC with me?"

"He’s tied up at the moment. Both the Caucasus Emirate and ISIS have claimed responsibility and we’re gearing ourselves up for more attacks."

"The two groups are working together?"

"We think it’s more of a one-upmanship at this point. We’ve not had any evidence of them collaborating in the past but things change. In any case, Paddington’s leaving for the Caribbean after lunch and I’ll be on my way back to DC."

"I’ll see you when you get in, then," Morrow said and rang off.

He’d just put his KnightFone away when it beeped again. When he saw the familiar number, he tensed.

"DiNozzo,"

"It’s me," Gibbs said. "You’re okay? Saw the news about Paris."

"I’m okay. How have you been?"

"You should have called."

"How did you get this number?"

"I know someone."

Pause. "Okay. Should he tell Gibbs he was returning to DC? "How’s everyone?"

"You’d know if you’d kept in touch, wouldn’t you?"

So, it was going to be like that. "I have kept in touch. By email. Whenever I could."

"You could have called."

"Yeah, well, where I was a lot of the time there was no cell service and when there was, I wasn’t free to do so. Anyway, it’s good to know you and McGee got out of Paraguay in one piece. Hey, I gotta go. Boss is calling me."

Tony rang off without another word, leaving Gibbs glaring at his cell phone before tossing it on his desk. Boss calling him? What boss? Who?
Jax’s callsign, Firebird, was blinking on Tony’s screen. He answered it.

“Feel like some downtime?” Jax asked.

“I’m already booked to fly back to DC tonight,” Tony said. “I was going to ask you whether I’m expected to report to KnightShade.”

“Nah. You’re on leave until further notice. The only thing on your plate is Paddington’s wedding. M31’s working on that at the moment. You’ll be contacted when the time comes. Until then, get yourself some downtime. It’s been a tough couple of years for you and as I see it, you have some personal shit to resolve. Next time I see you, I want that hundred and ten percent all the way.”

“I plan to but it’s not completely up to me.”

“Just do your part, DiNozzo. I know, for a fact, that Gibbs is in love with you. So go get your man.”

“For a fact, huh?”

“Yup. Remind me to tell you about Gibbs and Alex Knight one of these days.” With that he ended the call.

What the hell? Tony frowned at his KnightFone. What had Alex Knight to do with Gibbs? Jax was talking about Gibbs, wasn’t he? Regardless, Gibbs was on Tony’s mind. The phone call from Gibbs had left Tony unsettled. There was so much he wanted to say. All he needed Gibbs to say was to ask him to come home. But that, of course, was way too much for the ex-Marine to do. Once a frickin’ stubborn jarhead, always a frickin’ stubborn jarhead.

It wasn’t until he was thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic that it occurred to Tony he had no home to go back to in DC. He didn’t even have an agency to report to anymore. As a contract agent, KnightShade was not his employer and while there was a certain measure of freedom at being able to come and go as he pleased – at least until the next phone call from Jax – he also felt strangely empty and at a loose end. One day he was flying on private jets, living in penthouse suites and wearing bespoke and the next he was Eliza Doolittle back in Covent Garden. At least he still had the bespoke suits. Jax said he could keep them.

He hadn’t even thought to warn McGee he was coming back earlier than planned. He had been about to call McGee after Jax’s phone call but thought the better of it. First, it would put McGee out for him to turn up at their doorstep out of the blue. What could he say? Hi, Tim. Could you and Delilah move out cos I’m home? Nope. He’d check into a hotel then take his time finding a temporary place. That would give McGee and Delilah time to find one of their own. Though, if KnightShade was going to be hauling him for another overseas assignment, did he really want to shoo McGee and Delilah out then end up vamoosing himself? He couldn’t do that, not when Delilah was about to give birth. Twins. Imagine that. He’d had a bit of a shock when he’d gotten an email from Tim announcing Delilah was pregnant with twins. The thought of Timothy McGee becoming a father made him feel old somehow. Not just old, but as if he’d missed out on something in his life. Something meaningful. Like kids. Someone to come home to. He shook off the depressing feeling and thought about where he could stay until he decided whether he was going to remain in DC. He guessed he could take up a long stay room at a nice hotel. The assignment with KnightShade had paid handsomely and he could afford to treat himself without having to ask his trustees to release some funds seeing as they would be for his accommodation. He reminded himself to call them when he got back and find out if the Trust allowed him to purchase a second
The flight from Heathrow left at five-thirty in the evening and Tony spent the next half hour absorbing the fact that he was going home. Home. What did that mean now, after nearly two years? Before he left, home had been NCIS. It had meant Team Gibbs. It had been the bullpen with Gibbs at his desk. That wouldn’t be the case anymore. In eight hours’ time he’d land at Dulles and it would feel like stepping on foreign soil. To most people, twenty-one months would be like twenty-one minutes. To him, it felt like a lifetime. So much had happened during that time and he’d experienced things he never would have with the police force or even with NCIS. He knew he’d been a little out of shape when he left but hey, he’d never had any pretensions of being a US Navy SEAL, all tough and ripped on the outside, focused and indefatigable on the inside. Yet that was what he was now – not an ounce of extraneous fat on his body or in his brain. And this new Tony wasn’t quite sure where he belonged. He’d felt at home with the KnightShade men, that he knew. He knew, too, that despite feeling a part of the closely-knit M31 family, he’d been unable to shake off that deep, agonizing yearning for something that was real yet elusive. Oh, he knew what it was – a longing for a long ago time with a long ago love. For he had fallen in love with Leroy Jethro Gibbs that lifetime ago. Anyone who scoffed at insta-love had obviously never experienced it personally. Or never experienced Jethro. Never made love to him, see the desire in his eyes, watch the play of emotions as he gave himself over to the sensations; never experienced a surrendered Jethro.

He, Tony DiNozzo, had. And it had ruined him for any other man. Jax and his KnightShade boys gave fabulous sex but Jethro gave him life. He heaved a sigh as settled in for the eight-hour flight.

“Hi,” the man seated next to him smiled.

Tony hi’d him back.

“Sean Stinnet.”

Tony took the proffered hand. “Tony DiNozzo.”

They struck up a conversation and Tony learned Sean was returning from a two-week vacation in Spain.

“Navy lawyer, huh?” Tony said when Sean told him he was a JAG officer.

“Yup. And you?”

“Navy cop. Ex-Navy cop.”

“Oh yeah? How long?” And so it went. Sean was pleasant to talk to and the two traded stories until dinner was served and they watched the inflight movies.

Tony checked the time and saw it was about forty-five minutes to go. He ordered a drink for Sean and himself then went to the head where there was a short queue. By the time he returned, their drinks had arrived. The captain’s voice came on, announcing their descent to Dulles International in half an hour and would the flight attendants prepare the cabin for arrival.

“Hey, you mentioned you were going to check into a hotel,” Sean said, as they belted up. I have a secondary unit at my place in Alexandria and you’re welcome to stay the night,” Sean offered. “It’s at the rear of the house, above the double garage. It comes with its own entrance, a kitchenette and ensuite. Come on over and take a look. If you like it, you can lease it from me. Otherwise, there’s a Marriott down the road.
Sean’s house was situated in a tree-lined avenue in Alexandria. The long driveway extended from the main road, down the side of the house, and ended at the two-car garage at the end of the lot. The unit Sean was letting out was above the garage. Trees and thick shrubs surrounded the property so the neighbors were blocked from view. Once inside the unit, the neighborhood sounds were cut off and, to all intents and purposes, Tony could be living in the middle of the woods. Not that he minded. He was all for a bit of peace and quiet while he decided what he’d do next. He’d taken up Sean’s offer to lease the unit without even seeing it so the two men took a cab to Stinnet’s house. Sean said he’d give Tony the lease contract in the morning and Tony borrowed his car to buy dinner. He also got a six-pack and settled down to watch some tv. He ate dinner alone as Sean had dinner plans. He watched Star Trek Into Darkness and fell asleep during the emotional scene between Spock and Kirk as the latter lay dying in the decontamination chamber.

He awoke the next morning, checked the time and saw it was eight thirty. He wondered why it was so dark then realized he had pulled down the black-out shades. He padded naked to the bathroom, thinking about what he’d do today. Sean would have left for work by now so he’d have to walk out and catch a cab to the nearest car rental. After that he’d call Abby and McGee. And Phil. He’d exchanged a couple of emails with Phil and learned he and Douglas had gotten married last November.

With no pressing tasks on his plate, he took his time with his morning ablutions, catching up with the latest news on his KnightFone. He’d been given back his personal phone and would need to turn on his subscription which he’d put on hold so until then, he’d be using his KnightFone. It was a strange feeling, he thought as he turned on the water for his shower, not having any deadlines or training sessions, not having to wake up at five and fall into bed past midnight, his body spent and exhausted.

It was stranger, still, to not see a single M31 operative. He’d gotten used to going to bed and waking up with at least one of them in his bed – Jax, usually, whenever he was in town, wherever that happened to be – and even in the past year when he’d returned to London and lived with Crispian, Jax would meet him a few times a week, often with Nick in tow. He wondered if there was a possibility of his joining KnightShade full time. Then his thoughts went to Gibbs. What if Gibbs asked him to return to NCIS? An extremely unlikely thing, of course, but hypothetically-speaking, what would his answer be?
8.03am next morning:

NCIS, Washington Navy Yard

“Gibbs!” Director Vance’s voice sounded from the balcony. “My office.” He turned and strode back into his office as Gibbs made his way up.

“What’s up?” Gibbs asked.

“I heard there was a bit of a worry yesterday that DiNozzo was a victim of the Paris bombing. Well, I’m happy to know he’s alive and kicking,” Director Vance said.

“He’s fine. I spoke to him briefly.”

Vance’s brows lifted up in surprise. “Is he coming back to DC?”

“No, not to my knowledge.”

“You didn’t ask him?”

“Nope.”

“What did you talk about, then?”

He wasn’t about to tell Vance he wanted to tell Tony he missed him so much he didn’t think he’d last another minute.

"How are we doing on Petty Officer Browning’s killing?” Vance asked without waiting for Gibbs' reply.

“We got a lead yesterday and are following up on it. Why?” The Director didn’t follow an investigation unless it had a wider impact, like a terrorist cell.

“Because Browning is the daughter of SecNav’s close friend and he asked me to keep an eye on the investigation,” Vance replied.

“We’re on it, Leon,” Gibbs replied, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You okay?” Vance frowned at him.

“I’m fine,” Gibbs said. His eyes were bloodshot from a sleepless night. He'd put the bourbon back in the cupboard because he didn't want to drink when he felt miserable. Been there, done that.
Drinking, these days, was when he was feeling good. And the bottle was still three quarter full.
Pathetic. All he could think of through the night was that he could have lost Tony forever. When he
finally opened his eyes it was because Toni was pawing at him wanting to be fed and he'd gotten
out of bed dreading another day to get through.

“You really should take a few weeks off. Take that houseboat of yours and go catch some fish for
me.”

“Doesn’t take me weeks to catch fish.”

“Yes, well, I think you should.”

“I’m fine,” Gibbs said with finality.

“There’s one more thing I want you to look into. JAG officer, Sean Stinnett. Seems he could be
involved in a money laundering scheme. Fornell’s case but since it involves a JAG officer, I
thought we should be in the know.”

“We are. Fornell called me this morning and briefed me. I –”

A knock on the door sounded and McGee poked his head in, waving Gibbs’ cell phone. “Sorry to
interrupt. Gibbs, Fornell just called. He said Sean Stinnett’s dead and will meet us at Stinnet’s
place.” He handed Gibbs his phone and said he’d get the truck ready.

“I’ll meet you there in my car. Bring it round for me, will ya?”

When Gibbs pulled up outside Sean Stinnett’s house, the place was already swarming with cop
cars, their lights flashing and curious neighbors standing on the sidewalk. His team was right
behind him but there was no sign of Ducky and Palmer yet. Probably lost their way again if Palmer
was driving, Gibbs said to himself.

“NCIS. Special Agent Gibbs.” Gibbs flashed his badge at the police officer. The house had been
cordoned off but the cop let Gibbs and his team through. “Where’s the victim?”

“Sir, the FBI –”

“This is now a joint investigation. Fornell should be here soon. He’ll confirm it. Or, you can call
him.”

“No need,” Phil’s voice called out from the front door. “Fornell just called and told me. Come on
in. I just got here.”

The victim was lying in a pool of blood a few feet away from the front door. A bloody chest wound
pointed to the cause of death – if not for the gaping slash at his throat and a bloody mass stuffed
into the incision.

It was too bloody to see what the mass of tissue was. “Victim’s ID confirmed?”

“Sean Stinnett. Age thirty-nine. JAG Corps. Spoke to his superior. No family in DC.”
“You looked through the house yet?”

“No one upstairs. The house is empty and no sign of anyone else having spent the night with Stinnett. We haven’t gone through the entire property. As I said, I just got here,” McCadden said.

“Hey.”

Gibbs turned towards the door where Fornell was donning shoe covers before entering.

“Shit,” Fornell muttered as he saw the victim’s body. “What a mess.” He greeted McCadden and Gibbs then asked, “the rest of the house been searched?”

“Going through it now,” McCadden said.

Gibbs left McCadden to fill Fornell in and sent McGee and Bishop to look through the upper floor. “Torres, there’s a basement.” He tilted his chin to the stairs leading down. He went to the kitchen, opened a door. It led to a walk-in pantry. He looked out the windows into the backyard. “Anyone search the unit above the garage?”

“Was about to when you arrived,” McCadden said.

“Let’s go see.” Gibbs walked out, calling to his team. “Secondary unit at the back, above the garage.” He strode briskly down the driveway, followed by his Torres, McGee McCadden, and Fornell who was hurrying up to them.

“You got any info on Stinnett? Fornell asked Gibbs.

“Good reputation as an up and coming Navy lawyer,” Gibbs replied. “No debts, nothing to suggest he’d be involved in a money-laundering scheme. Or any scheme.”

“Locked,” McGee said, trying the knob to the door next to the garage.

“Try these.” McCadden dangled a set of keys he’d taken off the key press next to Stinnett’s kitchen.

The keys unlocked the door and the group filed in and up the staircase, Gibbs leading the way.

At the top of the stairs, Gibbs put a finger to his lips. Voices could be heard coming from inside the room at the landing. He put his ear to the door then opened it, his Sig in hand.

Gibbs was already inside, Torres and McGee following close behind when they saw the voices were coming from the tv. Two empty beer cans and a pizza box lay on the coffee table. A pair of black jeans was slung over the back of the couch and a pair of men’s ankle boots sat beside the door.

Gibbs put a finger to his lips again and gestured to the open bedroom where a rumpled bed could be seen. The group tread silently into the bedroom, all weapons drawn.

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Tony moaned as his fist pumped his hard cock. It wasn’t a proper shower without him shooting his load and crying out Jethro’s name. And for some reason, being home in DC, where Jethro lived and breathed, made him cum even harder. So-ooo close. Yet so far.

His hot cum splashed on the wall and ran down the wet, slippery surface. He gave a long groan as he came down from that earth-shattering orgasm.
Gibbs was about to open the bathroom door when it opened and out stepped a naked Tony, his semi-erect cock swaying between his legs. He didn’t even see the group in his bedroom as he was busy drying his hair with the towel.

“Aargh!” he yelped when he looked up and saw the faces gawking at him.

“What the hell are you doing at my crime scene, DiNozzo?” Gibbs demanded.

“Our crime scene,” Fornell amended.

“Whoa.” Torres looked at Tony’s cock. “That’s some murder weapon you’re packing there. If you’re our killer.”

“He’s not!” McGee said, glaring at Torres. “That’s Tony. Tony DiNozzo.”

“Ah. The infamous DiNozzo.” Torres smirked. “But Gibbs is right – what are you doing here?”

“Just a sec.” Tony held up a finger and turned to go back into the bathroom.

“Whoa. No, you don’t.” Fornell reached out and grabbed Tony’s arm. “You’re going downtown with me.”

“No, he’s not,” Gibbs said. “He’s coming with me.”

“Looks like you guys have the situation in control,” McCadden said, grinning. “Didn’t know you were back, Tony.” He gave Tony a wink. “Call me when you’re done with those two.”

“Let’s go, DiNozzo,” Gibbs growled.

“Excuse me, but he is now my prime suspect.” Fornell took out his handcuffs and called for his backup.

“Suspect for what?” Tony asked. “And you’re not putting those cuffs on me.”

“Put on some clothes!” Gibbs threw the pair of jeans at Tony.

NCIS Interrogation Room

Washington Navy Yard

“What do you mean Sean’s dead?” Tony asked. Opposite him Fornell and Gibbs eyed him with unsmiling faces. On the other side of the mirrored wall, McGee. Bishop and Torres watched. The door opened and two more people joined them – Abby and Ducky.

“What were you doing in Stinnet’s house?” Fornell asked.

“I stayed over.” Tony replied.

“So you’re friends.”

“We got acquainted on the flight over. From London.”

“And when was that?”
“Plane touched down at Dulles around seven p.m. last night. I needed a place to stay and Sean offered me the unit above his garage.”

“Then what?” Fornell asked.

“Did you two spend the night together?” Gibbs asked.

“No.”

“When was the last time you saw Stinnett?” Fornell asked.

“When I returned his car keys to him. I borrowed his car to buy dinner. Sean had a dinner appointment. I passed him back the keys and went back to my room. Didn’t see him again. How did he die? What’s the ToD?”

“Did he tell you who he was having dinner with?” Gibbs asked, ignoring Tony’s questions.

“No. How did he die?”

“We’ll ask the questions for now, DiNozzo,” Fornell said. “Where you were around August 8th 2014?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Tony asked, incredulous. “You seriously think I killed Sean?”

“No, but he’s gotta ask,” Gibbs said. “Humor him.” He stood propped against the wall and all Tony wanted to do was take hold of him and kiss him senseless. For starters. After that he’d kick his ass for bringing him in for questioning.

“Answer the question, DiNozzo,” Fornell said.

“What was it, again? Did I kill Stinnett? No, I did not.”

Behind the mirror, Abby asked, “They think Tony killed the JAG lawyer?”

“I don’t think Fornell and Gibbs think Tony’s the killer,” McGee said. “But he was in Stinnett’s house so he’s got to know something.”

“But why is he being interrogated like a suspect?”

“I think Gibbs brought him in here, not Fornell,” Bishop said.

“But why?” Abby asked. “That’s worse than Fornell bringing him in. This is Tony! Our Tony!”

“If Fornell took DiNozzo to Quantico, it would be out of Gibbs’ hands,” Torres said. “Gibbs is just managing the investigation, is all. He knows what he’s doing so relax.”

“But why is Tony even being questioned in the first place?” Abby asked, refusing to back down. “He – he’s…just gotten back. I haven’t even spoken to him…welcomed him back.”

“I agree,” McGee said. “Gibbs would never believe Tony’s a murderer, much less a money launderer and Fornell ought to know that, too. He’s known Tony even before I joined NCIS.”

“Stinnett had his throat cut and his genitals stuffed in the wound,” Fornell said. “You know who would have done that?”

“Ah, a variation of the Colombian Necktie,” Tony said, referring to the brutal method of execution
supposedly attributed to Pablo Escobar. “Except in Escobar’s version, it was the vic’s tongue that was pulled out through the incision. Actually, not physiologically possible without cutting through much of the organ, Ducky will tell you. I –”

“Will you focus? Answer my question.” Fornell snapped.

“Which was?” Tony looked back Fornell, brows raised.

“Man, that DiNozzo really enjoys yanking chains, huh?” Torres asked in the viewing room.

“Yeah, don’t know the half of it,” McGee said. “But I wouldn’t underestimate him if I were you.”


Tony took out his KnightFone and started tabbing the screen. “August 8, 2014…let’s see…August…August …ah here we are. Trrra-ansylvaa-nnia,” he said in an exaggerated Count Dracula accent.

Behind the one-way window, Bishop and Abby snickered.

“Near a village called Dragoiasa, population, 201. Very pretty. Very Bram Stoker.”

“Why were you in Transylvania?” Gibbs asked. “Weren’t you working in London with your cousin?”

“Yes and the Paddington Liberty Fund has an outreach in Romania and a few other East European countries. I was there for six months.” He had been under KnightShade’s special forces training, of course, but that was need-to-know, as was his entire time under KnightShade.

Abby squeezed Bishop’s arm tightly to her. “I can’t believe Tony is back! I mean, really, really back. Trademark snarkiness, the clowning around, jerking Fornell’s chain…I’m so happy! I wish Fornell would leave. Even an idiot knows Tony wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“February last year,” Fornell said. “Valentine’s Day. Were you in the US?”

“Come on, Fornell,” Tony said. “Surely the FBI knows when I left the US and when I got back and knows I did not step on the good ole US of Vey between July 2014 and last night.”

Fornell glanced at Gibbs who smirked at him.

“As he said,” Fornell gestured to Gibbs. “Humor me.”

“Mali, West Africa. I was there for almost all of February.”

“Oh yeah?” Fornell said. “Anything interesting there?”

Tony told him about patching up the girls who had undergone Female Genital Mutilation. Fornell’s mouth dropped open, questions momentarily forgotten.

“What were you doing in Paris?” Gibbs asked, stepping in. “Why was that dead guy wearing your security tag?”

“Oh. Bono. Yeah,” and Tony proceeded to explain how Bono ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Why are you back in DC, Tony?” Gibbs’ voice was soft.
“My project with the PLF is over. I need to sort out some things before I decide where I’m going next.”

“How long are you planning to stay?”

Tony shrugged. “Depends…how soon I can get things sorted out.”

“And after that?”

“I dunno, Gibbs. I haven’t anything planned yet. Except for renting a car. McGee sold mine when I left and since I don’t know how long I’ll be in DC I thought I’d just rent a car. And hey, I guess I’ll have to move out of Sean’s house, huh?”

Fornell, having recovered from hearing about the FGM, cleared his throat and told Tony about the money laundering ring the FBI had been working on the past one year.

“You’re both working a joint investigation?” Tony asked, knowing Gibbs wasn’t fond of them. “Who’s lead?” He looked at Gibbs.

“NCIS is only involved in Stinett’s death,” Fornell said. “My team’s stretched thin and I thought NCIS could give us a hand and follow up on Stinnett for us.”

“And maybe you can to help us,” Fornell said.

“What?” Tony blinked at him then asked Gibbs, “You want me to help in the investigation?”

“Yep.” Gibbs nodded.

“Why?” Tony asked.

“Because Stinnett was gay,” Fornell answered.

“And so are you,” Gibbs said to Tony.

“So Gibbs suggested we could pick that gay brain of yours and find out more about Stinnett.”

“You suggested it?” Tony glancing disbelievingly at Gibbs.

“Yep,” Gibbs replied.

“Why?” Tony asked.

“Because I’m not much help even though I’m gay,” Gibbs said. “Because I don’t go to gay clubs and bars or hang out with the gay community. You know that.”

This time it was Tony who was gaping. He stared at Gibbs, stunned.

In the next room, the occupants stared at each other.

“Did Gibbs just say he’s gay?” Torres asked.

“Yes, he did,” Abby said, then sucked in a deep breath. “Wow. I didn’t expect him to do that.”

“Do what?” McGee asked. “Out himself during an interrogation?”

“It’s not an interrogation, McGee!” Abby smacked his arm.
“Do what, then?” Torres asked.

“Reach out to Tony,” Abby said in a half-whisper. “Telling Tony they can stop hiding.”

“Hiding what?” Bishop asked. “That they’re both gay?”

“That, too,” Abby said.

“What do you mean ‘that, too’?” Torres asked. “What else was he telling Tony? And we already know Tony’s gay. You told me he came out before he left. Now, Gibbs…that I did not see coming.”

“None of us did,” said McGee.

“I can’t believe it,” Bishop said. “I mean, no I can believe Gibbs is gay. I just can’t believe –”

“You can?” Torres turned and stared at her. “Not me. Not in a million years.”

“I just did not expect him to be so casual about it,” Bishop clarified. “I mean…he just outed himself there in front of Fornell and Tony…”

“Yeah, did you see Fornell’s face?” McGee laughed.

“And Tony’s, too,” Torres added. “It was a shock to Tony, too. Either he’s shocked that Gibbs is gay, or shocked that Gibbs outed himself.”

“Maybe both,” Bishop said.

“The second one,” Abby said.

“Second?” Torres asked. McGee and Bishop looked Abby.

“Umm, yeah,” Abby said. “Look, you’ll have to ask Gibbs yourselves, okay? I’m not saying anything else.” She made the zipping motion across her pursed lips.

In the interrogation room, Gibbs looked at Fornell. “You done with DiNozzo?”

Fornell stood. “Yeah, I’m done. For now. And I mean DiNozzo. Not you. You and I still got stuff to talk about.” He turned to Tony. “So how about it, DiNozzo? You gonna help us or what?”
Tony DiNozzo went away and came back looking like a younger Jason Bull. And yes, they have The Talk.

“Tony! Tony! Tony!” Abby flew at Tony the moment he exited the interrogation room. “Omigod, I missed you SO much! You have NO idea.”

“Urkkkk! Abbs. Uggh…! Crushing my windpipe.” He kissed her on the cheek then gave her a hug. “Hey, there, McCool. Looking good.” He hugged McGee who had been sporting a close-cropped beard since his return from Paraguay. He’d also packed on some muscle on his previously gaunt frame – the result of an exercise and nutrition regimen strictly monitored by Delilah.


“Nick Torres.” Torres held out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you, at last. I’ve been hearing a lot about you.”

“You’re free for dinner, aren’t you?” McGee asked. “Delilah will want to see you.”

“He’s not free to have dinner with you guys,” Gibbs said, pushing his way through the narrow passageway, Fornell at his back. “He’s having dinner with me. Come on, DiNozzo!”

“Yeah, nice to have you back, by the way, DiNozzo,” Fornell said. “And you owe me and Taft.”

“What? Why?”

“Cos Taft and I had to deal with him while you were gone, that’s why. Nearly two fucking years. Make it up to each other and I’ll call it even.”

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs yelled. “Now!” He rounded on Fornell. "Clean up your language around my team."

“Still as bossy as ever,” Tony muttered, but ran after Gibbs. “It’s only noon,” he yelled at Gibbs' back. “You said dinner.”

“So that’s the infamous DiNozzo,” Torres remarked as the team made their way back to the
“Yes,” McGee said, still frowning over Gibbs’ behavior.

“Where do you think they’re going?” Torres said.

“Probably somewhere Gibbs can kill Tony,” McGee muttered.

“So why not here?” Torres persisted. “I wanna watch.”

“Because Tony isn’t an employee anymore,” Bishop interjected. “Whatever Gibbs wants to settle with Tony, it now comes under private and confidential.”

“And the Gibbs-being-gay thing,” Torres said as they climbed the stairs back up the bullpen. “You guys really didn’t know?”

“No,” McGee and Bishop shook their heads.

“Fornell didn’t look surprised,” Torres pointed out. “I think he knew. He’s Gibbs’ best friend, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” McGee said. “But if Fornell knew, I think Gibbs came out to him only recently. I’m not sure, but I think this coming out thing is another post-Paraguay thing.”

“Abby?” Torres looked at her questioningly.

Abby hesitated, then said, “Me? No. No, I didn’t know. Not until yesterday. Well, it makes sense now why his marriages didn’t work.”

“Yesterday?” They chorused.

“Gibbs told me yesterday. I wasn’t going to tell you because it’s not for me to out him. You can understand that.”

“Sure, we do,” McGee said. “And we’re glad Gibbs told you only yesterday and told us today because if he hadn’t come out to us today, you’d be carrying this secret for God-knows how long.”

Abby’s eyes widened. “You’re right. Omigod, I wouldn’t have been able to stand it.”

“So what is going on between DiNozzo and Gibbs?” Torres asked. “Because there is something. Trust me.”

“Where are we going for lunch?” Fornell asked as they waited for the elevator.

“You’re not invited,” Gibbs said.

“Aw, come on,” Fornell said, bent on yanking his friend’s chain. “I need to bring DiNozzo up to date if he’s going to consult on my case.”

“Our case,” Gibbs said. “And I can do that. Don’t need you.”

“Excuse me, but I have updates from my profilers I haven’t briefed you yet. Update both of you. Save time.”
“You can brief us tomorrow. Brief McGee first. He’s lead.”

“Since when?” Fornell asked.

“Since we brought DiNozzo in. Now shoo. I got stuff to sort out with Tony.” Gibbs steered Tony away from Fornell when they exited the elevator.

“I’m not done with you, Jethro. You can’t out yourself with your whole team listening and watching and not owe me and Taft an explanation!” Grumbling under his breath, Fornell headed for his car, taking out his cell phone as he walked away. He thumbed the contact on his list. “Guess who’s back in town,” he said. “Meet me for lunch and I’ll tell you all about it.” Grinning, he unlocked his car.

“Hey,” Tony said, as they walked to the Yards. “This place is bustling. Was just starting the foundations when I left. What’s to eat here?”

“We’re not eating here,” Gibbs said. “We’re going home.”

“Home?”

Gibbs led Tony to the small marina where half a dozen boats where docked. “This one. Get in.”

“A speedboat? Ooh. This is intriguing. Where are we going?”

“Just get in, will you?”

Tony got in and Gibbs followed. “Is this yours?” Tony asked.

“Yes.” Gibbs maneuvered the boat away from the pier and soon they were speeding towards the Washington Channel.

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?” Tony said, looking Gibbs over. “You haven’t put back any weight. You’re too thin.”

“You lost weight, too,” Gibbs remarked, then added, “You’re looking well. Different…but good.”

“I’m glad you approve. So, you gonna tell me where we’re going and why? Because this feels like an escapade. And Fornell is right – I need to be briefed because I have no idea what I’m consulting on. I haven’t even agreed to do whatever it is you want me to do.”

“You in a hurry to go somewhere? Your new boss expecting you back any minute? If so, tell him you’re taking a leave of absence because the Secretary of the Navy and the FBI have requested your assistance. He has a problem with that, tell him to talk to me.”

“Put that way, I can make myself available. At least until my boss calls me up.” Tony frowned as Gibbs steered the boat towards the Gangplank Marina. The last time he was at the marina was nine years ago. La Grenouille. Jeanne. A lifetime ago. A lot had changed here at the marina, too. The shopping mall and luxury condos were completed and the neighborhood looked decidedly more upscale and bustling than before. Some landmarks were still there – the Cantina Marina, the fish markets, the couple of eye-catching floating homes that appeared on every Google search on the marina.

His frown deepened as Gibbs docked the speedboat next to a floating nursery. The plant kind, not the kids kind.
They hopped up onto the houseboat and Gibbs said, “Home. Welcome aboard the Semper Fi.”

“Home’? What do you mean 'home’?

"This. My new home."

"This? It’s only March and it looks like a flower shop. What’s it look like in late Spring and Summer? How did you end up on a houseboat?"

“Friend of mine gave it to me."

“Gave it to you? Why?"

“He was dying of cancer. Died three days after I moved in."

“And when was that?"

“A few weeks ago."

“Hey…” Tony drew out the word, his face displaying his pleasure as he stepped into the lounge. “It’s a solarium. This is really nice, Gibbs.” He whirled around, taking in the decor of warm wood accented by the blue-and-white print sofas and bright yellow throw cushions. “Not very you…but nice. Very contemporary-meets old-world charm. Is this a houseboat or a floating home?"

“Former,” Gibbs replied, impressed that Tony knew the difference.


“Not here. Not since the new owners took over the marina and upgraded the facilities. Houseboats here are also hooked up the sewer, unlike previously. New technology. Other marinas are still on the old technology – houseboats still need the sewage pump-out, a problem when the river or lake freezes in winter."

The sound of frantic barking had Tony turning around in time to see a black-and-white dog bound onto the houseboat and rush at Gibbs before it noticed the presence of a stranger.

“And who might you be?” Tony held out a hand.

“Her name’s Toni,” Gibbs replied, ruffling the dog’s head and ears. Toni went over to Tony, happily sniffing at his crotch.

“Her? You got a bitch and named her after me?"

“I didn’t name her. She came with the houseboat."

Tony rough-housed with the dog as Gibbs looked on. “What breed is she? A retriever mix? Labradoodle?"

“Portuguese Water Dog."

“Not familiar with the breed. You leave her alone all day when you go to work?"

“She’s never alone. A lot of the marina residents are around, several work from home and she spends most of her time at the Cantina Marina. Everyone knows her.”

“Gonna give me a tour?” Tony asked. Or tell me the hell we’re doing here. But it was obvious
Gibbs would tell him when he was ready. Some things clearly hadn’t changed.

“Sure. Cabin’s up there.” Gibbs gestured to the narrow staircase beside the kitchenette.”

Ooh, gonna show me your etchings.

They went up, the narrow confines making it near-impossible not to touch. Impossible not to smell that Jethro smell – that unique blend of Old Spice, coffee and fresh wood shavings. God, he’d missed it. He wanted to grab the man and bury his nose in his neck, to breathe Gibbs in deep, to have Gibbs in him so deep he’d be inside him forever. He swallowed, drew in a harsh breath and reigned in his need. Get a grip. Don’t rush it. Don’t rush him.

He emerged to find himself in a bedroom whose space was taken up mostly by the king-size bed. Granted, there were drawers under the bed to save on space but two small night tables and a dresser was all the room could hold. It was the view that caught his full attention, though. The floor-to-ceiling doors opened out to a sundeck with a view of Hains Point where the cherry blossoms were nearing their peak bloom. It was a breathtakingly beautiful sight.

“Now, is that a million-dollar view or what,” Tony exclaimed, and went out onto the deck. He plopped down on one of the two deckchairs and sighed. “I must say you know how to live well. Didn’t think you’d be comfortable in any dwelling without a 50’s odor or a dank basement. Aahh…this is beautiful, Gibbs. DC can be spectacular in early Spring.”

Gibbs leaned against the doorway staring at Tony, his own emotions in disarray. He’d brought Tony here because he needed to be alone with him. Just for a while. Needed to whisk him away before someone else or something else took him away. Again.

After a few minutes when neither man spoke, Tony got up and stood at the threshold of the doorway, Gibbs just a hair’s breath away. “A king, huh?” Tony remarked, looking pointedly at the bed. “I guess you don’t have any problem getting anyone to stay over.”

“The only people I’ve invited over – for a visit, not to stay – are Fornell and Taft…and Grace Confalone.”

Tony’s attention was caught by the last name. “Grace Confalone? Doctor Grace Confalone? The shrink?”

“Yes. McGee and I needed therapy…after Paraguay.”

“Jethro.” The name fell softly from Tony’s lips. The two men turned and faced each other. “Are you alright?” Tony asked. “I-I heard you were…injured.” He meant tortured, of course. “Are you healed up?”

“I’m fine, Tony. I was told you had a hand in our rescue. Thanks.”

"You're welcome. It was your friend, Alex Knight's organization that got you and McGee out."

"I know, but thank you, nevertheless." There was a pause then, "I've been talking to Confalone. It helped. A lot.”


“Yeah,” Gibbs said in anexasperated tone. “I can. When I have to. When I want to.”

“You never wanted to before.”
“No, but Paraguay…what happened there. It has a way of changing a man.”

“Yes, look at McGee. He not only looks all manly man, he’s carrying himself like one. Like a team leader. He’s okay, isn’t he? He said Delilah and the twins are doing fine. She’s due soon, isn’t she?”

“Another couple of weeks to go or so.” Gibbs’ gaze roamed over Tony’s face and a slight smile hovered on his lips. “Your new look suits you. Didn’t know you needed glasses.”

“A very mild case of myopia. I don’t really need the glasses. They’re part of my–” he was about to say his cover. “My new look, as you say. A fashion statement. Like the jaw fuzz.”

“You hungry? I got a roast chicken in the fridge and salad.”

“Sounds good.”

They fixed a thick sandwich of cold chicken and greens. Tony had spied a lone avocado on the kitchen counter and sliced it up to add to the sandwiches.

Gibbs grabbed two bottles of water from the cupboard and tossed one to Tony as they settled down in the solarium.

Toni jumped on to the couch next to Gibbs and he gave her a treat.

“You carry dog treats in your pocket?” Tony asked, amused.

Gibbs smiled and bit into his sandwich. He hadn’t wanted to talk about what he needed to talk about until they were here. Now that they were here, he didn’t know how to begin.

“How’s Doctor Confalone?” Tony asked. “As a therapist, I mean.”

“Why? You want one?” Gibbs gave Tony a pointed look, expecting the other man to deny it. The Tony he knew would.

This new Tony surprised him by saying, “If you can talk to one, maybe I should, too.”

o o o

“Why am I here, Gibbs?” Tony asked awhile later. “Why did you bring me here?”

“We have things to talk about,” Gibbs replied.

Tony didn’t respond to that, wanting Gibbs to continue.

“I may not be able to say everything that needs to be said but…I – I need to say I’m sorry first of all.”

Seriously? Tony mentally gawked at that. Gibbs apologizing?

“All those years of pretending we’d never met before, denying what we had, what I was…denying that I was gay. It didn’t occur to me that I was forcing you to be in the closet, too.” He flicked Tony a glance. “Oh yeah, I concluded that after I told Confalone about how we met, about establishing the rules before we even did anything. My denial - that part I can accept. I mean, I grew up in a era where homosexuality was something to be hidden. It was Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell all the way. In my mind, that was never repealed. What I can’t live with – not anymore – is that I denied you the chance to come out…I think you would have come out earlier if it were not for me.
I think, Tony, you stayed in the closet all these years because of me. For me. Because you thought I’d be afraid your coming out might inadvertently out me. Am I right?"

“Yes.” Tony’s answer was a mere whisper, as if he was afraid if he spoke louder, this moment would vanish.

“Well, I’m sorry I did that to you.”

“Was I right, though? Would you have been worried about being outed if I had come out earlier?”

Gibbs shook his head. “You’re not wrong. I have been a selfish bastard. All I was doing those years was running away from myself, not even considering the people I hurt in the process.”

“You mean the three marriages?” Tony said with a soft snort.

“Yeah. But there was also Alex. My friend. With benefits kind.”

Tony’s eyes widened as he heard about Alex and Gibbs’ fuck buddy arrangement. “Alex T. Knight of KnightShade? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. You were my first, Tony. Even though I’d known Alex from my days in the Corps, we just fooled around a bit. It wasn’t until I met you and you joined NCIS that Alex and I started a sexual relationship.

“So while you were married, you weren’t doing Alex on the side?”

“No! I was never unfaithful to my wives. Just in my head and in my heart. My marriages were real attempts at living what I believed was a normal life. Be a normal person.”

“Obviously didn’t work.”

“Obviously. After I met you, I had to face the fact that I was gay but acknowledging it internally was one thing. Living outwardly as a gay man was something else altogether.”

“Then Alex came into the picture.”

“Yes, after the 9/11 attacks and he started coming to DC more often.”

“And while you and I were pretending we weren’t gay and we’d never met before, you were fucking the zillionaire private military company boss.” Tony tried to squelch the sarcastic tone but it still slipped out.

Gibbs ignored it and said. “If it weren’t for my being afraid to come out. I think Alex and I could have had more than just a fuck buddy arrangement. Both of us wanted people we couldn’t have - you were my subordinate, remember - so I guess it would have made sense to stick to each other. Except Alex was never in the closet while I had no intention of leaving it.”

“You still seeing each other?”

Gibbs cocked his head by way of a reply before saying, “Saw him a couple of weeks ago. He commutes between San Diego and DC once a month but he did mention he’d be based in DC from now on. Jax, too. His COO.”

“Jax?”

“Jax Theron. You know him?”
“Err…yeah.”

Gibbs looked at Tony. “How?”

“He and his cousin, Morgan Theron, are on the Board of Directors of the Paddington Liberty Fund. Got to know him from there.”

There was another spot of silence then Gibbs said, “I’m sorry, Tony,” he said softly. “I’m sorry for the last thirteen – no, fifteen - years. I’m sorry I denied you all these years. Denied what we had, what you were to me. What you still are…to me.”

“I always thought Rule Number Six was a dumb one,” Tony said, his heartbeat thumping in his ears. ‘Never say you’re sorry’. Gibbs was saying sorry. Should he be happy or worried?

“I’ve got a suspicion why you resigned without talking to me but I’d like to hear it from you.”

“Okay,” Tony said.

“Why did you leave without a word?” Gibbs asked, giving Toni the last bit of chicken before finishing his sandwich. “And that resignation letter doesn’t count.”

“I did mean to talk to you face-to-face and I went to your house. But…umm…you had Doctor Ryan there. Remember?”

Gibbs frowned as he recalled that morning. “Yeah,” he said with a sigh.

“It kinda threw me off, I guess. I thought you were gay and that’s why your marriages didn’t work but that was before my time so I dunno. In any case, when I saw Doctor Ryan, I realized you could be bisexual and…” Tony’s words trailed off. He got up and went to the window and looked out at the other boats. It was a clear, cool day, the last vestiges of winter still clinging on. The cherry trees over at Hains Point were in full bloom now and he told himself he’d go for a walk and enjoy the scene. After the dry, arid Mali landscape, cherry trees with the temp in the 40s would be heaven. “And I told myself you could decide to stick to women. I mean, it’d be a helluva lot easier. But me? I couldn’t do that. I’m gay, not bi and decided that the smart thing for me to do was to cut myself loose. Get a life.”

“I’m not bisexual,” Gibbs said. “I’m gay. Dr Ryan was…me in full denial. I told her, the morning you dropped by, that it wasn’t going to work between us. I didn’t tell her why and it turned out she was actually relieved because she’d been planning to tell me the same thing.” He paused then said, “Tony…” He stopped short again.

“Yes?”

“I told Confalone I’m coming out.” When Tony’s jaw dropped, Gibbs added quickly, “My therapy sessions. They weren’t all about Paraguay. It was at the start but towards the end, I came out to Confalone and I told her about you.”

“Coming out?” Tony echoed. “You mean ‘out’ out? Like you’re going to tell Abby, McGee? The team?”

“Yes. And…I want to know if…if there’s a chance for you and me. Look, I’ll understand if you’ve moved on, if you’ve met someone in the M31 team…not Jax…he’s taken…Nick? But I think he’s Staz’s…I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

“Yes, and it’s scaring the hell out of me.”
“Well? Do I have a second chance with you?” Gibbs’ eyes were fixed on Tony and his voice was soft, nearly a whisper.

This Gibbs broke Tony. He wanted the grouchy, irascible, confident man back. But this Gibbs needed him now. Needed reassuring now. He decided his own questions could wait.

“No,” Tony answered. “And yes.”
“That’s not an answer,” Gibbs growled. “Yes or no.”

“You asked two questions – have I met someone and do you have a second chance.”

“Tony, I swear –” Gibbs’ irritation was unmistakable.

“No, I haven’t moved on,” Tony quickly clarified. “I’m not involved with anyone. Fucking, yes, but you know Jax and his men. Yes, you and I have a chance. More than a chance.”

“I just need you to stay awhile. Stay with me. Just to see if we can pick up from where we left off fifteen years ago. We’ll take things as they come. No rush. I’m not even asking you to stop fucking the M31 guys.” Gibbs paused but kept his eyes on Tony.

Tony laughed. “That’s because you want to keep fucking Jax and trust me, you’ll be fucking Nick once he sees you face-to-face.”

“Forget about Nick and everyone else. I want to talk about us.”

“Um, okay. Us.”

“So, there is a ‘us’?”

“Yes, I’d say there is.”

“So, it’s yes you’ll stay?”

“Yes, I will stay.”

Gibbs nearly slumped with relief.

“I have a condition, though,” Tony said, sticking up his index finger. “That when the water pipes freeze, when the channel freezes and the sewage pump-out boats can’t do their job, you’ll let me
move to a hotel? I saw there’s a Regis-Millennium hotel right here overlooking the marina.”

“Yes, but there is an alternative.”

“As long as it’s clean and has flushing toilets, I’ll take it.”

“KnightShade has apartments at the Wharf. I can ask Alex to loan one to us when, and if, we need it.”

“They have apartments at the Wharf? Wait a minute. That's right. The Regis Millennium belongs to the Theron group.”

“Yup. The entire Wharf development is a joint venture between the Paddington Group and Theron Inc’s property division.”

“Really…I had no idea,” Tony said. The marina wasn’t a place he came to since he didn’t have a boat and though the Tidal Basin was pretty during the cherry blossom season, he tended to think of it as one of those things tourists did and locals took for granted.

“Alex is on the Board of Directors so he’ll be able to get a unit for you.”

“And you’re going to explain to him why you’re asking? I mean you’re going to tell him about me?

“He knows all about you.”

“He does?” Tony’s brows shot up.

“And how I feel about you.”

“And that is…?”

“That I love you and I don’t want us to be apart again.”

“You love me? Wait. You have to explain that. When did you know that? Somewhere in the thirteen years when I was your special agent, or somewhere in the two years after I quit?”

“There’s no fixed point, DiNozzo,” Gibbs snapped and Tony felt a small whiff of relief at the glimpse of the Gibbs he was used to. “I guess I’d come to love you over the years but I didn’t realize it until you weren’t there anymore.” He waited a beat then asked, “So. Are you in a relationship?”

“Well…no, I’m not.”

“No one at all in the nearly two years you were gone?”

“No one whose heart will be broken. But what about Alex? It may be more than just fuck buddies for him.”

“No. Alex is with Jax. They’ll be married at some point.”

“Oh. Do you, umm, know Jax well?”

“No, I only met him once. He was only sixteen then. I was part of the team that rescued him when he was abducted in Peru.”
“No shit. You were?”

“No. Never saw him again. He joined the Army, according to Alex. Runs KnightShade with him now. I’m sure we’ll meet him one of these days. We could double date.” Gibbs smiled at the thought. “He wants to share me, though, so you’re going to have to talk to him about that. Unless, of course, you don’t mind.” He saw Tony’s face and laughed. “I’m kidding.”

“You joke, too? Maybe I need to go to Paraguay.” Tony wiped a palm down his face. “There’s something I want to tell you… but –”

“But?”

“But there are adjustments we both have to make.”

“I know.”

“Could be deal breakers.”

“Try me.”

“Well, you have Alex…”

“Alex is not –”

“And I have Jax.”


“It’s sorta like you and Alex. Granted, I didn’t know Jax and Alex were that close. I thought they were just business partners…and Jax…do you know he fucks his team mates? That they live and sleep together? I mean that literally. They share one huge-ass bed wherever they can. When that’s not available they push their beds together.”

“I know,” Gibbs said.

“You do?” Tony’s eyebrow quirked up.

“Alex told me all about Jax and his umm, liking to fuck his team.”

“And you, too.” Tony assumed.

Gibbs didn’t respond to that. Instead, he said, “So…you and Jax, huh? I can’t believe Alex never said anything to me. But you said you’re not in a relationship so –”

“So what was between me and Jax was then. This,” he pointed to Gibbs then himself. “Is now. What Jax and I had in Europe stays in Europe.”

Yet there was a glimmer of wistfulness that did not escape Gibbs. He smiled and said, “You might want to reconsider that.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“I may not have seen Jax since he was sixteen and he was one helluva mess but I’ve known Alex for over three decades, half of them as my lover. Yes, My. Lover. No more word games, Tony. We call it what it is from now on. Got that?”
“Yeah.”

“So Alex isn’t just a fuck buddy,” Gibbs continued. “You called it right. If had to choose between you and him, I’d choose you in a heartbeat just as I know he’d choose Jax over me. But his relationship with Jax is…not the norm, as we know. Jax is free to fuck his team but that’s the limit. Jax does not play outside of M31. Is that a condition Alex set? I don’t know. But Alex doesn’t fuck anyone else but me. It’s been the three of us for a few years now.”

“And this arrangement works for you guys?” Tony asked, thinking this was one side to Jethro he wouldn’t have guessed in a million years.

“As far as I know, it does.”

“So? What has this to do with anything? With us?”

Gibbs didn’t reply but kept his eyes on Tony.

“Ahh. I see,” Tony said, a smile starting on his lips. “The possible deal breaker. A quid pro quo. You want to keep on fucking Alex and Jax if I want to keep on letting Theron pound the crap outta me. No, don’t take that literally.”

Still Gibbs stayed quiet.

“That’s not a deal breaker for me, Jethro. If you want to savor the KnightShade wares now and then that’s fine with me. As long as I’m Numero Uno in your life. As long as you don’t bring any new toys. I can accept existing relationships because...well, ours isn't simple what with the hiding, the secrets, the separations...it's a miracle we've found our way back together so -” he drew in a deep breath. "I'm not going to put a bunch of conditions in the way. I think that's fair enough, don't you?"

“You’ve always been Numero Uno, Tony. The difference now is that I’m not afraid to acknowledge it anymore. So yeah, quid pro quo but Alex and the M31 team, though I don’t know what they're like. I've not even seen Jax since he was 16.”

“Oh, believe me, you'll want to fuck them. Is it unnatural that I'm not jealous? I mean, I should be, right?"

"If ours were an ordinary relationship, yeah. But it's not and remember, I know you. I know I can trust you once you give your word and vice versa. I know you won't cheat on me and I would never do that to you. That's why we're having this talk. Getting it all out. Remember, too, if you hadn't left - if I hadn't made it impossible for you to stay - and we had been a couple, Alex would have remained just a friend and you would not have been fucking with Jax in Europe."

Tony digested that, then said, "And Adam and Nick in Africa. I only started fucking Jax in Monte Carlo."

"Whatever." Gibbs gave him an eye-roll."

'Are there any other rules? Like we can fuck them only on weekends. No staying over…no –”

Gibbs laughed. “No. No rules. I’m confident you and I know each other well enough to know what’s fine and what’s not. And if anything does come up that we need to address, then we will do that.”

“Really? You mean we’ll sit down and talk about it?”
“Same here, Tony, and take all the time you need. Just do it with me, not away from me.”

“I won’t drive you crazy with my incessant chatter?”

“When you’ve been incarcerated and tortured for two months straight, with no one but the rats for company, crazy develops a different meaning.”

“But McGee was with you.”

“Only some of the time. They brought him in only when I was being tortured, or during interrogations. They wanted him to watch. To break him. We were never left together on our own and the nights…the nights were solitary. I got through each day by thinking about you. About the two weeks we spent. So many years ago…but I relived each day as if it was just yesterday.” He drew in a breath. “And told myself if I survived, I would find you and ask you to give me another chance. Beg you if I had to.” When Tony just stared back at him, he said, “What? I’m serious.”

“I know you are. Sorry, you’re going to have to be patient if we’re going to make this work.”

“You have doubts?”

“No. Not about us. It’s just that the last two years have taught me to be wary, to not take things for granted. So I’m telling myself to not screw things up. That’s all.”

Gibbs nodded. “Then it’s settled. Now why was it never easy like this with my ex-wives?”

“Maybe because they weren’t men?”

“That is a sexist remark, you realize that?”

“No, I meant that you couldn’t relate to them because you couldn’t love them the way you should. Me? I got the right plumbing.”

Gibbs grunted in response. “Guess so. Hey, weren’t you working in a charity foundation? What did you do? Just travel around the world and decide how much money to give to which charity, right?”

“Uhh…I’ll tell you one of these days but right now I just want to know where I’m sleeping tonight. Stinnett’s house is now a crime scene and I don’t think Fornell’s going to allow me back there. I’m not going to crash on my couch with McGee and Delilah there.”

“You are not going back to Stinnett’s except to pack and come back here. You’ll stay here.” Gibbs paused then added softly, “Won’t you?”

Tony stood and Gibbs stood with him. Looking at Gibbs, Tony cupped his face between his hands and kissed him lightly. “Not leaving you again, Jethro.”
How did one make up for fifteen years of loss and longing? Neither man knew. Their jerky breaths and their tentative caresses spoke of a long yearned-for relief tinged with an almost fearful anticipation. Both so afraid that this would turn out to be just a dream. For Gibbs, awakening in his basement, shivering and alone, an empty tumbler nearby; for Tony, laying awake under a canopy of stars, wondering if the next day they’d be walking into another ambush and he’d never get the chance to tell Gibbs how much he loved him.

Yet here they were tonight, in each other’s arms, their lovemaking both slow and sweet, frantic and desperate. It felt to Tony as if he could live his life over a dozen times and he’d still marvel at the feel of Jethro’s cock on the first thrust, as it stretched him and impaled him, possessed him. He could have this for the rest of his days and he wouldn’t tire of it. And when one or the other, or both, were too old and couldn’t get it up even with a crane, he’d be content to lay in Jethro’s arms until the morning light roused them.

But right now, right here, they were filled with a renewed energy and strength and the memory of those long, lonely days and nights were dispelled in their lovemaking.

Tony’s eyes blinked open shortly after dawn and he thought he was dreaming because he thought he saw the sky instead of the cabin ceiling. Shaking off the vestiges of sleep, he looked about him. Gibbs was snoring softly beside him and they were on the Semper Fi. He could feel the gentle roll of the houseboat as another vessel passed.

Gibbs stirred and opened his eyes, his arm tightening on Tony’s torso. “Morning.”

“Jethro, your ceiling’s disappeared,” Tony said.

“What timer?”

“I set it on a timer. five a.m. the ceiling rolls back so that you’ll wake up to the open sky. You wanted that, remember?”

“You remembered?” Tony said. “That was fifteen years ago and I just mentioned it in passing. Whoa. This is so cool. How did you do it? Was it already like this when you got the houseboat?”

Gibbs sat up. “Nope. I got the KnightShade special effects guys to install it. Actually, they set up the whole boat for me. The ceiling get-up – it’s weather-sensitive. It can sense when rain is likely and will cover up then roll back when it’s dry. You just set your preferred parameters.”

“Cool. Really, really cool,” Tony said, getting up after Gibbs. “Of you. To do it for me.”

His smile lit up the cabin and Gibbs had to smile along. “You asked me when I knew I was in love with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Remember that time you were in Cartagena and Ziva and I flew in to meet you?”

“Ye-ahh.”
“That smile on your face when you turned around and saw us? When I saw that smile, that was when I knew.”

“That was eight years ago.”

Gibbs cocked his head in acknowledgment. The familiar gesture filled Tony with warmth. God, he missed this man. Missed him beyond words.

“You knew eight years ago that you were in love with me?” Tony swallowed the lump in his throat, wanting to cry and rage at the man beside him. “And never told me? And let me leave?”

Gibbs closed his eyes briefly and said, “I’m sorry.” Opening them, he reached for Tony. “I swear I’ll make it up to you.”

“It’s okay. You went into therapy and you talked about me, about us. That’s already a giant leap. Just means I’ve got a whole new Gibbs to discover.”

“Same here with you.” Gibbs ran a palm across Tony’s jaw. “When did you start sporting a permanent scruff? Not that I don’t like it. I do. The glasses are sexy, too. Suits the new Tony.”

“New Tony?”

“Yup. The old Tony I knew thought it was his job to be the class clown, glib remarks sliding off his tongue 7 days a week, a new date every weekend…that Tony left and looks like he didn’t come back.”

“No,” Tony sighed. “No, I left him somewhere in the desert in Mali. And the scruff,” he ran his palm over his jaw and cheeks. “It was easier not to shave living out in the desert. Kept my hair long and only had it cut when I returned to London but decided to keep the beard. Just trimmed it back. I might have to get rid of it, though.”

“Why?”

“Don’t want to give you beard burn when I eat your ass out.”

That brought a low groan from Gibbs and he pulled Tony in for a long kiss.

“Hey, you’re an old man.” Tony chuckled. “You’re not supposed to be so insatiable.”

“Sorry, but my cock not only disagrees, it’s offended.”

Half an hour later, Gibbs said, “You gotta be hungry. We skipped dinner last night.”

“Yes,” Tony said. “We did nothing but talk and fuck. Then talked and fucked some more. Then talked and fucked even more when we woke up.”

“You’re telling me you’re all talked and fucked out?”

Tony grinned. “Not by a long shot.”

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They were just finishing their breakfast when Tony’s cell phone rang. Not his personal one. The KnightFone.

“Director Morrow,” Tony muttered to Gibbs. “I was supposed to check in with him when I got in.”

Gibbs was about to ask why Morrow but Tony was already speaking to the Under-Secretary.

“Yes, sir. I got in on Monday night, actually, and got caught up in an ongoing joint FBI-NCIS murder investigation. I was going to call you this morning. You beat me by a few minutes.” After a couple of ‘yes, sir’s and ‘I will’, Tony said, “Uh, sir. I’m with Special Agent Gibbs right now. Having breakfast.”


“My KnightFone is on twenty-four seven. I’m also staying with Gibbs on his houseboat if you need to find me.”

“Oh? What happened to your apartment?”

“Umm, I’m moving in with Gibbs. McGee took over my apartment when I left and I wasn’t able to give him notice of my return.” Tony listened then glanced at Gibbs. “Yes, he’s right here beside me. Did you want to talk to him?”

Over, at the other end of the line, Morrow frowned briefly. “He’s going to want to know why I’m calling you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s fine. You can tell him I recruited you for an undercover assignment involving counterintelligence. Tell him I would have cleared it with him if you hadn’t resigned. Don’t mention Operation Silverwing. That’s still active and Gibbs has not been read in. Understood?”

“Loud and clear.”

“I’ll be getting a report from London any day now and you could be called up for Operation Silverwing II so be operationally-ready.”

“Already am, sir.”

“Have you checked in with Jax?”

“Yes, sir. I spoke with him briefly last night. He’s flying in to DC this afternoon.” They spoke for another few seconds then Tony hung up.

“You fly in less than forty-eight hours and the Under-Secretary of Homeland's OIA is calling you at eight forty-seven in the morning?” Gibbs quirked up a brow at Tony.

Tony drew in a breath and hailed the waiter at the same time. “More coffee, please.” Turning to Gibbs, he said, “Here’s what happened - Morrow called me the morning I went to your house to tell I’d resigned. He needed me to go undercover for a couple of years. Collecting and reporting on some suspected terrorists operating in Europe. He wanted my consent to the assignment before calling you but when he learned I’d resigned, he didn’t see the need to tell you. I had to pack in a hurry and catch a flight and my orders were that because it involved a highly-classified operation, I
would not be allowed to contact anyone not in the need-to-know. That was why I didn’t call any of you and why you couldn’t contact me. All I was allowed was an occasional email to show I was well.”

Gibbs listened, absorbing the explanation. “You didn’t even include me in your email.” He immediately regretted saying that. It sounded childish.

“No, I didn’t, because…well, the truth is, I needed the separation. Not just physically but emotionally and psychologically. As far as I knew, you and I were never going to happen and I had to move on with my life. I needed to distance myself for my sanity’s sake.”

“You did the right thing, Tony.”

“It was hard.”

“Was for me, too. I’m sorry,” Gibbs apologized. Again.

“Okay.”

“We can move on from that? Start afresh?”

“Yes, but stop apologizing. It freaks me out.”

Gibbs grinned. “Okay.”

Tony looked at the time. “It’s nine fifteen. We gotta move. McGee must be having kittens. You’ve never been late for work and Fornell’s coming in at ten to brief us.”
“SecNav called me early this morning,” Director Vance said when Tom Morrow called him on the secure line. “They’re giving Parsons carte blanche.

"I know," Morrow said.

“What’s Parsons after?” Vance asked, his anger rising. "If it’s to hurt the agency, then why am I not the one that's taking the hit?"

“Because you are a victim,” Morrow replied. “Parsons recognizes the political fallout of going after a man whose spouse nearly died in the line of her husband's duty. Gibbs’ family’s deaths was not connected to NCIS as Jackie’s injury was. Gibbs is the next best thing. Maybe even better than you. To someone like Parsons, Gibbs is a hell of a trophy.”

“Gibbs has paid his dues. Many times over. Hell, Tom, the man was imprisoned and tortured for two months and it’s taken him two more months to recover physically. I’m not going to standby and deliver him to Parsons on a platter. The man is a sniveling piece of sh—”

“Yes, he is. Morrow agreed. “And no. We are not going to standby and let that creep get his hands on Gibbs.”

“You got a plan?”

“I do.”

“What about SecNav? The Inspector-General?”

“It’s being taken care of as we speak,” Morrow said. “Jarvis called me after he spoke to you. And after that, a call from someone with a higher pay grade than all of us.”

“Who?”

“POTUS.”

Vance’s brows lifted and he set his coffee – halfway to his lips – back down on his desk. “Why do I get the feeling there’s more going on than I know. Or should know.”

“There is, and I’m going to read you in.”
Morrow briefed Vance about Operation Silverwing I and II. Vance wasn’t told what Gibbs would be doing, specifically, just that SecNav would handle the Inspector-General now that the word had come down from the highest office in the land. Silverwing II, Morrow explained, would only be activated if what they suspected about Varya Saidullayev proved true, something he expected confirmation any minute now.

“We need to get Gibbs out of Parsons’ reach and this isn’t just because we value Gibbs’ contribution over the years,” Morrow added. “This is also POTUS giving me orders to make sure Gibbs can’t be compromised, and to do it without it leading back to his office.”

“And why is the President involving himself in this?” Vance asked, understandably perplexed.

“Because he plans to put Gibbs in charge of the new anti-terrorism counterintelligence and critical intervention agency.

“What new anti-terrorism counterintelligence and critical intervention agency?”

"Just a sec." Morrow said when his cell phone vibrated. He glanced at the caller ID and said, “I’ve got to take this. Putting you on hold. Hi, Mike.”

“DiNozzo’s intel panned out and we’ve confirmed our reports on Saidullayev,” Mike said. “She’s a niece of Rustam Kasarov. Operation Silverwing II has been activated. DiNozzo will be getting a call any time now.”

“Thanks.” Nothing else was said and Morrow switched back to Vance. “Leon, you there?”

“Yes.”

“Operation Silverwing II has just been activated. It’ll take care of both Saidullayev and Gibbs.”

“Kill two birds with one stone? How?”

“Not one stone,” Morrow said. “One bullet.”

Tony, Gibbs, and the MCRT were in the middle of their briefing with Fornell on the money laundering case when there was a knock on the door and Director Vance’s secretary poked her head in.

“Sorry to interrupt but Gibbs – Director Vance needs to see you right away in his office.” Everyone watched him get up and leave then Tony’s cell phone vibrated and he got up, following after Gibbs.

Fornell threw up his hands. “Go on ahead. Nothing important going on at this table.” He rolled his eyes.

Torres grinned at McGee and Bishop.

“Uh, why don’t we go over the reports?” McGee said. “We’ve got more info on Stinnett here.” He slid a file across the table to Fornell.”

Tony’s call from Jax was brief. After Jax hung up, Tony waited for the call he was expecting. It came less than five minutes later.
“Hey, Tony. It’s Crispian.” His cousin sounded anxious and stressed.

“Hi Cuz. How are you doing?”

“Listen. Remember I told you about standing in for Simon in case he can’t make it? Well, believe it or not, he’s come down with chicken pox. Chicken pox! Can you believe that?”

Tony could but Crispian would never know how and why.

“So I’m going to need you to be my best man. The wedding is the day after tomorrow and I swear I’m about to break out in hives.”

"I know, but I'm still waiting for the details. And don't worry. It'll be fine."

"Thank God Varya wanted a small, private affair but anyway, you can fill in for Simon, can’t you?”

“Of course. Just tell me where and what time.”

“I’ll have the wedding program emailed to you right away and it’s being held in New York. My Long Island residence. Just a hour and a half flight for you. I’ll send the plane to pick you up tomorrow morning and you can stay at the house, oversee the final prep. Is that okay? I know it’s a rush but –”

“No problem, Cris. And I’ll let you know if I need the plane. I’ll call you back within the hour but no worries. I’ll be there. Now, make sure you have the wedding program emailed to me. As detailed as possible.”

“Will do. Sending it now as we speak.”

“I want the names of the wedding planner and I need you to inform them that I’m taking over Simon’s duties so they are to contact me and clear any changes with me. No changes until I give the okay. Can you do that? I don’t want to have to look for you or Varya because the flowers are the wrong shade of pink. Or yellow…whatever.”

“God, no, don’t ask me about things like that. Alright, here we go – I’ve emailed the wedding planner’s company and the planner herself and c.c.’d it to you…and the wedding schedule is also on its way to you.”

Tony’s KnightFone chirped indicating he had mail. “Okay, I got the emails. Security,” he added. “I need to know if you’ve hired security.”

“Well, I didn’t but there will be bodyguards belonging to the guests. We have some Middle-Eastern royalty and some billionaires. They’ll have their entourage.”

“I need a full list of these guests and their security detail. Down to each bodyguard’s name and where they are staying. As you said, the wedding is in two days and I don’t have much time to get a handle on things. The wedding may be small and private but the kind of guests you have attending does make it a little different from the average joe and jane’s wedding.”

“I know. You’ll have everything within a few minutes. My p.a. has all the details, anyway, so she’ll make sure everything is being forwarded to you.”

They rung off and Tony called Jax immediately.
Meanwhile, in the Director’s office, the NCIS Director told Gibbs about Parson’s investigation into his tenure at NCIS, charging him with abuse of his position and obstruction of justice.

“Why? After all these years?” Gibbs asked.

“Apparently, he’s had his eye on you for a few years,” Vance said grimly. “He’s now added the charge of the murder of Pedro Hernandez in 1990. Since there is no statute of limitations for murder, SecNav can’t just wave it away. You killed Hernandez in Mexico so once the Mexican authorities get wind of the charges, they will demand that you be extradited to face murder charges there. You know as well as I do that Hernandez’s family will ensure you don’t live long enough to stand trial in either country. We have a way to resolve this, though.” He picked up his phone and asked to be put through to the Under-Secretary of Homeland's Office of Intelligence and Analysis.

As Gibbs waited for Morrow to come on the line, he thought about Hernandez. He’d known one of these days, that particular ghost would materialize and bite him in the ass.

“Tom? I have Gibbs here in my office and I’ve told him about Parsons’ investigation,” Vance said. “I’m putting him on.”

“Gibbs? Good morning.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“Gibbs, we have a solution for this Parsons problem but I need your confirmation before I say anymore.”

“Confirmation of what?”

“A black op is being planned right now and if I get your okay to be a part of it, I can read you in on the details. You’re not a member of any black ops team or I wouldn’t need your agreement. You’d simply be given orders but in this case, I need you to say yes before I give you those orders.”

“If you’re okay with it, I am,” Gibbs said. He needed to trust someone and Morrow was one of the few he would trust with his life. At no other time in his life had coming home safely been more important. There was Tony now to consider and he regarded it his responsibility to ensure Tony didn’t ever have to worry about him again.

“Good,” Morrow responded. “This is what you have to do.”

“You’re telling me I have to kill someone to be exonerated from killing another?” Gibbs asked.

“I suppose you could put it that way,” Morrow responded.

“At her wedding.”

“She’s a terrorist.”

“Yeah. I got that.”

“Consider it a Command Performance.”

“By whom?”
“The President.”

“What’s he got to do with this? With me?”

“For reasons he has yet to make known to me, Jarvis went to the President personally. POTUS okayed his idea so you’re now part of Operation Silverwing II.”

“Just like that? SecNav talks to POTUS and I’m getting out of a murder charge?”

“Well…” there was a trace of a smile in Morrow’s voice. “Your reason was understandable. The drawerful of medals don’t hurt, either. Gibbs, you’ve proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that you’re an invaluable asset to our country. President Kellerman knows what you’re worth. Especially when you have one of the country’s wealthiest and most influential men supporting you. A man who wields enormous power in the DoD even though he’s not working for the government. Not as an employee, anyway.”

“Who?” Was he talking about Alex?

“Alex T. Knight. And not just Knight but Justin Theron – the third wealthiest man, not in the US but in the world. I must say you have very powerful friends in very high places. I had no idea.”

Neither did Gibbs. He was stunned and said nothing at first. Alex? Justin Theron? He had only been introduced to Jax’s father that day in 1998 and never met the man again. He knew Alex and Justin were good friends but…”What did they say to the President?” he asked.

“Enough for him to make a decision. Let’s get Silverwing II off the ground first then we’ll talk about KnightShade and GTAC. A car will pick you up at five this evening and take you to Dulles. You and DiNozzo will fly to New York with the team. The wedding is this Saturday. I’ll meet with you here Monday morning.”

“Did you say DiNozzo?” Gibbs’ brows snapped together.

“Yes.”

“So the undercover assignment you had him working on the last two years was Operation Silverwing?”

“Yes. You’ll get all the details now that you’ve been read in. I’ve got to go, Gibbs. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Gibbs put the phone away, digesting the conversation. "What's GTAC?" he asked Vance. "I haven't the faintest idea," The Director said.
In my story, I have used certain facts about the House of Saud (ie, Saudi royalty) and its relationship with the radical Islam of the Wahhabis and blended it with my fictional view of the Caucasian Emirate. In reality, the Caucasian Emirate is no longer active as most of its members have fled to join the local Islamic State affiliate, called Vilayat Kavkaz, whose leader is Rustam Asildarov on whom I based my fictional Rustam Kasarov.

At this point of my story, I have not decided, yet, what happens to Rustam Kasarov. I'll know only when I start work on the sequel.

Source for Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's pact: Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril; By Paul Aarts, Carolien Roelants; Pg 7

Meanwhile…

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Back 1744, Muhammad ibn Saud, founder of the first Saudi state and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam made a pact:

Saud declared to al-Wahhab: "This oasis is yours, do not fear your enemies. By the name of God, if all Nejd was summoned to throw you out, we will never agree to expel you."

To which al-Wahhab responded: "You are the settlement's chief and wise man. I want you to grant me an oath that you will perform jihad (holy war) against the unbelievers. In return you will be imam, leader of the Muslim community and I will be leader in religious matters."

Thus began a dynastic alliance and symbiosis that lasts to this day - the House of Saud would rule the kingdom and the House of Shaykh (descendants of al-Wahhab) would control the religious life of the people.

The House of Saud, however, had become increasingly uncomfortable, in the last few decades, with the ideology of the Wahhabis, especially since the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), known as ISIS from 2013 onwards, had taken control of Iraq and was making its presence strongly felt in Syria. The Islamic State of Iraq’s ideology had stark similarities with Wahhabism but where violence was a means to an ends for Al-Qaeda, for the Islamic State, it was an end in itself.
The Saud dynasty, while eschewing the violent characteristics of Wahhabism, nevertheless, would honor the ancestral pact. Saudi royalty – the House of Saud – did not want to alienate the “religious right” of the kingdom –the House of Al-Shaykh - the religious elite whose ideology is based on Wahhabism – and who provided the legitimization of the House of Saud’s right to rule.

However, many members of Saudi royalty chafed at the extremist views and practices and the bad image it gave the Saudis among the rest of the world. The intel that the Caucasian Emirate was planning to align itself with the Islamic State had alarmed Prince Saud bin Musaid. If Rustam Kasarov, the current leader of the Caucasian Emirate, managed to have his niece married to Paddington, it would became a financial pipeline for the Emirate. Kasarov would, inevitably, use those funds to gain power in ISIS which, in turn, would gain more ground then more control in Saudi Arabia.

“This marriage cannot be permitted to succeed,” Prince Saud said quietly to Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Abdulaziz bin Badr, his cousin and aide.

“I concur but let the Americans take care of Saidullayev,” Prince Abdul-Aziz said.

“No, my brother will hear of it and negotiate with the Americans,” Prince Saud said. “I am not such a fan of the US as the king is. I will stop Kasarov on my terms, not King Salman’s. I would get rid of Kasarov if we knew where to find him.”

“I hear he is taking refuge with al-Baghdadi in one of the ISI-controlled towns,” Prince Abdul-Aziz said.

Prince Saud gave a sigh of irritation. “Our relationship with the Wahhabis is aggravating enough as it is and the last thing we need is for Saudi Arabia to become another ISIS conquest. Whatever happens, that wedding must be prevented.”

“We may be lucky and the Americans may already be planning to take care of the problem.”

“They are not. My sources tell me the information was treated with skepticism. The Americans do not believe that a blond model from Chechnya is an ISIS plant nor do they want to upset the British by killing the bride of a prominent citizen. The Brits are their strongest ally. Don’t forget Saidullayev’s background has been carefully hidden. Neither the US nor the UK have any evidence that she has terrorist connections. Even if we get them to pay attention, they will want to wait for proof, by which time it will be too late. As Paddington’s widow, Saidullayev will inherit an enormous amount of wealth – all of which will go into the Emirate's coffers. It is Allah who enabled us to discover the details of the upcoming wedding. If not for your wife’s sister, we would have been taken by surprise.”

Prince Abdul-Aziz nodded. “I hear from Busana that the wedding is surrounded by utmost secrecy. Busana is the maid of honor.”

“Nothing can remain a total secret,” Prince Saud said. “Least of all, a wedding. All those chattering women!” He was silent for several minutes before turning to his aide. “We will remove Saidullayev.”

“But she has gone into hiding, too, and will not appear until the morning of the wedding when she goes to say her wedding vows.”

“Spare me the details. Just find someone who can do the job and tell him.”

“I know someone who knows someone,” bin Badr said.
“Don’t forget, nothing must come back to us.”

“Of course. We will let the Brits think the CIA did it and the US can believe the Brits did it. The latter is better at covering up. Remember Princess Diana.”

“I don’t care if they think Martians did the hit. As long as the Wahhabis do not connect the House of Saud with it.”

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**Four Seasons Resort:**

**Landaa Giraavaru, Maldives**

The Maldives was Quinn’s favorite hideaway. There was nothing like isolating himself on an over-water villa with time completely at his disposal. As he laid on the wooden deck in the middle of the crystal-clear sea, he thought of buying a small place on one of these tropical atolls when he hung up his gun for good. He’d just completed a job that had turned rather messy and he’d needed a few days downtime. The view of clear turquoise water, powder-white sand and endless blue skies always calmed him. He wanted to wake up to this forever. Hawaii was his first choice as a retirement home. Thailand next, depending on the state of his finances.

Today was his last day here. Tomorrow morning he’d be on his way back to the US. And to retirement.

His cell phone buzzed and he dug it out of his backpack. Only one person, other than Viktor, had this number and it wasn’t Viktor.

“I’ve got two jobs for you.”
Thursday, March 24, 2016

After Morrow’s phone call, Gibbs had returned to the meeting room only to be told by an irritated Fornell that both he and Tony had to be taken off the money laundering case.

Fornell glowered at Gibbs. “I was told both of you are being seconded to Homeland Security until further notice. Care to fill me in?”

Gibbs cocked his head. “Need to know. Sorry.” He turned to McGee. “You’re in charge until I get back. The investigation takes priority and if you have to assign someone full-time to work with Fornell, do it. Tony and I may not be contactable all the time so if it’s urgent, call Under-Secretary Morrow’s office.”

“Um, does Director Vance know you’re being seconded to Homeland?” McGee asked.

“Morrow will take care of that. If he hasn’t already. I’ll be back as soon as I’m done with Homeland.”

“With Tony?” McGee asked.

“With Tony,” Gibbs replied. “One way or another.”

The meeting continued without Gibbs and Tony as the two men made their way back to the Semper Fi. They could have stayed for the meeting but Gibbs wanted a detailed briefing on Operation Silverwing before they met with the M31 team.

“What did he mean by ‘one way or another’?” Torres asked after the meeting broke up.

“You tell me,” McGee said. “You’re the one who thinks there’s something going on between Gibbs and Tony.”

“There is,” Torres said, emphatically. “My gut is never wrong.”

“Operation Silverwing has two parts,” Tony said to Gibbs once they were settled back on board the Semper Fi. “Silverwing I is gathering intel on the Caucasian Emirate – which is what I did after I left NCIS. As a result of that intel, Silverwing II was launched – take Varya Saidullayev out.” He went on to tell Gibbs who Saidullayev turned out to be and update him on the workings of Rustam Kasarov and the current state of the Emirate. Then told Gibbs about his stint in Transylvania and Africa with some of the M31 team, whom Gibbs would be meeting for the first time.

Afterwards, they spent the rest of the afternoon making up for the lost years.
“Paraguay has really changed you,” Tony marveled aloud yet again. “I can’t get over how…how, umm, chatty you are.”

“You complaining?” Gibbs asked, smiling, tracing a finger around Tony’s nipple.

“What? No. I love the changed Jethro,” Tony started to say something else but halted.

“What?” Gibbs asked. “And don’t say ‘nothing’. That response is not allowed in our relationship.”

“New rule?”

“Yep. Rule 71.”

By the time they arrived at Dulles at 6pm and were taken to the Theron Falcon jet, Jax and the team were already on board.

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**On board the KnightBird II**

“Heads up,” Jax announced. “Operation Silverwing II. Nick, you won’t be taking the shot.”

“Why not?” Nick asked as the rest of the team gathered round in the plane’s lounge cum meeting room. Jax had picked the team members for Operation Silverwing II – taking out Varya Saidullayev before the wedding - and they were on their way to New York. Nick was the designated shooter and Dante his spotter. At a mere 250 yards, any of them could take the shot easily but Nick was the resident sniper, taking the job for every M31 mission when his skill set was needed. So why wasn’t he taking the shot for Silverwing II?

“Because Jethro Gibbs will,” Jax said.

“Jethro?” Nick asked, puzzled. “I thought he was tagging along to keep DiNozzo company.” It was all Nick could do not to stare at the silver fox. Sure, he knew Jethro Gibbs was hot from the profile and photo KnightShade had of the NCIS special agent but he didn’t expect Gibbs to be even more delicious in the flesh. If there was one thing he had a weakness for, it was older men. He’d fuck Alex in a heartbeat if it weren’t for the fact that Alex didn’t fuck the staff. Besides, the man scared the bejesus out of him. Nick couldn’t explain why but he did. That jet-black hair and piercing green eyes...he shivered at the thought of Alexs Tobias Knight advancing on him like Darth Vader with his huge light saber. But Gibbs…now he was fair game. If Tony didn’t mind sharing, that is. Whatever, he knew he’d have to take his cue from Jax because if he fucked anything up for the sake of his dick, Jax would cut it off and flush it down the toilet.

“Why Jethro?” Adam asked.

“Because some asshole of an investigator at the DoD is gunning for him,” Jax replied. “And the only way Morrow can legitimately make Gibbs “unavailable” to the IG’s goons for questioning is to have him in one of our black missions.”

“Ahh, so…” Nick slid his gaze to Gibbs and flashed one of his blinding try-and-resist-me-now smiles. “You do know that once you’re attached to M31 – even on a contract basis,” he said to Gibbs. “Your entire record would be sealed, preventing Parsons and everyone from digging into your files. In fact, as far as anyone would be able to tell, Leroy Jethro Gibbs would not exist. Not until KnightShade unseals the records when your mission is over…if we decide to unseal it.”

Gibbs looked at Jax for confirmation.
“What Nick said,” Jax confirmed. “For the duration of Operation Silverwing II, you will be completely black.”

“Oh, and I did some checking up on you,” Nick added. “You’re the Leroy Jethro Gibbs. I thought that name was familiar. You were a legend in your day – up there with Chris Kyle and Gary Gordon. With Kyle and Gordon dead, you’re now number one. You’re in your fifties, aren’t you? A bit long in the tooth.”

"Just because you’re twenty-eight doesn’t mean everyone over thirty-five is old,” Gibbs retorted. “Besides, I’ve had my eyesight corrected.”

“You did?” Nick said.

“You did?” Tony said at the same time.

“Is it good enough for us, though?” Nick added.

“As good as yours.” Gibbs smirked.

“Alex arranged for him to have it done at MediCom,” Jax said. “And you –” he said to Gibbs, “just fell for Nick’s oldest trick. He threw out a challenge and you swallowed it hook, line and sinker.” He turned to Nick and jabbed his finger in his direction. “You. Keep your ass out of his face until Silverwing II is accomplished.”

“Whoa,” Nick held up his hands, palms out front. “I ain’t got a single impure thought about Leroy Jethro Gibbs in my pretty head.”

Adam snorted. “Have you seen what he looks like naked?”

Nick whirled round to Adam. “You have? When? How?”

“Excuse me,” Gibbs said. “I’m right here and could we get back on track?”

“Oops. Daddy’s mad.” Nick winked at Gibbs.

“Told you so,” Tony leaned in and whispered in Gibbs’ ear. Gibbs stared back at him balefully. “Nick,” Tony clarified. “Watch your back once this is over. He can be as relentless as you when there’s an ass he wants.”

“Are we done with the distractions?” Jax asked.

Thursday Evening, March 24, 2016

Fifth Avenue, Central Park;

New York, NY

They arrived in New York just after eight in the evening and headed immediately to Paddington’s mansion on Long Island. Orders had been given for the sniper’s nest to be constructed before the team arrived and Gibbs gave it a thorough testing before giving it the thumbs-up. They did a trial run of the plan then satisfied they had all the bases covered, left for Jax’s apartment where they would be staying.

As was his custom, Jax preferred leasing properties to owning them and his New York residence
was one of the four penthouses in the luxury hotel owned by Theron-Leisure, the entertainment and property arm of the Theron Group.

Whatever Gibbs was expecting when he entered the apartment, it certainly wasn’t the simplicity and lack of expensive trimmings. There were no multi-million dollar artworks and sculptures, no gold fittings and glittering crystal. The apartment, with its clean, simple lines, open plan concept and muted earth tones declared very boldly that it was a men-only dwelling but also that it’s owner valued functionality and comfort over luxury and ostentatiousness. Gibbs liked it…but the Semper Fi was more his style even if it was an ultra luxury houseboat. He loved his houseboat though he wasn’t sure if Tony could adapt. Penthouses were more DiNozzo’s style.

He and Tony put their bags in their bedroom then Tony took a quick tour of the apartment. The M31 guys were in the lounge watching a game, Staz was pottering around in the spacious kitchen but Jax, Gibbs noticed, was out on the terrace alone. And smoking.

“Something’s bothering him,” Tony said quietly, joining Gibbs to study the lone figure standing at the edge of the wide terrace. “He only smokes when he’s mulling over something he can’t get a grip on.”

“Well, he better because the assignment is day after tomorrow. He may not be an active operator but he’s still the c.o. If anything goes wrong he’s the one to call for Plan B. Or abort.”

“Oh, he’ll get his head straight,” Tony said. “Look who just walked in.”

Gibbs turned around. It was Alex. Tony had never met Alex Knight but had watched him give corporate speeches. He was one of those men who, if you’d who'd seen him in the flesh, would not forget him.

Alex greeted the team and went up to Gibbs and Tony, introducing himself.

“We haven’t met,” he said, “but I know you very well, Tony DiNozzo.” They shook hands then his gaze moved to the man outside. “Excuse me. I need to talk to him.”

Jax looked out over the view of Central Park, his hands clasping the railing. An odd sense of longing was lingering inside him and irritating him. Like stepping on a small stone in his shoe. He considered himself a simple, clear-cut person. At least as far as his work and public life was concerned. And ‘public’ included his family and acquaintances. He had no friends outside of M31. By choice. His life was tied up in KnightShade and that left no room for anyone else. Except Alex. But meeting Jethro Gibbs had shaken him and he couldn’t figure out why.

When Gibbs and Tony arrived at Dulles earlier this evening, the M31 team were already boarding the Theron Falcon jet, the jets used by KnightShade for short-haul flights. Jax had briefed Gibbs and Tony on the plan and gone over it with the entire team two more times.

Jax had been struck by how good-looking Gibbs was. He had little recollection of that night in Lima when Alex and his men had rescued him. He could remember, though, that Gibbs was the one who held him throughout the helicopter ride to the airport where a KnightShade jet was waiting to fly him home. Alex had been preoccupied with making sure the rest of his team made it out safely and he remembered snatches of conversation between Alex and someone in Washington, DC. He’d been disoriented by the sudden and unexpected turn of events and spent much of the twenty-minute ride with his face buried between Gibbs’ neck and shoulder. Just now, when Gibbs had given him a man-hug, the familiar, comforting scent of his rescuer had filled his senses. Had
his ordeal been that traumatic? Dr. Cohen had thought so, had warned him that years from now, not to be surprised if images, thoughts, even tastes and smells from that period made an appearance.

He’d thought about Jethro Gibbs through the years off and on, wondering how he was, what he was doing but never thought to ask Alex. In any case, he hadn’t been in contact with Alex during the years he’d been away. He’d only kept tabs on him, on KnightShade, following the company’s progress on the quiet. He’d kept a lot of things inside. On the quiet. Choosing to deal with his inner demons his own way and who was going to argue with the solution he’d chosen? Mind-numbing sex with seven gorgeous men on tap. Even without his PTSD he’d keep his sex life the way it was. PTSD. He couldn’t call it that. Compared to what other military men and women suffered, the effects of his incarceration in Peru was mild. Nothing that a good ass-fucking didn’t cure.

But Gibbs. His reaction to the man came out of left field. As soon as Gibbs’ familiar scent invaded his olfactory glands, he felt an acute urge to bury his face in the man’s neck just like the adolescent boy had. He wanted to crawl onto Gibbs’ lap and feel his strong arms holding him tight. It embarrassed him, this sudden unexpected need for a man he hadn't seen in twenty years.

Damn. Of all times for this to happen. Operation Silverwing II culminated in forty-eight hours. He couldn’t afford less than total focus.

“Whatever you’re struggling with, get it over with,” Alex said. “You’ve never allowed anything to get in the way of a mission. The fact that I can see you’re distracted means your team knows, too. So get your head out of your ass. Or put a different one in there. Just do it now.”

“Jethro –”

“Wants you as much as you want him,” Alex finished for him. “For different reasons, perhaps – you want sex with him to help you deal with your issues and he wants to fuck you because, well, you’re fuckable.” He saw Jax’s expression and chuckled. “Come on, you’ve got a thing for him ever since you read his file and saw what he looks like. He may be a silver fox now but he’s still hard and fit – we saw to that during his rehab – and I’m taking him up to Level 2 when he joins.”When Jax's troubled look remained, Alex's voice softened. "Jax. I know what you're feeling. I talked to Dr. Cohen. Once I knew you were staying for good, I asked her how I could help you deal with the after effects of your incarceration." When Jax remained silent, he continued, "She warned me it wouldn't be just the incarceration that is traumatic. Even your rescue. Memories of your rescue will continue to haunt you. It will be as traumatic as the incarceration itself, if not more, because it's a new segment in the entire ordeal. Your rescue will be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, relief, fear, comfort, danger...various emotions clashing together. Far more complex than the incarceration. So your reaction to Jethro should not come as a surprise to you."

Jax turned to him. "You knew? About how I feel? I mean, when I asked if you would share, I was joking."

"I know you were, but I knew once you came face to face with him, you wouldn't be anymore. I was prepared for your response and now you have to understand and accept it."

"What about Jethro? Tony?"

"Don't worry. I've talked to Jethro about it already."

"when?"

"I called him when he was on his way to Dulles. As for Tony, he's on board with whatever helps
you. Now, you know better than anyone else that you have to focus solely on the operation. So follow my lead. Everything will be fine."
ACT THREE/SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL: CHAPTER 38

Author's Notes: Okay, guys. I don't know who you imagine when it comes to Jax Theron but for me, he's Chris Pine!!!

Synesthesia: a neurological condition that causes the brain to process data in the form of several senses at once. For example, a person with synesthesia may hear sounds while also seeing them as colorful swirls. In Jax's case, feelings are translated into swirls of color. I will deal with this more in the sequel, not here. For more info on the condition: https://www.livescience.com/60707-what-is-synesthesia.html

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ACT THREE/SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL

CHAPTER 38

The team watched, out of the corner of their eyes, as Alex and Jax entered the living room. Alex tilted his head at Gibbs, indicating for him to follow. Then crooked a finger at Tony. “Yes, you, too,” he said. Nick, watching the byplay, immediately stood up to follow, a grin breaking out on his face. Alex stopped him with a glare. “Stay.”

“Aw, man…,” Nick whined when the four men headed for the master bedroom. “I don’t want to miss tha-at.”

“Shut up, Nick,” Staz said, pulling him down onto his lap. “You seriously want to be there? With the big boss?”

“Why not?” Nick asked, allowing Staz to nuzzle his neck. “As long as you’re there.”

“Yeah,” Heekyll said, “Why not? Alex is seriously hot. For his age. The silver fox, too. I’d do them both in a heartbeat.”

“Me, too,” Jekyll added.

“Count me in,” Adam said. “I don’t even have to fuck them. Watching the silver fox in action’s good enough.”

“Satisfied?” Nick gave Staz a triumphant look. “Don’t tell me you never fantasized about the big boss? I mean, hey, he’s the big boss. Unattainable except by Jax. I’ve not even been as close to him as today. Only heard him during one of his rare corporate speeches. I nearly choked on my tongue when he walked in earlier.”

“He can’t be that intimidating,” Dante said. “He just looks it but I bet he’s a softie under that Darth Vader aura.”
Tony was still trying to absorb Alex’s proposal that they have a ménage à quatre. Even more incredulous to Tony, Gibbs was open to it! Tony knew enough about Alex by now to know Gibbs’ best friend would not have have broached the subject if he thought it would affect Gibbs’ and Tony’s relationship.

He’d also learned a lot about Alex from Jax so even though he’d only seen the man only once or twice from afar, it was with a mix of familiarity and uncertainty when he followed Gibbs into the master bedroom. As in all of his residences, the bed was custom-made, as were the sheets – if beds came in XL sizing, these beds would be 10XL. Huge enough to accommodate the M31 team’s sexual appetite for group sex.

To Gibbs, familiarity came from Alex and Tony, with Jax being the unknown. To Jax, it was Alex whom he knew like the back of his hand; Tony also familiar to him, sexually, by now. Jethro Gibbs was the uncertainty and the unknown and it caused his nerves to tingle. To Alex, the unknown had long ceased to unnerve him so he was looking forward to this and hoped it would be a permanent thing in their lives.

Tony eyed Alex with some trepidation, relieved that Jax and Gibbs were there. Not that he would be facing Alex if not for them. And yes, the idea of a ménage à quatre intrigued him. Not just a one-time thing but, assuming all parties had a good time, an ongoing arrangement. He’d admitted to Gibbs that he found Alex very attractive, in a dark, seductive way – “I kinda see him as a sexy Count Dracula,” he’d said, to Gibbs’ amusement. “That blue-black hair which he probably dyes because, come on, he’s older than you, those green eyes that probably shine in the dark and that long, lean body. Have you noticed how long his fingers are? He’d have long toes, too, I bet.”

Tony had been wrong about Alex’s hair, though. Due to a genetic quirk, the Knights had hair that remained jet black well into old age. And Jax had told Tony Alex’s eyes glowed in the dark when he was aroused. Then again, Jax could be full of shit.

By the time they’d landed at La Guardia, Gibbs knew Tony wouldn’t find sex with Alex a hardship. He’d be tentative at first, even a little shy, but he could see Tony did find Alex attractive. More than, in fact. And he was glad. He’d have turned Alex’s proposal down flat and not even mentioned it to Tony if he felt Tony would react negatively. In fact, he now suspected Alex already had some inkling of how Tony would respond before he’d approached Gibbs. Jax must have told Alex about Tony. Just how well did Jax know Tony while the latter was embedded in M31? Looked like was going to find out.

As for Alex Knight, he couldn’t have asked for more. He had Jax and now he had Gibbs. For keeps. DiNozzo, he’d have to give the younger man time to take to him. Not a problem. Alex was a patient man if he was anything.

Jax entered his bedroom and stood staring at the enormous bed. On that bed, he’d had every M31 member. Before he and the team had decided on their version of monogamy, he’d fucked a lot of other men on it, too. He didn’t think he’d be fucking anyone else on this bed. Or in any of his other homes. Anywhere else, for that matter. He was content with what he’d found in his team, each one of them so different, each one touching a different aspect of his psyche.

Yet, it seemed now that Alex and Adam were right – there were still holes to be filled. Like bullet holes on a wall that needed to be filled then smoothed out. Adam had told him he didn’t know what could patch up those holes. He was a trauma surgeon, not a shrink. He patched up the physical holes, but Alex had known. He’d known the minute Jax had picked up Gibbs’ file, seen his photo, read his history, and seen Jax’s response, subtle thought it had been.
One evening, Jax had told Alex about his fascination with Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Not with his good looks but with his connection to his trauma. “I don’t know why,” he’d said to Alex. “He doesn’t even look like the thirty-something man I met in ’96 yet his face feels familiar.” Then, when he’d met Gibbs face to face earlier today he knew he’d have to tell Alex how he felt. But Alex had beat him to it, had known exactly what he’d needed from Jethro.

And so, here he was, about to patch up that hole. And he was nervous as all hell.

“It’s okay,” Gibbs said in his ear. “Alex and I have talked about this. Tony, too. It’s all good. You need to know that. Tony and I belong together the way you and Alex do. Tony’s told me about you and him, when he was with KnightShade for the past year and a half and I have no problems with you and Tony continuing your relationship just as I am going to continue mine with Alex.”

He turned and looked at Gibbs. “So it **is** all good? I won’t come between you and Tony just because I have an itch only you can scratch.”

“Nothing can come between Tony and me. Nothing and no one. Tony can fuck you as much as he wants as long as I am number one in his life and he comes home to me.”

Gibbs drew him down on the bed, somewhat surprised by the younger man’s tentativeness. “Tony, tell me what Jax likes.”

Tony, who’d been talking to Alex in low tones, approached them, as did Alex.

“Kissing,” Tony said, getting on the bed and stripping off. “He likes long, invasive kisses.”

Which was exactly what Jax got when Gibbs laid over him, cupping his face between callused palms. “Odd how you can feel like you’re getting to know someone through kisses,” Gibbs murmured against his lips. He covered Jax’s mouth with his, sliding his tongue over his lips. “And I’m going to know you so well, Jax Theron.”

Jax was sandwiched between Tony and Alex, but it was Gibbs who was making love to him. Alex and Tony merely stayed plastered to his sides, their clothes laying in a pile on the carpeted floor. They held Jax’s folded legs against his chest and pressed kisses on him. Through lust-hazed eyes, the three men watched Gibbs take his own cock in hand and guide it to Jax’s hole.

Jax’s erection pressed against his belly, jerking and smearing it with precum. He felt the nudge of Gibbs’ broad cockhead and inhaled sharply as he was breached then impaled. The lube made sucking sounds as Gibbs began thrusting. Then he was enveloped in an embrace that felt both comforting and natural. He clung tightly to Gibbs as the other man thrust in and out relentlessly, unable to hold back his moans of pleasure, need, and so much more.

His senses were swimming, he wanted, needed, this for so long yet had not known. It was similar to when Alex had fucked him the first time. No one else had come close to making him feel that way — that sense of total surrender to that person who possessed him, owned him. He’d never believed that idea of fated couples, that there was a special someone just for you somewhere in the world. Life and love were what you made of it right there and then. Yet he and Alex had been reunited and, if he could believe it, they were meant to be. Was that what he’d felt that night in the helicopter when Gibbs had held him on his lap throughout the flight? The bird was one of those converted ones that could be used for medevacs with fold-out seats on the sides facing the opposite. He’d inhaled Gibbs’ scent, nuzzling on the skin of his neck and he’d never forgotten that distinctive smell. Gibbs pheromones. As addictive as Alex’s. None of the men he’d fucked since
then affected him the way Alex, and now, Gibbs, did. As Gibbs’ cock continued to ravage him, he opened his eyes to look at him. The raw, sexual need was plainly etched on Gibbs’ face as he lifted his head. Gibbs kissed him again and his arms automatically went around Gibbs’ neck. Together they moved in tandem, altering positions slightly for Gibbs to scissor him and go even deeper before returning to facing him.

Jax felt as if he was being sucked into a maelstrom of indescribable pleasure. He saw Gibbs’ scent and his lust as if they were visible, tangible swirls around him. Around the four of them. Somewhat like synesthesia. The swirls grew more intense in color and sensation and he felt his own orgasm building.

Whatever was taking place inside him was so deep he could only feel and see its effects. He’d never be able to articulate it.

When, at last, Gibbs erupted, shooting his seed deep inside Jax, Gibbs muttered, “I think…you’ve killed me.” Then he chuckled into Jax’s neck.

Jax’s guttural cry followed and his cock leapt, shooting ropes of cum like an out-of-control geyser, some landing on Gibbs’ hair. On and on his orgasm went and his cries filled the room. The swirls of colors raced faster around him, sucking him down yet another whirlpool before sending him up another tornado. Then he felt himself floating…and everything went black.

A minute later, Gibbs lifted his head and looked around the room. Tony and Alex were on the couch. Or rather, Tony was bent over the arm of the couch being thoroughly fucked by Alex. He grinned at the sight.

His grin turned to consternation when he looked back at Jax. “Jax? You okay? Hey.” He slapped Jax’s cheek lightly. “Alex! Get Adam. Jax’s passed out!”
“Heads up,” Jax called to everyone the next morning. They’d ordered room service breakfast with an extra jugs of coffee. Jax looked none the worse for wear, Tony thought. On the contrary, he looked refreshed. They’d all had an early night after that session of sex, wanting to be properly rested for the next day. By the time they’d emerged from the bedroom, the rest of the men had already gone to their bedrooms. Adam slept next to Jax, in case the latter needed help again. What happened earlier - Jax losing consciousness after an orgasm - had never happened before, though Nick had come close a few times after a Blue Dream session.

“Ceremony is scheduled at eleven-thirty hours tomorrow,” Jax said to the men who had gathered round in the apartment’s meeting room. On the wall was the map of the target area - Watermill, Long Island, and the surrounding neighborhood. “Target’s ETA is sixteen hundred hours here, at Point A,” he said, directing the laser pointer to a triangular field at the junction of Montauk Highway and Old Country Road. “According to the email Paddington sent DiNozzo, the target will be flown by helo to this field. From here she’ll be driven in a limousine to the front gate of the wedding venue, previously known as the Villa Maria and henceforth referred as. Target will switch from the bridal car to an open-top carriage. We couldn’t have asked for a more ideal setting. Nick is your spotter, Gibbs, and will be waiting at Point A. He’ll tail the target’s limo, giving a running commentary as he follows the bridal car to Point B, the main gate. Your nest is Point C and your countdown begins once the target reaches Point B. You have, at most, three minutes to get a clear shot once the target gets into the carriage. You can see here your view of the driveway will be blocked by trees and the pool area once the carriage is past this point. But you won’t get an easier shot than this so you’ll have to take it within the three-minute window. Once you’ve taken out the target, make your way to the water. Chai will be waiting in the speedboat for you, staying out of sight until Nick gives him the order to move. He’ll take you across Mill Creek, across Mecox Bay to Flying Point Road and drop you off here at Point D.” He pointed to an empty piece of land, "You get across Flying Point Road to this open field opposite. By the time you get there, Staz will be ready to land the helo and pick you up.

“Leave your weapon in the speedboat. Chai will take care of it. Flying Point Road can be pretty busy on weekends and we don’t want someone spotting you running with a high-powered rifle in your arms. By the time the target is due, our guys will have ensured the area is clear. No one will be allowed outside the house. No bodyguards, chauffeurs, etc. Everyone will be inside the house or in the designated area where the ceremony will take place. We’re making sure of that.”

“The wedding photographer,” Tony said. “He’ll be shooting the video from the moment the bridal vehicle approaches the front gate. He’ll be capturing everything, including the bride getting out of the car and up onto the carriage. He’s going to have the hit on video.”

“Yes, he will,” Jax said. “But he'll be a KnightShade operative. Dante will be at the reins of the carriage. He’ll go slow on the curve because he’ll know that’s when Gibbs will be taking the shot.”

“What happened to the real wedding photographer?” Tony asked. "How did you get him to hand
“He’ll be uhh, incapacitated temporarily,” Jax said. "Once the target is down, we move fast. Dante and the rest of us will be whisked away by Nick who is waiting in his spotter vehicle and there’ll be another vehicle to pick up the rest. Each driver will do a headcount. If one of us doesn’t make it to the getaway vehicle, he’ll have to find his own way to a suitable pickup point. To recap the last leg, Gibbs is running to the water to be picked up by Chai and we all get the hell outta there before anyone even knows something’s gone wrong. Remember, none of the wedding party and guests will know something’s wrong except -” he held up a finger, “except for the matron of honor, who’s waiting outside the front door for the bride to arrive because her job is to make sure the bride doesn’t trip over her train and fall on her face. We couldn’t replace her because she’s the target’s best friend and had been secluded with her for the two weeks running up to the wedding. Adam, you will keep her away from the driveway. It’s not imperative that she witness the hit but it’ll give us more time to get away if she doesn’t realize till much later that the bride is taking way too long to get to the front door. We don’t want her going out on the driveway to see what’s holding things up.”

“I can keep her occupied,” Adam assured their mission leader.

“DiNozzo, you’ll be wired up, too. Hekyll will give you instructions on that. You’ve got the toughest part of the mission – you have to deal with the suddenly-bereaved husband. Any questions?”

“You got a back up plan?” Gibbs asked. “What if I get a heart attack before I squeeze the trigger?”

“Then Nick will take the target out,” Jax said. "Everything will go on as planned. Only the shooter has changed. If you do really get a heart attack, we’ll know since we’re all connected. One of us will get to you and put in Chai's boat, Staz lifts you off. Everyone gets the hell out.”

They ran over the plan several more times, each one answering questions as Jax threw them out. The rest of the day went by quickly as they took another trip to the Villa Maria with Tony pretending to check out the place to make sure everything was in order for the wedding the next morning.

0900 hours, Saturday

33, Mecox Lane,

Water Mill, New York

When Gavriel had told Quinn the client had a house not just in the same neighborhood as the target but had a clear view of the location where the wedding would be held, he had turned it down, saying he preferred to organize every detail himself. His paranoia was one borne out of humility – he never made the mistake of considering himself invulnerable, good as he was in his profession. That meant always organizing the logistics and details of each job himself. Accepting a car someone else arranged for him meant it could be tampered with, a bomb could have been hidden in it just as a house or hotel room could have someone already waiting to finish him off. So with every job he chose when, where, how and handled all the little details himself. His fees were high enough to justify the extra time and effort, and till now every job had been completed to the clients’ satisfaction.

A check with Google Earth had shown him that the client’s offer was the ideal location. He’d be
able to get a clean shot, albeit his window of opportunity was a small one. A minute, at most. In the end, he decided the client’s location was the best. Plus, he’d be assured of privacy and the freedom to come and go.

He’d flown in to New York a couple of days earlier and scouted out the place, deeming it suitable. He had the keys so he moved in with his single duffel bag and weapons. The 4WD he rented was parked at the end of the driveway which conveniently overlooked the waterfront garden. Once the hit was done, he was clearing out. No doubt, the neighborhood would be crawling with the local Leos and he didn’t want to hang around when they came knocking on the neighbors’ doors.

There were only large, luxury mansions in Water Mill and the target’s location, he discovered, was formerly known as the Villa Maria until the target’s groom, a British billionaire named Crispian Paddington, bought it a couple of years ago for his US residence.

He didn’t think shooting the bride at her wedding was the best idea but Gavriel had said that it was the only opportunity. The bride had gone into hiding in case the media had gotten wind of the event and no one except the groom knew where she’d gone, which was odd to Quinn but then, the filthy-rich had all kinds of quirks and idiosyncrasies. Didn’t the bride need to be dressed and made up by an army of people? He shook his head. He wasn’t knowledgeable about such things beyond the basics. All he knew was that sometimes this made them easier targets and sometimes, like this instance, it made things a little more tense for him.

All that was known was that his target would arrive at the wedding venue at 1100 hours this morning. He had received the route she would take by email from his broker and saw that the best time to make the hit was when she was being driven in the open horse-drawn carriage from the gate to the front door of the mansion. From the master bedroom on the second floor he could see the curved driveway where the target would ride through. It was an easy shot provided there would be no guests and spectators standing in his line of sight. A reasonably good marksman wouldn’t miss. It was less than 150 meters from his position to the target. Child’s play. 0935 hours. Just an hour and a half-plus to go – if the bride wasn’t late. Which, as brides go, she was bound to be.

As he waited, he thought about his dreams of another life. One where he could let his guard down; where he didn’t have to sleep with a loaded Sig under his mattress and a Strider knife under his pillow.

He thought about the plan that had made him ask Viktor for his release eight years ago. By then, he’d served ten years with Viktor as he’d promised and Viktor, in turn, had been true to his, releasing Quinn with a bonus commensurate with the satisfaction Quinn had given him as his personal bodyguard, enforcer and assassin rolled into one.

Yet, for all his cold, lethal skills, Quinn Masterson, a.k.a. Akisame Nakayama a.k.a. Rain Waterstone, wanted to be a healer, a savior. Not a killer. He knew it was unrealistic, at the time, to dream of being a doctor. First, being at Viktor’s beck and call made it impossible for him to study, much less enroll in medical school. So he’d compromised. He'd be an animal doctor. By the time he left the Usmanov household, he was knowledgeable about veterinary practices. Sure, he wasn’t qualified but the vet that looked after Viktor’s three ovcharkas, the giant breed of shepherd dog from the Caucasus Mountains, was a cousin of Irina. He had a private clinic in the same building as Viktor’s office in downtown Seattle and Quinn had spent his days off assisting at the clinic, cleaning, bathing and attending to the pets at the pet motel the clinic ran. He’d loved the work and was loathed to leave the pets each day. He’d nursed a badly-injured dog back to health, bringing it home with him then back to the clinic in the morning. Nikolai, the vet, had taught him the basics and trained him to assist him during surgeries. Perhaps, it was not too late for him to get a veterinary degree.
His plan was to open a shelter for abandoned pets and a pet motel since he was as experienced at operating one as he was being a hitman. And if he got his vet qualifications, well, even better.

What he knew was that he felt so good every time one of his animals thrived under his tender loving care. It just wasn’t the same when he cleaned and handled his weapon with the same amount of TLC.

He looked through the scope of his rifle one more time. Twenty minutes to go. The villa was busy and from his elevated position could see the waitstaff hurrying between the marquee and the house. Most of the guests were now seated in the villa’s garden where the wedding vows would take place.

o o o

1000 hours, Saturday
Crispian Paddington’s Residence (the former Villa Maria).
615 Montauk Highway
Water Mill, NY

Gibbs was cocooned up in his sniper nest high in the sugar maple at the end of the property. His sniper rifle, the KM500, manufactured by Theron-Knight Atomics, was on a specially-constructed bipod fixed onto the tree branch upside down so that the rifle rested on the vee of the bipod. He caressed the barrel and as he waited for the countdown and reminisced about his time with the Corps. His weapon, then, was the M82. The KM500 he had in his hands now, was lighter and more accurate, apparently, having a stationary barrel instead of the recoiling-barrel design of the M82. He didn’t need such a powerful weapon since the KM500’s range was 2,500 meters. His target today would be a tenth of that but he was familiar with the M82 and the KM500 is very similar. He’d done some practice yesterday and found it an excellent weapon.

He peered through the scope and surveyed the place. The property was huge – 15 acres of land and 1,100 feet of waterfront on the Mecox Bay. The house was over 27,000 square feet and included three cottages for the staff. Homes like these, they made him want to hide in the Semper Fi. Thoughts of the cozy houseboat made him smile, as did the fact that Tony was not just back, but his. He wasn’t happy about having to make this hit but that was how it was. Get this done and Morrow would have legitimate means to have his records sealed off. He shifted a little. Not long to go.

The driveway was a semi-circled smooth path lined with low-lying purple –colored flowering plants at the edge. As the plan went, Saidullayev would arrive by limousine and be deposited at the main gates. There, an open carriage pulled by two white horses would take her to the front door – purely for the video which, presumably, would be given to the press after the fact. The carriage, Tony told him, had been in the family for over three hundred years and every Paddington bride had been transported to church in it.

He was antsy to get this over and done with. Get back to DC, give Morrow the rundown then get back to work. Oh, and get Team Gibbs together for drinks after work. Tell them about Tony and him. He also needed to have a talk with Tony about their future, about what they were going to do, work wise. He’d been mulling over the possible alternatives but one thing he knew, he was past pulling another trigger. He wanted out of the field. If doing this job meant Morrow was going to throw more at him, he’d better make it clear he was out of the game. This hit was his last.
He’d killed a lot of men in the course of his career. A few women, too. Not what he would have wanted but he hadn’t had a choice. It was them or him, much as he preferred to spare the women.

We try to live a good life. A clean life. But secrets get in the way.

Mike Franks’ words bit in deep. His sigh mixed with the soft rustling of the leaves as a breeze blew through. He’d tried to live as good a life as he could but yeah, he had some secrets. At least the biggest one was no longer a problem. He’d finally acknowledged his sexual orientation and come Monday, he would tell the team. He was so done with secrets. One down and one to go.

So, fuck you, Hernandez. You, too, Parsons.

♫ Maybe there's a God above
♫ But all I've ever learned from love
♫ Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya
♫ It's not a cry that you hear at night
♫ It's not someone who's seen the light
♫ It's a cold and a broken hallelujah

Marine Sniper Aaron Davis’ voice, singing those lyrics, had haunted him since he’d heard them. He adjusted his position, the twigs and leaves of his camouflage softly swishing as he shifted. The large sugar maple he was perched on provided excellent cover and was just five meters away from the water’s edge where the powerboat for his getaway would pick him up.

He’d been up in the nest well before sunrise, before anyone was awake and had prepared himself for the long wait to eleven hundred hours when the bride was scheduled to arrive. He couldn’t get into position later as the staff started work at six and by seven, the mansion would be bustling.

Eleven hundred hours. Still no sign of the bride. The last guests had arrived and he could see the colors of the women’s dresses interspersed by greys and blacks of the men’s suits as they mingled around the fountain. A couple of men who weren’t from the M31 team were standing by the gate. Probably Saidullayev’s men. He saw others that were obviously bodyguards but they were all scattered in the garden where the guests were seated and where the wedding ceremony would take place.

He caught sight of Tony momentarily and thought how good he looked in a tux. Then thought of the aftermath and Tony having to deal with that. His mood soured immediately.

1117 hours

“Target approaching. Six hundred meters from Gate 1,” Nick reported, his voice cutting through Gibbs’ thoughts. A minute later the white limousine come to a stop at the main gate.

She was here. A vision in white, as they always say. And he was about to add another color. Blood red.

He watched the bride as she got out of the limo and was helped up onto the carriage – an old-
fashioned thing that looked like it just popped right out of a fairytale story. The 2 black horses were magnificent Fresians, with spectacular flowing manes. Nick was in the driveway now, as was the videographer and photographer, both KnightShade operators, as Jax had said.

These next few minutes were crucial. His finger was already resting lightly on the trigger. He saw Dante moving two armed bodyguards away from the drive, watched them argue with Dante before going to stand on the opposite side of the driveway, out of his line of fire. Good enough.

At the gate, the carriage started to move and he tensed. He waited until it reached the curve and was about to pull the trigger when his target’s head exploded, splashing her brains on the pristine white of her gown. The horses reared and the coachman pulled on the reins, his face registering shock. The guards instantly hefted their weapons and looked around them, shocked themselves. One of them already had his phone out.

Momentarily stunned, Gibbs followed the plan as if he had been the one to pull the trigger. He clambered down the tree and dashed across the short length of lawn and jumped into the speedboat. Chai turned the boat around and they sped away. Gibbs turned to see what was happening. *Where the hell did the shot come from? Who killed Saidullayev?*

He saw the bodyguards running onto the lawn, their weapons trained on the speedboat but by the time they began firing, he and Chai were already too far away.

The powerboat flew across the bay towards the coast where the Channel Pond was. Once the boat reached Flying Point Road he jumped off and ran up the stretch of sand, heading for the empty field across the road. Mike took off with the speedboat and by the time he reached the field, Staz was already landing the helo and he climbed in as soon as the bird touched down.

“Mission accomplished?” Staz asked.

“Yeah, sort of,” Gibbs replied.

“Whaddya mean ‘sort of’? Has the target been taken out?”

“Yeah,” Gibbs said then paused.

Staz looked quizzically at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t take the shot. Someone else did.”

“Huh?”

“Exactly.”
Meanwhile,

Washington DC

“Hey, look!” Torres pointed to the LCD screen showing news crews and cop cars swarming around a mansion. “A bride just got offed on her wedding day.”

“Hey! That’s Crispian Paddington, Tony’s cousin,” McGee said, as they crowded in front of the screen. It was Saturday but McGee had called the team in to work on the money-laundering case as Fornell had been breathing down his neck.

“Omigod!” Abby exclaimed. “That’s Tony!”

“Where?” McGee and Bishop asked.

“There!” Abby pointed to the figure who was being surrounded by news reporters. “He didn’t tell me his cousin was getting married.”

“Shhh!” Torres said, “Listen.”

“A secret celebrity-studded wedding turned into a horrific and bloody disaster when top model, Varya Saidullayev, about to wed British billionaire, Crispian Paddington, was shot and killed on the driveway of the Paddington mansion on Long Island…reports remain sketchy but guests, which include Russian billionaires Roman Abramovich, Dmitry Rybolovlev and Viktor Usmanov as well as Saudi royalty, say that they were not aware of anything amiss…” so reported an on-site reporter for ABC News.

The BBC said, “What a bloody tragedy! British billionaire Crispian Paddington’s bride, one of Europe’s top models, Varya Saidullayev, was gunned down as she rode in the family’s 17th century open top carriage. The wedding ceremony was to take place on the Paddington mansion’s waterfront garden. The bride, who sources say, had been in seclusion for the last fortnight leading to the wedding, arrived by helicopter to Long Island then was transferred to the carriage for the ride on the white rose petal-covered driveway to the mansion’s front door. All Paddington brides since the eighteenth century have been transported to the wedding chapel by the family carriage…”

From CNN: “Billionaires and Saudi royalty made a hasty exit from the Paddington’s Long Island mansion where Crispian Paddington was to marry top Russian model, Varya Saidullayev. The bride was brutally killed with a shot to the head and…”

“And DiNozzo’s there?” Torres said. “Where’s Gibbs? He might know something.”

“Gibbs won’t be coming in until Monday,” McGee said. “He called yesterday to say we’re on our own for now and to play nice with the Feebs.”

“He might still know why DiNozzo’s there,” Torres nodded at the tv.

“Neither is Gibbs,” McGee said.

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**Long Island, NY**

“What do you mean it wasn’t you who took the shot?” Jax asked. He was in the helo piloted by Staz and were hovering over Mecox Bay. He’d seen Saidullayev’s head explode and the ensuing chaos as her bodyguards sprang into action. He’d watched Gibbs run to the edge of the bay where Mike was already waiting in the speedboat. As soon as Gibbs was in the boat, he told Staz to head for the pickup point.

“I didn’t take the shot!” Gibbs yelled as he and Mike sped away. “There’s another shooter!”

*What the hell?* Jax relayed what Gibbs said to Staz. As if goatfucks of this kind happened on every mission, Staz coolly kept his eye on the speedboat.

“Look for any vehicle pulling away out of neighborhood like a bat outta hell,” Jax told him. Staz banked the helo towards the opposite side of Mecox Bay across the Villa Maria. “Shot would’ve come from any of those houses,” he said, pointing to the properties along the inlet.

"Those two houses." Jax pointed to the two properties. "They're the only ones with a clear view. There. White SUV.”

Staz had already seen it. Jax called it in then told Staz to get close enough for the license plate. “Shooter likely in a white SUV, license plate GCU 2122 and heading toward Montauk Highway. Apprehend and bring the shooter in to DC hq. I’m picking Gibbs up now and we'll meet back in DC.”

The team members rogered the message as Jax and Staz headed for the pickup point.

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Quinn had noticed the low-flying helo when he went to his SUV. Not good, he thought. With a sinking feeling, he sensed his retirement plans were about to be delayed indefinitely. Nevertheless, he’d gotten in the vehicle and driven away. He kept an eye on the helicopter which looked like any corporate chopper. His tension heightened when it followed him close enough for him to see the two men. Not uniforms or military gear so what were they?

The helo followed him for a few seconds then pulled up and away. He released a breath of relief but before he could draw his next breath, he saw a vehicle coming up fast behind him. Another was heading straight for him on the other side of the road, causing him to brake and turn his wheel sharply. The side of his SUV grazed a tree and both 4WDs screeched to a halt, hemming him in. His car door was yanked open and he found himself staring at the business ends of four assault rifles.

*There goes my weekend, never mind my paradise island retirement.* Quinn held his hands up as he exited the vehicle.. What the hell happened? Who were these guys and how did they know to apprehend him?
“We have the shooter,” Jax said to Under Secretary Morrow who was speaking to him via video conference. “He’s being flown to DC as we speak.”

“Has he said anything?” Morrow asked.

“No,” Jax replied. “He said he would speak only to Alex Knight. We just got in to DC ourselves. I’ve got Alex and Gibbs here with me.”

Well, the mission’s accomplished, nonetheless,” Morrow said. “But we need to get on top of this and find out who ordered the hit. Make him talk, whoever this man is. What’s his name?”

“Quinn Masterson,” Jax replied. “He sounds American. We’ll give you a full report once we’ve questioned him.”

“Where’s DiNozzo?” Morrow asked.

“Got his hands full,” Gibbs replied. “Said he’ll handle the local Leos, send Paddington on his way back to the UK then fly back to DC. He should get in later tonight or tomorrow morning.” He hoped it was sooner than later. He and Tony still had a lot of personal ground to cover.

“I need to see the both of you as soon as possible. Let me know once DiNozzo’s back. Jax, I’ll leave you and Alex to take care of Masterson. Just get some answers from him.” With that they ended the conference just as Alex’s p.a. knocked on the door and told them Quinn Masterson was in Interview Room 3 waiting.

Alex had already ordered bloodwork and a Level 3 check to be done. A Level 3 check was done for shortlisted candidates on a KnightShade appointment. It not only covered their medical history, career and any criminal records, it searched through every known record of the candidate’s history, including friends and family. An L3 check could take up to several weeks, especially if the candidate was known, or suspected to have ties to the covert ops world. This, in turn, covered a wide field, not just the military or the intelligence community. Any one involved with any secret organization or operated in secret – contract killers, for example – came under the purview of an L3 check. The bloodwork, usually ready in twenty-four hours, would show if he was related to any terrorist listed on their network.

Masterson was seated in KnightShade’s interrogation room, a reinforced whitewashed room with a table and chair bolted to the floor.

Jax pulled out the interrogator’s unbolted chair opposite Masterson and sat down. Gibbs remained standing, leaning against the wall, next to the exit. In the KnightShade Command Center, Alex monitored the proceedings on the wall-to-wall LCD screen.

“Who ordered the hit?” Jax asked.

Quinn considered playing dumb and would have, if not for the fact that he’d been caught with the smoking gun. Literally.

“I don’t know,” Quinn replied. “I get my jobs via my broker. As every professional does.”

“Your name, please.”

A brief pause, then, “Quinn Masterson. US citizen. Age, twenty-eight. Yes, I know my rights but no, I’m not going to ask for a lawyer because you guys sure as hell aren’t cops so I’d be wasting
my breath.”

“And just how do you know that? What are we, if not cops?” Jax asked, a little amused by their detainee’s bravado.

Quinn rolled his eyes. “Please. Let’s cut the crap. I’ve told you I’m a professional hitman and you already knew my name before you asked because you had me stripped searched, swabbed, photographed in all my naked glory and didn’t even offer me a cup of water. What are you guys? Some ultra-secret FBI unit? Some government agency, for sure.”

“Mt. Masterson, we’ll ask the questions. I repeat, who ordered the hit?”

“And I told you I don’t know.”

Jax took out a cell phone from the envelope he’d brought with him and slid across the table to Quinn. “Call your broker. Now.”

Quinn stared at his phone, deciding how to play this next. If he called Gavriel, these people – whoever they were – would trace the call and locate the Israeli. Gav had been good to him, watched his six even though theirs was only a business relationship. This man in front of him, Gavriel wouldn’t be able to stand up to him. Quinn doubted he could. Those dispassionate eyes – what a gorgeous blue! – told Quinn their owner did a lot more than just verbalize his questions.

He picked up the phone but didn't do anything else.

"Call him," Jax said. "Or just tell us his name and we'll find his number. Maybe bring him in, too."

Quinn tabbed his phone.

Speed dial, Jax noted.

Up in the command center, Alex heard one of the techies tell him Masterson’s phone call was active and had been traced to Cyprus. Jax heard the same through his earwig. The conversation that ensued, though, stumped him. ComCen had traced the call to Viktor Usmanov’s Cyprus residence.

Jax stared up at the camera, knowing Alex was watching. Viktor was Masterson’s broker?
To say Alex was surprised was an understatement when they were told the number Quinn had called belonged to the Russian, now-US-citizen, oligarch. Alex listened intently as Viktor’s rich baritone came on the line with a curt, “Yes?”

“Viktor?”

“Quinn! What a surprise. A pleasant one but still a surprise. How are you?”

“I need your help.”

Quinn’s tone changed Viktor’s to one of concern. “Of course. What’s up?”

Quinn sagged with relief. He was hoping Viktor would step up to the plate without too many questions. “I am being held by some people who are asking me questions I can’t answer. Could you talk to them and get me out of here? No, I don’t know who they are. I was hoping you’d find out for me.”

“This is –” Viktor stopped short, then said, “Alright. I’ll see what I can do. Where are you now?”

“Somewhere in DC. I think.”

“Give me a few minutes,” Viktor said, as he saw another call coming in. From Alex Knight.

The line went dead and Quinn put his cell phone down. “Gentlemen,” he said to Jax and Gibbs. “My contact is attending to this. Would you happen to have anything for me to eat and drink? I missed lunch.”

Jax ignored the request as his comms unit plugged him in to Alex’s conversation with Usmanov. He’d met Usmanov several times and knew the man was a longtime friend of Alex’s, that Irina, Usmanov’s wife, was a frequent lunch companion of Katharine, his own mother. The conversation was brief but when Alex hung up, he told Jax to keep Quinn in custody until they got the L3 check results. Under-Secretary Morrow had already been apprised of Quinn’s apprehension. Suddenly, an incoherent sound came from Alex.

“Jax. Those photos you’re looking at,” Alex said.

Jax looked down at the 8 x 10s taken of Quinn when he was brought in. “What about them?”

“Quinn Masterson’s?” Alex said, his eyes still on the photos of a naked Quinn, front, back and sides.

“Yes. Why?”

“Bring them up to me and take Masterson to my private lounge. Have Bridget order lunch up for
him. Keep the cuffs on.”
Jax’s hesitation was brief. “On our way.” The instructions were so odd Alex had to have a good
reason so he stood, gathered up the photographs and shoved them back in the folder. He went to
the door, opened it and told the guard to release Quinn from the chair. “Come with me,” he said to
Quinn. “What would you like for lunch? The KnightShade bistro does a mean pizza."
Quinn broke out in a smile. “That was fast. Good ol' Viktor.” Jax didn’t respond but held the door
“What just happened?” Gibbs asked, looking perplexed.
“Let’s go find out,” Jax said.
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Okay, so now he was intrigued, Quinn thought, as he was led through a labyrinth of passageways
via a bright yellow buggy then to an elevator that required an iris scan. So, that’s why they had
taken his when he was brought in. Not just fingerprinted but strip-searched, body cavities and teeth
included, photographed, swabbed, had his blood drawn, and even a voice sample had been taken.
Where the hell was he? He’d been blindfolded on the trip here. Not with just a black hood or
regular blindfold but a futuristic-looking wraparound blacked-out vacuum glasses that left him
completely in the dark. The next time he could see, he was already in the interrogation room.
But now he was in a lounge high up enough to see the city sprawled out below with its ubiquitous
monuments. Yup. Washington, DC. Judging by the Capitol Building in the background, he'd be
somewhere south-west. He was led to the meeting table that was laid out for one. Nearby was a
suite of over-stuffed sofas. Potted greens, contemporary sculptures and a huge Impressionist
artwork made of little square pieces of cloth told Quinn whoever this lounge was for, he was pretty
far up the food chain in this Fort Knox of a place. He didn't know of any complex with this level of
security. Not even the Federal Reserve Bank in New York.
“Where am I?” he asked Jax.
“KnightShade. This is Alex Knight’s office,” Jax replied. “He’s the CEO.”
“KnightShade the private military company?”
“Yes.” Jax's answer, instead of satisfying Quinn, made him even more perplexed.
"Don't you guys run training programs?"
"We do."
"Then why this over-the-top security? You got gold bullion underground?"
Jax didn't answer, just sat opposite Quinn looking at him. Gibbs sat at the other end of the table.
“I'm allowed to know who you are? I mean, you're ordering me pizza and I'm not in the
interrogation cell anymore. Though it would be better if you uncuffed me. Unless you're going to
feed me.”
“I'm Jax Theron. I run the training programs. Alex handles the business end.”
And I'm born yesterday. “Why the hundred and eighty degrees?” Quinn asked. "What, exactly, did


Viktor say that you're now feeding me pizza in these luxury surroundings?"

Jax lifted a shoulder. “Guess we’ll find out soon enough.” He’d been privy to Alex's conversation with Viktor but all Viktor had said was that Quinn had been with him since he was a little kid, that he’d been the Usmanov family's personal bodyguard and left to go out on his own six years ago, that he was an exceptionally lethal assassin who’d never failed an assignment. "He is like my own son," Viktor had said. "Treat him well and he just might be your best operator. Give Jax Theron a run for his money." That was followed by Viktor's trademark roar of laughter. All well and good but didn't explain the odd reaction from Alex when he saw Quinn's photographs.

A knock on the door sounded and Bridget entered with a tray bearing Quinn’s lunch. A wine glass and a carafe of red was included.

“You are not joining me?” Quinn asked, his voice cool and detached, not giving away the curiosity and the tension he was feeling. Was he being fattened up for the kill? “How about you?” he asked Gibbs. “I’m sorry, I did not catch your name.”

“Gibbs.”

Before anything else could be said, a second door opened and Alex strode in.

“I’m Alex Knight.” Alex held out his hand. His facial expression was not unwelcoming but not friendly either. “Welcome to KnightShade.”

Once again, standing where he wouldn’t be so noticeable, Gibbs frowned. Something was going on and damn if he knew what. How did Masterson get from apprehended hitman to special guest in a space of a phone call? Who the hell did he call? He glanced at Jax but the younger man was watching Alex intently.

“Join me?” Quinn asked Alex. To Jax, he presented his cuffed hands. Jax got up and released him. "Thank you," Quinn said, rubbing his wrists where the flexicuffs had left a thin red line.

“Thank you, I’ve had lunch. Tell me about yourself, Quinn Masterson,” Alex said. “If you don’t mind talking as you eat.”

“I’ll try not to let my food fall out of my mouth,” Quinn replied, pouring himself half a glass of wine then taking a big bite out of the oozy pizza. “What did Viktor tell you? I know you spoke to him or I wouldn’t be here eating the best pizza I’ve ever had. Blue crab. Out of this world.” He took another bite. "Tell me what you know and I’ll fill in the gaps. Or try to – except who ordered the hit on the bride. That, I don’t know.”

“First, tell me why you called Viktor Usmanov instead of your broker.” Alex said. "What makes you think Viktor isn’t my broker?” countered Quinn.

Alex chuckled. "Viktor and I go way back so stop wasting my time. I've seen you in Viktor's household. When you were still in your teens."

"Oh? Who did you think I was? The houseboy?” Quinn took another bite of pizza, washed it down with wine then another bite.

"You were very unobtrusive. I assumed you were one of the staff...and I wasn't wrong."
“He must have told you I’m kosher. That’s why I called him. I know my broker won’t be of any help, even if he has the information you want - which I can tell you now he doesn't. Calling Viktor was just to get you off my back.”

“Alright, then,” Alex said. “I know the Usmanovs brought you to the US when you were a kid and got you citizenship, became your guardians until you were eighteen. I’m not interested in the details of how Viktor did it but I do want to know how you ended up a contract killer.”

"Viktor told you how he came to take me to the US?"

"Yes. That you offered him ten years of servitude if he would take you back to the US with him."

“Why are you interested in how I became a contract killer? Why should you be so interested in me?”

“Viktor told me you're very good at what you do. You might be very useful to my organization.”

Alex paused, then added, "Viktor also told me to keep an eye on you. Keep you out of harm's way. Not a realistic request, considering your profession, but I'll do my best."

“Why would he –,” Quinn paused, then waved a hand. “Never mind.” Viktor would have assumed that Quinn was in danger simply because Quinn had not once called Viktor for help in the six years he’d left Viktor’s employ and for him to have done so would mean he seriously needed it. “Did you tell him why I’m being held? You are aware you have no right to do that, don’t you? You’re a PMC, not law enforcement or even the CIA.”

“Can we agree that you tell me about yourself first?” Alex asked. “I promise I will answer your questions after that.”

Quinn stuffed the remaining bit of his pizza in his mouth and emptied his glass. "Thank you for lunch. That was excellent. The wine, too.” He picked up the paper napkin and wiped his lips. “I was born Akisame Nakayama in Okinawa in 1986. My mother was Japanese and my father was an American in the military, one of the johns that my mother serviced. Yup. My mother was a prostitute. I was raised by the Yakuza – it wasn’t rare for them to take in the hafu children – the half breeds that were illegitimate, as all of us were. My mother was only sixteen when she got pregnant by the unknown American soldier and gave birth to me on her seventeenth birthday. Yes, she and I share the same birthday. I was told I have my father’s eyes.”

Alex looked into the pair of green eyes opposite him. Next to him, Jax looked from one pair of emerald eyes to the other pair of green eyes. At the other end of the table, Gibbs' eyes widened.

They listened as Quinn continued. “I met Viktor and Irina when they were holidaying in Japan. I was twelve years old and been put to work by the Yakuza since I was eight.”

“Child labor?” Jax asked, speaking to Quinn for the first time.

“You could say that,” Quinn replied, looking Jax straight in the eyes. “Child prostitution would be more accurate.”

Alex’s frown came down fiercely on his brow. “Eight years old? Eight? You catered to the US military?”

“No,” Quinn said. “I was put to work where the German, Australian and other connoisseurs of pedophile pleasures congregated, all Yakuza strongholds. And eight is not young. I had kids with me who were adept at sucking cock when they were five. I traded myself for a different kind of service with Viktor.”
“And that was?” Alex prompted, managing to contain his rage.

“I would do whatever he needed done that I could manage as a kid, anything except sex. He was not to prostitute me. He agreed, or rather, Irina made him agree, and they took me in. I continued to serve out my indenture until I was twenty-two. I was very good at my job and my reputation preceded me.”

“As Viktor’s hitman?”

“Yes. I was his enforcer. From the time I arrived in the US as a twelve year old, I was taught how to protect myself. Then how to protect the Usmanovs. Eventually, how to kill for Viktor. I had my first kill when I was fifteen. By the time Viktor let me go independent, my reputation as a hitman was known. It wasn’t hard at all to get jobs – good-paying ones, too – and in less than five years I could command my own fee, be more picky about which jobs I accepted. My killing ground was outside the US. Mostly Europe and Asia.”

“And you kept in touch with Viktor after you left?”

“On and off but not in the last three years until today. The last time we spoke, about three years ago, he told me he could not be seen to be connected to me, that his life in the US was not the one he lived in Russia or the one when he first came to the US. I told him I understood. But he said if I ever got myself in a tight spot and really needed his help, he would do his best to give it.”

“You said you didn’t speak to him again until yesterday.”

“That’s right. And the only reason I called him is because that hit was my final job. I’d told my broker I was retiring. It was a very high-paying hit – far too generous for such an easy hit and the only ones who would pay that kind of money are the Saudis. But I’m sure you know that so I don’t know why you needed to ask me.”

“Viktor said you’d need a new identity and asked me to get you one, and to ensure you were safe. Help you get started on a new life, if need be. What, exactly, did you have in mind?”

“Viktor said that? I bet it was Irina again. Anyway, I will be Rain Waterstone from here on. Rain, because Akisame means that – autumn rain, specifically – and Waterstone because Nakayama is where my mother’s people came from and it is known for producing the best waterstones.”

“I know.” This came from Jax. “I have several and I don’t use anything but a Nakayama to sharpen my knives.”

It was only then that Gibbs came and joined them, sitting at the other end of the table. “No other waterstone kisses my knives,” he said. “I have a Ki-ita and an Asagi.”

“No shit. Really?” Quinn’s smile’s transformed his features.

What was a youthful, model-handsome Pan-Asian face was instantly changed into a stunning, gorgeous young man that would have taken Jax’s breath away if not for the fact that he was already completely taken with the older model. Oh yes, Quinn Masterson had to be Alex’s son. Somehow. Somewhere…in that probably sordid youth of his, Jax thought. Had Alex come to that conclusion earlier already? How?

“Ki-itas are yellow,” Quinn told Alex. “And Asagis are blue. They are the most coveted of Nakayama waterstones. Or whetstones, as some people call them. “You must let me see yours,” he said to Gibbs. “When I’m free to go.” He gave Alex a sidelong look.
Alex took out a photograph from the large envelope he’d brought with him. It was Quinn. From the back, naked from head to toe. Alex tapped the mark sitting above Quinn’s butt crack.

“Tattoo?”

“Birthmark.”

“Let me see.”

Quinn’s brows rose.

Both Jax and Gibbs’s gazes flew to Alex. Jax reached out and took the photograph, looking quizzically at Alex but the latter was waiting for Quinn’s response.

“What, now?” Quinn asked. “You want to look at my butt now?”

“I want to see your birthmark.”
Intriguing as what was transpiring between Quinn Masterson and Alex, Gibbs couldn’t stay. He needed to get back to the team. He’d debrief them then head to the supermarket. Tony was returning tonight so he wanted to make sure the fridge was stocked. One thing that hadn’t changed about Tony – he still had a healthy appetite.

“Go on ahead,” Alex said when Gibbs made his excuses. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Gibbs said goodbye and left, wondering about the day's events. Nothing in his time with NCIS had come close to what he'd experienced today - having his target - a bride! for God's sake! - taken out by another hitman, said hitman turning out to be related to Alex Knight. And he was sure Quinn was Alex's son even if they didn't look alike. Those eyes gave them away. The eyes, and those black slashes for eyebrows. He'd wanted to stay but he also wanted to get stocked up for the week he was planning for Tony and him.

When he entered the bullpen, he was greeted like a long-lost family member.

“Where’s Tony?” Torres asked. “You said you were coming back with him.”

“You said “one way or another”,” McGee added. “What’s that mean, Gibbs? Are you going ask Tony to come back to the team?”

“That’s one way,” Gibbs replied then turned and went to his desk, powering up his computer then picking up the phone to ask for the Director.

“Whatzat mean?” McGee asked, a puzzled look on his face as he looked at Torres.

“It means I’m right,” Torres whispered in McGee’s ear and grinned. “DiNozzo coming back to the team is one way, but, Gibbs prefers another way.”

“What’s that?” McGee asked.

“Yeah. What’s another way?” Bishop chimed in.

“Wait and see,” Torres replied cryptically, returning to his desk.

“And how would you know?” McGee asked.

"He doesn't," Bishop muttered. "He's just acting like he does."

“Wait and see. Live and learn.” Torres smiled sweetly at them.

“Torres, did anyone ever tell you you can be very annoying?” Bishop asked.

“Yeah. We don’t need Tony back,” McGee said. “We got you.” He felt something sharp prodding
his ribs and looked down to see Bishop poking him. “Ow.” He glared at her. “Your nails need trimming. “

“Ask him about his coming out,” Bishop hissed, glancing at Gibbs.

“You ask him,” McGee retorted.

“You know him longer than me,” Bishop said. “You ask him.”

“He’ll chew me to shreds. You ask and I’ll be right behind you.”

“Coward.” Bishop hissed.

“Heya, Gibbs.” Torres’ voiced sounded across the bullpen then quietened to almost a whisper as he pulled up a chair in front of their boss. “That thing you said back in interrogation.” Gibbs looked up. “Y’know…about being gay?”

“What about it?” Gibbs asked. “You wanna come out, too?”


“How are we doing with the Stinnett investigation?” Gibbs asked, changing the subject.

“We followed up on a lead yesterday,” McGee said. “But it didn’t go anywhere.”

“Why not?”

“The guy who could have witnessed someone entering Stinnett’s house that morning had a heart attack and died this morning,” McGee replied.

“But we’ve got another,” Torres said. “Another neighbor was watching the ambulance arrive to take the heart attack vic and she could have been watching for awhile. One of those nosy neighbors. Bishop and I were going to talk to her today.”

“Today when?” Gibbs asked.

“Dinner time. Thought we’d grab some Chinese and head there.”

“How about today now? Before she gets a heart attack and dies on us.”

“Now is good.” Torres gestured to Bishop and the two of them hurried out but Torres made a U-turn and ran back into the bullpen, stopping right next to Gibbs. He bent and said in a hushed voice. “You still need to tell us about the gay remark.”

“Is Tony okay?” McGee asked after Torres and Bishop left. “We haven’t been able to reach him. He might be back from Europe but he might as well not be, know what I mean?”

“Tony’s fine,” Gibbs replied. “He’s still in New York. Got his hands full at the moment dealing with the aftermath of the shooting.”

“Yeah. That was…what? A hit? Were you there?”

“I can’t talk about it, McGee, but I’ll bring Tony back as soon as I can. Abby will give me endless grief if I don’t.”
“Okay, boss. I’m holding you to that. We all miss Tony. Well, except for Torres who’s just curious. But…where’s Tony staying? I offered him the spare room but he declined.”

“He’s staying with me.”

“Oh.” The monosyllable sounded like it carried a lot more meaning but Gibbs wanted to get a move on.

“Don’t ask, McGee. You’ll know when I tell you.”

McGee’s puzzled look deepened. “Uhh, boss –”


“So we’ll see you both Monday?”

“No. I’m taking a week off. Going fishing.”

“With Tony?”

“Yes.”

“But Tony doesn’t like fishing. Or camping. He doesn’t like the things you like.”

“This is a different Tony.”

McGee’s mouth opened to say something else but Gibbs cut him off. “Go home, McGee.”

“Yeah. I just need to log away the evidence from today’s crime scene. Torres and Bishop will be meeting me after dinner to discuss the case.” He paused then said, “So you won’t be back till the Monday after?”

“Maybe. May be earlier. Call me but only if you need to. You’re the boss in my absence.”

“Yes, boss.” McGee turned to go, still frowning over the fact that Gibbs was taking a week off. "Say hi to Tony for me.”

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**Magas, Ingushetia; North Caucasus**

Rustam Kasarov’s face paled then turned red as he listened to the report by his head of security. Beside him, Kasarov’s aides whispered among themselves.

“You are sure she is dead?” Kasarov’s expression hardened as he listened. “Find out what you can –” he paused, listened, then said, “You are certain? Verify then return home.” He ended the call. Turning to his lieutenants, he said, “Varya is confirmed dead.” Voices of dismay and shock reverberated through the room. Someone switched on the tv and they gathered close to watch the CNN report. They were eight hours ahead of New York so it was now 9pm in the capital of Ingushetia, the smallest of Russia’s federal subjects and impoverished by the violence in neighboring Chechnya which occasionally spilled into tiny republic. Regardless, the capital did its best to promote tourism by offering free wifi and cable tv in its hotels. It was in one of these hotel rooms that Rustam Kasarov had gathered with his righthand man, Abu Bakr, and his trusted lieutenants.

“Do we have any idea who is behind this?” Kasarov asked.
“Sulman suspects the agency he is in,” Abu Bakr said. “NCIS.”

“How would they know about our plan?” Still another asked. “Varya made sure the wedding was kept secret.”

“We will find out,” Kasarov said. “And they will pay dearly.

“Sulman did tell us that the groom’s best man was an NCIS man,” Abu Bakr said. “His name is Tony DiNozzo. He is also the cousin of the groom, but he resigned from NCIS two years ago.”

“Find out everything about him,” Kasarov ordered. “If he is responsible, if NCIS is responsible, then I want them to pay.” Some of the men started searching on their tablets. All their tech gadgets, computers and cell phones had been provided through funds Varya had channeled through. With her dead, it would be a serious blow to the emirate.

“NCIS also operates an entity called MTAC,” the one who looked up NCIS said. “Multiple Threat Alert Center. It warns the US of threats to their Navy personnel and assets around the world. But why would they be behind Varya’s killing? Our plans were not targeted at their Navy. Not yet, anyway.”

“This DiNozzo man should be able to tell us,” Abu Bakr said. “Perhaps he is a covert agent with this MTAC and is only listed as an NCIS agent on paper.”

“It does not matter,” Kasarov said grimly. ”His connection with the federal agency is enough.”

"There is also DiNozzo's ex-boss,” Abu Bakr said. "Leroy Jethro Gibbs," he read off the sheet of paper one of the men had passed to him. "He is a very powerful man in the agency and he leads the team that investigates major crimes. It is called MCRT - Major Crimes Response Team He has also worked undercover in the past for joint-CIA operations. That is why he is also directing MTAC. He is more likely the man who uncovered what Varya was doing and he used DiNozzo to get to Varya.”

NCIS, MCRT, MTAC, all of them are guilty by association. The United States, the Whore of Satan, will know that we will not rest until they pay for every drop of Varya’s blood. And we will commence with NCIS.” Turning to the man who was doing the search on NCIS, he said, "Find out everything about this MTAC,” Kasarov ordered. "Tell Sulman to get everything he can." To Abu Bakr, he said, “Our plans for DC have just changed.”

“We are no longer targeting DC?” Aby Bakr asked.

“We are, but the specific target has changed. Get the word out and tell everyone to report here at dawn.”

WASHINGTON, DC

It was strange yet comforting to Gibbs that he and Tony missed each other despite having been apart only since the morning. This thing between them, Gibbs thought as he waited for Tony’s return, was new yet familiar. New, in that Tony had been his special agent, nothing more, for over a dozen years and was now his lover; familiar because it was Tony whom he'd worked everydsy, often including weekends, for thirteen years. Fifteen, if he hadn't left. He knew Tony’s sense of fair play – except when it came to teasing McGee – and knew his moral compass. He knew his likes
and dislikes when it came to food, drink, music and movies. He knew Tony when he was sick and dying, and he knew Tony when that irrepressible grin lit up his face.

All that was left was to know what it was like to live with him; to wake up next to him for the rest of their lives.

Toni shot up from her snoozing bed in the Semper Fi’s workshop and tore out of the houseboat. Gibbs went out to look and saw the lone figure walking up the pier, Toni jumping and running happily beside him. The surge of happiness caught him off guard then he realized this could be the start of a new life for him. And Tony. No screwing up, Marine, he told himself. No more holding out on your partner. No more withdrawing into your mental basement. He could do this. He could be a better person. Not just for himself but because Tony deserved a better man than he’d been to him these past fifteen years.

“Hey.” Tony’s smile lit up the houseboat and Gibbs went straight into his arms. They kissed deeply. Clung to each other.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Gibbs said softly.

“Same here, and I don’t want to go anywhere for a while. I just want to stay put and spend some alone time with you. If that’s even remotely possible.”

“I told Alex and Morrow not to call me until Monday,” Gibbs said. “McGee, too. Told them you and I were not available until next week. I also called Vance to tell him I was taking a week’s vacation. He asked if I was ill.” Gibbs chuckled.

“Are you?” Tony asked, pulling back from their embrace.

“Nah. I need the downtime with you, too.”

“Revisit Mount Hood?” Tony asked with a hopeful note.

“I don’t need to leave DC. I just need to be left alone with you for a few days straight.”

“The Semper Fi is a real boat, isn’t it? A houseboat, not a floating home?”

“Yup. It’s a real boat.”

“Then we take her out to the Bay,” Tony suggested. “We stock up on supplies for a week and get out of here. You can fish and I can watch movies. Err, you do have internet service on the Semper Fi, don’t you?”

“Of course. I told you, KnightShade set her up for me.”

“Cool. So you up for it? Still a bit chilly but nice for cuddles. I’m sure Toni would love it.”

“We can leave right now. I already stocked up. Anything else you want, we can make a stop along the way.”

“I’m really here?” Tony asked, after an hour or lovemaking which left them feeling languorous and sated. Almost. “I’m really moving into your houseboat? Permanently?”

Gibbs cracked open one eye and said in a gravelly voice, “You’re not moving in and out as you please, if that’s what you mean. You move in here, it’s permanent. You got a problem we better
“No. No, I don’t have a problem staying put. I, uhh, waited fifteen years for this so…no, permanent is just fine.”

“But?”

“But what about work? I’m supposed to be consulting on this murder/money-laundering case but now we’re off for a week. What happens when we get back? Do I go back on the case if it’s not closed yet? And what if Jax wants me to work on a KnightShade operation?”

“Don’t worry about the Stinnett case. I told Fornell you’re not available anymore. He’s not happy but he doesn’t have a choice. Unless you want to work on it instead of spending a week cruising down the Potomac with me. I can turn the boat back. You decide.”

“We’ll stick to our week off fishing and fucking. I’m not the only gay federal agent. Put Torres on it.”

“Torres?” Gibbs frowned.

“Yeah. C’mon, the guy’s gay as a butterfly. Didn't you see him ogling my dick at Stinnett's place?”

Gibbs laughed. "Torres? No way. He's just curious about you because the team was always talking about you." He waited a beat then asked, “Do you want to come back to NCIS?”

“How’s that going to work out? Looks like McGee’s doing well leading the team and if I go back, I’ll be your subordinate. Neither of us are the type to carry on a sexual relationship at work behind our colleagues’ backs.”

“No.” Gibbs expelled a breath as he sat up on the bed. “And we can’t have one openly either. Not if we’re all in the same team.”

“So, answer’s obvious – I’m not returning. I’d like to continue working in KnightShade, actually, though not necessarily in the field.”

“I wouldn’t want that. Not having you taking off in the middle of the night and not being able to tell me where, what and for how long. We’ve both done the undercover scene and I don’t want it. Not for us.”

“I don’t mean covert missions,” Tony said. “I was thinking something that would have me based in DC. They have their own intelligence unit. I can analyze intel and combine it with my field experience. KnightShade’s huge. I’m sure there’s something for me somewhere. Whatever it is, I’m here to stay.

“Sure you can get used to living on a houseboat?”

“You underestimate me, Special Agent Gibbs. You won’t believe some of the places I’ve had to sleep in the past twenty months. The Semper Fi is a floating Four Seasons suite in comparison.” Then he took Gibbs’ hand. “What I’m sure of, after being away and doing what I was doing for nearly two years, is that I can be happy anywhere, doing anything, as long as I’m with you. I admit, living on a boat’s never been on my bucket list but I'm more adaptable than you think.”

Gibbs gave a soft chuckle. “Getting married for the fifth time wasn’t on my bucket list either.”

That brought a startled look from Tony. For several moments, there was silence as both men stared
at each other.

“I’m hungry,” Tony said, when his stomach yowled. “Let’s go eat.” That would give him some time to think about Gibbs' last comment.
“Quinn Masterson is my son,” Alex said to Jax the next morning. "I just got the test results."

“That birthmark,” Jax said. “It isn’t just a birthmark? But you never spoke about yours so it was just a splotch of skin pigmentation to me, albeit a rather fancy one. So what’s the story?” He poured himself a glass of chilled orange juice, added fresh fruit to his muesli and waited.

“All firstborn Knight males carry the fleur-de-lis birthmark,” Alex began. “For as long as we’ve kept genealogical records – ours go back to 800 CE – every firstborn male has been born with the fleur-de-lis birthmark on the same spot – at the top of the butt crack. You were holding up a photo of Quinn while he was on the phone with Usmanov. As soon as I saw the birthmark I put a rush on his DNA test for paternity.” Alex paused, picked up his cup of coffee and drank.

Jax waited, eating his cereal as if the test results were of no interest to him. But when Baxter, Alex’s majordomo, brought in freshly-toasted bread and Alex began to butter a slice, Jax put his spoon down and pushed his cereal bowl away. “Dammit, Alex. Stop eating for a minute and -”

“Yes, I am his biological father.”

The silence was ear-splitting as neither man spoke for several minutes.

“What are you going to do?” Jax asked, finally. “His mother…”

“Is dead. She died shortly after giving birth to him, and I haven’t decided yet what I’ll do with Quinn. I don’t intend to keep him ignorant, if that’s what you’re asking. I just need to consider the implications before I tell him. And I need your input.”

“What do we do with him in the meantime?”

“Keep him close. He knows he was caught literally with the smoking gun. Tell him the FBI is doing me a huge favor by letting him stay in my custody and not languishing in a jail cell. He’s to be under 24-hour surveillance. Internal tracker, the works. House arrest. Until further notice. He may be my son but he’s still a professional hitman. He's still being charged with murder and that it's a messy case because Saidullayev was a British citizen. Continue to interrogate him and have our guys dig deeper. You were the Firebird. Quinn will have a codename.” He got up. "I need to brief Morrow."

Forensics Lab;

NCIS Hq

Five faces stared back at Gibbs. It was early but Team Gibbs and Palmer were closeted in Abby’s office in her lab. Closeted wouldn’t be the right word since Gibbs had just confirmed he was gay, was coming out, and –
“See!” Torres whacked McGee across the chest with the back of his hand. “Told you there was something going on.”

“Wait a minute,” McGee said. “You and Tony knew each other before he joined NCIS?”


“And you decided not to tell us?” Bishop chimed in. “Because?”

“Because at the time I was struggling with…being gay,” Gibbs replied. “I felt it would be too much for me to handle if I told you about Tony, too. Besides, I wasn’t the one who hired Tony. Morrow did and SecNav recommended Tony.”

“Yeah,” Torres nodded. “If I was you I couldn’t tell my Director we can’t hire SecNav’s rec because I’m sleeping with him. Especially when no one knows I’m even gay. Boy, were you in a pickle.”

“Just to make sure you all know,” Tony said. “Gibbs and I had already agreed if we ever ran across each other in the course of our work, what happened in Baltimore stayed tightly locked up in Baltimore. So, yes, our relationship from the day I joined NCIS has been strictly professional. Not once did he break Rule Number 12.”

“What’s Rule Number 12?” Torres asked.

Four voices said, in unison, “Never date a co-worker!”

“Well, that’s it,” Gibbs said. “Tony is no longer with NCIS so we’re free to date. Actually, he’s moved in with me.”

Both Gibbs and Tony were bombarded with questions following that announcement until Gibbs called a halt. “Enough. McGee, you’ll remain in charge until further notice. I’m taking a week’s leave Tony and I have a lot to catch up on. Don’t call me unless it’s urgent and you guys can’t deal with it yourselves.

“We’ll be fine, boss,” McGee said. Turning to Tony, he said, “Fishing? A whole week? Really?”

“Oh, Gibbs will be fishing. I’ll just hold his rod for him…if you know what I mean.”

“Ohh, eww.” Bishop grimaced.

For the next several days, Gibbs and Tony cruised down the Potomac to the Chesapeake Bay. The time-out gave both men the opportunity to do their best to make up for the last fifteen years. While they knew each other inside out when it came to work, they were only just beginning to know each other in the personal, private sense. Each man was also experiencing the other sexually in a completely different environment. They’d only known each other’s sexual likes and turn-ons in a purely physical way. Now, they were learning the nuances, the connections and reasons that you only reveal to someone you trust implicitly, someone with a shared intimacy that came from withholding nothing.

The team had taken the announcement as Gibb and Tony had expected, certainly as they hoped it would. Everyone of them were not only accepting but congratulating them. Of course they had questions. A ton of them. So Gibbs had invited them to the Semper Fi for a barbecue on the weekend they returned.
“I’ll have to tell Jax,” Tony said. “Just as a matter of policy. KnightShade doesn’t have a no-fraternization rule but they are required to inform their team leader and Jax, who’s the overall commander, then it goes into their profile.”

“What happens when they break up or it’s just a casual thing?” Gibbs asked.

“Still needs to be reported. The profile is updated regularly and all mission commanders check every operator’s profile before putting them in a mission together. The non-direct action teams do the same with the operatives. I don’t exactly know how a mission leader judges if two operators who are sleeping together – or were - can be assigned to the same mission. Would be interesting to know.”

“I guess the team leader would know. Like I would know if it’s okay to be sleeping with you while you were in the MCRT.”

“And it wasn’t,” Tony concluded.

Gibbs gave a quick shake of his head. “No, it wasn’t. You were my subordinate. We’re a close-knit team but they would still wonder if you got special treatment on a particular case, or they’d be unable to focus on a situation a hundred per cent because they worried about you getting hurt and having to face me. I would never put my team in that position.”

“I know, and I fully agree with you. I would not have wanted it any other way.”

“But I should have talked to you,” Gibbs said. "I should have acknowledged our relationship privately. Who knows?” he shrugged. “We could have carried on without letting anyone know.” Before Tony could respond to that, he added, “I know. You wouldn’t want that either, but it wasn’t just *my* decision to make yet I did make it. I unilaterally shoved both of us into the closet and pretended you were nothing to me but a co-worker. In my mind, it was better than being each other’s dirty secret...and...”

"No more apologies." Tony pulled Gibbs to him. “You talk too much, Jethro. Now shush and let me put some bait on your rod. He proceeded to take Gibbs’ cock out and sucked it to full attention. “There,” he smiled. “Now you’re ready to catch some Tony ass.”

**Chechnya**

“Where are we?” Kasarov asked Abu Bakr. “Ready to execute our plan?”

“Yes,” Abu Bakr replied. Kasarov grunted. It had been a week since the infidels had killed his niece. She had made a big sacrifice – he was to have married her. Instead, she had offered herself. Her life. To marry a wealthy man in order to have access to the funds the Emirate would need to further their cause. He would not let her death go unavenged.

It would have taken them longer than a couple of weeks to carry out what they were about to do – if they hadn’t already planted Sulman in NCIS. Sulman’s job was to gather information on the capital. Their plan had been to bomb the annual Gay Pride festival scheduled for June 11. As an employee of a federal agency, Sulman had access to the Naval Yard as well as most secure buildings otherwise inaccessible to them. At first, the idea was for Sulman to get a job at one of the service companies in the capital but since the gay pride festival was a block party, the street would be closed to vehicular traffic and make it harder for Sulman and his men to execute the plan. Being
able to get him the janitor’s job at NCIS ended up a stroke of good luck from Allah. He was now able to move freely and not arouse suspicion when he entered the buildings in the Naval Yard after office hours.
8.55am, Monday:

NCIS bullpen,

Washington Naval Yard

“You won’t frickin believe what happened!” Torres exclaimed.

“Won’t believe what?” Gibbs asked, coming up behind Torres, Tony at his heels.

“My landlord! That scumbag!” Torres whipped out a sheet of paper from his backpack as McGee and Bishop gathered round.

“Morning, Tony,” McGee said. “For me?” he asked, taking the bag Tony handed out to him. He looked inside and grinned. “Bagel and smoked salmon! Cream cheese?”

“Of course.” Tony grinned. Clapping Torres on the shoulder, he asked. “Now what’s got your knickers in a twist?”

“My apartment block’s going to be demolished,” Torres said, flapping the sheet of paper. “Frickin landlord gave me one month notice. One month! Took me longer than that to find the unit I’m in.”

“Why is it being demolished?” Bishop asked.

“Termites,” Torres said glumly. “All throughout. The block is old. There was a fire in one of the units and after it was inspected for safety, they found it’s ridden with termites. Then they confirmed the entire building is infested. Where am I going to find another place I can afford?”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” McGee said. “Just have to advertise for one with roaches instead of termites.”

“You think it’s funny?” Torres said. “Wait until I turn up at your front door with my bags.”

“Well, don’t,” McGee said. “Because I won’t let you in.”

“You wouldn’t help a team mate out?” Torres asked. “I won’t be in the way. Just let me crash on the couch until I find a place.”

“Yeah, McGee,” Bishop said. “He’s pretty small…I mean short, so he won’t take up much space.”

“Why don’t you offer to share your place with him, then?” McGee asked.

“Because Abby and I are moving in together,” Bishop said. “And the house has only two bedrooms.”

“You?” Tony said, as several pairs of eyeballs swiveled to Bishop. “And Abby? When did that
“Happen?”

“Whoa.” Torres held up his hands. “I had no idea you two swung that way.”

“Wait a minute.” Bishop held up her hand in a stop gesture. “Abby and I are sharing a house because it’s a great house and belongs to my aunt, who’s letting me rent it at a nominal rate. Abby’s rent just got jacked up so I offered to share the house and she said yes, aa-and, as I said, it’s only got 2 bedrooms so no space for you, Nick. Besides, we don’t move in until July when the tenant moves out. Too late for you to borrow our couch.”

“So there’s nothing going on between you two?” Torres asked. “You’re not like Gibbs and DiNozzo?”

“No, we are not,” Bishop said, emphatically.

“Well, you can’t bunk at my place,” McGee said, “Because Delilah’s due any day now and we need all the space we can get. Besides, I don’t think you want to be surrounded by soiled nappies and all that baby paraphernalia.”

“No, I don’t. Crap, what am I going to do?” Torres moaned.

“Stop whining,” Gibbs said curtly striding into the bullpen. “You can use my guestroom until you find a place.”

Everyone whirled round to Gibbs.

“Say what?” Tony asked, going up to him. “You’re offering your guest room to Torres?”

“Serious, boss?” Torres asked, smiling widely. “Oh man, I love your houseboat and thanks for inviting us over yesterday. It was great.”

“Yeah, Gibbs,” McGee agreed. “It was perfect weather, too. Delilah said thanks, too. Palmer and Breena were really bowled over.”

“And thanks to both of you talking to us about your plans,” Bishop said. “We know you’re not one for discussing your private life.”

Gibbs looked up at them. “Have to – if my private life’s going to run into my work one.”

“You seriously don’t mind him living on your houseboat?” Tony asked, thumbing Torres. “With me there?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Torres asked. “I don’t mind sharing.” He looked at them and quickly clarified, “The boat. Houseboat. I mean…”

Tony bent down to Gibbs ear and whispered, “Because you and I can get kinda loud. If you know what I mean.”

“Seriously, boss? I can bunk in your houseboat?” Torres asked, looking like an excited retriever waiting for a treat.

“Look at that face,” Gibbs said to Tony. “How do you say ‘no’ to that?” Looking at Torres, he confirmed the guestroom was his for as long as he needed.

“Wow,” Tony muttered. “To say Paraguay has changed you is a gross understatement. Remember the time I asked if I could stay over at your house because my boiler blew up? Remember you said
N.O.? because of what happened the last time?”

“Last time what?” Torres asked. “The last time you slept over at Gibbs’?”

“I didn’t know you’d slept over at Gibbs,” McGee said.

“I didn’t,” Tony said. “Never have. Gibbs is referring to something else.”

“Ohh…” Torres grinned. “The last time you two slept together…what? Like at your place?” he asked Tony. “Is that how you two…” he waved his finger back and forth between Gibbs and Tony.

“Enough,” Gibbs growled. “Have you guys gotten anywhere with the case?” That sent everyone scattering. The plasma screen came on and a discussion commenced.

Half an hour later, Gibbs said he was going to get coffee and Tony said he’d be down at Abby’s.

Gibbs had just purchased his coffee when Fornell strolled up to him. “There you are. C’mon. Take a walk.”

They crossed over to the Anacostia Riverwalk then strolled towards The Yards.

“What’s up?” Gibbs asked.

“I was on my way back to my office. Thought I’d stop and see if you’ve got time for coffee.” In response, Gibbs lifted up his cup. “I’ve been moved to the anti-terrorism unit,” Fornell said.

“You have? When?”

“While you were not answering my calls all week,” Fornell snapped. “They talked to me about it a couple of weeks ago then confirmed it last Friday,” he added. “I’ve been there since Monday.”

“You don’t look too happy about it.”

“I like where I was. This anti-terror shit. It’s time-sensitive. Homicide? The victim’s already dead. With terrorism, it’s preventing deaths. One minute late and it can be too late.”

“Somebody’s gotta do it.”

“Yeah, but not me. I’m too old to go chasing after terrorists.”

“It’s a field position?” Gibbs asked, surprised.

“No. I’m one of the SACs but the stress is no different just because I won’t be literally chasing down the perps. It’s chasing down the chatter and deciding what’s credible and what’s not.”

“No different from chasing down leads.”

“Like I said, homicide leads – the vic’s already dead. And by the way, your team looks happy about you and DiNozzo from what I saw yesterday. Thanks for inviting Cy and me.”

“You’re welcome. And yeah, you guys will still be invited over. You just have to get used to having DiNozzo with me, that’s all.”

“Where is he, anyway?”

Gibbs hitched his chin towards the NCIS building. “Catching up with the team.”
“You know what?” Fornell stopped walking.

Gibbs cocked his head, waiting.

“You look really happy. I’ve never seen you happy.” Then he clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “DiNozzo’s obviously very good for you.”

“Good because…I’m going to ask him to marry me.”

Fornell’s mouth fell open but before he could say anything, the blast shattered the morning calm sending both men flat on the ground.

A second explosion rocked the Navy Yard. Gibbs looked up and saw the NCIS headquarters covered in thick smoke. Flames could be seen coming out of smashed windows. Gibbs ran towards the building, Fornell behind him. He didn’t know where the second explosion was but from the sound of the blast, it was somewhere within the Navy Yard.

Gibbs reached the building and saw the damage was extensive. The entire front was rubble and the doors were gone. His heart in his throat, he picked his way to the stairs. The power had gone out and once he got to the stairs, it was dark. He switched on the flashlight app in his phone and carefully made his way up.

He knew if he didn’t try to make it to the bullpen before the Fire & Emergency Medical Services arrived, he would be barred from entering. Already the sirens could be heard. “Get out, Tobias!” he yelled at Fornell who was behind him. “Wait for the FEMS and tell them I’ve gone to look for my team in the bullpen and the Director. Tell them where Abby’s lab is and the autopsy. Get them out. I’m going to get Tony.” He called Tony and waited what seemed like an eternity. Pick up, Tony! but the ringtone went on. He was about to hang up when he heard Tony’s ragged voice.

“Gi-ibbs.”

“Tony! Are you hurt? Where are you?”

“I…I can’t hear you. Just listen - I’m with Abby…in her lab. She’s unconscious but alive. I’m fine.”

“Stay with her,” Gibbs said automatically even though Tony had said he couldn’t hear him. “I’m on my way up to the bullpen. I’m going to call Fornell and tell him to direct the FEMS to you. Faster and safer than me going back down again.”

“Gibbs. I can’t hear –” but Gibbs had already hung up.

Calling Fornell, Gibbs said when the call was answered, “Tobias! Tell whoever’s directing the rescue that Tony and Abby are in autopsy. Abby’s alive but unconscious. Tony sounded okay except he can’t hear.”

“Stay where you are,” Fornell said. “You don’t know what else may collapse. The FEMS should reach you any minute now.”

Ignoring Fornell’s advice to stay where he was, Gibbs slowly made his way towards the bullpen. There was light coming through the windows and enough for him to make out movement under a collapsed table. He heard a groan and shone the flashlight towards it. It was Dorneget under the rubble, dusty and blood streaking his cheek but not seriously hurt, he assured Gibbs.

“Can you walk?” Gibbs asked him. Dorneget said he could. “Follow me. We gotta find McGee,
Torres and Bishop.” He tried calling them again but got no answer.

“This place looks like a bomb went off it in it,” Dorneget said then apologized. “Sorry. Bad choice of metaphor. But it was a bomb, wasn’t it?”

“Had to be,” Gibbs said. “We’ll know soon enough.”

They picked their way through the rubble and collapsed desks, Gibbs and Dorneget calling out the special agents’ names. Voices came through as the FEMS personnel reached them. Powerful flashlight beams cut through the semi-darkness.

“Sir,” the first firemen said, coming up to Gibbs. “Sir. You need to leave the building. Now. It’s not safe.”

“I need to find my team,” Gibbs said. “They could be under the rubble somewhere. This is – was – our bullpen.” He looked at the destruction in front of him, felt the panic rising. Not a single desk was standing. It was just a pile of rubble and collapsed ceiling boards and dividers.

“Sir, we’ll go through it. You have to get out.” Turning to his colleague he told him to escort Gibbs and Dorneget out of the building.

Gibbs dug his phone out and called Tony but he didn’t pick up. “Tony!” He turned to the fireman. “My…my partner. And Abby. They’re in the lab. Basement. You need to get them out!”

“We already have,” A second fireman said. “They’re on their way to Bethesda. You have to get out of here, sir. The bomb squad is already on the way up and we’re sealing off the building.”

Just then Gibbs’ phone buzzed and he saw, to his relief, that it was Tony. “Tony! You okay?”

“I still can’t hear you well,” Tony said. “Hearing’s coming back but only a bit so just listen. I’m with Abby in the ambulance. We’re outside the building about to leave for Bethesda. Hey, I see Bishop and Palmer. Come on out, Jethro.”

O o o

“Tony! Your back. You told me you were okay,” Gibbs exclaimed when he found him. There were fire trucks, ambulances, and the FBI were swarming all over. He spotted Fornell, bits of white ceiling plaster covering his bald head.

Tony was laying prone on the stretcher, waiting to be moved into the ambulance. It was pandemonium with everyone yelling and gesticulating. Of course, the news vans were already there and a CNN helicopter was hovering over the Naval Yard. “Text what you want to say and let me read it,” Tony said.

The paramedic said to Gibbs, “He’s got glass shards on his back. Will be a bitch getting every piece out but other than that, he should be fine. His hearing loss isn't acute and should return to normal in a couple of hours. We’ll have it checked out at the hospital.”

Gibbs tabbed a message on his phone and showed it to Tony: I’ll meet you at Bethesda. I’m going to check in on the others and look for McGee and Torres.”

“Okay,” Tony said, drew in a deep breath then closed his eyes. “My back hurts.”

Gibbs saw Bishop and Palmer and waved them over. “You two okay? Where’s McGee and Torres?”
“Both on their way to Bethesda,” Bishop said. “McGee’s got a broken leg. Torres is unconscious and…we don’t know the extent of his injuries.”

“Where were they? None of you were in the bullpen when I got there.”

“I’m not sure,” Bishop said. “I was in autopsy with Palmer when the blast hit. The FEMS led us out and I called McGee and Torres but neither answered. “I saw Abby and Tony. Abby’s unconscious, too. Where were you when the blast occurred?”

“I was on the Riverwalk, close to the Yards with Fornell. I went up to the bullpen by the stairs. Didn’t see you guys being evacuated on my way up.

“They got us out through the back entrance. That wasn’t blocked.”

“Yeah, I just came out from there. They’ve blocked off the front exit because the lobby could collapse any time. I’m on my way to Bethesda with Tony and Abby.”

"We're coming with you. I've already called Delilah. She's on her way. Oh, and Gibbs. Director Vance is seriously injured. He was one of the first to be brought out. We're not sure if he'll make it."

"Jackie." Gibbs took out his phone.

"We've already contacted her. She should be at Bethesda already."

To Gibbs’ relief, Tony only had cuts from glass shards on his back. When blast occurred, the windows in Abby’s lab were blown out. Tony’s back was to the windows and bore the brunt of the flying shards of glass. He’d also fallen on Abby who hit the table hard on her way down and lost consciousness with Tony on top of her. His weight from the force of the blast had broken her collar bone and fractured two ribs when he fell on her. Gibbs made a mental note to have the basement windows changed to armored glass. X-rays showed she’d fractured her skull and more tests would be required to find out the extent of the head injury.

Some of Tony’s cuts were deep and required stitching but most were superficial. His shirt was in tatters, though, and that hurt more than the cuts. “That’s a bespoke Chittleborough & Morgan!”

Gibbs was relieved Tony was none the worse for wear. He was still lying on his stomach and would stay that way for a while. He bent and kissed Tony's cheek then gave him a light headslap. “We’ve got fifteen NCIS personnel dead and two dozen injured. Read my lips. Fifteen dead. Twenty-four injured”, he said, including hand gestures to indicate the number. That brought things back into perspective for Tony. “And SecNav was killed in a second blast at the JAG headquarters,” Gibbs added heavily.

Tony’s eyes widened.

“Morrow just called. If you’re feeling up to it, we are to meet him in his office asap. I’ll go on my own if you aren’t. Hearing better?”

“I can hear fine now. If I want to. And my shirt’s in a worse condition. I need to throw it away… but!” Tony held up a finger. “I know. It’s replaceable. I’m not. Get me outta here.”
We appreciate your joining us, DiNozzo,” Thomas Morrow said. His face was drawn and his eyes didn’t hide the stress he was feeling. “As you know, The Secretary of the Navy was killed in one of the two explosions this morning at the Navy Yard. He was at the JAG headquarters for a meeting and was just leaving when the blast occurred. Needless to say, in the light of the events last week, we suspected the blasts are connected to the Caucasian Emirate. We can’t confirm this because no one has claimed responsibility.”

“That’s unusual,” Tony said.

“It is,” agreed Morrow. “So we’re going ahead to investigate and uncover the perpetrators.

“If it’s the Caucasian Emirate,” Gibbs said. “They obviously think we killed Saidullayev but how would they know? Operation Silverwing is so top-secret I didn’t even know about it until a week ago.’

“We have a mole,” Tony muttered.

“That’s our thinking,” Morrow said. “I’m expecting Alex to be able to tell us more. He does, after all, have Saidullayev’s shooter in custody.’

“Yes. A bit of complication there,” Morrow remarked then sighed heavily. “What a tangled mess. We set out to take Saidullayev out but someone else kills her right under our noses; we don’t know who ordered the hit and the hitman turns out to be Knight’s son; our Naval Yard is attacked and our Secretary of the Navy is dead and no one is standing up to take credit. I’ve had much better days than this one.”

The door opened after a sharp rapping and Alex Knight entered, followed by Jax Theron.

“Ahh, we’re all here now,” Morrow said. The door opened again and this time a trolley bearing coffee and sandwiches were brought in. “I hope you don’t mind but I organized for a simple lunch in. We have a lot to discuss, but first, I need to cover the death of SecNav and Director Vance’s condition. The assistant secretary of the Navy will step in, of course, but we do not have an assistant NCIS Director. None was appointed after Leon Vance took over Jenny Shepard’s duties. The idea being that SecNav would appoint the next NCIS Director when the time came. Unfortunately, SecNav was killed in the same attack that injured Director Vance who, as we speak, is undergoing emergency surgery. To cut to the chase, Gibbs, the President has asked that you be NCIS Director until Vance’s successor is appointed. As you know, Vance postponed his retirement
and was scheduled to retire at the end of this year and SecNav was to have appointed his successor in a couple of months’ time. I suggested to the President that you take over temporarily. I know it’s not what you want but we’re asking you to step in until things settle a bit and, besides –”

“I’ll do it,” Gibbs said.

Surprised, Morrow’s brows lifted. “You will?”

“Provided you name a successor within six months, if not sooner.”

“Thank you,” Morrow nodded. “President Kellerman will, no doubt, be pleased to know. We also thought we’d have more time to find out who ordered the hit on Saidullayev and, admittedly, it wasn’t at the top of our priority list. We have no choice now but to assume today’s attacks are in retaliation despite no one claiming responsibility. And we have to assume more attacks are being planned.

“So we need to find Saidullayev’s killers fast,” Tony said.

“We need Quinn to get hold of his broker,” Gibbs said, looking at Alex. Your son. Quinn.

Turning to Alex, Morrow said, “I trust he is co-operative?”

“He’s not being unco-operative,” Alex replied. “But Gavriel Sharon, his broker, is not picking up his phone. Quinn, or Rain, as he wants to be called from now on, tried the emergency number and that, too, failed to reach Sharon. Our operators in Europe are working on it and I expect some intel to come in soon.”

“Rain suspects Sharon’s either dead or is in hiding,” Jax said. “Whoever killed him or is looking for him doesn’t want him to talk.”

“We’ll have to find him,” Morrow said. “If he’s alive.”

“Like I said, KnightShade’s on it,” Alex said.

“And DiNozzo”, Morrow said, turning to Tony. “I’d like you to consider accepting the post of Acting Director of the newly-created Global Threat Alert Center. GTAC. This agency replaces the current MTAC. The position of Director of GTAC is meant to be Gibbs’ but since he has accepted the position of Acting NCIS Director, we thought you would agree to step in until the new NCIS Director is appointed, after which Gibbs will be the Director of GTAC. May I assume you’re agreeable to that?” he asked Gibbs.

“What the hell is GTAC, exactly?” Gibbs asked.

Tony gave a soft laugh. “You want me to be Acting Director, holding the fort for Gibbs for something he has no idea about? Man, you should be glad you’re not on Team Gibbs or you’d get a headslap.”

Morrow eyed Tony balefully. “You haven’t changed in the two years you were away, have you?”

Tony caught Gibbs’ glare. “I apologize, Mr. Under-Secretary. I’m not quite myself today.”

“It’s the painkillers,” Gibbs said to Morrow. “He’s allergic to them. Turns him into an idiot. Don’t mind him. It’s temporary.”

Shaking his head, Morrow gave another sigh then said, “GTAC is the new 24-hour threat
assessment for both the Navy and Army. Where MTAC was operated by NCIS, GTAC will be operated jointly by KnightShade and Homeland Security. Both Alex and I will oversee the agency but its missions will be directed by you and Jax Theron. Until now, KnightShade has been running some of our black ops but with the renewed threats both international and domestic, President Kellerman has re-examined Homeland Security’s international scope and is making some changes. Among one of them will be the appointment of Alex Knight to counter-terrorism advisor to the President. Another will be the amalgamation of counter-terrorism intelligence agencies under GTAC. As head of GTAC, you will oversee the various missions that are launched. You decide when to commence and abort as necessary. Jax will direct the operation once it is launched, from picking the team to giving the OK to strategies. That is, he’ll monitor the operation once it’s activated. Jax and his M31 team will also be involved in ground operations from time to time. In which case, you will take over his responsibilities as GTAC’s missions commander.

“I know it’s a heavy responsibility but hey,” Morrow smiled, “You will have full autonomy over your hours and even where you want to work from. You want to direct global ops from the Semper Fi, we’ll have her outfitted. You want to move into one of KnightShade's apartments, that should be fine with Alex.” He glanced at Alex who said, “Mi casa, su casa.”

“The entire Navy Yard is in lockdown for now,” Morrow continued. “And the NCIS building is too badly damaged to be restored. The agency will have to move elsewhere. Temporary offices are being prepared at the Russell Knox Building in Quantico and NCIS will, in all likelihood, end up there permanently.”

“You up for it?” Gibbs asked Tony. “Holding the GTAC fort for me?”

“And after that?” Tony asked the group.

“After that,” Morrow said. “You can come on board as full-time liaison officer between the various entities as Alex suggested to me. Jax, why don’t you elaborate for DiNozzo?”

As Morrow passed the plates of sandwiches around, Jax explained what Tony’s role would entail. “GTAC, as the name suggests, will encompass worldwide threat assessments. It will be the center where joint-agency-task force missions will be launched and directed. I will be co-Director with Gibbs when Gibbs comes on board. Since GTAC missions will involve different agencies and task forces working together with KnightShade, we need a liaison officer to co-ordinate and be the pointman for the 22-member intelligence community which Homeland Security heads. With your experience working with KnightShade and your knowledge of US federal law enforcement agencies, together with your people skills – something I’m told Gibbs hasn’t quite acquired in his, otherwise, stellar career. You, on the other hand, have the ability to negotiate and wade your way through the ego and turf wars which, if left entirely to Gibbs, would likely result in World War Three. Or so I’m told.”

“Just keep him away from the painkillers,” Morrow said, looking at Tony.

It took Tony several minutes before he responded. He locked eyes with Jax then moved to Morrow as he bit into his sandwich and chewed. Finally, he said, “I need to talk it over with Gibbs first.”

With a slight tilt of his head, Gibbs said, “It’s up to you entirely, Tony. As long as you don’t go running off without telling me. Or better yet – without me, I’m good.”

Morrow’s brow lifted. A single one, this time.

“Guess now’s the time to tell you DiNozzo and I are in a relationship,” Gibbs said to Morrow. “It’s a recent development. Well, sort of.” And gave Morrow a brief account of their initial meeting and
subsequent reunion fifteen years later.

Morrow sat back in his seat after Gibbs was finished. “Well. Hmmm. I suppose it’s good news, considering what’s happened this morning.” He looked at Alex. “Do you have any problems with them working and living together?”

“How can I when Jax and I have been involved for several years now and KnightShade does not have a no-fraternization rule?” Alex responded. Gibbs looked at him, noting Alex’s serious expression. Not just serious, but angry. Upset about the morning’s attacks, Gibbs assumed. Or, more likely, because the attack happened right next door to KnightShade. Not catching it in time would have seriously pissed him off. Were any KnightShade personnel injured? Killed?

“Well, then…” Morrow looked expectantly at Tony.

“Who’s my boss?” Tony asked. “Who do I report to if I accept?”

“You will report directly to Alex Knight and to the Under Secretary of DHS’ Office of Intelligence and Analysis – currently, me. You will be based out of GTAC’s offices at KnightShade next to the Naval Yard.

“You’ll share an office with me and Gibbs,” Jax said. “Alex will be right next door but we’ll likely be in GTAC’s ComCen most of the time and Alex will be commuting between KnightShade and the White House.”

“I’d still like to think about it and discuss it with Gibbs,” Tony said.

“Please do,” Morrow said. “Give me an answer in forty-eight hours.” Morrow stood. “We’re meeting with all the heads of the intelligence community this Friday at the Pentagon. I’d like to announce your appointment – both yours and Gibbs’ – at the meeting and expect your attendance if you accept the positions.”

The next day, Gibbs and Tony visited their injured Team Gibbs family. Vance had come through surgery and expected to make a full recovery. His retirement had, understandably, been brought forward and as soon as he was cleared to travel, would fly across to San Diego with his family.

Torres was worried about his accommodations and needed assurance that Gibbs was serious about him moving into the Semper Fi so Gibbs packed up his belongings from his apartment and put them in the Semper Fi’s guestroom. Torres was expected to be discharged only at the end of the week but at least he had the comfort of knowing he really was moving into the Semper Fi with Gibbs and Tony.

“As soon as I find a suitable place, I’ll be out of your hair,” Torres promised. “Wait. We’re moving to Quantico, right?”

“Yup,” Gibbs said. “An hour’s drive from the marina. Good news is I’ll be doing that only until the new Director is announced. Max, six months.” He and Tony had filled the team in on the changes the attacks had brought about, told them about their new jobs and discussed the implications.

"Wow, boss, I mean Director Gibbs," McGee said, from his hospital bed. "This is an unexpected development. Congratulations. So, Tony, you’ll be leaving us for good."

"Don't worry, McPessimist, I'll visit often. Gibbs is still at NCIS so it'll likely be more often than
“We’ve lost Tony and now we’re going to lose you?” Abby said to Gibbs, her face understandably downcast. She was in a wheelchair because of her concussion but otherwise not looking the worse for wear, to Gibbs’ relief.

“I’ll be around for the next six months,” Gibbs said.

“Not if a new Director gets appointed earlier,” Torres pointed out. He, too, was in a wheelchair, his face mottled with bruises, scrapes and butterfly bandages. “And a new SecNav. I foresee lots of changes ahead,” he predicted in an ominous tone.

“We’ll cross that bridge when the time comes,” Gibbs said. “For now, I just want to tell you that Tony and I are getting married and the wedding’s being held on the Semper Fi. You are not only expected to attend, I’m going to need you guys to organize it.”

Squeals of delight came from Abby and congratulations were extended.

“Uhh, aren’t you supposed to propose to your intended first and if he accepts then you announce the nuptials?” Tony asked, bemused.

All eyes turned to him.

“You didn’t ask Tony yet?” Abby said, looking from Tony to Gibbs and back. Next to her, Torres and Bishop said, “Uh-oh.”

“I thought I did,” Gibbs replied.

“When?” Tony countered.

“Saturday night. When you flew back from New York.”

“Saturday night?” Tony scrunched up his face. “You said, let me quote – ‘Getting married for the fifth time wasn’t on my bucket list’.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? That’s not a proposal! And if it was I didn’t say yes.”

“You’re saying no?”

Four pairs of eyes swiveled back and forth between Gibbs and Tony.

“Put that phone away!” Gibbs snapped, seeing that Torres was videoing everything.

“Okay, okay,” Torres said. “As soon as Tony answers.”

“No, I’m saying yes,’ Tony said. “Yes, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. I will marry you and yes, in some ways I’m glad the old Gibbs is still lurking around.” Then he kissed Gibbs. On the lips. In front of the team. Torres got it all down on video.

The next day Delilah went into labor and gave birth to twins. A boy and a girl.

The day after, they informed Under-Secretary Morrow that they would be accepting the positions offered. Morrow announced their appointments at the meeting for the intelligence community which he was chairing. Gibbs sat through it without complaint, probably because President
Kellerman dropped in unannounced and stayed for fifteen minutes, sitting next to him. After two hours of more droning on and on, Jax and Tony started playing games on their KnightFones.
The last few weeks had been a whirlwind of activity as the move to the new NCIS headquarters at Quantico was completed. There was the new NCIS Director to be confirmed and that wouldn’t happen until the President elected a new Secretary of the Navy. Tony was handling his new job – Acting NCIS Director – with aplomb, as Gibbs knew he would.

“You sure you don’t want it to be permanent?” he asked Tony.

“Nope,” Tony replied. “This is like getting to play with McGee’s twins. I get to hand them back when I’m done.” He slid his arms around Gibbs. Then he bitched about having to drive from DC to Quantico and back everyday. Jax shut him up by arranging for a KnightShade helo to fly him there and back.

“You shouldn’t spoil him like that,” Gibbs told Jax.

“Not spoiling. He’s still working during the flight and we have his full concentration, which we wouldn’t have if he were driving. If it’s the helo you’re objecting to, I can downgrade it to a car and driver.”

Gibbs shook his head. "You're as bad as he is."

They compromised and on days when Gibbs was needed at Quantico, they took the helo. Otherwise, a chauffeur-driven sedan picked Tony and Torres up at the marina and took them back.

Tony stirred and sneezed, his nose tickled by Gibbs’ chest hair. Gibbs’ arm tightened around Tony and he kissed the top of Tony’s head. He could hear the rest of the team who were up on the roof deck having breakfast. It was April 16. Emancipation Day and the team had come over last night for a barbecue then stayed the night.

“I’m hungry,” Tony murmured against Gibbs’ chest.

“Me, too,” Gibbs said and climbed on top of Tony. “For you first. Then coffee and food.”

Tony obliged. Half an hour later, the aroma of frying bacon irresistible, the two men joined the team.

Torres was loving the good life, as was to be expected but griped about it coming to an end once Tony left and he’d be back to the hour-long drive to Quantico. As he had predicted, the new NCIS premises ended up being the permanent one, which made sense since the Marine Corps Base was there in Quantico. Abby and Bishop were going to look for a place in Quantico instead of taking Bishop's aunt's house. They still offered Torres the spare bedroom - if they had one - until he found his own place. “If you want to,” Abby said, and Bishop said he might as well share with them. “I mean, you probably feel awkward bringing your dates back to the Semper Fi.”
“Ooh, yes,” Abby said. “I wanna know what Gibbs says.”

Torres said no, he did not take his dates back to the Semper Fi. Not that he’d any time to date since he joined NCIS,” he told them. “And my ribs still hurt, so no action for a while. Besides, I like living on the boat. They leave me alone much of the time and I’ve made some new friends at the marina. It’s really kinda cool.”

None of the team members were looking forward to Tony and Gibbs leaving eventually.

“It won’t be the same without you and Tony,” Abby said to Gibbs. The rest of the team concurred. Then Abby wanted to know what Jax was like to work under.

“He can be quirky,” Gibbs said. “In a nice way. Like you. He’s still very much a field agent, though, and running one op or another in some country or other.”

“Why can’t you take us with you?” Torres asked. “Don’t you miss working with us? We’re that easily replaced? At least take me. You can send me in undercover whenever a mission calls for it. I mean, hey, I’d fit in with KnightShade like tortilla chips and salsa.” And proceeded to show off his salsa dance moves.

“Better watch that wriggly bubble butt of yours,” McGee warned. “I heard KnightShade is a very gay-friendly place and Jax’s team is not only all-gay, it has its own way of welcoming new members.”

“So what?” Torres asked. “I’m not gay.”

“The way you shake that booty?” McGee laughed. “They’re not going to believe that.”

“What do they do to new members?” Bishop asked.

McGee leaned in, cupped a hand over her ear and whispered. Bishop’s eyes went wide and she clapped both her hands over her mouth.


“You don’t wanna know,” Bishop replied. “Trust me. You really don’t.”

“Let’s wait for things to settle down,” Gibbs said. “We still don’t have a Director and that won’t happen until the President appoints the new Secretary of the Navy who, then, appoints the NCIS Director.”

“When’s that happening?” Torres asked.

“In a couple of months’ time,” Bishop said. “My friends over at NSA said a couple of four stars have already been nominated and awaiting President Kellerman’s decision.”

“When that happens, I’ll decide if it’s feasible to bring you guys over,” Gibbs said. That brought squeals from all of them, not just Abs. “It’s a given that the new Director will make changes,” Gibbs continued. “I can suggest he start with a new team and that we’ll help him form one before you guys come across to GTAC.”

“You think that’ll work?” McGee asked.

“Of course, it will!” Tony said. “Gibbs has friends in high places. Once the NCIS Director commences, out I go to join GTAC and I’ll be taking you along like the Pied Piper.” He helped
himself to more bacon.

“What makes you so sure?” McGee asked.

“Because Gibbs and I already discussed it, didn’t we, honey bunch?” Tony looked at Gibbs who glared warningly at him. “And last week I was at the Pentagon where the people who can give the go-ahead for Gibbs to hire you for GTAC gave the green light for him to hire his own team.”

“They did?” The team chorused. Abby squealed again, jumping up and bouncing on her platform shoes.

“But we have to wait until the new Director comes on board,” Gibbs reminded them. “That should be sometime in July. Hang in there for another three months.”

“Ooh, that’s fine,” Abby said, smiling widely. “It’ll give me time to get to know the KnightShade people. You can introduce us to them first, can’t you?”

“Sure,” Tony said. “We can throw a party, right, Gibbs?”

The image of the M31 men partying on his roof deck filled his head. “We’ll think about it,” he said. “Gotta check what the marina rules are concerning public disturbances.” He could see McCadden taking them all away in cuffs.

A month later, Gibbs and Tony were married in a small ceremony on the Semper Fi. In attendance were a lot of KnightShade personnel whom Tony had befriended during his stint with the organization, as well as the Paddington Foundation. By then, Team Gibbs had already befriended a lot of the KnightShade people and to Gibbs it was like an extended family.

Tony's cousin, Crispian, had flown in for the ceremony then flown out the same day. Before he left, he made Tony promise he’d see him in London soon as he wanted to hear personally from Tony what had happened at the fiasco that was to have been his wedding and why Tony didn’t tell him his late intended was a radical Muslim with jihad on her mind.

Tony promised he’d arrange a visit and would do his best to explain what had been happening provided it wasn’t classified. He wasn’t looking forward to it but felt it was the least he could do for his cousin.

The KnightShade appointments came with a heavily subsidized rental for apartments at the Wharf so that solved the question of Abby's and Bishop' accommodation.

They could see the Semper Fi from their balcony and every weekend saw them heading over to have breakfast with Tony, Gibbs and Torres. Torres liked living on the houseboat and neither Gibbs nor Tony minded so Gibbs invited him to stay on if he liked. Besides, Tony told Torres, he had his own apartment at the Wharf included in his contract with KnightShade and Torres was welcome to use it whenever he wanted some privacy.

Life was good. They were all settling into their new jobs. Then one evening early in July, Gibbs got a call from Torres who had just returned from a three-week training mission in Arizona. Gibbs was still at the GTAC office, waiting for Tony to walk over from NCIS after his meeting with the incoming Director whose term would commence the next day.

“Yeah, what’s up, Torres?” Gibbs asked.
“I, umm, need to talk to you…and Tony,” Torres replied. “So I was, uhh, wondering if you’d be home early tonight.”

Torres’ tone made Gibbs frown. “What’s wrong?” From what McGee had told him, Torres was fitting in well at KnightShade, as was Bishop. Abby was over the moon, making lots of new friends as was Major Mass Spec, who, according to Abby, “was in a relationship”.

“With another machine”? Gibbs had asked.

Abby had giggled and proceeded to tell him about life in KnightShade. "You know, Gibbs. I think the nuns won't approve of some of the things that go on here...so I leave those details out when I meet them for our monthly bowling date."

“I thought you were fitting in well,” Gibbs said to Torres. “Jax is satisfied with your progress. Said you’d aced all your physical fitness tests.”

“I don’t have a problem with any of the program’s requirements,” Torres said.

“Then what? The M31 guys? I warned you they’re a weird bunch.”

“Yeah, well, I work fine with them. I just got my latest results –you’d be proud, Gibbs. They also offered me a permanent spot with the team. The M31 team! That's like...A-Team, man. I think it's because of you. They know if I was good enough for you, I'm good enough for M31.” The excitement sounded in his voice. “And I accepted! Of course!”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Umm…uhh…I don’t know how to tell you that part.”

Gibbs blew out an exasperated breath. “You called me, Torres. So talk. I'll meet you as soon as I can.”

“With Tony?”

“With or without. He’s tied up with the new Director but, hopefully, he’ll get back in time for dinner.”

“I can buy Chinese back,” Torres suggested.

“Works for me. Torres, if it’s not work or the M31 guys, what is it? Give me some time to think about it before I give you my two cents. You know I don’t like surprises.” There was long pause then he heard Torres take a deep breath.

“It’s my initiation.”

“What initiation?”

“The one the team made me undergo after I accepted their offer.”

“Well? What about it? Were you injured?” Gibbs didn’t think so though as far as he knew, there were no initiation rites among the KnightShade teams. Tony never mentioned any. The retraining and orientation program for new recruits were sufficient to get the new member properly bonded to his or her team.

“No, nothing like that. It was the umm, content of the ritual…what I had to do." A long pause. Then, "They made me have sex with them. All of them.”
“What?” Gibbs spat the word out. “Did you tell them No? Did you tell them you’re not gay? Because if you said no and they still went ahead, that’s rape, Gang rape! Damn. I’m going to call Jax.”

“No. No. No.” Torres protested quickly. “It wasn’t like that. Not at all. Please don’t tell Jax anything.”

“What do you mean it wasn't like that?”

“Well, I did tell them I wasn’t gay; that I was straight. They didn’t listen to that. So they went ahead.”

“Went ahead and what? Fuck you?”

“Yes-ess.”

“So they did it against your will.” Gibbs raked his fingers through his hair. How did this happen? How could Jax allow this to happen?

“No. I mean I said no but I let them.”

“You let them fuck you?”

“Uhh, yeah. But not right away,” he added quickly. “They sucked me off first.”

Gibbs closed his eyes and rubbed the spot between his brows. “If you let them fuck you, if they didn’t force themselves on you, then what the hell is the problem?”

Another deep suck of air by Torres. “The problem is, I liked it. Way too much.”

“Mr. Anthony DiNozzo Junior, please,” said the woman in a British accent, the next morning.

“This is Still-Very-Special-Ex-Agent Tony DiNozzo. How may I help you?”

“Good morning, Mr. DiNozzo. I’m Ms. Jankovic. Beverly Jankovic, of Alba, McCallum and Bellisario, lawyers for your late mother’s estate and the late Clive Paddington. Is this a convenient time to speak with you?”

“Ya-ah. Please go ahead.” He stifled a yawn and checked the time. 6.45am. Gibbs had already left for GTAC. They’d stayed up past midnight with Torres and Gibbs had told him to sleep in but make it to GTAC for the eleven o’clock meeting. What was this about now, Tony wondered. Did KnightShade forget to pay for the two suits he’d bought before he flew out of London?

“Your mother and your uncle, Clive Paddington, had left you a portion of the Paddington Estate, with the proviso that you only be told two days before your fortieth day and the inheritance be turned over to you on the said birthday. I would like to make an appointment to meet with you as soon as you can –”

“Uhh…wait a minute.” Tony stifled another yawn. “I-umm…sorry, did you say my mother and uncle left me something?”

“Yes. It’s part of the Paddington Estate but –”

“But that’s all been distributed.” Tony sat up. "My mother set up a small trust for me before she
died. I got nothing from Uncle Clive.”

“Well, your mother and your uncle did set up another trust for you. It was part of your mother’s estate but as I said, they stipulated that the existence of this trust not be made known to you until two days before your fortieth birthday. Which is this Friday, the eighth of July. Mr. DiNozzo, would it be possible for you to fly to London this weekend so that we can attend to this matter? There is a great deal of money involved.”

When Ms. Jankovic told Tony how much Uncle Clive and his mother had left him, he was surprised he didn't fall off the bed.
GIBBS’ POV

It’s not as if I haven’t done this before – sit in the dark, alone, contemplating where Life had led me. Before Tony came home, the operative word being ‘home’, I did the solitary navel-gazing every night. Busy as the MCRT may have been, at times, I’d still go home, descend to my basement and take out the bourbon. Tonight, I'm alone up on the roof deck of the Semper Fi. Tony, Torres an Nick have gone to a movie. I opted for time out by myself.

If I didn’t have the kind of friends for colleagues that I had back when I was at NCIS, I would have descended into my personal abyss and only emerge for a few hours to inflict my drunken sonofabitch self on them and anyone else foolhardy enough to cross my path. Instead, I was blessed with a team who cared about me as if I was family. They watched my back not just professionally but personally as well. I am so blessed to have them. Which is why they are with me today, working together, spending weekends together and, in Torres’ case, living together. I hope the young man gets his head straightened out. I guess "straightened" is the wrong word. In any case, I'm confident he'll come to accept that he's gay, too, and that it's not some disease he caught or a condition that he can reverse.

These days I am optimistic about a lot of things. Not unrealistically so. Just seeing life through clear lenses. Now, my days and nights are peaceful even when the noise and laughter around me make it sound like there was a party on board the Semper Fi every weekend. Now, when there's no noise and the quiet night is broken only by the clink-clonk of the boats' halyards, I feel at peace with myself and with life. All because Tony is back home. All because Tony is mine. My husband. Never in my wildest dreams would I ever think I’d be another man’s husband. Never would I ever even imagine I’d have Tony…and Alex.

Nothing has changed yet everything has. Tony continues to be my first love but Alex has a special place in my life, too, just as Jax has his in Tony’s. The four of us are often together – either at Alex’s penthouse, or here on the Semper Fi. Alex is very much like me – he needs alone-time. Tony is more like Nick Monterey – hyper-active and insatiable. When those two start planning their RPG weekends, Alex and I hole up in the Semper Fi while Tony and the M31 gang party on in the penthouse. No need to explain what kind of RPGs that insane bunch play but they’ve managed to persuade Alex and me to attend the one this Friday which they’ve named Caligula’s Cure. I want to take a rain check but it’s for Alex's and Tony’s birthday so I’m obligated to attend. It starts from Friday dinner and carries on till Saturday afternoon. What the hell kind of party goes on that long? Then Saturday evening Tony and I fly to London. He’s come into a lot of money and I know I need to be there with him in case he decides to buy up the whole of Savile Row.
TONY’S POV

I have never been so happy in my life. Yeah, I’m like a giddy schoolgirl in love for the first time. Jethro and I are together everyday, save for some days when my liaison meetings, especially those at the Pentagon, last from morning until we break up for dinner.

I love my current job despite the aggravation – imagine trying to liaise between parties who can’t see past their egos while a Situation is brewing to Cat 5 proportions. No wonder the President wanted GTAC up and running and have KnightShade operationally-ready at all times. While the Pentagon brass is duking it out among each other and making it impossible for the CIA to do its job (they do diffuse some very critical situations before anyone realizes there’s a situation so don’t believe all the bad press about them) I manage to get cooler heads to prevail and, somehow, get decisions made before it's too late. It’s stressful and exhausting but I have a gift for it, apparently.

It’s been a hectic week at GTAC but all missions were completed successfully and we’re celebrating this weekend. Nick organized it, remotely, since he’s still somewhere in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of northwest China. That’s a vast, mountainous region inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups. Not as bad as Mali but still not my choice for a visit. I’m perfectly happy plying my tradecraft in the civilized capitals of the world. Then again, KnightShade has a way of teaching you how to appreciate the raw, untamed beauty of Planet Earth so I know it’s only a matter of time before I’m trekking through some National Geographic-worthy terrain.

But…good news – TGIF! Because Caligula’s Cure commences tonight at eight. It’s a birthday celebration for Alex Knight and moi! Since he’s the older birthday boy, he gets to be Caligula. Jethro is a victorious General coming back from a battle with the barbarians. Naturally, he’s bringing home the spoils of war to present to Caligula. Nick, Torres and I are part of those spoils. We didn’t invite Mcgee. I mean, can you picture a bare-assed McGee in a toga? I'll take Team Gibbs out for another small celebration, of course. And yeah, Caligula's Cure is an all-male event. Throw in a bucketful of Blue Dream and this is going to be one unforgettable weekend.

As for my inheritance, I’m still in shock. A little annoyed, I mean, I could have been driving Magnum’s red Ferrari to work all these years if mom and Uncle Clive hadn’t concocted this stupid idea of waiting until my fortieth birthday. If they’d let me know when I turned twenty-one, I could have taken out a loan using the will as collateral but no, I had to live in near-poverty level until now. Of course Gibbs didn’t share my feelings of outrage. He gave me a headslap instead.

I guess the headslap worked because I can now see my mother and uncle did the right thing. If I’d gotten the money when I was in my 20s, I’d have run through it all and be left a bankrupt. But now, two days before my fortieth birthday, I’m no longer the Tony DiNozzo that picked up Jethro Gibbs in a bar. Gibbs has taught me a lot since then and so has Jax and Alex. Gibbs inculcated in me a value system that can withstand the storm of life’s temptations while Jax and Alex have shown me wealth need not erode that code of ethics that I now live by.

1730hours, Friday, July 8, 2016:

GTAC

They were wrapping up a Philippine operation when an urgent call came in. Ziva David, KnightShade’s chief operative for the Middle-East, was calling from Israel. She appeared on the wall screen in GTAC, reporting that they had located Gavriel Sharon.
“How reliable is your intel?” Jax asked.

“How 95%,” Ziva replied. “I’m sending the co-ordinates as we speak. He’s in a remote village in Syria.”

Of course, it’s in Syria,” Tony muttered to Gibbs. “And of course it’s remote. Thank God I’m only a liaison officer and not an operator anymore.”

“If you can get a team to head out now, we have a good chance of snatching Sharon before he’s moved.”

“You got it, David. We’ll see you in Tel Aviv. ETA 1700hours, Tel Aviv time,” Jax said, then made the call to Staz to get M31 ready for departure for Tel Aviv in two hours’ time.

_Two hours' time? Tonight?_ Well, as I said, thank God I’m no longer an operator. I have zero interest in going to Syria.

“There’s a humanitarian organization working with the villagers,” Ziva was saying. “If we go undercover as the aid workers, we can get close enough to reconnoiter the area and work out the exfil.”

“Which humanitarian agency?” Jax asked, not that it mattered. Whichever it was, they could embed KnightShade operators.

“The Paddington Liberation Fund,” Ziva said.

No. No, no, no. N.O.

Needless to say, Caligula’s Cure never got off the ground, to Gibbs’ relief. Tony wasn’t happy. Not about having to miss his birthday party but because he’d be spending his birthday weekend on ISIS’ home turf.

“Don’t look so glum, Tony,” Nick said to him as they strapped on the seat belts. “The KnightRay is in the Med at the moment. We retrieve Sharon and we’ll meet Gibbs and Alex on the yacht. It’ll be even better having Caligula’s Cure on board the nuclear yacht. It will be a triple celebration – for yours and Alex’s birthday, for a successful operation, and to give you and Gibbs a proper KnightShade welcome.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Gibbs said, looking at Jax for confirmation. “You’re going to have an orgy on board a nuclear yacht?”

Jax shrugged. “You might as well see GTAC’s backup installation. You’re already on your way to London and DiNozzo’s part of the retrieval team. Might as well make it a working trip.”

“Yeah, what’s this about DiNozzo inheriting a shitload of money from his uncle?” Adam and Nick wanted to know.

“We’ll find out when we find out,” Gibbs said. “Now shut up and let me sleep. Wake me up when they’re serving breakfast.” With that, he put on his headphones and listened to Peter Cincotti’s Some Kind Of Wonderful.
Hmm. Looks like I need to write a sequel.

I hope you enjoyed this alternate take on Tibbs and the KnightShade guys. I was not planning for this to have a sequel as all I wanted was to see how a relationship between Jax and Alex would play out. I also wanted to fit Torres into Team Gibbs. I like his character but I think, like many NCIS fans, I find it hard to take to new members because we ALL know Tony is irreplaceable.

Anyway, because I had a strong action plot in this story, unlike the Oldies but Goodies romances, the story would end up way too long if I finished all the loose threads. So I'll have to tackle those in the sequel - the mission to rescue Gavriel Sharon, neutralize the Caucasian Emirate, see what happens to Rain Waterstone, see if Torres survives life as a gay man in M31, see if Nick gets a taste of Gibbs...and so on.

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