The Hanged Man

by rose_malmaison

Summary

A sexually charged murder investigation brings up a bad time in Tony’s past. It makes him think differently about his long-term relationship with Gibbs.

Notes

Thanks to Jacie, Combatcrazy for betaing my story.
Thanks to penumbria (penumbria_fic) for the art
Written for: NCIS Reverse Bang 2018

And in a flashback: in Dec. 2004, during and after Chained

NOTES:
• None of the NCIS characters suffer any abuse during the time frame this story covers. There is mention of past abuse, however.
• Graphic sexual content. But there’s also angst and romance!
• I made up most of the company and product names in this story.
Night Moves

The Hanged Man
Rose Malmaison
Length: 42,000 words, 11 chapters
Category: Slash
Pairing: Gibbs/DiNozzo
Rating: Mature, explicit
Warnings: See tags
Betaed by: Jacie, Combatcrazy
Art by: penumbria, penumbria_fic
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CHAPTER 1

NIGHT MOVES

December 2006

Night Moves

Bob Seger

Ain't it funny how the night moves
When you just don't seem to have as much to lose.
They’d been run ragged by their last case, got shot at a couple of times, and had too many suspects and too few clues. When they finally wound up the investigation, the paperwork proved to be a bitch. NCIS had been coordinating with several agencies in four time zones, and the constant squabbling and posturing between the CIA and the FBI had put Gibbs in a really pissy mood. It was over though; they’d locked up the bad guys, and the final set of paperwork had been signed, sealed and delivered to all parties concerned.

It was Friday night, nearly eleven p.m. when they emerged from the Navy Yard. Jethro said he was in the mood for a late dinner of eggs and steak fries at the Olympus Diner, so that’s where they went. Once home, they had a few beers, and messed around on the couch with the late news droning in the background. When they finally made it upstairs around one, Tony took a quick shower and joined Jethro in bed.

Tony was on the edge of sleep when Jethro started kissing his back. He made the mistake of groaning and mumbling, “Mmmm, nice,” because Jethro took it as a go-ahead. He encouraged Tony into a kneeling position, murmuring, “Love your ass, can’t get enough,” as he licked and kissed his way down Tony’s spine.

Tony whined, “I really need some shut-eye. Can’t this wait ‘til morning?” He didn’t really mean it. It was just, he gave him trouble ’cause he took pleasure in making Jethro work for his reward. And besides, he liked to resist a bit before submitting, to show he wasn’t a pushover. One thing about Jethro, whenever he focused on sex, there was no way you could divert him. He was like a heat-seeking missile, not giving up until he reached his target. Jethro’s technique and stamina, and sheer determination to get every last drop of pleasure out of the sex act, usually left Tony feeling like he’d been through a wringer, but in a good way.

They wrestled for a few minutes, but it was half-hearted on Tony’s part. As soon as he complied, and pulled his sleep pants down, Jethro slid his cock home and started fucking him in long, slow sweeps. Considering that until a couple of years ago Jethro had never even imagined having sex with a man, he was pretty damned good at it. Yes, thought Tony, he was the luckiest guy in the world to have Jethro to share his life with. Now, if only he could convince his lover that a bit of bondage was a good thing…

Jethro was fucking him hard, going at it with such enthusiasm that the headboard was banging against the wall hard enough to leave a dent. Tony was past caring. In fact, he couldn’t think at all, just felt the fat cock sliding in and out, hitting his prostate just right, the fingers digging into the scars on his hipbones, the hot wet mouth sucking on the back of his neck, and then, finally, the clever fingers wrapped around his cock, jerking him off. The world outside, all the bad shit they dealt with every day, all the death and crime and sheer stupidity simply disappeared as if it had never existed. There was nothing but him and Jethro, the feeling of his pleasure rising, his own desperate whines,
sweaty flesh slapping on flesh and the deep rough groans Jethro made every time he drove into him.

It was four in the morning, and Jethro showed no sign of flagging. Where his stamina came from, Tony didn’t know. Not that he was complaining. They hadn’t had sex for days, unless you counted a blowjob he’d given Jethro a couple of mornings ago before he’d even finished his cereal.

Without warning, Jethro bit his shoulder. Tony shouted in surprise, and came hard. “Oh fuck! Yes, fuck!”

Jethro strained and shuddered, and came inside Tony in long, hot pulses. He gave a couple more thrusts, wrapping an arm around Tony’s chest to get better leverage. He wasn’t done yet, drawing it out for as long as he could. Finally, he collapsed on top of Tony with a satisfied grunt, and Tony panted happily in response. There was little he loved more than feeling his lover’s weight on his back, pressing him into the mattress. Covering him with love.

Jethro’s spent dick slipped out. He breathed heavily in Tony’s ear and nuzzled his cheek, too tired to speak.

Eventually Tony’s brain came back online, and he realized one of the phones on the nightstand was buzzing. He couldn't tell if it was his or Jethro’s. Unable to reach his cell, he panted, “Hey. Phone.”

Jethro groused, but he grabbed the phone and peered at it. Holding it under Tony’s nose, he said, “It’s yours,” as if it was somehow his fault for getting a call in the middle of the night.

Tony quickly took the phone out of his hand and squinted at the number. It was the night dispatcher at NCIS. Good thing Jethro hadn’t answered it; the news that they were sleeping together would have been all over the city by breakfast. “Yeah, this is DiNozzo,” he said, trying to catch his breath. Apparently he didn’t cover it up very well because Franklin, the dispatcher on duty, figured he was in bed – with a woman. Tony protested, “No, I’m working out… couldn’t sleep. Very funny. Yeah, she’s hot all right.” He laughed. “Yeah, big. Bigger than that. Okay. Uhuh. Send me the address.”

They’d been together for two years now. Right from the start, Tony had determined that Jethro was a straight-shooter when it came to relationships. No games or lies, because that’s just the way he was made. That was fine with Tony, but as far as sex went, Jethro was way too vanilla for his personal taste. Sure, getting fucked on a regular basis was great, more than great, but never having any rope-
play, spanking or cock-and-ball torture was a difficult pill to swallow. Tony really missed it. It was like having a birthday cake with no sugary frosting on it; it was edible but no way did it have that extra zing he craved.

One of his former lovers – and there had been many – had once accused Tony of being a bondage addict. That might be true, but it wasn’t like he couldn’t get it up if he wasn’t bound in leather, or that he didn’t feel pleasure if he wasn’t spanked until his butt was bright red and as sore as shit, because he could and did. It was just… he felt something was missing.

On the other hand, having Jethro for a lover, a life partner, far outweighed Tony’s longing for kink. He had come to accept that it just wasn’t going to happen. It didn’t take him long to get used to being loved the Jethro way, strong and sweet, and sometimes a bit rough. After a while, it struck him one day that he just might have already given up one addiction for another. He was hooked on Jethro, for sure, and he would do whatever it took to ensure their relationship worked.

Tony never doubted that Jethro wanted him, and even loved him, although somewhere in the back of his mind he expected the older man’s desire for him to wane. Tony’s relationships had always been short-lived, and he was no stranger to being rejected or dismissed. Early on in life, he had figured out that it was better for both parties – okay, he was really thinking of himself – if they parted amicably before things soured. He became the guy who gave his dates a good time, and would say softly, “It was great. Go back to sleep,” as he slipped out of bed sometime before dawn. He was the one-night-stand who never made false promises or said he would call you when it was clear he wouldn’t.

Gibbs revealed that his marriages had started out okay, that he’d had high hopes for them. But when each of his wives, in turn, had hated his secrets and stubbornness, had tried to change him, he’d dug in his heels and retreated to his basement. He had treated them badly because they couldn’t hold a candle to Shannon. Gibbs knew it was wrong to compare them to his dead wife, but he couldn’t help it. He would be the first to admit he’d driven them away.

Once Tony realized that Jethro was serious about their relationship, and truly wanted it to work, he asked, “Why me? What makes you think this will end up any different? I don’t want to go through that, what you did to them. I can’t. I just can’t.”

Jethro had been looking for a lifelong commitment, but in all the wrong places, he told Tony. It had taken him a long time to get past all the pain of losing Shannon and their daughter. There had been a lot of self-hatred, but he was beyond all that. “It’s different with you. It’s you I want,” he’d said.

Tony couldn’t believe he was saying this, but he had to. “Wanting me isn’t enough, Jethro. There has to be more to it.”
“I want to make a life with you. We know each other, understand each other. We don’t have unrealistic expectations. And I… I’m crazy about you. I have been since the first moment we met. When you got me without me saying anything. Damn it, Tony, I love you. So damned much… Please say yes.”

It was hard to wrap his mind around Jethro actually wanting him in a way that wasn’t fleeting or temporary. And then there was Jethro saying that he wanted a man. That he’d had the hots for him for years. That just beat everything. Eventually Tony took Jethro’s hand and said, “It never entered my mind to try to change you. I love everything about you, even the bad parts. Actually, I think I like those the best.” Jethro was patient and steady, and showed how much he cared about him at every turn, and that was far more than anyone in Tony’s life had ever done. And so Tony said yes.
Chained

CHAINED

Two years earlier - December 2004

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Chained to the Rhythm
Katy Perry

Yeah, we think we're free
Drink, this one's on me
We're all chained to the rhythm
To the rhythm, to the rhythm

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Tony’s relationship with Jethro began right after Tony killed the serial killer Jeffrey White. You could say that Jeffrey’s actions were the push they both needed to stop dancing around each other, as they’d been doing since they’d met in Baltimore four years earlier.

The second Jeffrey’s arm snaked around his neck and he saw the glint of the knife, Tony grabbed his gun, aimed over his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The loud bang of the gun going off within the confines of the car was deafening. Blood splattered everywhere, like a scene out of Pulp Fiction. It was a close call, more luck than anything, blindly shooting over his shoulder and hitting the intended target. In reality, he’d been aiming for Jeffrey’s chest, not his head. Either way, he killed the guy.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, his heart hammering in his chest, the coppery smell of blood and the stink of urine making him want to puke. All of a sudden, it seemed, Gibbs was opening the car door, demanding to know if he was hurt. It was unreal, seeing Gibbs so concerned. Tony felt out of it; he didn’t know what was going on, only that he’d done something terrible. When he got out of the car it felt like he was walking on rubber. He sat on the curb and held his head in his hands, wondering if he was having a migraine. Ducky looked him over, but he seemed to be speaking from the end of a long echoing tunnel. Gibbs was hovering, like he was guarding him, and Kate looked like she was in shock. For a moment, Tony thought she was going to hug him, but a sharp word from Gibbs and she backed off.

The front of his shirt was drenched with blood, his own, it turned out. He felt a sharp sting when he
touched his neck, and his fingers came away bloody, and only then realized he’d been cut. “Ow,” Tony said, surprised. He never even felt the blade slicing into his skin. It shook him badly, knowing he’d come so close to getting his throat cut, and by someone he’d liked.

Gibbs took him to the closest hospital to get it sutured. It wasn’t a big laceration, but it was really close to his jugular, too close for comfort. Ducky had taped a large wad of gauze over the wound, and Tony prodded it with his fingertips now and then.

“Stop touching it, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said tersely.

They took him into the exam room and the ER doctor stitched him up. He felt awful all through the procedure, unable to catch his breath, like he was going to pass out or something, but Gibbs stuck close to him. He even held his hand at one point. Tony barely held his shit together, and when he caught sight of the shirt they’d cut off him, and saw the back was covered in Jeffrey’s blood and brain matter, he threw up. Gibbs was quick with a plastic basin and the attending nurse thanked him.

Gibbs pointed out to the ER doc that his eyes didn’t look right, so they kept asking him questions like, had he taken any drugs? And, was he sure he hadn’t taken any drugs? Tony shook his head mutely, even though he suspected White’s buddy had slipped him something the night before. Next thing he knew, a nurse was sticking him with a big needle and drawing what had to be a quart of blood from his vein.

“That hurts,” Tony complained. “You trying to finish off the job?”

“The lab will be doing a tox screen,” she said with a sniff, apparently thinking he was lying about taking illicit drugs.

“Boss,” Tony whined.

Gibbs’ phone rang and he stepped to the other side of the room. After a brief conversation, he said, “Gotta go.”

“No…” You can’t leave me.

“I have to go,” Gibbs said, looking torn. Tony asked where Ducky was, and was told he was removing the body. McGee and Pacci had arrived to help Kate finish processing the scene.
“I’ll come with you. I can help, Boss,” Tony said, a little bit desperate.

“You stay here until they release you, DiNozzo. We’ll talk about this later.” Gibbs picked up a large paper bag containing Tony’s bloody clothing, now evidence, and left the exam room, followed by the doctor. Once Gibbs was gone, Tony realized he didn’t even know if he was coming back for him. At that moment, he felt just about as lonely as he’d ever been.

A nurse came in to check on him at regular intervals, and after a long wait, a couple of men in pale green scrubs walked in. One of them was a doctor, not the same one who’d seen him when he’d first been brought into the ER. The other was a beefy guy who looked like a janitor. After the doctor asked Tony a few questions and checked his vitals, he nodded to the beefy guy.

Without saying what was going on, the doctor laid a hand on Tony’s hip and urged him to roll on his side. As soon as Tony heard the snap of exam gloves, he looked over his shoulder. He almost died when he saw Beefy Guy was holding an institutional-size tube of KY in his hand. “No way! No fucking way!” Tony exclaimed. He rolled onto his back and crossed his arms over his chest, refusing point-blank to cooperate. The doctor was obviously displeased, but he didn’t care. No way was anyone going to stick a finger up his butt, and he had the right to refuse treatment, he reminded them.

They kept saying it was for his own good, and tried to coerce him, but Tony wasn’t having any of it. He launched into a detailed description of every hospital scene he’d ever seen on TV or on film. “Beaches, what a tear-jerker, and Philadelphia! Man, that Tom Hanks, when he tells his partner he’s ready to die. Shit, that one gets to me, every time. Oh, Terms of Endearment, can’t forget that one; ‘Give my daughter that shot!’ And oldies like Marcus Welby, making house calls – remember those days? Dr. Kildare; Richard Chamberlain was way too cute, and way too gay for that part. And what about…”

The ER doctor soon left, presumably to see someone who actually wanted his services. In retrospect, Tony may have gone a bit overboard with all the nervous chatter, because next thing he knew, a shrink came into the room and began asking him not-so-subtle questions, trying to determine if he was crazy.

Tony didn’t like Dr. Bollard. In fact, he didn’t like any shrinks. The doctor came across as a patient and caring man, but Tony knew better. He could see right through him. Behind the gentle, understanding smile lurked a wariness, like the guy had seen too much. It was as if he expected his patient to go off the deep end at any moment. Tony thought about letting loose, just to see how the doc reacted, but he didn’t want to end up in a straight-jacket, shipped off to some asylum upstate, sedated and drooling all the way. He knew what went on in those kinds of places. He’d seen Silent Hill and Session 9, thank you very much.
Bollard questioned Tony for a while in an attempt to gauge his mental stability. It was too soon, the scene too vivid in his mind, and Tony couldn't deal with all the questions. He'd looked towards the door several times, expecting Gibbs to come to his rescue, but eventually he realized, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that he was on his own.

“Look, doc, you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Tony said, swinging his legs over the side of the exam bed. “I’m fine and although some people might tell you otherwise, the cheese has not slipped off this cracker. What I am is tired, dead tired, and I just want to get out of here, go home and have a nice hot shower, order my favorite pizza... so thanks but no thanks.”

“But you can’t just...leave, not until I sign your papers,” Dr. Bollard said, taking hold of Tony’s arm.

Tony stared at the hand restraining him, and he said in a low, dangerous voice, “I’ve just come off an undercover assignment in which I was shackled to a bat-shit-crazy serial killer who wanted to be my best friend. Let me tell you, it didn’t end well.” Tony pointed at the bandage taped to his neck. “I shot him when he tried to cut my throat. So if I were you, I’d get your fucking hand off my arm and get the hell out of my way, because I’m not in a good mood, and I won’t be held accountable for my actions.” With that, Tony got up and headed for the exit, not caring that he was wearing a flimsy hospital gown with his ass hanging out, or that the shrink was following him down the hall, demanding that he stop. Tony kept on walking and made it out the hospital doors and to freedom, unscathed.

Tony took a deep breath of fresh air and squinted in the bright sunlight. He was still feeling the lingering effects of whatever drug Jeffrey’s friend had given him, and he felt a little unsteady. In addition, he was having a hard time dealing with the fact that Jeffrey had been talking about them flying to Mexico one minute, and was attempting to kimbo-slice his throat the next. The events of the past couple of days troubled him, but he wasn’t about to confide in some doctor he didn’t know.

He couldn't turn to Gibbs, either. He had already proven himself to be an unsympathetic bastard, making that snide remark about his friendship with Jeffrey White. Jeffrey had liked him; he could tell it had been genuine. So what if the guy had been a psycho and turned on him? That didn’t mean their friendship hadn’t been... Tony stopped in his tracks, suddenly seeing how he was trying to reason out something that didn’t, in reality, exist.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed. He had no clue how he was going to get back to DC; it was four hours from Lynchburg. He had no wallet, no clothes and no shoes either. People came and went but apart from a few sideways glances, nobody approached him. Not even any security guards, sent by Dr. Bollard. Maybe the shrink had given him up as a lost cause.

All of a sudden Tony felt exhausted and the glare of the sun was too much, and his head ached and
the tape on the bandage on his neck became unbearably itchy. He just wanted to go home.

As Tony stood on the sidewalk, looking around for some sort of solution, a car pulled up at the curb. A man got out and it took him a couple of seconds to realize it was Gibbs. From the frown on his face, it was apparent he wasn’t expecting to find his agent hanging around outside the hospital clad in only a hospital gown. “Hey, Boss,” Tony greeted him casually.

Gibbs demanded, “You sign out AMA?”

“I had to get out of there, Boss,” Tony implored, seeking understanding.

Gibbs looked past him at the hospital entrance, and Tony turned his head. Coming out was Dr. Bollard, accompanied by three security guards. Gibbs got all stiff like he did when someone annoyed the shit out of him. “DiNozzo, get in the car.”

Tony did as he was told, and watched Gibbs go nose-to-nose with the shrink. It only took a minute for the doc and the guards to retreat. Gibbs slid into the car, reached over the back seat and handed Tony some folded clothing. He waited while Tony pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants (no underwear) and a navy blue polo (Gibbs’ clothes, from the fit), and tossed the hospital gown in the back.

Gibbs was sizing him up, as if deciding what to do with him. “You good?”

“Yeah. Can we go now?” Tony asked. All of a sudden, he wanted his identity back, his credentials and his gun. The weapon he’d used to kill Jeffrey – Jeffrey’s own gun – had been taken into evidence, but Gibbs would have his service weapon and his creds with him. “D’you have my gun?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Tony twisted to look in the back, but there was no sign of his belongings. Maybe locked in the trunk? “Where is it?”

“Why? You thinking of using it on someone?”
“Not at this moment,” Tony said slowly. For some reason, Gibbs was looking seriously pissed, and he wasn’t sure why.

Gibbs started the car and peeled away from the curb. He muttered something under his breath and refused to look Tony’s way.

After a few miles, when the silence became too much to bear, Tony asked, “You mad at me? You got something you want to say?”

“Me? Nah. No point in me saying anything, is there?” Gibbs griped. As soon as they were on the highway, he pulled out his cell phone and called Ducky. “Hey, Ducky. I picked him up. He looks okay. Well, how the hell would I know? Yeah, he just walked out.” There was a long pause with Gibbs listening to the ME. “I’ll take care of him. McGee can take Kate back with him.” He snapped the phone shut and stuck it back in his pocket, letting out a sound of frustration.

Tony turned to Gibbs and asked, “What’s going on?”

“Ducky got the results of the toxicology.”

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“You were drugged, DiNozzo! Ducky’s concerned about you.”

That was Gibbs’ way of saying he wasn’t too concerned. “It was already out of my system. They were giving me the third degree, like I was a criminal,” Tony said, explaining why he’d walked out before they’d finished examining him. “Where were you, anyway? I could have done with some support. That doctor was about to break out the straight-jacket.”

“Doing my job, DiNozzo. Making sure the scene was processed properly because you shot one of our suspects.”

“Sorry to give everyone so much work,” Tony retorted.

Gibbs snorted and said, “Ducky says they found traces of gamma hydroxy-something in your
“Blood.”

“GHB.” Tony wasn’t surprised.

“What happened?”

Tony shrugged. “Guess they didn’t want me running off in the middle of the night.”

Gibbs sent a look of disbelief Tony’s way. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Well, yeah. I felt sorta… weird, but I’m okay now.” What the hell else did Gibbs want from him?

“So you think you’re fine? You got a medical degree I don’t know about?”

“Look, I got stitched up. Got checked out by two doctors. I just didn’t want to stick around for shrink-the-cop 101, okay?” Tony said defensively. “You know what? I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve had enough of this crap. Let me out. Pull over. Pull over!”

Never letting up on the accelerator, Gibbs turned his head and shouted, “We lost track of you!”

Tony stared at him. “What is your problem? I have done undercover before, you know. When I was on the Macalusco case, I was out of contact for days at a time. You’re acting like you don’t trust me to do my job!”

Gibbs glared at him and said slowly, “I don’t like losing sight of my agents.”

“I had a tracker…” Except that it had gone on the fritz the second it got wet. He’d have to talk to Abby about that. “I left you clues.”

“It wasn’t some kind of game, DiNozzo! Next time we fit you with one of those tracking devices, it’s gonna be hidden where the sun don’t shine,” Gibbs said through gritted teeth.
“I don’t know why you’re taking this out on me,” Tony complained. “We got the antiquities before they left the country. We stopped the bad guys. And I did my fucking job like I always do!” There was a long silence. Tony crossed his arms and stared out the passenger window. It made him dizzy so he closed his eyes.

In a calmer tone, Gibbs said, “I know you did your job. You did a good job. I trust you, Tony. But I was… worried. I’m going to get Ducky to look you over once we get home.”

“I’m fucking fine,” Tony retorted. Every time he turned his head, the stitches in his neck pulled, reminding him of his close call with Jeffrey’s knife. “Some friend,” he muttered.

“You’re not damned well fine, Tony! That bastard almost cut your head off! If you’d been… Fuck!” Gibbs hit the steering wheel with the heel of his hand.

“How many times do I have to say I’m fine? They didn’t hurt me,” Tony protested, having almost convinced himself they’d never touched him by that point. Whatever had gone on last night, he’d probably never know. It was a total blank. Probably better it stayed that way. “I did what I had to do. The case has been solved and everyone is present and accounted for. I’m fine and I don’t want everyone to keep asking me the same fucking questions, okay? I can handle this alone.”

“You sure about that?” Gibbs asked, meeting his eyes.

All of a sudden, it was too much. Tony had to avert his gaze. It was hard to breathe. He clutched a fistful of his shirt, over his heart. No, he wasn’t at all sure, not of anything. He managed a nonchalant shrug, but his next intake of breath turned into a sob, and a second later Gibbs turned the wheel hard and pulled off the road and onto the shoulder. Tony found himself wrapped in Gibbs’ strong arms, his face pressed against Gibbs’ chest, tears streaming down his face. He had no idea where all the emotion had come from, but he hated it. It was so fucking embarrassing, and he tried to extricate himself from the hug. Gibbs wasn’t letting him go, though, and it felt so good to be held that it overrode any sense of shame.

Time passed. The car grew hot. Cars whizzed by. Gibbs stroked his back and handed him a handkerchief, a real cloth one.

The tears stopped, and Tony wiped his face and sat up straight. He looked at the hankie and said, “I’ve gotta blow my nose.”
“A little snot won’t hurt,” was Gibbs’ calm reply.

Tony used it and when he was done he stuck it in the pocket of his borrowed sweatpants. “Thanks, Boss.”

“Any time.”

Tony managed a rough sort of laugh. “Wow, they must have slipped me some strong drugs last night.” He couldn't look at Gibbs. “I’m really tired,” he whispered, “Can we go home?”

Gibbs said softly, “That’s where I’m taking you. Home.” He got back on the road and proceeded to drive at a surprisingly sedate pace.

Home turned out to be Gibbs’ place, but Tony was too tired to kick up a fuss. Once they were inside Gibbs fed Tony some soup, made him take his meds, and turned on the shower and left him alone. After he’d washed off a few days’ worth of dirt and sweat, and some dried blood, Tony took a moment to carefully probe his anus, checking to see if Jeffrey or his buddy had done anything to him while he was unconscious. Thankfully, it appeared that they hadn’t. With a sigh of relief, he finished washing up and stepped out of the shower. A pair of flannel pajamas were sitting by the sink. They looked like they’d never been worn. Must have been a gift, he thought, as he carefully pulled them on.

Tony emerged from the bathroom to find Gibbs waiting. He blushed, thinking that Gibbs had been just outside the door while he’d had a finger up his ass. Gibbs looked at him with a puzzled expression but didn’t pursue it. It only took him a minute to tape a fresh bandage over Tony’s sutured wound, and when he was done, he guided Tony to the bed.

“This is your bed, Boss,” Tony said, staring stupidly at Gibbs as he pulled down the covers.

“Plenty of room for both of us,” Gibbs said, as if it was of no consequence. He gave Tony an extra blanket once he had slipped between the sheets. It wasn’t the best mattress, sort of soft and with a dip in the center, but the sheets were clean and it smelled like Gibbs, so Tony was happy.

Gibbs stripped down to his undershirt and boxers, and settled on the other side of the bed, with
pillows behind him and a book in his hands. “Ducky said to keep an eye on you,” was his excuse. Tony was too exhausted to care.

He woke up the next morning, sore all over and with a headache he wouldn't wish on anyone, only to find he was snuggled up to Gibbs, and what’s more, Gibbs was asleep with an arm around him. Tony fell asleep again, and when he next awoke, he was alone. Tony went down to breakfast, not sure what to say, if anything. Gibbs made him sit at the table and served him scrambled eggs and toast, and sat down with a plate of the same.

Tony had only eaten a small portion of the food when he put his fork down and said, “About last night…”

“Sorta nice,” Gibbs said with a shrug.

Of all the things Tony had expected to hear out of his boss’s mouth, ‘Sorta nice’ was not one of them. Gibbs’ blue eyes were on him, expectant and cautious. Instead of making a joke or saying something totally off the wall, Tony told the truth. “Yeah, it was. I… I needed that. Being taken care of. Thanks.”

Gibbs seemed satisfied with his reply, judging from the smile on his face. “Me, too. Slept well for the first time since you went under.” After they’d finished eating, he cleared his throat and said, “When we found Lane’s body… I thought it was you. I haven’t been that scared in… I was out of my mind with worry, Tony. I was sure he’d killed you, too. All I could think was, I should’ve told him. I should have…”

Tony was floored by the emotion he was seeing in Gibbs’ face. “You really were scared.”

Gibbs nodded. “Yeah.”

“Um… you know I’m okay now, right?”

“Yeah.”

Tony squinted at him. “Is there something else going on here? Because I’m definitely getting this feeling that there is.”
“Yeah, there is,” Gibbs said.

Tony waited but it soon became apparent that Gibbs wasn’t going to expand upon that comment. Tony complained, “You think you can say something more than just ‘yeah,’ because you’re starting to freak me out.”

Instead of speaking, Gibbs rose, came around to Tony’s side of the table and pulled him to his feet. Tony’s stomach was fluttering and he had the feeling something big was about to happen, something important. Gibbs’ eyes were so blue and he had sunburn across his forehead and nose, and there was a small scar near his hairline that Tony didn’t think he’d ever noticed before. “Boss?”

Gibbs reached out and gently pulled him into an embrace. Tony let out a small sound, and when Gibbs’ mouth descended on his, kissing him lightly, he moaned and angled his head, thinking how good this felt, how right it was, and what an idiot he’d been not to see it coming.

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It was as much a surprise to Jethro as to himself, apparently, the sudden need to be close, to make physical contact with Tony. To protect him. It had been so long since Tony had had any kind of connection with someone he cared about. He drank in every hungry kiss and caress Jethro bestowed upon him, and still, he wanted more. He wanted everything.

They ended up on the couch, half-entwined, grinning at each other. Jethro cupped the side of Tony’s face and asked softly, “You okay with this?”

He looked a little scared, Tony thought, and he knew how he felt. “Very okay. But… this seems really sudden.”

Jethro shrugged. “Just needed to.”

Tony cleared his throat. “Is this your first…?”

Jethro blushed to the roots of his hair. “Uh… Yeah.”
“I don’t want to discourage you or anything, but… are you sure?” Tony asked, concerned about Jethro changing his mind.

Jethro looked at Tony with a small smile, and it grew wider as he said, “I’ve never been so sure of anything. From the moment I found you, alive, in that car, I just knew.”

“I’ve been with guys before,” Tony warned.

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

“Like… a lot of them.”

“So those dates you’ve been on weren’t all women?”

“Uh, well…” Tony scrunched up his face. “None of them.” Jethro raised his eyebrows, so Tony added, “I used to like the ladies, but I like men more, and I haven’t looked at any women for a long time.”

Jethro looked at him curiously. “How long?”

“Six years.”

“You mean all the time… Huh.” After a moment, Jethro smiled. “I was afraid there’d be competition.”

“No. There’d never be any competition, Jethro.”

“This is good then?” Jethro asked.

“It’s damned good,” Tony said with a grin. “Only… I’m not sharing you, so you can forget about dating anyone else.” Tony knew he was getting ahead of himself but didn’t care, because he’d seen
Jethro chuckled. “Last time I had anything that even comes close to a date was so long ago that…
Hell, I don’t even remember it, so that’s telling you something.”

“I’m not sharing you,” Tony said, just to make certain he was understood.

Jethro looked pleased with what he was hearing. “Good, ‘cause that works both ways.”

And then Jethro kissed Tony until Tony couldn’t remember what they’d been talking about, and he kissed him some more, until he didn’t care.

Tony scarfed down a big plate of lasagna for lunch. Recovering from an undercover assignment was a bit like getting out of prison. Everything he’d once taken for granted became a luxury. Food tasted better and he couldn’t get enough of it, and sleeping in a bed with fine linens was something to take pleasure in. But the best thing was being held in Jethro’s arms, and kissed with abandon, and treated like he was someone special.

Director Shepard called and told Tony to rest up for a couple of days. Tony knew he needed time to get his head on straight so he didn’t quarrel about it, like he usually would. After lunch, Jethro kissed him softly on the cheek and reluctantly went in to the Navy Yard. Tony wrote his report while sitting at the dining room table, using Jethro’s barely used laptop. By mid-afternoon, he couldn’t keep his eyes open; he felt like he’d been hit by a truck. The couch had never looked so enticing, and the second he laid his head down on a handy pillow, he was asleep.

When Jethro returned around seven, Tony was just waking up, with no idea what time it was. He got up for dinner, and afterwards Jethro changed the bandage on his neck. The wound looked okay, he said, as he carefully pressed down the tape along the edges of the gauze. Later, they watched some TV, with Jethro’s arm draped across his shoulders as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The whole thing seemed surreal, and Tony kept wondering when it was going to come to an end.

Tony had to answer a lot of questions about the shooting, and deal with the NCIS shrink before being reinstated. He didn’t mind talking to Dr. Julie, the NCIS-appointed psychiatrist. He’d had sessions with her a few times before, and he liked that she was a no-nonsense type who didn’t ply
him with any stupid questions, or ask him about his childhood. She came from a family of cops and knew how things were. He had to see her three times before she signed off on him though.

His neck healed and the scar wasn’t so bad. Ducky okayed him for field duty, and things returned to normal. Only they didn’t, because instead of going back to his own apartment after work, he went home with Jethro.

At night he slept in Jethro’s bed, and was held in his strong arms, and although they made out like teenagers, they didn’t get around to having sex for days. Tony got so wound up with anticipation that the first time Jethro caressed his balls, he came with a soft moan. Jethro was taking things slowly, too slowly, and Tony had to practically beg to be fucked. Their first time was a bit awkward and surprisingly sweet, but it turned out Jethro was as direct, commanding and earnest in bed as he was at work, and that made for great sex. The first time they made love, the expression on Jethro’s face, of bliss and utter satisfaction, made Tony happier than he’d been in a very long time. He had dreamed of seeing love shining in Jethro’s eyes, love for him, and when he saw it, the real thing, he knew that he was in deep trouble – because there was no turning back.

Somehow, Tony couldn’t believe it was going to last, because none of his relationships ever did, and this was his boss. Within a few weeks, half his belongings had somehow migrated over to Jethro’s house, so he shouldn’t have been surprised when Jethro asked, over a breakfast of cold wheat cereal and hot black coffee, “Hell, why don’t you just move in?”

Tony must have been half asleep or stupid or something, because he looked at Jethro with his mouth open for a good ten seconds before asking, “Uh… for how long?”

“Forever, dumbass,” Jethro said, shaking his head. “I want us to live together.”

“Really?” Instead of feeling cornered, or anxious about the prospect of living with another man, Tony was thrilled. He grinned and threw himself at Jethro. Luckily it was a Saturday because they ended up in bed and didn’t come up for air for hours. Eventually, Tony slapped Jethro on the ass and told him to get dressed, because had to go to his apartment and pack up his belongings. “And we’d better stock up on condoms and lube, and an extra box of gloves, and we’ll need enema supplies…”

He was happy; they both were. They got along surprisingly well at home, sharing chores, doing guy stuff together. The sex was regular, and it certainly hadn’t slowed down or lost that nice shiny new feeling. It was good, with some pretty amazing orgasms and some nice cuddling afterwards, and it seemed to be getting better all the time.

Tony loved that they were keeping this arrangement to themselves. It was just the two of them. No
outsiders intruding and messing things up. No sideways looks or crude remarks from friends and co-workers. They were both experienced at keeping their private lives private, and that’s exactly how Tony wanted to keep it. Nobody had to know; it wasn’t anyone’s business what they did in their own home.

Jethro was focused and attentive, and he had some fucking magical ways with that long, wet tongue of his, but one night, after they’d been together for four months, Tony decided to move things up a notch. He fetched his sex-toy bag out of the back of the closet, thinking it was time he introduced Jethro to some alternate fun. He pulled out a large inflatable dildo, and pled in his sexiest voice, “Please, I want you to fuck my ass with this, and pump it up big, bigger than big, and fucking just fuck me so hard I fucking pass out.” Jethro’s neck flushed a deep red and he stared at Tony in shock. The what-the-fuck freeze only lasted a couple of seconds, but it made Tony wonder, hadn’t anyone ever brought some toys into the bedroom and talked dirty to him? Apparently not.

“What did you just say?”

Tony waggled the dildo around. “Um… it’ll be fun?”

Jethro snorted and pretty much head-slapped the dildo out of Tony’s hand, and a minute later he was getting all growly and had him pinned to the bed, wrists captured over his head. Jethro jerked his hips, thrusting his hard cock against Tony’s equally hard cock, and soon had him writhing and moaning underneath him. That night, Jethro fucked him in the same manner he usually did, only perhaps with a little more vigor.

Tony wasn’t about to just let the subject lie there. He tried again, pulling out anal beads and a tube of Extra-X Hot Sex Cream while smiling enticingly. Once again Jethro got rid of ‘that crap’ with a snort of disdain, and went about things his usual way. “Get your legs up. Ass higher. I’m going to fuck you, and then I’m going to fuck you again.”

“Oh okay,” Tony said breathlessly.

If Tony tried to talk about sex toys or bondage at any time, Jethro shut him up by kissing him until he felt faint, or he pushed him over the back of the couch and fucked him until he forgot whatever it was he’d been trying to discuss.

When Tony tentatively introduced role-playing, or handcuffs or Saran Wrap, Jethro seemed to think he was kidding, and brushed it off. Then there was that time when Tony had a crazy moment and donned an unforgiving black corset and a heavy black leather collar he’d been saving for a special occasion. He asked, in his best sultry voice, to be tied up and spanked. He even provided several feet
of a nice green linen rope and enticed, “C’mon, Sailor, show me how good you are with tying me in knots.”

*That* was the last straw, apparently. He could see Jethro was angry, or maybe upset, and he knew he’d pushed him too far. Anyway, Jethro unbuckled the collar and threw it in the trash, growling, “Don’t ever wear anything like that again.” Before Tony could respond, Jethro shouldered past him and stormed off.

Jethro walking out on him hurt more than Tony had anticipated. He told himself he should be used to rejection by now, but the more he thought about it, the angrier he got. They could have at least talked about it, and Jethro could have tried. Tony removed the corset and put everything away, muttering, “Who the fuck does he think he is? Don’t my feelings count for anything? What is he so scared of?” After getting himself all worked up, Tony tracked his lover down to give him a piece of his mind. Jethro wasn’t hard to find. He was in the basement, hammering nails into a useless scrap of wood, apparently taking pleasure in beating the crap out of it. Tony waited for a minute, but when he didn’t even look over at him, he called out Jethro’s name until he stopped the hammering.

Jethro was all tense and bristling, his eyes glittering in the overhead lights. “I don’t get it. Why the hell do you need that crap?”

“They’re called toys because they’re fun,” Tony replied.

“Maybe I don’t want that kind of fun. You ever think of that?”

“Okay, so maybe I came on too strong, but you won’t even consider the things I like? Things I’d like to share with you?”

Jethro shook his head, obviously bemused. “Isn’t what we do together good enough? You getting bored? Is that it, DiNozzo?”

“Of course it is – good enough, I mean.” Tony felt bad that he’d made Jethro think there was some problem with the sex, or that it was lacking in any way. “It’s wonderful. I love making love with you. Only… things like costumes or dildos aren’t the main attraction, they’re more like the appetizer.”

“And you need this… stuff.” Jethro frowned at him in a way that said he just didn’t get it.
“Well…” Tony wavered a little too long, and Jethro started to turn away, but Tony caught his arm and made him look at him. “I’m used to it,” he said truthfully. “I’ve always had partners who enjoyed cuffs and floggers and… It’s not like I can’t get it up without being tied up but… It’s fun, if you’d only try it.”

“It doesn’t sound like fun, and if you think I’m going to spank you or whatever, you’ve got another thing coming. I mean, you don’t really want that big dildo up your ass, do you?”

Tony looked at Jethro and saw he was really out of his element here. He tried another way of explaining it. “When I was in college, there was this English Lit professor, Professor Barbara Astin. I met her at a German Expressionist Films series. She invited me back to her place after a showing of *Different from the Others*, 1919. It was the first pro-gay film ever made. Anyway, I remember… it was a Sunday night.” Tony grinned. “The professor told me to strip, and she said the bedroom was soundproofed.”

“She tied you up?” Jethro asked, scowling.

“Oh yeah. Spread-eagled, my wrists and ankles tied to the bed with *sumersha*. It’s a red Japanese bondage rope. She spent the next twenty minutes dripping hot wax all over my body.” Jethro looked horrified, but Tony smiled. “The minute she touched my dick I came. God, I’d never come so hard before. I thought she was going to untie me, but she didn’t. She left me tied to the bed while she sat at the end of it and masturbated.” Tony laughed a little, remembering. “I went back every Sunday night for weeks. You couldn’t keep me away. If I got there and she hadn’t finished grading papers, she’d tie me in the raccoon dog position – legs crossed, arms tied behind me – next to her chair. By the time she was done, I was so fucking hard.” He sighed. “I had to stop going when it got in the way of basketball practice.”

“Why would you want to be hurt?” The expression on Jethro’s face seemed to be saying ‘I would never hurt you.’

“I don’t know. I guess it makes the release feel so good. It can be pretty intense.”

After a long pause, Jethro said, “I don’t get it but… I’ll think about it.” It was obvious the whole thing made him uncomfortable, but at least he seemed willing to consider Tony’s needs. Tony nodded in acknowledgment and went upstairs to watch the late movie while waiting for Jethro to come up from his man-cave. He must have fallen asleep, because next thing he knew it was morning. He was still on the couch and there was a blanket draped over him. The house was silent. Jethro had already left for work and hadn’t woken him. It was the first time they had slept apart since they’d started their relationship.
At work, Jethro kept any conversation strictly case-related, which was okay, but once they got home, he continued to act like a clam. Tony didn’t like being shut out, but he was willing to give Jethro some space – for now. That night, when Tony went up to bed, he expected Jethro to join him. When he didn’t, Tony went downstairs to see why he wasn’t coming up, and found him asleep on the couch. That really hurt. Tony understood that Jethro needed some time to figure things out, but abandoning him to sleep alone felt like he was being punished. He felt like he’d done something wrong, even though he knew he hadn’t.

Jethro treated him like a stranger at work the next day, and Tony started to fear for their relationship. McGee and Ziva noticed something was going on, and tried to get Tony to tell them about it. He just plastered a fake smile on his face and avoided their questions as best he could.

Tony stayed out as long as he could that night, watching a game on a big screen at a sports bar. Eventually he had to go home. When he stumbled in around one, he found Jethro waiting up. Jethro asked him to sit next to him on the couch, and he looked so serious Tony grew anxious.

“Please, sit with me,” Jethro said. Once Tony was seated, he handed him a medium-sized black box. It had the name of a shop in gold script on the lid: All Tied Up. “I got this for you,” Jethro said, looking nervous. “And I am sorry.”

“Sorry for giving me a gift?” asked Tony, raising his eyebrows.

“No, for being boring.”

“You’re not boring, you’re not,” Tony said quickly, wishing he’d never started down this road.

Jethro gave him a look that clearly said he didn’t believe him. “You wouldn’t be the first to say so. Open it,” he urged.

This was totally unexpected, being given a present and an apology. Tony carefully removed the lid of the box and unfolded the tissue paper. There, lying on a bed of black velvet was a beautiful silver collar. For a second, he couldn’t breathe, as the significance of the gift struck him. It was a tinted gunmetal shade, and had little red gemstones set all the way around. An ornate o-ring dangled in front. “This is for me?” Tony asked, touching the finely crafted collar reverently.

Jethro was watching him intently. “Is it right? Your birthstone. I’ve been thinking about this for a while.”
Tony didn’t know what to say. That Jethro thought enough to choose a gift like this, and one with his birthstone, was amazing. Even more so was the symbolism of giving the collar, and for him, receiving it. “Yes, Yes, it’s beautiful.”

Jethro asked, his voice rough, “I guess I’m traditional. Tony, what I really want to give you is a ring but… we can’t…”

“I’m yours, with or without a collar, or a ring,” Tony said with a rueful smile. “Put it on me?”

Jethro moved behind Tony and fastened the clasp to secure it around his neck. He leaned over to kiss the side of Tony’s neck, just above the collar, and growled, “I want to see you wearing it, naked.”

Unable to find his voice at that moment, Tony managed a nod. He angled his head to give Jethro better access to his neck, the kisses changing to sucking and then biting. Tony groaned, “You’re making me hard.”

“Just the way I like you,” Jethro said, turning Tony so he faced him. He hooked a finger through the ring at the front of the collar and pulled Tony in for a kiss. The softness of Jethro’s lips, the coffee-tinged taste, the feeling of warmth and love stole his breath away. It was more than a kiss – it was a promise, just like the collar was, and his arousal flared. They parted, slowly, giving each other lingering kisses, as if they had all the time in the world. Once again, Jethro apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to do with all that stuff you were telling me. But I want you to be happy. Maybe we can… start small?”

Tony smiled at the man he loved, and told him the truth. “I didn’t mean for you to be uncomfortable. I kept pushing you when I could see you didn’t like it. I was being insensitive and, I’ll admit, I like pushing you a bit. Jethro, I can live without being stuffed with a butt plug and tied up, but I can’t live without you. I just want… I need you to understand that I’m yours, and that you can do anything to me. Anything, okay?”

Jethro’s response was to take him to the bedroom, where he fucked Tony so beautifully that he was left shaking and unable to catch his breath.
In the Black of Night

IN THE BLACK OF NIGHT
December 2006

«•»«•»«•»

In the Black of Night
Slow Train

Bright white light up ahead,
Screaming sirens that I dread.
No one but me to be
Witness to this tragedy.

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Tony, still in bed with Jethro on top of him, was on the phone with the NCIS night dispatcher. “Sure, I’ll let him know. Yeah, I know, rather me than you. Remember, you owe me, Franklin.” Hanging up with a sigh, Tony looked over his shoulder. “Let me up.” He shifted his ass a little, and Jethro rolled off him with a satisfied groan.

Tony flopped on his back. “Franklin says to tell you it’s our case because he can’t reach anyone else.”

“Why does he owe you?”

Tony turned to face Jethro with a wicked little smile. “Because he thinks I have to phone you and wake you up, and he assumes you’re gonna get all growly. Of course he has no idea you’re right next to me, or that you’re one big pussy cat.” He ran a hand down Jethro’s sweaty chest, stroking him softly. “Meow.”

Jethro snorted and pulled Tony into a kiss, his mouth open and demanding. When their lips parted, Tony was breathing hard and wanting more. Jethro shook his head regretfully and warded off his wandering hands. “Shit, we can’t do this. I shouldn’t have started.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Tony retorted, nipping Jethro’s chin.

Jethro sucked in a deep breath and moved away. “As soon as this case is over, you tell your buddy Franklin we’re off rotation for the next three days.”
“Promise?”

“Promise,” Jethro replied.

“Okay, Boss,” Tony agreed, sneaking in another kiss before Jethro rolled off the bed. It was only ten days before Christmas, and he’d been looking forward to shopping for a tree. This would be their second Christmas together as a couple, but last year they’d worked the holidays and hadn’t had time for a tree.

“Where’re we going?” Jethro asked, heading into the bathroom.

Tony watched him go, admiring his tight ass. “Oh…um… 13 Hayfield Street NW. Dead Naval officer, hanged in his own home.”

While Jethro was showering, Tony ran downstairs and started the coffee maker. The bathroom on the ground floor had originally been small so they had taken out a closet in order to put in a shower because there were times when one or the other of them was injured and couldn’t make it up the stairs. The small den at the back now had a queen bed and TV in it, even though it was a tight fit. Tony had a quick wash and dressed in casual work clothes – dark jeans and an LL Bean turtleneck. It was chilly out, so he pulled on a sweater and made sure he had some gloves. Knowing they both needed coffee, and a lot of it, he stopped to fill two travel mugs from the coffee pot and headed out the door.

Jethro was already waiting in the car. He smirked and asked, “What took you so long?”

Tony slipped into the passenger seat with the travel mugs in his hands. “Well, gee, I guess I could have shaved a few seconds off my time if I hadn’t stopped to get you this.” He stuck one mug in Jethro’s hand. Jethro grunted an apology so Tony leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He said affectionately, “Grouch. You get up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“There is no wrong side so long as you’re in it,” Jethro said with a crooked smile.

“That’s so sweet,” Tony said, meaning it.
Jethro smiled and kissed Tony on the mouth, with cool lips and a hint of a warm tongue. Tony angled his head and deepened the kiss with a low moan, and soon forgot exactly why they were sitting in a cold car before the sun was even up.

It wasn’t long before Jethro pulled away with a sigh. “We’ll finish this later,” he promised.

As soon as Jethro turned the key in the ignition, they were in work mode and calling each other by their surnames. Funny how they were able to switch off their work life when at home, and never had any trouble closing the door on their personal life when they were at work.

Tony echoed his lover’s sigh with one of his own. Having sex with Jethro was great, like unbelievable, but lately they always seemed too tired to do much more than the basics. Not that there was anything wrong with a hand job, especially when that hand had calluses on it, and the man attached to that hand had a special way of touching him that made him feel more loved than he’d ever felt in his life. It was just… he wanted more. Tony never brought up the fact that he was aching to be punished and plugged, to be bound in leather while gagged, and fucked without mercy. The collar Jethro had given him – when Tony wore it he felt that he was loved by Jethro, that he belonged to him. But the collar was as far as Jethro was willing to go. He’d made it clear when they’d first become lovers that he wasn’t going to have any of Tony’s toys or restraints in the bedroom. Tony accepted he’d have to do without, and he even got used to it, but sometimes he just yearned for something more.

“We need some serious alone-time,” Tony said.

“Job comes first,” Jethro reminded him.

“I know, we agreed. Still, it sucks.”

Jethro agreed, “Yeah, I get it. Maybe this’ll be an in-and-out.”

“A suicide,” Tony said hopefully, as he got on the phone to notify McGee.

Gibbs pulled up outside a brick townhouse at 13 Hayfield Street, and hit the brakes hard enough to jostle his senior agent. “We here?” Tony asked, stretching and looking around with bleary eyes.
“Ya think?”

It was a chilly, long before sunrise, and streetlights illuminated a narrow, tree-lined street with handsome brick town homes on both sides. The residences were built close to each other, but most had driveways and garages, so there was some parking available on the street. The bushes were trimmed, and the small lawns and flowerbeds were orderly and well maintained. Even the trash cans sitting on the curb awaiting pickup were neatly lined up.

Their destination was easy to pick out. It was the only house with all the lights on, and there were two uniformed policemen standing guard out front. Gibbs was out of the car and heading for the house, his badge out, before Tony had even unfastened his seat belt.

McGee pulled up a few houses down and met Tony at the rear of the company sedan he was driving. “Nice neighborhood,” he commented, sounding a little envious.

“Not if you’re a dead body,” Tony said with a smirk. He stretched with a yawn and watched Gibbs greeting to a man who emerged from the large brick house. Tony recognized him as a Metro detective, Zipkowski. Together, he and McGee pulled their equipment out of the trunk. He was glad Ziva was on leave. She’d gone to Israel to a wedding, she’d said. They’d had almost one week so far with no games, no sniping, and no pushing her way into the men’s room. She wouldn’t be back until Monday. Tony wished they had more than three more days of peace. It meant they had to take on the extra workload, but he’d been a two-man team with Gibbs long enough to learn it was possible for two agents to handle an investigation. Tiring but possible. And with McGee, they made an efficient team.

The detective was saying, “Called you Navy cops as soon as I saw he was one of yours.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the big house behind him.

“Hey Zipper, how’s Bobby Junior?” Tony asked as he lugged a couple of bags up the sidewalk.

Detective Bob Zipkowski, a large man, often wore a hangdog expression, and he spoke slowly, as if every word that came out of his mouth was preceded by a great deal of thought. At the mention of his son, though, he beamed with pride. “Heading for college soon. The kid got a scholarship, thank God. You know the cost of college these days? The classes alone are enough to break the bank, and we’re not even talking living expenses. Rhonda and I put our foot down. Live at home and go to a local college, we said.”
“He get into Virginia Tech?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, he plans to go into agricultural tech–”

Gibbs interrupted the detective, saying sourly, “Maybe you two’d like to stand out here and play catch-up while Agent McGee and I check out the crime scene on our own?”

Zipkowski handed over a wallet. “Here’s the ID we found in the kitchen, along with a key ring. Somebody called it in anonymously about an hour ago. Two officers arrived, found the front door ajar, and proceeded to check out the residence. The victim is an Edward Devlin. He’s the owner. It looks like someone else lives here up on the top floor, but there’s no sign of him.”

Gibbs looked through the wallet and inspected the deceased’s ID. “Lieutenant Edward S. Devlin,” he read aloud. “Robbery?”

“I don’t think so. Nothing seems out of place,” Zipkowski replied.

Gibbs held out the wallet. “McGee…”

McGee pulled out an evidence bag and collected the wallet.

Gibbs told the two policemen to wait outside while his team cleared the residence, even though they assured him they’d already checked out the entire place. He asked Detective Zipkowski, “Where’s the body?”

“Downstairs. Basement…”

They entered the house and Tony and McGee dropped their bags to one side of the foyer. Neither of them needed any instructions other than Gibbs’ nod towards a sweeping staircase that led up to the second floor. Gibbs drew his weapon and went to clear the ground floor first, with Det. Zipkowski on his heels.

Tony and McGee drew their weapons and searched the second floor with their usual efficient teamwork. The house was furnished in a contemporary style, and Tony’s discerning eye told him
everything was high quality. In his estimation, the art on the walls, all contemporary work and strong abstracts, was probably worth more than the house itself, which was saying a lot.

The master bedroom was the size of Tony’s entire old apartment. A huge painting of two men hung over the bed, the colors dark and dramatic. Tony couldn’t make out if the bold figures were fighting or were having sex.

The bedroom boasted a huge walk-in closet filled with designer suits and a collection of high-end watches that must have set the man back a few thousand. There were several uniforms and some military gear at the far end of the closet.

The bathroom just off the master was opulent with a closet full of high-end towels and the usual toiletries, all expensive brands. Tony quickly poked around in the medicine cabinet and found Lt. Devlin’s prescription medications: Viagra, penicillin and two types of antibiotics.

They cleared two other bedrooms and a second bathroom. Everything was neat and clean, with no sign of any struggle. It was almost as if nobody lived there.

The two agents progressed cautiously to the third floor, although Tony’s instinct told him there wasn’t anyone up there.

Whereas the rest of the house was clean, the room they first entered was messy, bed unmade, clothes and dirty dishes strewn around on the floor. It seemed as though the renter had little respect for his personal space. The bathroom was just as bad.

“Looks like a college dorm room,” McGee muttered in disgust.

Tony wrinkled his nose. “Smells like one, too.”

The only other room on the third floor was huge, and it was being used as an art studio. A glance around told Tony there was nowhere for anyone to hide. There was a ratty old couch and a broken upholstered chair to one side, and an industrial-size sink in the corner. Tony was more interested in dozens of large canvasses leaning against the wall, facing away, and a finished painting displayed on a sturdy easel. A big table was covered in art supplies, everything neatly stored in containers, brushes upright in heavy mugs, tubes of oil paint lined up next to a clean palette. Tony sniffed the air. “Linseed oil and damar varnish,” he said while poking around at the art supplies.
“Nice work,” McGee said, pointing at the work in progress on the easel.

Tony agreed. The scene depicted on the large canvas was pleasant, a river with boats and reflections, painted in rich colors, in large loose strokes. He pulled out one of the big paintings leaning against the wall, expecting to find another landscape, but what he saw took him aback. It was as though someone completely different had painted it. Thinking it might be a fluke, he turned several of the canvases around and lined them up, and then stepped back to stand next to McGee. He didn’t know what to say at first. McGee was as speechless as he was. The paintings were powerful and incredibly violent, and looked like they were done by someone who was angry and very disturbed.

All of the paintings, with their bold, erratic strokes, heavy emphasis on black and splashes of red paint were macabre, with decaying flesh, blood and gore, and grotesque figures fighting or fucking, or both. The largest painting depicted two figures in some kind of physical conflict. One man was physically big, with bulging muscles, and a strikingly large penis jutted from his body. He was standing, bound with red rope that crisscrossed his body and looped around his neck. He was choking; his grossly swollen tongue protruded from his mouth, and his eyes were popping out of their sockets. The other figure in the painting, of much smaller stature, was wielding an ax, hacking huge gashes in the big man’s body. He had a piece of what appeared to be human flesh stuffed in his mouth, torn from his enemy’s thigh.

But it was the smaller man’s head that was so bizarre, rendered in an unrealistically small size. There were spikes of blond hair showing, but the face was completely obliterated with a frenzied scrawl of black paint. It was as if the artist was trying to eradicate the smaller man’s identity.

Tony turned a few more of the large paintings around and they were all of a similar theme, although in one, it was the man with the small head was bound in ropes, knotted around his torso and legs. The face was blackened in all of them, and in some, his penis appeared to have been cut off.

Tony suppressed a shudder. “Jesus, these are… disturbing. They remind me of that painting by Goya, with the man eating his own children.”

McGee looked troubled and a little pale. “They’re worse than any crime scene I’ve ever seen. At least they’re not John Wayne Gacy killer clowns.”

Tony said, “Okay, those clowns scare me, but you have to admit these are worse. I mean, this guy has some serious issues, probably into self-mutilation. Definitely some fantasies of killing the big dude, whoever he is. Plus, he’s into bondage, but not in a good way.”

“There’s a good way?” McGee asked.
Tony stared at his partner for a moment, and shook his head. “Of course there is. Don’t you know...?”

“I know enough,” McGee shot back. “Let’s get this done.” He rifled through a pile of sketches on a nearby art table, and found some 8x10s in a folder. “Looks like he used these for reference.”

Tony looked through the photographs. They featured men bound in rope that followed their body’s curves, intricately rigged and knotted. There were shadows over the faces, their identities obscured. “These are shibari. Japanese artistic rope bondage. Erotic. I’d say they were shot by someone experienced.” He turned one over. “There’s a label, says MaxXChen. The photographer?”

“I’ll look it up, but we need to finish here and get downstairs.”

Tony glanced at his watch. They’d only been up here for about fifteen minutes but McGee was right. Gibbs would be wondering where the hell they were. He quickly searched a large desk behind the easel, rifling through several drawers until he found something useful. “Receipts for art supplies. A school schedule, freshman college courses in art and psychology. Now there’s a surprise,” he said sarcastically. “Hey, I’ve got a name: Jacob Alderman. Must be our Picasso.”

McGee looked around the kitchenette. “I wonder where he is. Hard to tell when he was last here. There are things growing in this sink. I think that’s some kind of fungi,” he said, looking grossed out.

Tony had a quick look, confirming that McGee wasn’t exaggerating. There were mugs and plates covered in congealing food, and some suspicious grey matter that was probably HazMat-worthy mold. “Okay, let’s get out of here, see what Gibbs found.” They’d come back to take photos and collect evidence, but now he led the way downstairs.
SCENE OF THE CRIME

Scene of the Crime

Marcia Ball

Well if you're wondering why I'm bad,
Well the whole world knows my sin.
I just want everybody to know
The sorry shape I'm in.

December 2006 from now on...

On the ground floor, a Metro cop directed them to a stairway at the far end of the wide hallway. “They’re down there.”

Tony and McGee picked up their bags containing the camera and everything they needed to collect evidence, and went down a stairway at the end of the hall. At the bottom, they pushed through a heavy door and entered a finished walk-out basement.

The first thing Tony noticed was the nude male body hanging from the ceiling. It would have been hard to miss. It was right in the center of the large open basement, with leather chairs set up in a semi-circle as if ready for an audience. At a glance, he saw a bed set up on one side, a sitting area on another, and at the back of the basement, a variety of equipment commonly seen in sex dungeons.

But it was the hanging man he found fascinating. The victim had an intricately woven harness of red rope knotted around most of his well-built body. He was suspended by several ropes secured to industrial hooks that slid along a metal beam that ran the width of the basement ceiling. His arms were bound tightly to his sides, immobilizing him; only his legs were free. A length of rope was wound several times around his neck, creating a tall collar, also tied off above his head; the rope collar forced his chin up, preventing his head from hanging. And his head – it was completely encased in a tight black latex hood, with only his mouth exposed. Below the dangling corpse was a pool of bodily fluids, including a considerable amount of blood that appeared to have come from several puncture wounds around his groin.

Tony noticed the man’s cock had so much twine wound around it, it jutted out from his body. He said with an abrupt laugh, “Talk about a trussed-up turkey. Didn’t anyone tell him Thanksgiving is over?”
“Hey!” Gibbs admonished.

“Sorry, Boss,” Tony said quickly. “Got a little carried away there. Won’t happen again.” He walked slowly around the body, fascinated by the intricacy of the rope-work.

Detective Zipkoski said, “Well I’ve seen a lot in my day, but nothing like this.” He indicated the rope wound about the dead man’s neck. “Strangled?”

Tony studied the rope, wrapped several times around the victim’s neck and knotted at regular intervals up the back of his neck. “It’s a shibari corset collar. Never seen one like this before. Those knots are designed so they don’t slip. The rope that goes from the collar to the hook up there pulls on his neck and cuts off his oxygen, just enough to take him to the edge of panic.” As he finished talking, Tony realized that everyone was staring at him. He gave a nonchalant shrug and said, “Read a book on it once.”

It was obvious from Gibbs’ frown that he didn’t believe him.

Zipkowski was looking at the deceased as if he’d never seen a dead body before. “How’d he die then? Looks to me like he was hung.”

Dr. Mallard arrived just in time to hear the detective’s statement. “The correct word is hanged, Detective Zipkowski. Pheasant and clothing is hung. Humans are hanged. Good morning, gentlemen, even if it is a bit early to be chipper.” The ME set down the gear he was carrying and looked at the body with interest. “Hmmm.”

Gibbs greeted him with, “Hey Ducky. Stab wounds to the abdomen and groin. Bled out.”

Tony asked, “Where’s Palmer? No assistant today?”

“Mr. Palmer is at a seminar in Chicago, and so I am flying solo. As to the cause of death, we shall find that out, all in good time. The officers are kindly bringing in some of my equipment. Ah, here they are,” said Ducky, as he hurried to meet the cops at the door, and directed them to leave a rolling gurney bearing his equipment just inside the room. He thanked them and quickly and efficiently ushered them out before they could get a good look at the deceased.
Gibbs turned to his agents. “You two find anything upstairs?”

Tony reported, “The second floor is spotless, spit-and-polish clean. In fact, it’s so damned clean I just know something dirty has to be going on.” He looked thoughtfully at the body hanging in front of him. “Maybe all that cleanliness is overcompensation for being a bad boy down in the dungeon.”

McGee reported, “We found evidence of someone else in residence, Boss, possibly a student living the top floor. He isn’t here now though. Name is Jacob Alderman…” McGee had his iPad out and quickly brought up the information he was seeking. “Alderman, age 19, with this address listed at DMV. Looks like he’s lived here since early August. He’s a freshman studying art history at American University. He has a part time job at the Hennesy Museum…”

“The Hennesy?” Tony queried, perking up. He peered over McGee’s shoulder to look at Jacob’s picture and info. He looked ordinary enough, with light brown hair, sun-bleached on the tips, and with freckles across his nose. He had that startled expression you see all-too often on driver’s licenses.

“Yeah, why?” McGee asked suspiciously.

Tony smiled. “Well, the Hennessy Museum has the largest collection of erotic art in the US, and they recently acquired a large collection of erotica from the 19th century. Anonymously, of course. They use art history students to do the cataloging.”

McGee asked, “How’d you know all this, Tony?”

With a widening grin, Tony said, “I guess I read it in Forno. That’s Tel-Aviv’s newest erotica magazine. Ziva loaned me her copy.”

“You can’t read Hebrew, Tony.”

“Don’t need to. It’s got pictures, McLinguist.”

McGee snorted. “I’ll bet Ziva doesn’t want it back after you read it.”
“Well, you’re wrong. I promised I’d wear gloves and wipe it down before I return it.” When Gibbs glared at him, Tony turned back to the investigation, “Alderman, who lives on the third floor, he’s an artist, and I don’t think it’s a stretch to say his paintings look an awful lot like this scene here. Could be he’s been fantasizing about doing away with his landlord, and finally decided to do it for real.”

Ducky perked up at that. “Do you know that there was once an artist in Chile who created the most beautiful lifelike sculptures of young women. Everybody adored them, until one person noted the resemblance of these sculpted figures to certain local women who had gone missing. They later discovered that the artist had not only murdered a long string of young females, but he had encased them in plaster while—”

“Ducky,” Gibbs warned.


Gibbs gave Tony a swift smack on the back of his head. “You want to see dark, DiNozzo?”

“Ow.” Tony gingerly touched the back of his head. Sometimes, when Gibbs smacked him, it really stung. He really wished he wouldn’t do it. Still, getting slapped wasn’t enough to prevent him from getting out of line now and then. He liked to push Gibbs in order to get a reaction. “No, Boss!” He smiled at Det. Zipkowski, who was looking at their little interaction as if he were observing a five-car pileup. “He simply can’t help himself,” Tony whispered to him.

“Either of you put a BOLO out on this Jacob Alderman’s car yet?” Gibbs demanded.

McGee looked at his iPad and replied, “There aren’t any vehicles registered in his name. Lt. Devlin has two vehicles, though, a Porsche Carrera and a special edition Ford pickup.”

Zipkoswki pitched in, “Both vehicles are accounted for, in the attached garage.” Gibbs asked the detective if he could work on locating Alderman, the missing artist. He agreed, looking relieved to have an excuse to leave.


Ducky’s response was to tell them he wouldn’t know for sure until he got the body back to NCIS,
but he allowed, “I cannot use the liver probe while the body is hanging like this, but rigor and lividity suggests sometime between midnight and three a.m.”

Tony pulled his Nikon out of its case. After taking several shots of the body, he asked, “Do we know for certain that this is Lieutenant Devlin, Boss?” He caught Gibbs sending him a sideways look, and said defensively, “Well, this could be anyone. We can’t see his face, and he’s dressed in bright red rope and nothing else. You peek under the hood yet?”

“Anthony has a point there,” Ducky said with a tight smile, as he inspected the hanging man. “I will need this poor fellow lowered in order to have a proper look at him.”

Gibbs said, “We’re waiting for DiNozzo to finish taking photos and do sketches. McGee, do the fluids.”

Tony wrinkled his nose at what appeared to be blood, urine and semen on the floor under the body, and patted McGee on the back. “I heard you aced Fluids 101 at FLETC, Probie.” He laughed at the sour look his partner gave him.

It was Ducky who pointed out that the deceased may have been sexually assaulted. “There is trauma to the anus and evidence of bleeding, possibly from forcible penetration by an object.”

“Rape or sex play gone bad?” asked Gibbs.

Tony raised his eyebrows at hearing Gibbs say ‘sex play gone bad’ aloud. Gibbs caught his expression and scowled at him. It wasn’t easy to stifle a smile, but Tony managed. “You want photos of… the trauma now or should Ducky take them in autopsy?” he asked.

“I shall do it later, Anthony. And Jethro, you know I can’t speculate,” Ducky scolded. “However, I would make an educated guess that an inanimate object was employed, with considerable vigor, due to the damage I can see.”

“You have such a way with words, Duck,” said Gibbs, shaking his head.

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Ducky replied with a smirk and a slight bow of his head.
As McGee collected samples from around the body, he spotted something under one of the chairs. He got down on his knees and reached under it, saying, “Hey, I think I found … something… under here. Oh Jeez.” He stood and turned to show them what he’d found. It was a dildo, a large black rubber one.

“Finders keepers,” Tony said, taking a step back with his hands raised.

“Just take the pictures, Tony.” McGee held out his find at arm’s length so Tony could take the required photographs.

The dildo was a good ten inches long and over two inches in diameter. Tony didn’t want to hazard a guess as to what was coating its length but it looked like blood to him. The letters ‘B B’ could be seen in relief on its base. “The Big Boy,” Tony said, a little awestruck. He shuddered a little at the thought of what it would feel like to be impaled on the monster cock. Pretty damned intense.

McGee deposited the item in a large paper evidence bag and sealed it. He looked around before asking Tony in a low tone, “How can someone… you know… take all that?”

“Very slowly and carefully? And, with a really big bucket of Crisco. Considering it’s possible to take a hand and forearm up your ass…” Tony said, leaving his sentence unfinished. McGee blanched and gingerly carried the bagged dildo over to the box where they were holding the collected evidence.

Tony went back to taking photos of the hanged man, making sure he got close-ups of the knotted rope and the victim’s details: abraded skin from the rope, bruises around the neck, blood on the backs of his thighs, and several puncture wounds around his groin and lower abdomen. Gold hoop nipple rings. Erect cock wrapped in heavy red jute. A tattoo on his upper left arm. Tony took a close-up shot of the tattoo and then lowered the camera to inspect it with his naked eye. It was a tat of a winged skull with words running around a circle. “It says, ‘Force Recon, Swift, Deadly, Silent.’” He looked up at Gibbs. “Hey, Boss, this guy’s an MEU.”

McGee located his mobile fingerprint scanner and used it on the deceased. After a minute he read on his iPad, “We have confirmation that this is Lieutenant Edward S. Devlin, age 36, in the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit. He’s seen several tours in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Highly decorated. Uh… Looks like he is in the process of separating himself from the Marine Corps, Boss, is active in the reserves, and recently began working at the DoD in defense logistics.”

Gibbs looked grimly at the body, swinging slightly on its ropes. “Ducky, I want Lt. Devlin down as soon as possible.”
“Of course,” Ducky said, walking over to his equipment near the door. “I shall have to get the tarpaulin. I must have left it in the van.”

Gibbs told his agents, “When we’re done down here, I want photos of the entire residence, including the vehicles.” He pulled out his cell phone and placed a brief call to dispatch, telling them he needed another team of agents at the scene to assist with going door-to-door. It was early but people would be rising about now and soon they’d leave for work. They needed to do interviews before then.

There was a remote control on a chair, not far from the body. Tony took a photo of it, then handed it over to McGee. “What’s this for, McRemote?”

McGee pressed a button and the body started to lower towards the ground. He quickly pressed another button and it stopped.

“The lieutenant sure wasn’t operating that remote,” Gibbs said while opening a fingerprint-dusting kit. He started dusting the smooth finishes of the furniture.

McGee asked, “You want me to do that, Boss?”

“Nope. I can do it,” was Gibbs’ response. Without Ziva there, someone had to take up the slack, and if Gibbs was willing to pitch in, all the better, thought Tony.

Tony proposed, “You know, this could have been consensual. Not the killing part, but the getting tied up part. I mean, maybe he liked to struggle, fight the bondage. In order to get off.”

“You think his partner killed him?” McGee asked.

Tony shrugged. “All I know is you don’t do this kind of thing with just anyone. It has to be someone you trust. He could have been playing with one person, they left, and someone else came along and stabbed him.”

Gibbs said, “As soon as this room is finished, I want you on Lt. Devlin’s personal info, McGee. Find out what his plans were, if he had anyone here last night, friends’ names, finances, trouble at work. You know the drill. Tony, as soon as you’re done, start canvassing the neighbors. Find out if anyone
saw anything… C’mon, let’s get this done.”

The two agents said, “Yes, Boss,” at the same time, and got back to work.

As Tony sketched, he noted distances and measurements of the room. The basement was nicely finished with a floor of gray tile. There were areas designated for different activities, all well-lit with track lighting. More a playroom than a dungeon. To one side, near a small wet bar, a couch and chairs sat upon a large area rug the color of blood. A large flat-screen TV was on the wall, and below it sat a neat row of DVDs in cases. A glance at the titles revealed they were homemade movies, with hand-written titles: “Beating Around the Bushes,” and “Extreme Bondage from XDungeon,” and “Boys Will Be Boys Part IV.” They’d end up in Abby’s hands, along with the rest of the evidence; maybe he’d get a chance to sneak a peek at them in the privacy of her lab.

The coffee table had art books on it, as well as several wine glasses, and plates with the remnants of hors d’oeuvres that appeared to be a few hours old. Tony picked up a glass bowl filled with small foil packages. “Flavored condoms – party treats! Looks like someone had a little party down here last night, Boss.” He noticed another glass bowl on the carpet and picked it up carefully. There was blood on it and a few hairs. “Got a weapon here,” he called out.

Gibbs came over and bagged it. “Bet there’s a dent in the lieutenant’s skull that matches his bowl.” They wouldn’t know until the body was down and the hood removed from the deceased.

There were several small windows up high, currently shuttered from the inside. A heavy metal door at the far end led to the outside. To the left of the large basement was a king-size bed, and upon closer inspection Tony saw it had rubber sheets on it. “Easy clean-up, and satisfies that rubber kink, too,” he said to himself as he took photos. It appeared clean but he took some swabs anyway. The headboard and footboard were made of heavy tubular steel with rings welded onto the frame at regular intervals. It wasn’t hard to imagine some of what had gone on here.

After a closer inspection of the ceiling and walls, Tony called out, “This place is soundproofed. I’ll bet you could do a lot down here and the neighbors would never hear the screams.” Gibbs looked up from bagging evidence and nodded in acknowledgment.

Tony kept taking photos as he moved along. A heavy wooden St. Andrew’s cross was bolted to the wall, and some wooden stocks sat nearby. Nearby was a cushioned medical chair, complete with heavy straps ready to hold the patient securely in place. There was also an interesting looking bench covered in black padded leather. There were knee-rests and support for the chest, as well as heavy straps used to secure someone for a whipping. Tony approached the bench and sniffed. Leather and sex, sweat and hints of lemon lube. One whiff and his cock started to rise to the occasion. Shit, this was not the time to get turned on. He took a cleansing breath and concentrated on taking photos of the apparatus, telling himself this was business, and not pleasure. He took samples, efficiently
marking the plastic tubes as he went. He’d been doing this for a long time and was quick at it.

Ducky returned with a folded tarp and proceeded to regale them with the history of sex toys, but Tony only half-listened. He moved on to a built-in closet that took up about twelve feet of the wall. A glance over his shoulder told him McGee and Ducky were working together to get the victim down.

The first closet revealed some heavy rubber clothing, and a tripod and some photographic equipment. When he moved on and opened a set of double closet doors, Tony exclaimed, “Whoa!” Laid out before him was a collection of every type of toy, device and tool you’d need for a lifetime of practicing BDSM. Hanging neatly were whips, floggers, restraints, heavy cuffs and a large assortment of ropes. There was latex and leather clothing, and a pair of submissive ballet boots that Abby would die for. The shelves bore several aggressive-looking posture collars, and a variety of nipple and genital torture devices.

Tony’s breathing quickened as his eyes roved over the variety of hoods, breathing devices and gags, anal beads, spreaders and butt plugs, as well as a bunch of stuff that he had no clue as to its use. But it was a number of dildos in rubber, glass and metal sitting upright on a shelf that left Tony speechless. One was bigger than the Big Boy they’d found near the body; he wondered what kind of gaping hole it would leave.

“Holy crap,” said Gibbs, under his breath.

“No fucking kidding.” When Tony tore his eyes away from what was in front of him, he found Gibbs standing at his elbow, staring at the contents of the closet. “This guy was into some serious fetish stuff,” Tony said in awe. “Did you see the way his cock was tied up? Some boner! At least he died happy.”

Ducky, once again, proved that his hearing was sharp. He raised his voice slightly, to be heard across the basement. “Angel lust, it is sometimes called. Priapism can be caused by swift and violent manners of death, but I believe this poor fellow’s erection was premortem, due to lack of oxygen. The manner in which his penis is bound is all that is keeping it erect…”

Ducky droned on but Tony wasn’t listening because Gibbs was leaning so close he could feel his warm breath on his cheek. “This turn you on, DiNozzo?”

Tony glanced sideways at Gibbs. “Well, no. This is a crime scene and my personal feelings don’t come into it. I mean, this is an incredible collection, something for everyone, and… I’d say Lt. Devlin must have had some very interesting orgies down here. I’ll bet he was into threesomes and
foursomes. But no, it doesn’t make me all hot and bothered.”

Gibbs snorted. “A twosome is about all I can handle. Take your photos and then shut the damned doors.”

“What’s that?” Tony asked, reaching for a thick book on a lower shelf. He pulled it out and found it was a photo album. “Oh…I really don’t want to open this, Boss,” he said. Gibbs took it from him and started to leaf through the plastic-covered pages. Tony’s hunch, that there would be something in that album that all the brain bleach in the world couldn’t eradicate, was correct. The 8x10 photographs were of young men, some teenagers, some in their twenties, all tied up in some form of bondage. Most of the pictures showed someone – it looked like the same man throughout – having intercourse with the bound victims. Tony’s immediate thought was that these men were being raped, although there was nothing to say the sex wasn’t consensual.

In all of the photos, the man’s identity was hidden. Either his head cut off by the angle of the photo or it was cast in deep shadow, but the physique seemed the same in all the pictures. “Most of these photos were taken here,” Tony observed, recognizing the basement, the shuttered windows in the background of some of the pictures.

“It’s a trophy book.” Gibbs said, swearing. “Looks like these are from a few years ago.” He turned several pages and stopped at a photo that appeared to be recent. A tattoo was clearly visible on the arm of a man caught in the act of flogging a boyish figure with shaggy brown hair.

“And that’s Jacob Alderman, the college student who lives upstairs.” Tony recognized him from the ID McGee had pulled up. The young man looked skinnier in the photo, while naked and tied spread-eagled on the rubber-sheeted bed.

Gibbs flipped through the pages; at least half the album was made up of images of Jacob. In one photo, the man – it had to be Devlin – was fucking Jacob’s mouth; hands gripped both sides of his head. Another showed Jacob hanging upside down, his body twisting as the soles of his feet were caned. There was a series of photos of a naked Jacob strapped down in the examination chair, an anesthesia mask over his nose and mouth, Devlin’s rubber-gloved hand between his legs; it was impossible to tell if Jacob was conscious or not, but he appeared to be limp. Another showed him bound from thighs to shoulders in duct tape, a ball gag in his mouth, trapped in an impossibly small cage, staring at the camera lens, his eyes wide and pleading for release.

Tony pointed out that some photos had dates written them. “This one’s August. He’s been doing this since Jacob started renting the top floor from him. Devlin must have taken his own photos. There’s a tripod and camera in the closet.” They’d seen enough. Tony took the photo album from Gibbs and bagged it, automatically writing up the evidence tag. A hand on his shoulder made him turn. It was Gibbs. He didn’t say anything, just met Tony’s eyes, and the look in them, anger and sadness, almost
did him in. “Don’t, please,” Tony said. He couldn’t take any emotions right now, except for anger, he was so close to the edge.

Gibbs’ expression grew steely and determined. “We need to keep going.”

Tony nodded, unable to reply. He continued around the room, collecting evidence. A small trash receptacle nearby held a few items: bits of twine, crumpled tissues and wipes, and used condoms. He bagged and tagged them all. The drawers in a tall white cabinet revealed row upon row of instruments, some medical, some tools that you could buy at Home Depot. There were even a few kitchen tools in there, which gave him the creeps.

“Lots of sharp objects here,” Tony said, with an unexpected shiver. They looked clean, clinical, and were laid out with the kind of precision you might see in an operating room. McGee came over and helped him bag everything, just in case there was any of the lieutenant’s blood on them.

By the time they were done, Lt. Devlin’s body had been lowered, thanks to the motorized hook, and his body had been laid out on the plastic tarp. Ducky was waiting for them, for the big reveal. When Gibbs nodded, the ME selected a pair of shears from his bag, and proceeded to carefully cut through the hood covering the dead man’s face.

Ducky said, “The shape of the entry wounds around his groin is unusual. I’d hazard to say the cuts were not made by a knife, but by a small tool with a curved tip. A wood carving tool or a gouge, perhaps. Whatever it was, it was sharp enough to do the trick. With all the blood loss, it is probable the assailant cut an artery.”

“Wait a minute.” Tony looked around the room. “There aren’t any scissors here. You bag any, McGee?”

“No scissors,” McGee replied.

Gibbs asked Tony, “What scissors are you looking for?”

Tony said, “Um… when you practice bondage you always have some EMT scissors at hand, just in case. But look, there isn’t even a knife close by. No murder weapon either.”

“Did anyone witness someone leaving the house?” Tony asked.

“Nobody has come forward yet. We’ll need to knock on doors,” Gibbs replied.

“There we go,” said Ducky, having finally removed the hood covering the dead man’s features. “Hmmmm, I believe this man died of a heart attack.”

“But he has a rope around his neck, Ducky,” McGee pointed out.

“And he lost a lot of blood,” Tony chimed in.

Ducky nodded in agreement. “True, losing blood certainly would not help matters any. However, if this gentleman was practicing autoerotic asphyxiation, which is entirely possible, his heart could have gone into a dangerous abnormal rhythm, and a heart attack would ensue. Being stabbed did him no favors though.”

“And why didn’t his partner get him down when he was in trouble?” McGee asked.

“Maybe the partner wanted him dead,” Tony replied. He edged closer so he could get a good look at the man behind the mask. “So the question is which one killed him, the loss of blood or…” He took a couple of photographs of the dead man’s face and slowly lowered the camera. “Or…” The dead man had chiseled features, military-cut short blond hair, and full lips, now tinted a blueish gray. His eyes, half-open in death, stared at him. Tony stared back, unable to breathe, because he realized he knew this man. He knew him… “What… what’s his name?” Tony asked, his voice hoarse.

“Lt. Devlin,” McGee said, looking at Tony like he was crazy.

Tony replied sharply, “No, his full name.”

McGee said, “Lieutenant Edward S. Devlin. The S is for…”

“Stefan,” Tony whispered, shaking his head. “No, no…”
“What’s wrong?”

“You okay, DiNozzo?”

“My boy, you do look pale. Jethro…”

Tony backed away, gripped by cold, dark fear that came out of nowhere. Without warning, he found himself tied up, suspended from the ceiling, screaming, being whipped without mercy. Tony stumbled, almost ending up on his ass, barely catching himself before he fell. Gibbs was reaching out to steady him, saying something. They were all looking at him, mouths moving, talking urgently, but there was buzzing in his ears, drowning them out. Tony couldn’t tear his eyes away from the man’s face, and all of a sudden he knew he was about to lose it. With a hand over his mouth, he fled the basement, slamming out the back door and into the cold, pre-dawn darkness.
He heard Jethro talking to him, but it was as if it was through a fog. A hand was on his shoulder, steadying him. It felt comforting. Slowly things came back online. He was sitting in outside in the early light of dawn, head bowed, hugging his knees, cold, so cold.

“I’m right here, Tony. C’mon, talk to me. It’s me, Jethro… Please…”

He blinked a few times, and sniffled, running the back of his hand across his nose. “Wha…what…?”

They were in a back yard. Light was streaming from all the windows in the house behind them, illuminating a patio and a neat but small grassy area, surrounded by a high fence. Jethro was crouched before him, a hand on his shoulder, watching him with a worried expression.

“Tony? You with me?”

Unsure, Tony nodded slowly, and met Jethro’s eyes. “Yeah. I’m… What’s goin’ on?”

“You ran out.” Gibbs indicated the house behind them. “You went white. You froze, like you couldn't hear us, and then you took off.”

He’d run from the scene of an investigation? “I don’t… I don’t understand.”

Ducky poked his head out the back door of the townhouse. “Do you need me?”
His question could have been intended for either of them, but it was Gibbs who called over his shoulder, “I think we’re okay. Give us a few minutes.”

“I have some hot tea in the truck…”

“Thanks, Duck,” Gibbs said, dismissing him. As soon as Ducky had gone back in, he rose to his feet, knees popping, and pulled Tony up with him.

The minute Tony was standing, it all came back to him. “Oh God, he’s… I didn’t know… I didn’t recognize him at first. It’s been so long and I…”

Tony backed away, but Jethro quickly reached out and pulled him into a hug, even though he resisted. “It’s okay, nobody’s going to hurt you. Relax… I’ve got you.”

“I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay. Nothing to be sorry about. Take it easy.”

Tony couldn’t stop shaking, but being held within Jethro’s strong arms, and knowing he would protect him at all cost, helped to stem some of the fear. Flashes of memories, of horrible things he didn’t want to think about, were coming at him, relentless and frightening. Tony closed his eyes and tried desperately to regain some control. This was crazy, he told himself. The guy inside was dead. Stefan couldn’t hurt him, would never harm anyone, ever again, but his instinct was telling him to run as fast and far away as he could. Tony found himself repeating, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry…”

Jethro said in a steady tone, “It’s okay. We’re going to walk around to the front and…”

Tony gripped Jethro’s jacket. “I don’t think I can go back in there.” He couldn’t look at him, couldn’t be in the same room, even if he was dead.

“You don’t have to,” Jethro said. “Come with me. You trust me, don’t you?”
Tony nodded, ashamed at his behavior. “Course I do.”

With his arm around Tony’s shoulders, Jethro led him out a side gate and along the driveway at the side of the house. The sky was just starting to lighten and there were signs of the neighbors stirring, lights on, faint sounds of activity. As soon as they hit the sidewalk, Tony shrugged off Jethro’s arm. “I’m okay now,” he said quietly. He attempted a smile, to appear strong, but he could tell Jethro wasn’t buying it.

They located the NCIS van, which Ducky had parked a few houses down from Lt. Devlin’s residence, and sat in the front. It was good to be out of the chilly December air. Jethro found Ducky’s thermos of tea and poured some for Tony. He unwrapped a package of plain cookies – biscuits, Ducky would call them – and handed him two of them. “Eat them,” Jethro said firmly. He watched Tony drink some hot tea and eat the cookies, nodding with satisfaction when he finished.

Tony wiped his mouth, and shook his head when Jethro made as if to pour him more tea. All he wanted to do was to go home and hide under the covers, but he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t. What must Jethro think of him, cracking up like that? “You must think I’m a total head case,” Tony said, expecting his boss to agree with him.

Instead, Jethro regarded him with kind eyes. “No. I think you saw something in there that brought up some really bad memories. Something you need to tell me about.”

“I don’t know if I can,” Tony said truthfully. His hand shook when he went to screw the empty cup back on the thermos.

“Just tell me what you can.” Jethro waited a moment before prompting, “You called him Stefan.”

Startled, Tony stared at Jethro and tried not to panic. “That’s his name.” A name that made him cringe when he heard it.

Jethro reached out and squeezed Tony’s shoulder, and although his expression was sympathetic, he was all business. “Where do you know Lt. Devlin from?”

Tony had difficulty getting any words to form, but he managed to say, “Um… I met him at a bar.”

“When was this? Recently?”
“No.” Then, when Tony realized the implication, “No, of course not!”

“Hell, DiNozzo, I wasn’t suggesting…”

“That I was cheating on you?” Tony ground out. How could Jethro ask him something like that? Did he really think he would go out to a bar to meet some guy and…

“Tony!”

“What?”

“This is business,” Gibbs said.

It was difficult, but Tony nodded in reply. “Sure thing, Boss.”

Gibbs asked, his tone neutral, “How do you know the deceased?”

Think of this like you’re in court, Tony told himself. You’re the witness. Tell him the facts. He thought back, and after a minute started speaking. “It was eleven, twelve years ago. I was just out of college. It was before Peoria. I… was staying in Chicago for a couple of weeks. I went to a bar one night and he… Jesus…” He looked out the window for a while before admitting, “He was interesting, charismatic. Had this presence. Took charge, paid for everything. I liked it.” He paused before continuing, “We had dinner and traded life stories. Then I went with him, back to his place. It was a dumb move and… I didn’t know what I was getting into.”

Gibbs prompted, “You went with him… You had sex?”

Tony flinched. He didn’t like being asked these questions by his boyfriend, or for that matter, by anyone. “Yeah. It… it was more than that.”

“More?”
Exasperated, Tony asked, “You want me to spell it out?”

“Just the basics will do,” Gibbs replied. He seemed tense, as if he didn’t want to know but had to ask.

“I was into it at first. I wanted it. I asked him to…” Tony stopped mid-sentence as a flood of unpleasant memories overwhelmed him.

“Asked him to what?” Gibbs asked, sounding like he was conducting an interrogation.

Tony could feel his cheeks coloring. His hands were shaking. He clenched them into fists and stared at them, willing them to stop. He started talking – more like whispering – and once he began, it all spilled out. “I asked him to flog me while I sucked him off. The pain made me come. Then he gagged me with an O-ring to force my mouth open, tied me to a table, and fucked me at both ends. I was just glad he did my mouth first. Some guys don’t care.” He looked at Gibbs and explained, almost pleading with him to understand, “You’ve gotta know, I tried a lot of things back then, did a lot of risky shit, but this guy… he took everything to another level and… it got out of control. Really fast. He did this thing with ropes, making sure the knots were on pressure points, left me hanging there…” God, he could still feel the unrelenting agony, the realization that he was at the mercy of this man, and that he was going to die by his hand – he’d never felt such despair and it had been totally debilitating.

Tony looked down at his hands, curled so tight his fingernails dug into his palms, making them bleed. He increased the pressure until he gasped in pain. He was breathing too fast but the pain felt good, cleared his head.

Jethro laid his hand over Tony’s and said firmly, “Don’t. You’re hurting yourself.” He gently opened Tony’s clenched fists and sighed at the gouges and oozing blood. “Oh, Tony,” he whispered. He found a box of tissues and wadded several together, putting pressure on the small wounds.

Tony laughed humorlessly. “Don’t you get it? I asked for it. I asked him to hurt me. That’s what I did, with all the guys I ever went home with. And this guy – Stefan – he had no problem obliging. He was the worst.”

“The scars…on your hips,” Jethro said. “He did that?”

Tony pulled his hands out of Jethro’s grip and lifted the tissues from his palms. The bleeding had
stopped. He was so tired, he almost didn’t care that Jethro was looking at him like he was pitiful. Turning away, Tony looked out the windshield, noting the sky had turned from inky blue to a deep shade of red. “Red sky in the morning… sailors take warning,” he said, fascinated by the color.

“DiNozzo…” Gibbs sounded impatient.

He sighed. He really didn’t want to do this. Gibbs didn’t take his eyes off him, and that made Tony’s defenses go up. “Fine. You want the gory details? He tied me up and he hurt me, that’s what he did. Relentlessly. He didn’t stop the entire time I was there, and every time I thought it couldn't get any worse, he’d come up with something…worse. He hung me from the ceiling and beat me, bit me, and made me drink his piss. He cut me – he used a vegetable peeler on me…I never told you that, did I?”

Jethro shook his head slowly, and the pain in his eyes brought tears to Tony’s eyes. He’d never intended to tell Jethro any of this, never. He averted his gaze. He couldn’t look at Jethro and still talk, and he had to get this out, now, because he knew he’d never speak of it again. “The bastard fucking fucked with me until I was in so much pain I couldn't move. I can’t even remember all the fucked-up shit he did to me, but I remember the pain.” His voice was shaky when he admitted, “It got so bad I gave up, and I… I wanted to die. I just wanted to fucking die.” All of a sudden, he had to get out of the van, but as soon as he reached for the door handle, Jethro pulled him back and enveloped him in a hug. Tony protested, pushing at him, angry and desperate and wanting to be somewhere else, anywhere but there.

Jethro persevered, holding Tony in his arms until he shuddered and gave in. He stroked his back while murmuring, “You survived, and you’re with me, and I’ll never let anyone hurt you like that again. Never, you hear me?”

Tony nodded and clung to Jethro, hiding his face in his shoulder, afraid that he would stop hugging him, would reject him. He wouldn't blame Jethro for walking way – hearing your boyfriend was a pain slut wasn’t exactly the most endearing thing ever. Tony went to wipe his face with his sleeve, but Jethro pulled out a handkerchief from the depths of a pocket and handed it to him. Eventually Tony sat up a little, still within the circle of his man’s arms, and said in a quiet voice, “He raped me… the whole weekend. I remember waking up in the bathroom, throwing up. I think maybe he drugged me. It was funny how long it took me to realize I was alone, and untied… I didn’t know why I was free and I didn’t care. I grabbed some clothes and got out of there. I kept running and running… Some guy found me at the side of the road and took me to the nearest emergency room. I don’t remember much about it. I was in the hospital for a few days.”

“This isn’t in your records,” Gibbs said.

“Oh. No. I didn’t have any ID, and I gave the cops a fake name. I took off before anyone figured out I wasn’t who I said I was, and that I couldn't pay the bill,” Tony said. He was tired of talking, and
closed his eyes, drifting.

Jethro gave him a gentle shake. “You never told anybody?”

Tony shook his head.

“Did you go back? Where it happened?”

Tony looked up in surprise. “No! I was trying to put the whole thing out of my mind. I made it through the Police Academy, started working a beat. That helped for a while.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I couldn’t forget it though. I had bad dreams, remembered things at some really inopportune moments, got weirded out on dates sometimes.” He sighed. “After a while, when I was working in Peoria, I got access to some records. I located the place he’d taken me to, a big house out in the middle of nowhere. I never found out Stefan’s last name. The property was in someone else’s name, and when I checked them out, they’d been out of the country for two years. He must have rented it. I was glad he was gone. I didn’t want to… confront him. I think maybe I was afraid I’d kill him,” he said with a small laugh. He didn’t say aloud what they were both thinking, that someone had done the job for him. If Lt. Devlin was a serial predator, which Tony believed he was, who knows how many young men he’d assaulted, or how many of them had it in for him? “He gave no indication he was in the military, though, looking back, I can see he could have been. The way he gave orders, the way he looked like he was at attention half the time. I’m sure he didn’t have that tattoo though.”

Jethro sighed and kissed his temple. “That’s good, Tony. Look, I’ve got to go back in. You wait here. I called in some more agents, so once they’re working, I’ll take you home.”

Tony didn’t want to be relegated to sitting in the van while the team was working on the investigation, but going back inside, seeing Stefan’s body again? Truthfully, he didn’t think he could handle that. “You don’t have to take me home, Jethro. I’ll be okay so long as I don’t have to go in there again. I’ll be fine. Honest.” It struck him that Ducky was likely to bring out the body any time.

Jethro already had that covered. “How about you wait in my car? Or… you could take a cab home.” The way Jethro spoke, it was apparent he didn’t like the idea of Tony going home alone. Neither did Tony; he opted for waiting in Gibbs’ car.

They walked along the sidewalk, not touching. “You gonna be okay, DiNozzo?” They were back to being special agents, calling each other by their surnames.
“Yeah, Boss.” The fresh air felt good, and Ducky’s tea had done the trick, so when they got to Gibbs’ sedan, Tony turned to him and offered, “I can talk to the neighbors.” Gibbs gave him an ‘are you crazy?’ kind of look, but Tony pled his case. “I’m fine. Better, anyway, and I’m really embarrassed I broke down like that. Give me a chance. Let me do the job.” Gibbs was shaking his head, so Tony said, “I need this. And you know I can interview neighbors like nobody else can. I’m okay, really.” He felt bone-tired and if there’d been a bed in front of him he probably would have collapsed upon it, but he knew he could do the job. “At least let me work until the other team arrives. C’mon, Boss.”

Gibbs frowned but he gave Tony a curt nod. “We’re going to talk more about this later on.”

Tony had never told anyone about this particular part of his past, for a good reason, and now Gibbs expected him to spill everything. He’d rather forget about the past. It had always worked for him. But Gibbs had that look in his eye that clearly said he wasn’t going to let this go. Reluctantly, Tony said, “Okay.”

Gibbs looked at him for a long moment before nodding. “Go. Keep in contact. Be careful.”

“Thanks, Boss. Oh, and… I think you and Ducky need to go upstairs and take a look at Jacob Alderman’s art. It’ll give you an idea of where his mind is.” Tony pulled up the collar of his NCIS windbreaker. It wasn’t doing much of a job against the brisk December breeze. He grabbed a notebook and pen from the car, and headed across the empty street. As he made his way towards a house at the end of the block, he could feel Gibbs watching him. Instead of finding it intrusive, or taking it as a sign Gibbs didn’t trust him, it felt good to know someone was keeping an eye out for him.

People do not like being woken up by a cop at their door at dawn, but Tony put on his best earnest and trustworthy face, and cajoled every one of Lt. Devlin’s neighbors into giving him a few minutes of their time. It wasn’t easy to do when they’re still half-asleep and cranky on a cold December morning. However, informing people that the guy down the block had been murdered in his own home was a pretty good way to start a conversation.

An hour later, all Tony had learned was that Lt. Devlin was absent from home for long periods of time, was deployed overseas, and whenever he returned it was one party after another. This past month though, he’d been around more. None of them seemed to know why.

A middle-aged woman who was heading for her car took a few minutes to talk to Tony when he
approached her. Her name was Sandi, “with an i,” she said, as she pressed a business card in his hand. She was the realtor who had sold Lt. Devlin the townhouse eight years earlier. He had said he had family money, and he loved being in the Marine Corps, but he was now retiring from the military. She also said that the tenant, a college student, kept to himself, but was friends with the two men who lived immediately opposite, as was Lt. Devlin. “John Chen, he lives at number 14, is such nice man. Max is, too, though he’s a typical teen. That young man who rents from Lt. Devlin? Jacob, that’s his name. I see him riding his bike all the time, except when Lt. Devlin is in residence. Then, I never catch sight of him,” she said before getting in her car.

Tony was walking away when Sandi opened her car window and called him back. “Agent DiNozzo? Actually, I did see them the other day,” she said, her mouth tight with disapproval. “Lt. Devlin was in the driveway, telling Jacob off. They didn’t see me. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but the lieutenant was fit to be tied.” She paused and said in a low, angry voice, “He twisted that boy’s arm. I was about to say something but he let him go. Jacob ran inside and Lt. Devlin got in his car and drove away.”

Tony thanked her and walked to the next house, trying not to let the image of Devlin abusing a kid get to him. He had to focus or he’d never get through this. He took a deep breath, walked up the steps to the front door of number 14, which was directly across from Lt. Devlin’s. Before he even reached for the doorbell, the door opened.

“You look like a man on a mission,” said an Asian man of about forty-five. His black hair sported a few gray streaks but his figure was trim. He was neatly dressed in dress slacks and a gray sweater that did little to hide his well-muscled chest and arms. His feet were bare and his toenails were painted a dark metallic purple. He saw Tony looking at his feet and said, “It’s called Passion Purple.”

“Nice color,” Tony said, wondering if the nail polish came in Marine Blue. He gave his name and held out his credentials.

The homeowner took a step back and indicated with a sweep of his arm that Tony was welcome to enter. “It’s too cold to stand on the doorstep. You might as well come in.”
Connection

CONNECTION

«•»«•»«•»

Connection
Keith Richards

All I want to do is get back to you.
Connection, I just can't make no connection.
But all I want to do is to get back to you.
Everything is going in the wrong direction.

«•»«•»«•»

Tony accepted a cup of coffee from John Chen, and sat across from him at the kitchen table. Chen had shown little emotion when he’d learned of Lt. Devlin’s death. Tony had a feeling he was a lot more affected by the news than he was revealing.

Chen was a photographer and designed books for a specialty market, he said, as he placed a plate of toast in front of Tony, along with butter and a jar of strawberry preserves. Creamer and brown sugar were offered and Tony accepted them gladly. Ducky’s hot tea had helped warm him up, but coffee was what he craved. He’d been drinking a lot more of it since moving in with Jethro, and he was taking it a lot darker and with less sugar than previously.

Although Gibbs would probably give him hell for eating on duty, Tony was willing to risk his boss’s ire. Breaking bread was an age-old tradition meant to encourage trust. Besides, he was starving. He bit into a piece of toast and made an appreciative sound. “What kind of specialty market?” He pulled a small digital recording device out of his backpack, and pressed the ‘record’ button. “You don’t mind if I record this, do you? My boss is a stickler for the rules and I really don’t want to get in trouble. Besides, it’s for your protection as much as mine.”

There was a slight hesitation before Chen nodded.

Tony spoke clearly, stating the time and location, and their names. He read Chen his Miranda rights, which seemed to surprise him. Tony assured him it was merely a formality. Once that was done, he prompted, “You were going to tell me more about your business, Mr. Chen.”

“Please, call me Chen. I take photographs of people, portraits, some models for stock photos.”
“You mentioned you have a specialty?”

Chen looked at Tony as though he was weighing him up. He said cautiously, “Relationship portraits, couples sharing intimate moments, that kind of thing. I do photo shoots at private gatherings and clubs.”

“Clubs? The kind with lots of leather, maybe? A little rope bondage going on? Maybe some flogging, just for fun?” Tony inquired, keeping his tone light. He knew he was going out on a limb, as there was nothing in Chen’s home to suggest he was into BDSM, but, according to the realtor, Sandi, Chen and his son were good friends with the late Lt. Devlin. Okay, maybe not friends, but something told Tony they were more than just neighbors.

Chen replied, “Yes, those and more. Perhaps you’re a member of such a club?”

Tony brought out a smile that he felt evoked a feeling of trust; a gentle curve of the lips, softening of the muscles around his eyes. “It’s been a long time.” Well, it wasn’t exactly a lie, even if he hadn’t done anything even remotely call kinky for over two years now.

Chen nodded, accepting Tony’s words, smiling at him as if now they had a mutual connection. “You have to be careful. There’s so much hate and intolerance out there. People don’t always understand.”

Tony nodded, agreeing. “You go by the name MaxXchen? I believe I saw some of your photos at Lt. Devlin’s house, in an art studio on the top floor. There was a card on the back of one of the pictures.”

“MaxXchen is a business name. I’m in partnership with Max Baxter. We’ve been together for two years now.” Chen’s expression softened. “Max is a very creative young man, and does most of my photo editing. He gives Jacob proofs, as reference for his paintings.”

So, Max was not Chen’s son, as the realtor had surmised. “You know Jacob Alderman?”

“Yes, we both do.” Chen leaned forward, concerned. “Is Jacob okay? He isn’t hurt, is he?”

“He wasn’t at the residence when we arrived. You know where I might find him?” Tony smiled. “Just to make sure he’s safe.”
“He has friends at college. There’s a girl…LaShonna, she’s in some of his art classes. She lives somewhere near the university. He might be with her.”

“You know her last name? Her address? I’ll need Jacob’s phone number, too,” Tony said. If Chen didn’t have it, he’d get it from the college, or the museum where Jacob worked, once they opened for the day.

“I seem to recall she has an apartment on 45th NW. I don’t know exactly where.” Chen pulled out his phone and while he was scrolling down the contact info, a teenager came into the kitchen, wearing a t-shirt with a Miss Kitty image on it, and pink pajama bottoms. He glowered at Tony as if he was an interloper, but Tony smiled and acted as if he belonged there. Chen introduced him as Max Baxter, and told the young man who the stranger was sitting in their kitchen.

Max mumbled, “Hey.” Instead of sitting at the table, he slouched against the kitchen counter, arms crossed over his chest.

Tony introduced himself and let Max know he was recording their conversation, and, as he had with Chen, he explained it was routine to read him his Miranda rights. Max seemed a little confused but he said he understood his rights, and that was all Tony needed.

“Here’s Jacob’s cell number,” said Chen as he held out his phone for Tony to see. “Max, what’s LaShonna’s address? You know her last name?”

“Why?” Max appeared to be about sixteen, with long brown hair sweeping over one eye. He looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes. He was good-looking, almost pretty, with full pink lips and long eyelashes. His slight figure was the opposite body type of his burly partner. From the way Chen was looking at him, it was clear that the two were involved sexually. There had to be twenty-five years between them.

“Don’t make me ask again,” Chen warned in a deceptively soft tone.

Max’s cheeks colored at the rebuke, and in retaliation he scowled at Tony. “It’s Reid. She lives in off-campus housing. Why’d you need to know?”

“Just trying to locate Jacob to make sure he’s okay. Do you know where he might be?” Tony looked the young man over and wondered if Max might be older than he looked. Maybe he was trying to
appear younger in order to please Chen. Tony texted the name and address of Jacob’s friend to McGee; he’d send someone over to locate Jacob and bring him in for questioning.

“No, I don’t know where he is. What’s going on?” Max demanded.

Chen spoke to Max as if he were talking to a child. “Special Agent DiNozzo has brought us some sad news. Devlin has passed away,” he said softly. Max sank into one of the kitchen chairs, his face blank with shock. Chen slid an arm around his shoulders and gently rubbed his arm, then looked up at Tony. “I presume that it wasn’t a natural death?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. We’re just starting an investigation,” Tony replied. He wasn’t about to give them any specifics, but he noted the look that passed between the two men. “You knew Lt. Devlin well?”

Chen seemed indecisive for a moment, but he said, “I have known Devlin for about eight years, since he moved in. He comes back home when he’s on leave, a few times a year. In the past he’s never stayed more than a couple of weeks, but this time he’s been here for a month already. He just announced he was retiring from the Marines, and plans to live here full time. I mean, he planned.”

Tony sensed that that news had not pleased Chen. Max’s scowl deepened. There may have been bad blood between the neighbors; Tony wondered how bad. “It sounds like you notice what’s going on in the neighborhood.”

Chen shrugged. “I keep an eye on the house for him.”

Tony perked up at that bit of info. “You have access to the lieutenant’s house?”

“Yes, I have the code to the keypad, and a key, in case of an emergency. Plus an alarm code. I do regular walk-throughs, make sure everything is okay and handle any maintenance issues that come up.”

“You keep tabs on Jacob Alderman, too?” asked Tony. The college student had the entire house to himself most of the time, up until recently. He wondered why he didn’t live on campus, or closer to school and friends. It was obvious, from the photos he’d seen, that Jacob had been abused on a regular basis by the lieutenant, so why would he remain in his house? Lt. Devlin must have had some hold over him, and Tony was determined to find out what it was.

Chen said, “I’m not legally responsible for Jacob, but both of us consider him a friend. Max, you see him more than I do.”
Max said warily, “We just talk. He spends all his time painting.”

“Does Jacob have many friends over? Keg parties? Maybe when Lt. Devlin is out of town?”

Max’s response was immediate. “No, he wouldn’t bring anyone… home.”

“How many people had a key or the keypad code?” Tony asked. The cops had found the front door ajar, and no alarm had been set off. If someone had entered the house, they’d been invited in, or they’d had the key and the code. Or else someone like Jacob had left in a hurry, and hadn’t closed the door properly behind him.

“As far as I know, just me and Jacob,” Chen said. “And Devlin, of course.”

Tony noticed the way Max squirmed a little in his seat. He’d bet he also had the access code. “You were friends with Lt. Devlin?”

Max made a derogatory noise, and Chen laid his hand over his partner’s. Immediately Max dropped his gaze and became still. Chen said, “We rarely saw him, but we were on good terms. As I said, until recently Devlin was hardly ever here. May I ask what happened to him?”

“He was found in the basement,” Tony said, unwilling to reveal more. From the knowing expressions on Chen and Max’s faces, they were both aware what the lieutenant’s basement held.

“So he died in…the playroom?” asked Chen. Tony could tell he was trying to figure out how Devlin might have died.

Tony nodded. “That’s where we found him. It must have taken a lot of time and money to get that basement set up. All the bondage equipment, the specialty bed, the expensive toys… I mean, you could open a sex shop with the dildos alone.” Chen tensed up and Tony knew something he’d said had struck a chord. He just wasn’t sure what.

Chen said, “He hand-picked everything. Special ordered the bigger items. It was his retreat. He liked to host parties though. Only close friends and special guests were invited.”
“Friends like you and Max?” Tony addressed his questions to both Chen and the teen, but only Chen was responding, so far.

“Yes. He would invite all sorts of people, but we only went by first names. It was all very discreet.”

“You take photos at these parties?”

“Usually, if everyone agreed,” said Chen. “I made contacts there. Devlin ran with a very wealthy crowd.”

“He have any boyfriends?”

“If you want to call them that. He’d meet men at clubs and bring them home. Devlin liked the ones with life in them, with some spirit. So he could prove to them he was the boss,” Chen said, sounding uncomfortable.

“So he got off on overpowering people, these spirited young men,” Tony concluded.

Chen confirmed, “It was a big turn-on for him. He called himself Top Dog.”

Tony knew all about top dogs, although the silver-haired one he knew so well was nothing like Lt. Devlin, like Stefan, and never would be. Jethro would never strip his lover of his humanity as a way of getting his rocks off. He’d never string you up and cause you so much pain you pissed yourself while screaming until you were hoarse. Tony shook himself mentally, telling himself to stop thinking about Stefan. Think only about the case. Ask the questions. Find out what these two knew about Lt. Devlin. Find whoever killed him.

Tony asked, “How young were these men?”

“Late teens, early twenties mostly,” Chen replied. He glanced at his young partner when he said that.

“And what about Jacob?” Tony asked. Chen seemed puzzled so he added, “What kind of relationship did Lt. Devlin have with Jacob Alderman?”
Max stiffened but said nothing. Tony noticed his breathing quickened. It was Chen who replied, “Devlin was his mentor. He agreed to pay for Jacob’s college, all his expenses. Jacob lived there rent-free.”

That was news. “Sounds very generous,” Tony said, watching their expressions. Max averted his eyes, but Chen didn’t shy away from Tony’s gaze.

“Devlin was a patron of the arts. He collected some fine abstracts; they’re hanging all over his house. He wanted to help a promising art student and had the connections to do so. He was quite wealthy, but that didn’t stop him from joining the Marines,” Chen said, with a slight smile.

It all sounded perfectly feasible but Tony wasn’t fooled. “Were they intimate?” he asked.

Chen blinked a few times but showed no emotion. “Him and Jacob? I… I rarely saw them together.”

“But he liked young men, teens,” Tony said. He saw Max open his mouth, about to say something, but Chen took hold of his wrist. It was a blatant warning not to speak.

“Like I said, Agent DiNozzo, I never saw anything between them,” Chen said firmly. “Jacob’s family threw him out of the house when he was in high school, for being gay. He’s had a tough time of it. Devlin offered him a helping hand.”

Max bit his bottom lip and watched Chen from under his eyelashes as if he was awaiting some kind of signal. Tony wondered if he was naturally submissive or if it was a persona he took on to oblige his partner. Chen might seem mild mannered, but Tony suspected that underneath the composed veneer was a man who was just as demanding and controlling as Lt. Devlin. He’d bet that it was Chen who had chosen the pink pajamas for his boy, and that Max secretly hated them.

Tony took a sip of his tepid coffee and cleared his throat. “Did Lt. Devlin ever mention trouble at work? Maybe had some disagreements with men in his unit? Old grudges?” They would check out everyone connected to Devlin, as a matter of course, but sometimes neighbors knew more than colleagues – or were more willing to talk about the deceased.

Chen replied, “No, never. His time in the military, that was like a separate life. I know Devlin was proud of being a Marine, but it wasn’t a sense of duty or love of his country that drove him. He told me that he enjoyed the conflict, the danger of being deployed in hot spots. I think the best part for
him was working with the young men under his command. He called them...nubs, I believe it was. He said they needed a strong hand."

“So he liked working with subordinates, influencing them.” Tony didn’t make it a question, but Chen confirmed it with a nod.

Tony tried not to think about the ease with which Stefan had picked him up at a bar, and seduced him, all those years ago. He’d been easy prey back then, and he’d submitted quickly and allowed Stefan to take the lead. The handsome stranger had only been a few years older than Tony, but he’d carried himself with an authority that Tony had found unbelievably sexy. He’d let his dick think for him, and look where that had gotten him – fucked over and almost killed.

“I can’t believe he would get involved sexually with them,” Chen explained. “He wouldn’t risk his career that way. Devlin would go on the prowl, looking for fresh meat, he called it, away from wherever he was stationed. He thought of his conquests as prey.” Chen rose and refreshed their cups of coffee. He made Max sit at the table, and placed a glass of milk in front of him. It was only when the teenager had drunk half of it that Chen gave a smile of approval. He gently pushed a lock of Max’s long hair off his forehead and asked, “You okay, baby?”

Max nodded half-heartedly. He spoke in a small voice, asking, “What’s going to happen to Jacob now? Is he going to still live there?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of him, just like you, sweetie.” Chen turned to Tony. “Most people I know are not controlled by their fetishes; they are a part of their life, but not their entire life. But Devlin, he was driven by his desires, consumed by them. It was an addiction. I doubt it ever crossed his mind that there might be consequences.”

“Like the consequences of abusing and raping Jacob whenever he came to town?” Tony asked bluntly. “What did he do, parade him around for you and his friends to play with? Tie him up and let the party guests use a flogger on his bare ass?”

“What? No! I told you, Agent DiNozzo, there were only adults at the parties. Ask anyone who was there,” Chen insisted, looking faintly sick at the thought of Jacob being passed around like a party favor.

Tony said, “Believe me, I plan to ask. You see, I saw the photo album.” He didn’t take his eyes off Chen’s face but out of the corner of his eye he could see Max cringing.

Chen swallowed and asked, not too convincingly, “Photo album?”
“You know which album I’m talking about, right?” Tony asked.

“No,” Chen said, shaking his head.

Tony shook his head in disbelief. “I saw the photos, dozens of them, of young men, teens, naked and abused, tied up like chickens and raped by your friend. Right there, in Devlin’s playroom!” Tony slammed his hand on the kitchen table and Chen jumped. “You were taking photos, videos, in exchange for meeting his rich friends!”

Surprisingly, it was Max who cut in, coming to his partner’s defense. “There were never any kids there! I should know. We always went together!”

“I don’t take those kinds of photos,” Chen said, seemingly outraged. “I only work with consenting adults. I swear! I don’t do that kind of thing, not with kids. And I never saw Jacob being abused. You don’t think I would have stopped it if I had?”

Tony challenged, “What about Max? How old was he when you brought him home?”

“He was sixteen,” Chen conceded, drawing the now crying Max into his arms. “Please, stop. Just stop. I’m not like Devlin! I love my boy.”

Tony looked at Chen, with his young man practically sitting in his lap. Chen and Devlin had similar tastes, it seemed. Two alphas in the same room must have heightened the tension a notch or two. Maybe they fought over Max. Tony caught the teen’s eye and asked, “How old are you now, Max?”

Max raised his chin defiantly. “Eighteen.” He wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. Tony felt bad about upsetting him, but he had a feeling the young man was a lot tougher than he appeared.

“Max is of legal age, Special Agent DiNozzo.” It was clear that Chen didn’t appreciate the question.

“I know what the age of consent is, thank you, Mr. Chen. Did you and Lt. Devlin fight over your boy here?”

“Max is mine, and Devlin knew that. He understood there was a line he couldn't cross.”
“You don’t sound too sure about that,” Tony said. “So what happened? Maybe Devlin tried to get Max here to perform at one of his parties. He wanted to paddle him in front of his guests while you took photos. I can see him getting off on taking what was yours while you were stuck on the sidelines.”

It was Max who answered, half rising as he said vehemently, “No, he never did!”

“But he wanted to, didn’t he? He put pressure on you to show your naked ass to all his friends, told you what a good boy you were, right?” Tony asked, pressing hard.

Max, his eyes bright with tears, said, “I would never let him touch me! He tried but…” Chen made a motion, trying to cut off Max’s words, but it was too late.

Up until that point, Tony had been guessing, tossing things out there, hoping something would stick. Now he knew something had gone down between Lt. Devlin and Chen, and that Max had been the catalyst. “No, but Devlin would. He’d take what he wanted, and never think of the consequences. Isn’t that right, Max?”

“Leave him alone,” Chen said, his voice low with anger.

“I can’t leave it alone. You know I can’t,” Tony said tersely. He looked at Max expectantly.

Trembling, Max whispered, “Last night, after the party.”

“Last night?” Tony asked.

“He wanted a private session, that’s what he said. I knew what he meant and I told him no,” Max said, looking to Chen for guidance. “I said no!”

“I know you did, baby.” Chen looked at Tony and said in a defeated voice, “We were both at Devlin’s house last night, for his party.”
“So you were both with Lt. Devlin around the time of his death?” Tony ascertained.

Chen exclaimed, “No! Look, I don’t even know when he died. We got there around eight. It was well underway and half the people were high. We left at eleven.”

“Together?”

“Yes,” Chen said firmly. Tony saw him squeezing Max’s hand hard enough to make the younger man give a small gasp.

“How many guests were at the party?” asked Tony.

After thinking for a moment, Chen replied, “There were nine of us, not including Devlin.”

“When you left, did anyone remain in the house?”

“No, everyone left at the same time, around eleven. He ushered us all upstairs,” said Chen. He sighed and said, “I took a lot of photos last night, at Devlin’s request. You can look at them and see. They’re time stamped.”

There were photos? Tony couldn’t believe his good luck. “I’ll need them, and a list of all the guests,” he said, making his request sound like an order.

Chen seemed stunned by Tony’s request. “You want me to give them to you? No, I…I don’t feel at all comfortable… This was a very private affair.”

“I need those photos and the names. I can get a warrant,” Tony said.

Chen said stiffly, “Perhaps, for legal purposes, you should do that, Agent DiNozzo.”

Tony used his phone to text McGee, asking him if a guest list had been found at the scene.
“Yes but no last names on it,” McGee texted back.

Tony replied, asking him to get a warrant for the photos and guest list. Also for a camera and any computers containing photographs of a party at Lt. Devlin’s that took place the night before. He got a quick response, saying, “On it. Where R U? Gibbs wont say where U went.”

Tony typed back, “Needed fresh air. I’m interviewing neighbors.” He typed in Chen and Max’s names and address, for the warrant, and signed off. He motioned for Chen to continue. “Tell me about this party.”

“When we left, he was still breathing, if that’s what you mean,” Chen replied.

“Any witnesses?” Tony inquired.

Chen sent him a dark look. “I told you we all left at the same time. And nothing happened, other than some adults having fun.”

Tony tried another tactic. “Let’s get this straight. You were aware that Lt. Devlin had sex with teenagers, abused them, and yet you never called the authorities,” Tony accused.

Chen replied, “We never saw anything going on over there, Agent DiNozzo. Of course I would have done something, if I’d known.”

“And you saw nothing suspicious in the fact that he had a nineteen-year-old living in his house?”

“Jacob was taking advantage of a free place to live. That was the extent of their relationship,” Chen said firmly, but Tony could see the conflict in his eyes.

“Are you trying to convince yourself of that? I saw the photos in the album. I saw Jacob, the abuse,” Tony reminded him.

Once again, Chen silenced Max with a hand on his arm. “We never saw anything out of line,” he said firmly.
Max made a sound and averted his face.

Tony asked, “You got something to say, Max?”

The teen blurted, “Everybody knew the guy was a sadist.”

“Max, I told you to keep quiet,” Chen admonished.

“But it’s true! They knew what he liked but they came around anyway. Some of them got off on the things he did to them, some did it for the money.”

“Prostitutes?” Tony asked.

Realizing that he couldn't hide the obvious, Chen admitted, “It was no secret among the community that Devlin had an insatiable appetite, that he enjoyed doling out pain. He had a steady stream of takers. And no, most weren’t prostitutes, and they were over twenty-one. But you have to understand, he never invited those kind of people to his parties.”

“What kind did he invite?” Tony asked.

“People with money, with influence. Some Devlin knew from private clubs he belonged to. People who wouldn't want their names in the papers. And the people at the party last night, the youngest there, apart from Max, was thirty-five. One couple was in their sixties.”

“Except for Jacob,” Tony pointed out.

“Jacob never came to the parties. He stayed up in his rooms, painting or studying. I had the impression Devlin told him not to show his face. Look, if Devlin had sex with him, or was doing anything else to him, I didn’t know about it,” Chen insisted.

Max blurted, “Well, I’m glad Devlin’s dead!”
Tony quickly asked, “And why is that?”

Chen tried to prevent Max from responding by saying, “Agent DiNozzo, Max is very upset and he’s saying things he doesn’t mean.”

“I do mean it. He made Jacob trust him, and then he hurt him. I hate him!” Max glared at Tony, as if it was his fault. “But I swear we didn’t know. We only found out last night.”

“What exactly did you find out?” Tony asked.

It was Chen who admitted, “Last night, Jacob revealed to me what that bastard had been doing to him. He was very upset, naturally. He was saying he couldn’t stay there any longer. I invited him to come home with us, but he refused.”

Tony asked, “Upset? Like angry?”

Chen said, “Yes, he was angry. He was pacing, going on about how he couldn't stand it any longer. He said he had something he had to do, and after that… I tried to reason with him but he wouldn't talk to me any longer. I went downstairs and got Max, and took him home. I assure you, Agent DiNozzo, if I had known earlier what Devlin had been doing, I would have done something about it!”

“I should’ve killed that fucker myself when I had the chance!” Max said, his features twisted in hatred.

“Enough, Max,” Chen said sharply. He stood and, with one hand gripping his young partner’s shoulder, he said, “I’m sorry, Special Agent, but you need to leave now. We’ve told you everything we know.”

No way was he going to let this go, not when they were finally getting somewhere. Tony got to his feet and said, “A murder has been committed, Mr. Chen. We need to find out exactly what happened. You and Max appear to have been the last people to see Lt. Devlin, and right now the young man who is living in that house is missing. I’m going to have to move this interview the Navy Yard.”

“Why? We’ve told you everything,” Chen said, looking a little alarmed.
Somehow, Tony doubted that. These two were no longer classified as helpful neighbors; now they were witnesses, bordering on being suspects. “We’re going to need your written statements, and I can’t do it here. It’s protocol,” was all he was willing to say. Tony stepped out of the kitchen and into the hall, pulling out his phone. He kept his eye on Chen and his lover while he placed a quick call to Gibbs to get the ball rolling. They arranged for the Metro officers to take the possible witnesses to the Yard in separate cars, and the NCIS team would interview them once they’d finished working the scene.

Max was near tears and Chen was going into protective mode. Tony told Max to go and get dressed, but prevented Chen from going into his bedroom with him. He ordered Chen to remain in the kitchen while he followed Max partway down a hallway, positioning himself so he could keep an eye on both men at the same time. While he waited, he looked at a series of large framed black-and-white photographs lining the hallway. They all featured a young man with long dark hair in a variety of sexually explicit poses. In every photo he was naked, with all body hair removed from his slim form. Tony immediately recognized a very young looking Max as the subject of the erotic images. “Sixteen, my ass,” he mumbled to himself.

In one of the photographs Max was impaling himself on a fat dildo. In another he was wearing a black corset, and was fondling his dick while smiling at the camera with a sultry expression. But it was the photo furthest down the hall that caught Tony’s interest. In it, the boy, standing upright, was tied up in ornate ropework. He was bound from his feet all the way to his neck, and there, wrapped around his youthful neck was a collar of rope so high his chin was forced upwards. All of the images were intimate portraits of the boy, but this one was incredibly personal. Tony leaned over to see the hand-written signature – it was a large X.

Before Tony could process what that meant, Max reappeared, dressed in a black sweater and even blacker jeans. He brushed past Tony without looking at him and joined Chen, who had pulled on his shoes and had their coats ready. They joined hands and walked out their front door, acting as if Tony wasn’t even there.
Details

Robert Downey Jr.

*I will spare the details*
Of the rocks and the nails,
The times that I've lied.
Can't lay down tonight,
I've already tried.

Det. Zipkowski was talking to Gibbs near the NCIS sedan they’d arrived in. Tony caught the end of the conversation, and deduced that they had not located Jacob Alderman. Gibbs turned as he approached and ran his eyes over him, as if to make sure he was okay. “No sign of Jacob. His friends say they haven’t seen him.”

“They’re hiding him,” Tony said.

Gibbs shrugged. “Maybe, but we have a BOLO on him, and I alerted the campus police. We put it out that there’s a health risk involved. It’ll only be a matter of time.”

Zipkowski said, “We’ll find him soon.”

Tony shook his head. “I wouldn't be so sure. Jacob seems like a smart kid. He’s used to taking care of himself. His parents threw him out of the house for being gay, when he was fifteen, and yet he still managed to make his way here and get admitted into college, all expenses paid. Okay, so it looks like he’s being abused by the guy who’s paying the bills, but… I’m just saying he’s a survivor. I don’t think it’s going to be easy to find him.”

“We’re going to do our damnedest,” Det. Zipkowski said. “Was anything missing from his rooms?”

“You’re kidding. The bedroom was a mess.” Tony thought for a moment. “No wallet. McGee can
see if Jacob has a Metro card, and track his movements that way. Devlin may have given him a debit card.”

“How did he leave?” Gibbs asked.

“The neighbor, Sandi, she said he biked everywhere,” Tony said.

“No bikes in the garage,” Zipkowski said. “Only the two cars.”

“It’s maybe a 30-minute bike ride to the university from here, and the streets would be pretty clear that time of night,” Tony mused.

The detective said, “We’ll add that to the BOLO.”

Gibbs nodded. “You call me as soon as you know anything.”

Zipkowski said, “Sure thing. Hey, here are your guys now.”

Agent Balboa had arrived with his team to help out. Gibbs raised a hand to indicate he’d be there in a minute, and said to Tony, “They can wrap this up, take pictures of the residence. You and I are going back to the Yard.”

Tony really didn’t want to go inside Lt. Devlin’s house, but he felt it should be him taking photos. He never left a job half-done. “But I should be in there…”

“Ducky took the body away an hour ago, and McGee’s gone to talk to LaShonna,” Gibbs said, seeing his nervousness.

“Oh yeah, of course,” Tony said, shifting uncomfortably.

Gibbs studied him for a long moment. “You think you’re up to interviewing your two suspects?”
Tony replied, “They’re not suspects, officially, or not until we get results from forensics.” Gibbs gave him a sour look, so Tony amended his words. “I’m fine to go, Boss. I’m good with questioning Chen, but I think Max might respond better to you.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s a submissive,” Tony said matter-of-factly. “I think he’ll put on a brave front, but I’ll bet if you growl at him, he’ll spill the beans. If he has any beans, that is. One thing for sure, he has some serious hate for Lt. Devlin. I think the guy made a move on him and Chen walked in. Things escalated from there.”

“Then let’s go and prove it. We’re done here for now.”

“Did you get the warrant for Chen’s camera and computer?”

“I’ll get Balboa to pick them up as soon as it comes through,” Gibbs replied. “Let’s get this done. I need coffee.”

Chen and Max had been situated in separate conference rooms, and each had an agent sitting with him. They were given beverages and told there would be a wait, but that their statements would be taken as soon as possible. When Tony looked in on them, he half expected to find Max falling apart, but it turned out to be Chen who was most upset over being separated from his partner. Max seemed calm and serious, unlike the person he was when in his boyfriend’s company.

Chen gave NCIS the names of the other guests, once Tony produced a warrant and promised they would be discreet about their identities. Unless any of them had something to do with the lieutenant’s death, that was.

He left the two men cooling their heels, still in separate rooms, and joined Gibbs and McGee to go over what they knew so far. Tony filled them in on what he’d learned from Chen and Max earlier, and how they swore they’d left Devlin’s at 11 PM, and had gone home together. All of the guests had left at the same time. Chen had talked to Jacob prior to leaving; the young man had been visibly upset and said he couldn’t remain in the house any longer. That was the last Chen had seen of him.
“Or so he says,” Tony added.

“You have reason to doubt him?” asked Gibbs.

“You know I don’t believe anything anyone says until there’s proof,” Tony replied with a small smile. “Chen keeps saying the same thing but… I think he walked in on Devlin forcing himself on Max, and Chen got mad and strung him up. Maybe it was a warning that got out of hand. Maybe it was murder. All I know for certain is I aim to get a confession out of somebody.”

McGee and Tony contacted everyone who had been at Lt. Devlin’s the night before. After they got over their initial concern that their sexual preferences would become general knowledge, the people who had been Devlin’s guests were candid about what had gone on. Unfortunately, none had seen anything amiss, except for one man who went by the name Verona, who had seen Jacob standing in the doorway, watching. He spoke to Tony on the phone. “He’s like a mouse, afraid of Devlin,” he said derisively. “I was going to invite him in to play, but next time I looked up he was gone. He looked delicious. I don’t know why Dev hides him away.”

McGee’s interview with Jacob’s friend, LaShonna, didn’t get very far. The young woman, obviously an advocate for her friend, kept saying she knew nothing. McGee had a look around her small apartment, but here was no evidence she was hiding Jacob. He noted the make and model, and the license plate on her car before he left.

Gibbs contacted Devlin’s Marine Corps commanding officer to get background information on him. The CO couldn't think of any reason anyone would harm Devlin, and he verified the whereabouts of all the men in his unit from the previous night. They had been over the Atlantic at the time, heading for their next assignment.

Gibbs pulled Lt. Devlin’s service record. It looked good on paper; he was a decorated Marine, and there was nothing official or even unofficial that suggested anything negative about the man. Everyone he talked to said the same thing, that the lieutenant brought out the best in the men he worked with and trained. Sure, he was cocky, but so were half the men in the corps. The worst Gibbs heard, from Devlin’s new boss at the DoD, was that Devlin came across as arrogant and he’d been asked to tone it down. Because he had only recently started working there, the new boss said he was giving him some slack. Devlin was a strong and an effective leader – that was the general consensus.

Tony sighed. “Nobody stands out as a suspect. Except for the two we’ve got in custody. Nobody outside the BDSM community knows about his fetish parties or his sexual preferences. Or if they do, they’re not saying anything. Somehow, he kept his two lives separate,” Tony said moodily. “How’d he do that?”
Gibbs said quietly, “Not so easy, is it?”

“You’re talking about us? It’s not the same,” Tony retorted, annoyed that Gibbs would even suggest he was anything like Devlin. “I’m not hiding anything. No secret life.”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow but Tony wasn’t going to quarrel with him, not with McGee working only a few feet away. He glanced over at his colleague, but he needn’t have worried; McGee was frowning in concentration at his computer screen, phoning people, tracking down the whereabouts of Devlin’s guests from the night before.

Gibbs ordered, “Find out if any of them knew how to do this shibari thing. Whoever tied Devlin up knew what they were doing.”

McGee discovered that two of them had gone to dinner and a club and didn’t leave until 5 AM. One of the guys was pulled over for drinking and driving miles away, and two had flown out on the red-eye for Los Angeles.

Tony delved into Chen and Max Baxter’s histories and spending habits, and tried to dig up dirt on Lt. Devlin. Mid-morning, breakfast arrived, along with several high-test-strength coffees ordered from Gibbs’ favorite diner. When Gibbs came over to place a coffee and an egg and bacon sandwich in front of him, Tony ignored him. Gibbs stood there patiently, so eventually Tony looked up. He was going to tell his boss to leave him alone, but the minute he met Gibbs’ eyes he felt bad. It wasn’t his fault that this case was getting to him, setting him on edge. “Thanks.” He hated fighting with Gibbs.

“I didn’t mean you were like him,” Gibbs said quietly.

“With this job, you have to keep some things separate. You can’t take all this home.” Tony leaned forward and whispered, “You can’t share your personal life with everyone, either. We can’t. You know that.”

“I agree. I was just saying it isn’t always easy.” Gibbs shrugged.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap.” Tony watched Gibbs return to his desk, and thought that even a year ago they’d never have been able to have such a truthful conversation. But Gibbs was right; Tony did keep some things hidden, things he did years ago that had no bearing on the present. He just didn’t
want to bring them up. He was afraid of ruining what had turned out to be the best thing that had ever happened to him – being Jethro Gibbs’ life partner.

Tony ate his second breakfast of the day and felt a lot more energized with some food in his stomach.

Gibbs got off the phone with the university. He read his notes to his team. “Jacob Alderman’s student advisor gave me some background on him. Originally from Kansas, he excels in art and business, seemed shy at first but came out of his shell. Then, a few weeks ago, his behavior became erratic.” Gibbs looked up and commented, “Correlates with the return of Lt. Devlin stateside. His work is described as being emotional and evocative.” Gibbs peered at his agents over the rim of his glasses. “Not sure if that’s good or not.”

McGee asked, “Have you seen his paintings, Boss?”

“Oh yeah,” was Gibbs’ reply. “Alderman was hand-picked for the job at the Hennessy Museum. The director there says he’s bright and innovative. Alderman never mentions family, has only a few friends, and hasn’t attended any college activities. He has had the same address since he first arrived at the end of the summer, which is Devlin’s street address. Nothing of note prior to his arriving in DC.”

“I got some info on Chen. Some of this is from Tony, but it’s been confirmed.” McGee gave them a synopsis of what he’d found out. “Johnathan Chen, 46, moved to DC from New York ten years ago. He’s known for his high-end portrait photography and books on gay lifestyle and sexuality. He owns his own home, across the street from Lt. Devlin, and was seeing him socially. He also had access to Devlin’s house with a key and an alarm code. There’s a keypad lock on the front door. His partner, Max Baxter, has been living with him for the past two years and has no apparent income, no credit cards, no money trail. Apart from that, there’s nothing outstanding in the financials.”

Tony was looking into Max’s background, and after some digging, discovered some interesting things. “Hey, check this out.” He put his findings on the plasma while Gibbs and McGee stood on either side of him. “Our little friend Max not only has a juvie record but he has also been lying to his partner about his age. Turns out his isn’t eighteen at all. Nope, the kid is twenty-four.”

“Why’s he been lying about his age?” McGee asked.

Tony snorted. “Wants to be Daddy’s little boy? Playing into Chen’s fantasies?”
“His record, DiNozzo,” Gibbs prompted.

“Sure, Boss. Max has done his share of youthful offenses, including, but not limited to, shoplifting, theft, graffiti, underage consumption of alcohol, criminal trespass and indecent exposure.” Tony really wanted to know the story behind that charge. “Plus he was incarcerated from age fourteen to sixteen in Beaumont for a sex offense against another minor, and an assault on a police officer. While in there, he stabbed another boy in the groin with a fork.” Tony took a deep breath. “He started prostituting himself as soon as he got out, but avoided getting arrested as an adult. Then he met Chen. Moved in with him. Max does all Chen’s photo editing but doesn’t have any income. No bank account, like McGee said. Looks like he’s Chen’s kept boy. Or slave? With a background like his, it’s no wonder he’s happy to pretend to be a kid and let Chen dress him in pink PJs.”

McGee blinked a few times as he processed that information. “Uh… do you think Chen knows about Baxter’s record?”

Tony shrugged. “Ignorance is bliss. I think those two are living in their own little world, and don’t want anyone rocking the boat.”

Gibbs said testily, “I want their DNA checked against the scene. Same with all the other guests. I don’t care if they were a thousand miles away at the time. And where the hell are those photos you got from Chen’s computer?”

“I’ll go and get them from Abby right now, Boss,” McGee volunteered. “There’s a lot of evidence to process and it’s going to take her a while.”

Tony told Gibbs how he’d seen framed photographs in Chen’s house of a young Max in various erotic or bondage images, including a rope corset collar, like the one tied around Lt. Devlin’s neck. “I know Chen took those photos. I can’t see him allowing anyone else to tie up his partner. I’d bet he knows his way around a rope.”

“Check out everyone who was there last night, anyway,” Gibbs said.

“I know, Boss, dot the ‘i’s and cross the ‘t’s.”

Ducky would be well underway with Devlin’s autopsy by now, and if he found anything interesting, he’d send the samples off to Abby. Tony didn’t even want to think about the body being dissected by the ME, nor about the man he’d been while alive. For now he was able to keep the two separate,
like they were different people. At some point, he knew he’d have to reconcile the parts and deal with it. Not now though.

McGee returned with a flash drive containing the photos from the party, and opened them on his computer. Tony and Gibbs joined him to study the images for any clues as to why Devlin had been killed. There were photographs of adults dressed in fetish style clothing – lots of latex and leather – posing for the camera like their pictures were going to be featured in the society column. The focus, however, was on a nude woman being bound in red rope and suspended in a position that made her appear to be flying. They were beautifully shot, and Tony recognized John Chen’s work. What surprised him was that the man doing the ropework, binding the woman and tying knots between her breasts, was Max Baxter.

Gibbs asked, “The kid is the one tying the ropes?”

“Uh, yeah. Nobody mentioned this before,” Tony said. Max did look young in the photos, but they knew by now he wasn’t a kid.

McGee identified the woman hanging from the ceiling as being Lorraine Harrington. “The guy in the white shirt watching them is her husband, Chuck J. Harrington, CEO of Oysterfly. The company prides themselves in their clean, outdoorsy reputation and wouldn’t like anyone knowing what their CEO is up to in his free time.”

Tony would have described the husband’s expression as avid; he was obviously getting off on seeing another man truss up his wife. The other guests seen in the background appeared to be just as fascinated by the scene playing out in Devlin’s playroom as he was. Generally, everyone looked as though they were having a good time.

There were a few short videos, too, and the one of Max wrapping lengths of red rope around the woman’s body proved to be intimate and sensual, something Tony wasn’t expecting. Another video followed Max as he slowly removed the ropes from the woman. Once released, Mrs. Harrington just about collapsed in his arms, a beatific smile on her face.

“Wow,” Tony said aloud. “Looks like Max has some serious talent. Imagine being wrapped up in nice soft rope…”

Gibbs made a sound and Tony turned to him, raising an eyebrow in question. Gibbs said, “Max knows what he’s doing with those ropes.”
Tony said, “Yeah, he must have been practicing. Think he was the one who tied up Lt. Devlin?”

Gibbs said, “From what you’ve said, Devlin didn’t seem like the kind of guy who’d allow anyone to put him in that position, tie him up like that, certainly not some kid.”

Tony explained, “Bondage alters the balance of power. And whoever did the shibari ropework on the lieutenant did it after the party. It would have been private. No social restraints. Some of those knots were putting a lot of pressure on him, like around the groin. Pain stimulus, pain becomes pleasure… struggling can be highly erotic. Good times.”

McGee glanced over his shoulder at Tony but didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. It was obvious he wondered how it was that Tony knew so much about the physical and emotional aspects of bondage.

“However,” Tony continued, with a smirk, “getting hanged in your own safe space with an excessively large dildo shoved up your ass goes well beyond anyone’s definition of having a good time.”

McGee said, “The lieutenant had to either be agreeable to being tied up, or he was unconscious at the time. He’s a big guy though. Max, if he’s the one who did it, would have needed another pair of hands.”

They went back to the photographs and were able to match up the faces to the names, by Chen’s description of them, but Gibbs double-checked the head count. He pointed to the screen. “There’s one extra. There. Isn’t that Jacob?”

McGee had a closer look at a young man in the background, standing in the doorway. He brought up a head shot of Jacob from his ID, for comparison. “Chen told you that Jacob was in the house, right? But he didn’t mention he was actually at the party.”

Tony reminded him, “Verona said he saw Jacob in the doorway.”

McGee went back a few photos. “He isn’t in any of the previous photos. Looks like he left almost as soon as he arrived.”

Tony replied, “Chen said that Jacob never came to any parties. I get the feeling that Lt. Devlin kept
him locked up, and only brought him out for his own pleasure.”

“Well, he was there last night,” Gibbs said.

“Maybe the little mouse was getting brave.”

They checked the time stamp on the image, and found it had been taken near the end of the evening, at the time Lt. Devlin was announcing his retirement. The next photo was of Lt. Devlin, looking pleased with himself, smiling broadly, one arm slung around Max’s shoulders, a glass raised in a toast. Once again, Jacob was in the background, staring at Devlin as he made his announcement.

“He looks… unhappy,” McGee said.

“Jacob? More like shocked,” Tony replied. “Max doesn’t look too happy either.” In fact, he looked downright uncomfortable. Devlin looked so alive in the photo, a mature version of the man he’d briefly known, still virile and commanding. Well, he wasn’t anything any longer, Tony thought, except dead.

McGee said, “If I was Jacob I’d definitely be freaking out to learn that my abuser was going to be around 24/7.”

“I’d be heading for the exit, and wouldn’t look back,” Tony said.

“Yup,” Gibbs agreed. “Better make that BOLO cover the entire East coast.”
Interviews

INTERVIEWS

«•»«•»«•»

Interviews
Indica

Yeah, question after question, you seem interested.
Yeah, playin' good cop, bad cop, tryin’ ta get confessions.
Ahaha, think you’re slick, you can’t catch me slip.

«•»«•»«•»

Tony strode into interrogation and tossed some file folders on the table. He had brought a couple of bottles of water with him, and he set those to one side.

He loved talking to people, wheedling information out of them, getting to the truth. Just because a suspect was scared or anxious didn’t mean they were guilty of anything, and he’d faced down some criminals who had looked him in the eye and proclaimed their innocence even after being caught red-handed. Chen fell somewhere in between. He seemed nervous, but who wouldn’t be when seated in a dark room lit only by a glaring overhead light? And being confronted by a determined and experienced cop who seemed to think you had something to do with a grisly murder? He didn’t look guilty, but time would tell.

Tony opened the top folder and slapped several autopsy photos of Lt. Devlin laid out on Ducky’s stainless steel table, right in front of Chen. The man blanched and looked away, but Tony knew he’d seen enough. “Not very pretty, is it, seeing your buddy’s dead body cut open so a stranger can rummage around in his insides?” Tony asked. He dropped a photo showing Devlin hanging from the ceiling, entwined in ropes, the hood still over his face. “And look at this one from the scene of the crime. I don’t know about you, but it’s the smell that always gets to me, that coppery smell of congealing blood. And why do you think it is that he’s got this hood covering his face? I get the feeling whoever fucked him up like this needed to objectify him. That way, you’re not really killing a man, are you? It’s just a thing.”

“Why are you showing me these?” Chen asked, unable to hide how disconcerted he was.

“Because I’m investigating the murder of this dead Marine, Mr. Chen, and you know more about it than you’ve been letting on.”
“I don’t know…”

“You know about this one?” Tony opened another file folder and slid a mug shot of Max Baxter across the table.

From the stunned expression on his face, it looked like Chen didn’t know about Max’s past. He looked sharply at Tony. “What is this?”

“This is Max Baxter, age sixteen, after he’d been incarcerated for two years. He doesn’t look too good, does he?” Tony asked. In fact, Max looked drawn, his expression defensive. “See here,” Tony said, pointing at the date on the photograph. “This tells us that little Max has been fibbing about his age. He isn’t sweet eighteen, sorry to say; he’s twenty-four years old. That’s like… really old. He’ll be twenty-five in January. You didn’t know that, did you?”

It took a moment for Chen to form any words, but when he did he looked at Tony with defiance in his eyes. “I don’t care what age he is, or what he’s done in the past. He isn’t that… that person. He hasn’t been that person since I took him into my home.”

“Well, that person has a record of assault, Mr. Chen. He stabbed someone with a fork and left him to bleed to death. Lucky for him, the guy didn’t die. However, I’ve observed that once a blade-man, always a blade-man, and I have this hunch that Max just might have been the last person to see Lt. Devlin alive, who just happens to have some holes poked in his body. Our ME thinks they were made by a kitchen tool, and I’m guessing it was a spork. Remember those? I still can’t believe they didn’t catch on, really good for grapefruit, Spaghetti-Os and even for use as a handy-dandy murder weapon!”

“Max didn’t do any of this! It was someone else. What about… the other guests? Harrington… Devlin was always making him feel small in front of his wife and–”

Tony made the sound of a buzzer. “Wrong! We already have solid alibis, and no good motives, for every single person at that party. That leaves you and Max. Or, maybe just Max?” Tony put on a fake smile of apology.

“I’m telling you Max didn’t lay a hand on Devlin.” Chen worked hard at collecting his thoughts, and threw out, “What about Jacob?”
“What about him? You gonna throw that poor kid under the bus?”

“He was there, at the house last night. He hated Devlin, more than anyone knew!”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “And can you blame him?”

Chen said insistently, “He was desperate to get away, out of Devlin’s clutches! He would have done anything.”

Tony leaned back and crossed his arms. “How about you tell me what really happened last night? I know Jacob made a brief appearance at the party, long enough to find out that his tormentor was going to be at home an awful lot from now on, and that he’d be consigned to a full-time life of hell. Instead of the part-time version of hell. Was he still in the house when you and Max left?”

“Where is Max? I want to see him!”

“He’s fine. Right now he’s chatting it up with Special Agent Gibbs. He’s my boss, and let me tell you, he’s quite the alpha. I’ll bet that right around now he’s using all that gruff Gibbs charm to break your sweet little Max right open,” Tony said, smiling proudly.

“He can’t talk to Max without–.”

“Gibbs can do whatever he wants, and believe me, if he wants to extract information from Max, he’ll find a way.” Chen was looking frantic so Tony decided it was a good time to push him harder. “Why did Jacob stay in that house when he knew damned well that whenever Lt. Devlin came home he was in for a rough time?”

“Because… because it was all he had,” Chen said.

“You’re saying he was willing to accept whatever perversion was on the menu that night in exchange for… for what? Rent and beer? Someone got a raw deal, if you ask me.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Chen said impatiently. “I want to speak to Max.”
Tony ignored his request. “How did Jacob end up in Devlin’s house?”

“They met at an art show in Chicago last summer,” Chen said, sounding impatient. “Devlin brought him back here, became his mentor. He’s been paying all of Jacob’s expenses, and lets him live there for free.”

“You and I both know that there’s no such thing as free. In fact, it sounds like Jacob was paying quite a steep price,” Tony said.

Chen slumped in his chair. “You have to believe me, I thought, all this time, how good Devlin was to help this kid, how generous he was, how great it was that he was treating him like a son. Devlin recommended Jacob, got him into college, even paid for it. Look, we thought he was simply a benevolent benefactor. We had no idea... we rarely saw them together, what with Devlin hardly ever being here.” Chen dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “God, I must have been blind not to see what was going on.”

“But those blinders came off last night...”

Chen looked up and nodded. “Yes, Jacob told me what was going on. After the party, we were about to leave when Devlin stopped Max and started talking to him about shibari. He wanted him to teach him how to make some knots.”

“In the playroom?”

“Yes. I got our coats, waited in the foyer. That’s when I saw Jacob on the landing, upstairs. He motioned for me to come up.”

“So you left Max down in the playroom with Devlin. Alone?” Tony asked, as if he doubted Chen’s word.

“It was only supposed to be for a few minutes. Look, it was obvious that Jacob desperately needed someone to talk to, and I couldn’t say no to him. I saw his expression when Devlin announced his retirement,” Chen explained. “The kid was as white as a sheet. He just stood there staring, and suddenly he turned and ran out.”
“Did Devlin know he was there?”

Chen nodded. “Definitely. He was gloating. He did things like that. Made the situation awkward. Forced people into corners, gave them no way out.”

“So you followed Jacob upstairs to find out what was wrong?”

Chen nodded. “He was scared, really scared. I wanted him to come home with me and Max, at least for the night, but he seemed really confused. He wanted to leave, but seemed terrified of leaving in case Devlin caught him. I had a hard time getting him to tell me what was going on, but once he started…” Chen hugged himself, upset. “He was crying, sobbing. It was hard to understand what he was saying, but he kept saying he couldn't live like this any more. He broke down and told me everything. I didn’t believe him at first. But then he… showed me his scars… He’d been burned and cut all over his belly, his hips – he pulled down his pants and showed me – Jesus… it looked like his skin been sliced off his hipbones with some kind of tool; he had bandages on his stomach, and a couple were still bleeding and… I don’t understand how he could have done those horrible things to a … a child.”

Tony pushed a bottle of water towards Chen and opened one for himself. God, he still had nightmares about the things Stefan had done to him, and he’d only suffered through one weekend of torture, not four months of it. He’d had a terrible experience, to be sure, but this boy, Jacob, he’d endured God knows how much abuse at Lt. Devlin’s hands. It didn’t bear thinking about.

There was a slight crack in Chen’s voice when he said, “That monster has been raping and torturing that kid since the moment he came to live in his house. Across the street from us! The things he did to him… keeping him in a cage, beating him, using him for all his sick fantasies, and even mutilating him. Jacob said when Stefan was around he used him all day, every day…”

Tony felt the color draining out of his face. “What did you call him?” So far, he’d been able to separate the man he’d know briefly as Stefan from the deceased Lt. Devlin, but hearing what Devlin had done brought the two identities closer.

“He made Jacob call him Stefan. Why would he do that?”

“It’s his middle name,” Tony said emotionlessly. He thought, thank God Devlin hadn’t been living at his DC home full-time, or else that kid would have been dead by now. “Why did Jacob stay? He could have left any time that Devlin wasn’t here.”
“I think… I think Jacob believed he didn’t have a choice. He’d made friends at the university but he still felt trapped.”

“So he thought his only out was killing Devlin? That’s bullshit. He could have walked away, asked for help,” Tony said adamantly.

“Like all the other people who live with their abusers for years on end? He was petrified Devlin would catch him on the way out, and do even worse things to him,” Chen countered. “I tried to help him. I offered him shelter, and he refused.”

“So you left him upstairs. You went down to the basement to fetch Max. What did you see when you entered the playroom?” Tony asked.

“Devlin, with ropes knotted around his…” Chen made vague motions indicating his chest and groin.

“Tied by Max. You taught him how to do shibari, didn’t you?”

Chen looked disconcerted. “Yes. How do you…”

“I saw the photographs in your hallway, the rope collar. Is that your signature look? You taught it to Max and he’s taken over. What’s the matter? You don’t like tying people up any more, Chen?”

“I love it as an art form. I love setting up the poses and taking the photos. Max, though, he’s a fast learner. He’s very good at it. He’s even given a workshop. Everyone loves watching him. Devlin asked him to demonstrate shibari at his retirement party. I said no at first but Max begged me to allow him, and I finally gave in.” Chen went silent, and sat staring into space.

“Mr. Chen?”

Chen turned and met Tony’s eyes. “What? Oh… Max was finished, so I took him home.”

Tony could tell he was lying. “What time was this?”
“Um… midnight. I guess. I wasn’t watching the clock.”

“You sure you didn’t find Devlin with his hands all over Max? All over your property, your own sweet boy? Man, if I was you, I’d have been so fucking angry. Devlin took what he wanted. He hurt people because it made him feel good. He laid his hands all over Max and he hurt him. You lost it. You went down into that soundproofed playroom, and you got Lt. Devlin hanging from the ceiling, and you showed him who’s the boss. Isn’t that what happened?”

Chen stared at Tony, pain in his eyes. His voice was steady though, when he said, “No. I met Max at the playroom door and we left.”

Tony sighed. “Then if you didn’t do it, I’m going to have to believe that Max got back at Devlin for something he did. He was perfectly capable of tying him up, and he was able to get that lady off the ground earlier. Little Max picked up the biggest dildo he could find and he fucked–”

Chen struck his hands on the table, shouting, “No! Max didn’t do anything! He didn’t…. He didn’t do it!”

Tony shouted back, “Then how about you tell me who raped and murdered Lt. Devlin?”

“Jacob did it! I heard footsteps overhead. He was still there when we left and… he killed Devlin!”

While an agent escorted Chen to a holding cell, Tony went into the observation room to talk to Gibbs and McGee. Gibbs handed him a bottled juice and he drank it down quickly. With a sigh, Tony wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Always makes me thirsty,” he said with a small smile.

Gibbs said, “He’s lying about the confrontation with Devlin.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony agreed. “I think Chen got into it with him. Hit him with the glass bowl.”

McGee reminded them, “It had blood on it. Abby was going to test that first. She should be able to tell us the results soon.”
Gibbs said, “Chen’s quick to point the finger at Jacob. He’s a convenient scapegoat.”

“Doesn’t mean Jacob didn’t do it,” Tony pointed out. “Any sign of him yet?”

Gibbs grunted. “No. Let’s talk to Max Baxter next. Need you to sit in,” he said to Tony.

McGee’s phone buzzed and after a brief conversation he announced, “Abby has some results. She also says Ducky wants to see you, Boss.”

Gibbs left the small room, saying, “DiNozzo, you’re with me. McGee, see Abby. We’ll be there soon.”

Tony did not want to go into Autopsy. He definitely did not want to see Devlin laid out on a slab. Nevertheless, he followed Gibbs into the ice-cold room and kept his eyes averted, for the most part. Luckily, the autopsy had been completed and the body stitched up, and covered to the chest with a sheet.

“Ah, gentlemen,” Ducky greeted them. “I have some news to impart.”

“Keep it brief, Ducky,” Gibbs said gruffly. “We’re still doing interviews.”

“Brief? Oh dear. I suppose…” Ducky must have seen Tony was uncomfortable in the deceased’s presence because he said, “Of course. Lt. Devlin was not tied up voluntarily. He was initially struck on the side of his head, with some type of large blunt object.”

“We have a heavy glass bowl in mind,” Gibbs said.

“Oh my, yes, I’m sure that would do the trick,” Ducky said. “Interestingly enough, the lieutenant was tied up in this intricate shibari style while he was dazed, or perhaps rendered unconscious.”
Gibbs asked, “How’d you come to that conclusion?”

“From the way in which the ropes are tied. I could see the angles of the knots varied, some being tied by someone standing at his head. He must have been supine.”

“How did he die?” Gibbs asked.

“I was about to get to that, Jethro. After being dazed, his attacker looped the rope around his torso…”

“And his neck,” Tony added.

“Yes, quite. Then the lieutenant’s head was covered by the latex hood, his body winched high on the overhead hook, and he was violated with the rather large dildo Timothy collected as evidence. There were significant tears which I can show you if only you would…”

“I’ll take your word for it, Duck,” said Gibbs, raising a hand.

“The word ‘dildo,’ as you may know, comes from the old Norse word ‘dilla,’ meaning to soothe. I cannot imagine that anything this poor man went through last night could be called soothing.”

“So how’d he die, Duck?” Gibbs growled.

“Anthony was correct that the rope collar alone did not asphyxiate the lieutenant. His larynx was bruised though, and he would have had trouble getting enough oxygen. In addition, the rope harness constricted his chest when he was hoisted aloft. Ultimately, his heart went into arrest due to arrhythmia from lack of oxygen.”

“Told ya!” Tony said with a grin.

“Any drugs in his system?” asked Gibbs.

“Only Viagra, though this man had taken twice the dosage recommended. Whether it was due to the
asphyxiation, or from being stimulated by the dildo, he ejaculated shortly before death. Oh, and another male had unprotected intercourse with the lieutenant. This was prior to him being penetrated by the aforementioned dildo, which was foolish considering he had several sexually transmitted diseases. I have sent samples to Abby. It will all be in my report.”

“Wait a minute, you mean Devlin got fucked by…” Tony looked at Gibbs. “By the guy who tied him up?”

“So we’ll know who did it when we get the labs back,” Gibbs said.

“Yes, and I can tell you that the stab wounds were done by a right-handed person, several quite deep, and one nicked an artery. If the lieutenant hadn’t had heart failure, he most certainly would have bled to death.”

“Anything else we need to know?”

“Not really. Except his liver was in a shocking state for someone his age.” Ducky tutted and shook his head.
Revelations

REVELATIONS

«•»«•»«•»

Revelations
Audioslave

You know what to do, you know what I did,
Since you know everything just clue me in.
I am such a wreck, I am such a mess,
I know what I know, why don't you fill in the rest?

«•»«•»«•»

Gibbs and Tony went down to Abby’s lab to go over her findings. McGee was already there, checking for any usage of Jacob’s debit or Metro card. “Nothing so far,” he reported. “I’ve set it up so I will get an alert on my phone when he does.”

“Students carry IDs, right? Is there any way of tracking them?” Tony asked.

Abby smiled. “Sure. Every time a card is used for keyless entry it’s logged in a database, for security to track students in case of emergency or if there’s a crime. It sounds really Big Brother but they don’t watch your every move, and it is kept on a secure server. I’m sure I can access it from here, and…. okay, here’s Jacob Alderman’s UniPass. He last used it several days ago. Either he wasn’t on campus recently or he didn’t go near any of the card readers.”

“Can you locate LaShonna Reid’s pass and follow her activity?” Gibbs asked.

“Can I or will I?” Abby said, rolling her eyes. She went to work and a few moments later she said, “Yes, here she is. She was in and out of several buildings over the past week, ate at the dining hall at lunchtime and afternoons but never at night – anyone want to know what she ate? No? Okaaay. According to her UniPass, she was in the arts center all afternoon Friday and… after spending an hour in a dorm, she went home last night at six and hasn’t left since. It logs you in and out in university housing, even if it’s not on campus.”

Tony asked, “Can you monitor both their movements and let us know…”

“I’ll have it send updates to your phone, Tony. McGee’s, too.”
“Thanks, Abs. I’m glad you’re on our side,” McGee said.

“You’d better be, mister! Okay, let’s talk evidence.” Abby went over the forensics with them, saying there was DNA of a dozen or more people on the items they’d given to her. “But what you’ll want to hear is that there was some interesting material on the dildo, belonging to three people. Chen’s fingerprints were only on the end, where you’d hold the dildo. There was some fecal matter and blood belonging to Lt. Devlin, as expected. However,” she said, looking excited, “there was also some blood from a second person on the tip, belonging to Max Baxter.”

“Only the tip?” Tony asked, feeling a bit queasy.

“Yep. By contrast, the lieutenant’s blood was found most of the way up the shaft,” Abby told them, nodding. “And… this is really exciting… there was semen both on the dildo and inside the lieutenant’s body. Okay, who wants to guess who had sex with Lt. Devlin just before he died?”

Gibbs and Tony looked at each other, and then at Abby. They said in unison, “Chen.”

“Not Jacob?” McGee asked.

Abby seemed disappointed they knew the answer. “Guys!”

Tony consoled her, “I knew he was hiding something. Devlin tried to do some funny business with Max, Chen interrupted him, whacked him with a handy glass bowl, and he and Max tied him up, trying to make it look like… what was it you called it, Gibbs? Oh yeah, a sex scene gone bad.”

“You did not!” Abby exclaimed. She slapped Gibbs’ arm and said, “Sounds like you have a tale to tell. I’m looking forward to hearing all about it.”

“Nothing to tell,” Gibbs said hastily.

Tony couldn’t take his eyes off Gibbs, who was flushing a nice shade of pink. He looked like he was about to hasten from the lab but Tony caught his arm. “Not yet. She isn’t finished.”
Abby beamed. “Why, thank you, Tony. The tools you brought me, all one hundred of them, were really clean, probably steamed in a sterilizer cabinet.”

“But you found something anyway,” Gibbs surmised.

Abby’s smile grew wider. “How well you know me! I found this one tool was washed but not sterilized. Actually, it was barely rinsed off.” She held up a clear plastic collection tube containing a sharp tool. It wasn’t very large, about 7” long with a stainless steel blade and an ergonomic silicone handle. “This point matches the wounds, all twenty of them, by the way, in Lt. Devlin’s groin area.”

McGee peered at the tool. “Isn’t that a peeler? For vegetables? I think I have that same brand.”

Tony cringed at the sight of the peeler, but nobody seemed to notice. He gave a nervous laugh. “Yeah, the kind you might find in any kitchen. Or in the toolbox of a psycho sadistic creep who likes to slice bits of skin off his victims.”

Abby pulled a face and exclaimed, “Eew!”

Gibbs looked grim. “Whose blood was on the peeler?”

“Lots of Lt. Devlin’s blood, and a trace of Jacob Alderman’s,” Abby said. “Plus both men’s fingerprints.”

“What? You mean Jacob stabbed Devlin? I was sure Chen did it!” Tony exclaimed.

Abby shook her head, making her pigtails bounce. “Nope. According to all the evidence, Jacob stabbed Devlin with the potato peeler in the playroom.”

McGee asked, “So all three men were in on it?”

“Sounds like an Agatha Christie,” Tony said. “Only, Jacob could have gone down and finished off Devlin after the other two left.”
“How about proving your theory, DiNozzo?” Gibbs planted a quick kiss on her cheek, said, “Good work, Abs,” and strode from the room, Tony on his heels, and McGee not far behind.

Tony sat in on Gibbs’ interview of Max Baxter that afternoon. Not at the table but leaning against the wall in a dark corner.

Gibbs wore his reading glasses and spoke in the tone Tony secretly called ‘sexy teacher,’ sort of tough but understanding. “You know Jacob Alderman.”

Max bushed the hair off his face and looked at Gibbs like he wasn’t scared of him. “Yeah. I like him but I think he was crazy to stay in that house, the way he was treated.”

Gibbs nodded and looked at his notes. “Crazy, huh? You know Lt. Devlin was paying for all of Jacob’s expenses, housing, college. And that’s a lot of money. He also introduced him to the right people. Even got him a job with a prestigious museum. Everything he did was aimed at helping Jacob towards an impressive career as an artist. Pretty good for a gay kid from Kansas who’d been couch surfing ever since his folks tossed him out of the house, don’t ya think?”

“Devlin made him pay for it with sex,” was the petulant response.

Gibbs reasoned, “Why should Devlin give it away for free? He worked hard for his money. Served in the military, did several tours overseas.” He shrugged. “If he wanted some blowjobs instead of rent, or got to have sex with Jacob in exchange for an expensive college course, then he had every right to do so.”

Max said angrily, “No…he didn’t have any right…”

Gibbs cocked his head to the side. “Isn’t that the arrangement you have with John Chen? Tit for tat? He does something nice for you and you have to repay him… somehow.”

Max frowned. “No! It’s not like that between us!”
“You pretend to be a kid, and in return he takes care of you, treats you right, pretends to love you. That’s how it looks to me.”

“He isn’t pretending anything! He loves me.”

“Okay, so Chen loves you enough to protect you from predators like Devlin. He does protect you, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, of course he does but…”

“And you don’t want to go back on the streets, or end up doing hard time in prison – which you will because you’re now an adult – so you do whatever it takes to make sure this arrangement continues.”

“I guess so. Only it’s not as cold and calculating as you’re making it out to be. He loves me,” Max said.

“You protect him, too, don’t you? You care about him. You’d cover for him, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. I mean, I guess so.”

Gibbs posed his questions as statements. “So if Chen is in really bad trouble, and he tells you to lie about something, you go along with it. Naturally, because you love him and he loves you. You tell everyone that nothing happened when you were alone with Devlin. That Chen came down and got you and you left at midnight. Is that correct?”

“Yeah, we left at twelve.” Max added, “That’s the truth!”

“It’s the truth that Chen wants you to say, right?”

“Yes. I mean no! Stop trying to trick me!”

“I’m just trying to sort some things out. You wouldn’t want to get Chen in any trouble would you? If he gets convicted, goes to jail, you’re gonna have to find another sugar daddy. And somewhere else
to live, some way of making ends meet. Trouble is, you’re probably end up on the street, or with someone who’s a hell of a lot worse than Chen. You’re not going to fool anyone with your ‘I’m just a kid who’s willing to put out’ act any more. I’ve gotta say, you look your age today. Must be all the stress of killing a man and trying to cover it up.” Gibbs signaled to Tony who rose from his chair and handed over a large brown paper bag. Gibbs pulled on a glove before withdrawing a huge dildo. “They call this the Big Boy. Between you and me, I’d never let anyone get near my ass with this thing. Boy, it’s gotta hurt. You’d need lots of lube. Devlin tried to use this on you last night, didn’t he?”

Max had gone pale, and looked like he was going to throw up. “It wasn’t his fault,” he whispered.

“Wasn’t Chen’s fault?”

Max shook his head in denial. “It happened so suddenly. Devlin had me over that bench, and I… I got away. I grabbed something and swung it at him.” Max’s eyes were wide with horror. “It made this crunching sound. I thought I’d killed him. I didn’t know what to do, and Chen came down and he…”

“But he knew what to do.”

Max nodded miserably and wiped his eyes. “He always knows what to do.”

“You tied Devlin up and killed him. Trouble is, you didn’t clean up very well.” He indicated the dildo they’d found before putting it back in the bag.

“We were only going to teach him a lesson. That’s what Chen said. Only… only Devlin woke up after we got him hanging, and he started laughing, calling me names and… and I wanted to shut him up! Just shut him the fuck up! Chen got really mad. I’ve never seen him lose it like that. He… held onto the harness and fucked him, and Devlin was making these choking sounds, and… Chen told me to leave.”

“You left the basement?”

Max nodded. He said in a small voice, “He came upstairs a while later, but he looked like he was guilty about what he’d done. He said Devlin wouldn’t be bothering me any more. He took me home and gave me some hot tea and I slept.” Max closed his eyes, tears streaming from them. He opened them and begged, “It was all my fault. Please don’t blame Chen. Please.”
With Max and Chen safely locked up in separate holding cells, Gibbs decided they should go home, freshen up and look for the still missing Jacob Alderman first thing in the morning.

As soon as they got home, Tony went straight upstairs for a shower of the hottest water he could stand. He soaped and scrubbed and rinsed twice over. Dressed in clean sweatpants and a tee, and feeling a lot better, he made his way down to the kitchen. Some chicken noodle soup was simmering on the stove. He could hear water running in the downstairs bathroom. A few minutes later, Jethro emerged, pink-faced and smelling like lemon soap, towel-drying his short hair. He met Tony’s eyes and a second later they were standing in the middle of the kitchen, hugging each other. It was barely five PM when they slid into bed, to take a short nap. They were both so drained they immediately fell sleep in each other’s arms.

Something was buzzing. The phone. Damn. Tony groped around and found it on the nightstand. It as dark out and he had no idea what time it was. “Yeah,” he mumbled.

“Tony! Haven’t you been reading your texts?”

“Abby? Uh, my phone’s set so it doesn’t buzz every time I get a text.” Tony sat on the edge of the bed and yawned. He glanced at his watch. It was two a.m.

“LaShonna’s pass card was active this evening. She spent some time in a dorm on campus but she just left.”

“Wait a minute. You think she went to see Jacob? He’s been hiding in a dorm?” If LaShonna picked Jacob up in her car, where would they be going at two a.m.?

“I tracked her movement, well, her car’s movements. She’s heading straight for Lt. Devlin’s address,” Abby said excitedly.

Tony could feel the mattress move behind him. Jethro was getting up. “Okay, we’re awake. Thanks,
“McGee told me to tell you to phone him.”

“Why didn’t he just call me?”

“Um… you’ll have to ask him about that,” Abby said, sounding suspiciously like she was hiding something.

“Okay, I’ll call him,” Tony said, and after a quick good-bye he pulled on socks and shoes and watched Jethro doing the same. After a quick pit-stop in the kitchen, Tony joined Gibbs in the car. While Gibbs took the wheel, Tony called McGee and told him they were on their way. Once they were in the vicinity of Devlin’s house Gibbs slowed down and looked for a parking spot. He found one half a block away. They both put on body armor with their NCIS jackets on top. There was no sign of McGee, so Tony texted him they’d arrived. He spotted LaShonna’s parked car as they approached Devlin’s house on foot, but there was nobody in it.

There were a few lights on in Devlin’s house, and from the sidewalk they could see the top floors were alight.

“Looks like he came back to get some things,” Tony surmised. The yellow Do-Not-Cross tape across the front door had been broken.

“There might be two of them. Keep an eye out for the girl.” Gibbs pulled his firearm from its holster.

“How’re we going to get in?” Tony whispered, doing the same.

Gibbs smirked. “Got the code thingy for the front door.”

“Thingy?” Tony replied.

“Hey!” Gibbs said in a low voice.
Tony rolled his eyes, even though his boss would know he was doing it, despite standing behind
him. Gibbs punched a series of numbers into the keypad by Lt. Devlin’s front door, and the door
opened without setting off any alarms. They ventured into the house, treading lightly to avoid
making any noise. Tony motioned ‘up’ and they silently climbed to the second floor. When they
were partway up the stairs they heard a thump from down the hall.

They cautiously entered the master bedroom, guns at the ready. The room was a wreck; the bedding
and pillows had been slashed, and feathers were everywhere. A lamp lay smashed on the floor, and
the large painting that had hung over the bed, of two men in an erotic embrace, had been torn off the
wall and cut to ribbons. On the other side of the king-size bed, a young man was viciously stabbing
at a piece of clothing with a knife, making inarticulate sounds of rage.

Gibbs trained his gun on the man and stepped forward. “NCIS, raise your hands! Drop the weapon!”

The man turned in surprise, and Tony recognized Jacob Alderman. He seemed taller and broader
shouldered in person. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days, but it was his eyes that struck Tony.
They were pale gray and wide with shock, almost dazed. At first Tony thought Jacob was high on
drugs, but he realized the young man was distraught and, at that moment, very dangerous. He had
the remains of one of Lt. Devlin’s uniform jackets clenched in one hand, cut to shreds, and in the
other, a knife with a long, sharp blade.

Both Tony and Gibbs ordered Jacob to drop the knife. He looked down at the weapon in his hand as
if he wondered how it had got there. But instead of dropping it, he gripped it in a tight fist and said in
a shaky voice, “He’s dead. I didn’t p-plan it. He was hanging there, ch-choking. It was my only
chance. I had to do it. I had to!”

Gibbs, who was closer to Jacob, said evenly, “Put the knife down and we’ll talk about it, okay? Just
put it down. You’re Jacob, right?”

Jacob dropped the remains of Devlin’s uniform but not the knife. He shook his head. “I… I can’t do
that. I have to take care of things here.”

“Sure you can,” Gibbs said, trying to convince him. “Everything’s going to be fine. Put the knife
down and we’ll take care of you. We’ll help you.”

Jacob shook his head harder, distressed. “Jesus, don’t you get it? There’s nothing for me. You don’t
get it… I killed him and I’m not sorry I did! I can’t go back…”
He raised the knife a little and Tony felt Gibbs tense beside him. There was nowhere for Jacob to go though. If he tried to get around the bed and make for the door, Gibbs was blocking his way. Tony did not want to shoot the young man, but if he came at Gibbs with that knife… he’d have no choice.

“Jacob, look at me.” Tony raised his left hand to catch Jacob’s attention, and dipped into his pocket to pull out a vegetable peeler he’d brought from their own kitchen. It wasn’t exactly the same style as the one Jacob had used to stab Devlin, but it was close enough. “I get it, I really do. See, a long time ago, I met this guy in a bar, and I went home with him, and he did a lot of really bad things to me. He… Stefan cut me with one of these.” Tony held the peeler up so Jacob could see it clearly.

Jacob took a step back, breathing hard. “No! Don’t. Oh God, oh God!” His eyes darted around the bedroom, but there was no way out. He was trapped and he knew it.

Tony put the peeler back in his pocket and assured the young man, “Hey, it’s all right. I know what he did to you because he did the same things to me. I’ve got the scars, just like you, and even now, when I see them, I hate myself for being so stupid, for falling for his bullshit. I barely made it out alive. But I did, and I made a life for myself.” Tony could see he had Jacob’s attention, so he continued, “I know you had it far, far worse than I ever did, and I kick myself for not doing something about it, reporting him to the police. I wish like hell I’d done something, but I didn’t. I just ran and hid, and I never told anybody. Not even my partner. Not until yesterday. I’ve got to tell you, it was hard, damned hard, but it’s a relief now someone else knows. You can share what happened to you with me, with someone who’ll listen, Jacob. Gibbs, my partner, he understands.” Tony nodded towards Gibbs to let Jacob know he understood what a monster Devlin had been, and that he sympathized, too.

Jacob was shaking his head and moaning. “No, no! I don’t want to talk about it!”

“We’ll help you. Just drop the knife, okay?” Tony was doing his best to persuade Jacob to take a chance on them, but he had a feeling nothing was going to get through to this guy.

“We can go somewhere else, some place safe,” Gibbs said.

Tony suggested, “How about up in your studio? We want to help you, Jacob.”

“You can’t help me! Nobody can,” Jacob said in anguish. “My paintings… All my work… I cut them up. Fuck, why did he have to ruin everything? We were fine and he had to go and… I could take it so long as I knew he was going away again soon…”
“But you overheard his plans to retire, to be around more,” Tony said. “So you killed him.”

Jacob nodded and inhaled a deep shuddering breath. “I couldn’t take it any longer. Just… just leave me alone. Leave me the fuck alone!” he screamed. “I’ve got to take care of this. Get rid of him! Got to… fuck! Fuck! I hate him!”

Both Gibbs and Tony kept trying to convince Jacob to drop the knife, to come with them so they could talk, but from the way he was talking to himself and waving the knife around, it was painfully obvious the young man was losing his grip. It was as though he didn’t hear them, and Tony knew they’d have to try to subdue him physically. He heard a sound behind them, McGee warning him he was coming in.

Without looking at either of his agents, Gibbs said quietly, “Don’t shoot.”

Tony glanced over and saw him holstering his weapon. “Gibbs, no,” Tony warned, not liking the idea that he was about to make a move on Jacob. The room was too small for any kind of physical confrontation. “Damn it, Gibbs,” he said. “We can get a taser. McGee, go and…”

“I’ve got this.” Gibbs held his hands away from his body, palms up in a gesture of trust. He took a step towards Jacob, and then another, until he was standing on the other side of the bed, only a few feet from him. Gibbs was talking to him all the while in a low, even tone. For a moment, it looked as though he was getting through to the young man, but the minute he got within arm’s reach, Jacob suddenly ran at Gibbs and plowed right into him. Gibbs grabbed Jacob’s arm and kicked his feet out from under him, but the momentum took both of them down.

Tony jumped in, but Jacob was fighting wildly, in a panic, the knife waving around dangerously. It glinted in the light, slashing close to Gibbs’ face, too close. An elbow bashed into Tony’s face and he saw stars, but he got hold of Jacob’s right arm and refused to let go of it. It all ended quickly, with Jacob pinned to the floor, Gibbs’ knee in his back. Jacob struggled, his eyes wide in terror, making odd keening sounds, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

McGee stepped on Jacob’s outstretched hand until he released the knife, and took it out of his reach.

Gibbs handcuffed Jacob and took a couple of deep breaths before motioning for McGee to take the prisoner. McGee pulled Jacob to his feet, and pushed him into a chair at the far end of the bedroom. Whatever fight Jacob had in him had disappeared. He slumped to one side, trying to curl into himself, eyes closed, crying silently.
“You okay, Boss?” McGee asked, not taking his eyes off the prisoner.

Gibbs, kneeling on the carpeted floor, grunted and pointed at Jacob. “Call an ambulance for him.” Tony reached down and offered Gibbs a hand. As soon as he got to his feet, he took a look at Tony’s face and asked, “You okay?”

Tony touched his face gingerly, but the elbow – he presumed it had belonged to Jacob – had caught him on the cheek near his eye. It hurt as bad as being punched. “I think everything’s still in the right place. He didn’t break my nose, did he?”

Gibbs smiled and gently patted Tony’s cheek. “Not even a speck of blood, DiNozzo.”

“I’m going to get a black eye, aren’t I? Damn it!”

McGee put in a call for an ambulance, and another one for a backup team to process the scene. Jacob seemed physically unharmed, but it was obvious he had some serious issues that needed attention.

Tony collected the knife from McGee and grabbed some paper towel from the bathroom to wrap it in. As he did so, he saw there was blood on the blade. He stepped back into the bedroom, looking at Jacob and then at Gibbs. “Boss, did someone…” Gibbs was standing, but not in his usual straight-backed stance. He was listing slightly to one side. Fear gripping his heart, Tony approached him, saying, “Gibbs? Are you hurt? Shit, did he get you?”

Gibbs pressed his hand to his ribs on the left side and winced. He smiled at Tony, obviously trying to assure him, but the smile faltered. He suddenly turned pale. “Damn.”

“Shit!” Tony immediately put an arm around Gibbs and guided him over to the bed. He pulled Gibbs’ jacket open. He was wearing a vest, but a frightening amount of blood was pouring out of the gap a few inches below his armpit.
Good Intentions
Gerry Rafferty

I asked my heart to talk to my mind,
They said don't worry, oh well you're doin' fine.
I went to the doctor, I said I'm misunderstood.
He said, 'Don't worry, why, your intentions are good.'

“I’m okay,” Gibbs said, not very convincingly.

“No you’re not! He stabbed you!” Tony rushed into the bathroom and grabbed a bunch of towels. He folded one and pressed it against Gibbs’ side, wincing in sympathy when the older man grunted.

Unable to leave the prisoner, McGee craned his neck, trying to see how badly Gibbs was hurt. “Tony? What’s going on? Boss?”

“I’m still breathing,” Gibbs said, loud enough for McGee to hear. “It can’t be too deep.”

Tony hoped so, but he was concerned about the amount of blood that was seeping through the towel. “Let’s get your jacket and vest off.” Gibbs tried to help undo the vest’s wide Velcro strips but Tony pushed his hand away and removed the protective gear for him. “Keep pressure on the towel, okay?” It was easy to rip Gibbs’ polo and undershirt, exposing his side. Tony removed the towel just long enough to check out the wound. The gash high on his ribs was barely an inch long but there was no telling how deeply he’d been stabbed.

“Damn it, I should have shot him on sight,” Tony said angrily, pressing a fresh folded towel against Gibbs’ side. His hand was shaking, and Gibbs must have noticed, because he laid his bloodied hand over Tony’s and smiled crookedly at him.

“Hey, he’s still a victim.”

“I know, but…” Tony could hear sirens approaching and within a few minutes, there was a
commotion downstairs. A minute later, Det. Zipkowski entered, followed by several police officers, guns drawn.

After checking out the room and seeing that everything was mostly under control, Zipkowski said, “Heard there was a ruckus at this address. Figured it had to be you guys. Nobody got hung… I mean hanged, did they?”

McGee said tersely, “Gibbs needs an ambulance.”

“They’re on their way,” Zipkowski replied, taking a closer look at Gibbs.

They heard a woman’s voice just outside the door, demanding a Metro officer move out of her way. “I am an NCIS investigator. Let me through. I can make you regret it.”

Tony said under his breath, “Shit, Ziva?”

Gibbs groaned.

Ziva pushed her way past the cops and stopped to take in the scene before her: McGee guarding a handcuffed young man, Tony standing over Gibbs with blood on his hands, and Gibbs on the bed with his shirt open, hunched over in pain, with a blood-stained towel pressed against his ribs.

McGee looked at her in surprise. “Ziva! I thought you weren’t coming back until Monday?”

Ziva raised her chin and said, “I now understand what they say about relatives. That you cannot choose them but you can choose your friends. Who is this?” She glared at Jacob, who was too involved in his own misery to care about the dark-haired woman giving him a dirty look.

Tony shook his head. “Long story. So, they kicked you out of Israel, huh?”

Ziva scowled at Tony. “Have you finished with my *Forno* magazine yet, Tony?”

“You mean *Porno*, right? I’m afraid it’s a little bit… sticky.”
“Hey, think you two can squabble somewhere else?” Gibbs asked, frowning at them.

Ziva came over to take a good look at their injured boss. “What have you done to Gibbs?” she asked Tony.

“Me? I didn’t do anything. He got stabbed, okay?” Tony replied.

“He does not look good,” Ziva said bluntly. She was standing far too close for Tony’s liking.

Zipkowski jerked his head in Ziva’s direction and asked Gibbs, “This one of yours?”

“Oh yeah,” Gibbs replied.

“Give us some room, Ziva. How about you get him out of here?” Tony suggested, indicating their handcuffed murder suspect.

She bristled. “You can not tell me what to do–”

“The hell I can’t, Liaison Officer David,” Tony shot back.

“Enough,” Gibbs said, and made as if to rise. He didn’t get far off the bed though. Tony clamped a hand on his shoulder and told him to stay put.

Zipkowski loomed over Ziva, using his greater height and bulk to advantage. “Hey, little lady, how about you and me take this suspect downstairs where we can secure him?”

“Did you just call me ‘little lady’?” Ziva asked, furious.

Not at all fazed, Zipkowski leered at her and said, “I’ll just bet you have a pair of those fancy handcuffs in your purse. The kind where you can shock your prisoner with the push of a button.”
Ziva narrowed her eyes and said, “I do not carry a purse.” Zipkowski laughed in response.

“Ziva, work with Detective Zipkowski, or get out,” Gibbs said in a voice that brooked no argument. “McGee, you go, too.”

Ziva huffed, “Fine, but only because you tell me to do so, Gibbs. I will assist McGee to remove this slowlife.” Between them, Ziva and McGee got Jacob out of his chair and took him away. He looked like he was in shock. Tony just couldn't find it within himself to worry about him, not right now.

Zipkowski took in Gibbs’ state, and the amount of blood soaking through the towels and on both Gibbs’ and Tony’s hands, and he said he’d go see what was taking the EMTs so long.

The second he was gone, Tony kneeled in front of Gibbs, keeping the pressure on the wound. He hated being in Devlin’s bedroom, and as crazy as it seemed, he couldn’t say the things he wanted to say to Gibbs while in this place. He felt a hand on his head, and looked up.

Gibbs licked his lips and said, “Stop worrying so much.” He looked exhausted and a little gray, and was breathing fast, shallow breaths.

Tony shook his head. Of course he was worried. Gibbs asked for some water, and although Tony didn’t want to leave his side, not even for a moment, he ran into the bathroom, located a glass and filled it with tap water. Gibbs took a few sips while Tony put pressure on the wound again. He took the glass when Gibbs was done and put it aside on the nightstand.

Gibbs said, between breaths, “I love you… you know. More than anything.”

“Yeah, well, you can show me exactly how much when we get home. After they fix you up at the hospital,” Tony replied, smiling at the unexpected sentiment. Gibbs snorted and smiled, but his smile slowly slipped off his face. He blinked a few times, and Tony knew something was wrong. Before he could ask what was the matter, Gibbs mumbled, “Tony?” and a second later, his eyes rolled back and he passed out on the bed.

“Gibbs? Gibbs! Do not do this to me!” Tony said, trying to rouse him. He shouted, “Where the hell are the EMTs?” Even as he called for help, McGee hurried in and held the door open for two paramedics with a gurney they’d hauled up the stairs. They quickly assessed Gibbs, stuck a couple of IV lines in him and set up a heart monitor. The fact that they didn’t waste any time getting him
loaded on the gurney told Tony how urgent this was. As soon as they had Gibbs bundled up, they
got him down the stairs with the assistance of two police officers. By the time they had loaded Gibbs
in the ambulance, he was waking up, disoriented and belligerent. Luckily, Tony was there to explain
what was going on, and settle him down.

All the way to the hospital, Tony held onto Gibbs’ hand, praying silently and saying encouraging
words aloud. “You’re going to be fine, Boss. Just hang on. I’m right here, Jethro. Not gonna leave
you.” A couple of times he thought Gibbs had passed out again, but then he’d feel the pressure of his
grip on his fingers, and his fear would ease a little.

The weekend they were supposed to have off? They spent it at George Washington University
Hospital, with Jethro in intensive care, and Tony, along with his friends and colleagues, camping out
in the waiting room.

Over 10% of George Washington’s trauma patients come in with serious gunshot wounds. Tony
remembered that statistic from some bulletin, and he figured that an emergency department that
handled so many injuries from gun violence had to be the best place to get treated for a penetrating
knife wound. He also remembered reading, in that same bulletin, that half of the shooting victims
who survived left the hospital with lifelong debilitating conditions.

Tony quickly put his worries about any long-term prognosis out of his mind. All he cared about was
Jethro coming out of this alive. Anything else, they could deal with later.

Gibbs was admitted with low blood pressure and an unstable heart rate, and by the time they decided
he had a belly full of blood and damage to his spleen, his vital signs took a plunge south.

There is a good reason emergency personnel oust relatives from the trauma bay when a loved one is
being worked upon. Seeing the nurses and doctor working in a controlled frenzy, shouting out
Jethro’s stats, shoving a tube into his chest, hearing the wildly beeping monitors, seeing him
intubated, for God’s sake, was awful.

More than once Tony had been in the same situation – the one lying on the gurney, scared shitless
and bleeding all over the place, but this was far scarier than being on the receiving end of emergency
care. This was worse because it was Jethro. He realized it was far easier to be on the receiving end
of emergency treatment than to witness it, because although you experienced the pain and fear on a
very personal level, at some point you either passed out, or were put out of your misery by an angel
in white.
They rushed Jethro into surgery and were able to repair the tear – the small tear, a bored-sounding doctor had told him – in Jethro’s spleen. He would be staying in the hospital for several days, and after release, would need a lot of rest at home. He was lucky, another doctor said, a kinder doctor, who seemed more concerned about Tony’s appearance than about his patient.

Jethro wasn’t allowed visitors yet. “You may as well go home and get some rest,” Ducky insisted. Tony caught a glimpse of himself in the men’s room mirror; he looked washed out, had dark circles under his eyes, and he suspected he smelled pretty bad, but he fought Ducky on it. “I don’t want to leave him. I can’t…” Ducky made a deal with the doctor and they allowed Tony into recovery to see Jethro for five minutes. It was difficult, but Tony held Jethro’s hand and whispered to him, that he would be fine, and he had to be strong, and he had to remember that Tony loved him.

McGee drove Tony home and hovered while he ate a few bites of leftover linguine. “I’m fine, McWorrywort. I’m going to have a hot shower, and take a nap, and I’d like to do that all alone,” Tony said tiredly.

“I’ll come back in a few hours, okay?” McGee asked.

Finally alone, Tony undressed, and found he still had some of Jethro’s blood on his hands and forearms. He broke down when he saw the dark red stains, sinking to his knees and crying his heart out. Eventually he had that hot shower, and crawled naked into bed. He slept for five hours and felt better for it. By the time they got back to the hospital, Jethro was awake but drugged to the gills. The news was guarded but positive. The surgery had gone well. Jethro would recover. That was all Tony wanted to hear, all he cared about.
for an easy dismount, all at the push of a button. Jethro muttered under his breath that he wasn’t an old man, and said, “What’s next? One of those chair lifts up the stairs?” Tony could tell he was secretly pleased with the gift though, and caught him playing around with the controls with a smile on his face.

On Christmas Eve, Tony made Jethro comfortable on the couch in the living room, so he could sit next to him. Abby and Tim and Ducky and Jimmy came over, along with a host of other friends. It seemed like everyone they knew dropped in with food and good cheer. Ziva arrived late and only stayed an hour; she spent the entire time playing around with Gibbs’ new chair. After they ate, they all sat around to watch *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Nobody seemed to notice how close Tony and Jethro were sitting on the couch, or else they didn’t care. Halfway through the film, Jethro fell asleep leaning against Tony’s shoulder.

Tony went back to work as temporary Supervisory Special Agent DiNozzo. This time around, he had a better handle on how to be team leader in Gibbs’ absence. No more Mr. Nice Guy, like he’d been when Gibbs had been in Mexico and the leadership position had fallen into his lap. Of course Ziva wasn’t too happy to be taking orders from Tony, and she clashed with him at every turn. He wrote so many negative performance evaluations that he kept a stack of form 1610-PERF-32/A on his desk during the two months he was in charge.

McGee was amenable, probably because Tony worked with him rather than simply ordered him around. The junior agent might not have liked all the paperwork that accompanied the position, but he came to appreciate how much of a workload Tony had been doing all along.

It was a while before Jethro recovered enough to move around with ease, and to be pain-free. He was stuck on desk duty for two weeks once he returned to work, and had to undergo physical and mental therapy, neither of which put him in a good mood. Ten weeks after he’d been injured in the line of duty, Special Agent Gibbs was back at work, full force.

Before the day started, Director Shepard called both Gibbs and DiNozzo into her office for a meeting. Tony was nervous as hell that she’d discovered they were sleeping together, but Jethro told him nothing she could do would split them up.

Shepard said, “I feel that it would be a mistake to demote you, Special Agent DiNozzo. You have earned the position of Supervisory Special Agent. Because there are no team leader positions currently available, I have decided to make you two partners,” Director Shepard told them. “It may be unprecedented, but I feel it wouldn’t serve the agency to split you two up. You are to remain on the same team. Agent DiNozzo, you and Agent Gibbs are now officially equal in rank. When an opening becomes available, we’ll talk again. Oh, and Agent Gibbs, welcome back.” And with that, the director dismissed them.
Not quite believing what had just occurred, but happy about it, Gibbs dragged Tony into an empty office and gave him a quick and dirty blowjob as a way of congratulating him. Once Tony had recovered, they walked down to the bullpen together and Gibbs stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his partner and told them about Tony’s promotion. He then shook Tony’s hand, clapped him on the back, and went about business as usual.
Commitment

Chapter Summary

The last chapter... It's never easy to wind a long story up, to choose the words to end it with. I hope you enjoyed this. As often happens, it started out as something else quite different, and went sideways with a mind of its own. Thanks to Penumbria for the art that prompted me. You can see it at the beginning of chapter 1.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

COMMITMENT
February, 2007

«•»«•»«•»

Commitment
LeAnn Rimes

What I'm lookin' for
Is a love that's forever,
Someone who can capture my soul in a heartbeat
And stay for all time.
What I'm prayin' for
Is a match made in heaven,
Someone who will worship my body
And still put his heart on the line.
Commitment.
Someone who'll go the distance.
I need somebody with staying power,
Who will make me go weak in the knees.
Commitment.

«•»«•»«•»

A week after Gibbs returned to work, Tim and Abby took Tony to Sunday brunch. As they ate, the conversation moved on to the Lt. Devlin investigation. They had already wrapped it up and the legal proceedings were beginning.

Jacob Alderman was being charged with the homicide of Lt. Devlin. The young man was still being assessed in a mental facility, but would likely be found competent to stand trial. Ducky was certain Jacob’s violent behavior had been brought on by extreme sexual and physical abuse, and said the courts would take that into consideration. Nobody said as much, but they all wondered if Jacob would ever recover from the terrible things he’d gone through.
Tony told his friends that he had just learned that Devlin had left everything he owned to Jacob, and in his will he had referred to Jacob as ‘his partner in life.’ If and when Jacob ever got out of prison – or a mental hospital – he would be a very rich man. Tony shook his head at the insanity of it all, and said, “What a price to pay.”

Tony accepted that Jacob had not meant to stab Gibbs, that it was an accident caused during their brief struggle. That didn’t mean he forgave Jacob for hurting Gibbs. He just couldn't do that.

LaShonna, Jacob’s friend, admitted she had given Jacob her student access card, but she swore he had taken her car without her knowledge. She said she had no clue about Jacob’s intention to go to Devlin’s house. As there was no evidence of her complicity, other than loaning a friend her UniPass, no charged were filed. LaShonna did, however, have to go before the university disciplinary board, and they suspended her for four weeks for ID fraud.

Johnathan Chen was facing criminal charges for his part in Devlin’s death, as was his partner, Max Baxter. Chen had been brought up on charges of rape and criminal negligence. Gibbs believed that Max would get a lighter sentence, as an accessory, but neither would get off scot-free.

“This is the kind of investigation that stays with you, you know?” Tim said.

“I’m trying my best to forget it,” Tony said with a sigh. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you something, McGee. Why didn’t you phone me that night? When Abby tracked LaShonna’s car to Devlin’s house? I had to hear it from Abby.”

“I didn’t?” McGee said, looking way too innocent.

“C’mon, McOblivious, ‘fess up,” Tony cajoled.

“Yeah, Timmy, why didn’t you call Tony at two in the morning? Afraid you’d interrupt his beauty sleep?” Abby asked, elbowing Tim. She had a wicked gleam in her eye, and Tim was blushing, so Tony had a feeling he didn’t want to know what was behind his colleague’s action. “I had to call Tony for you!”

“Yeah, Timmy, why?” Tony asked, smiling.
“Okay, all right!” Tim exclaimed. “I didn’t call you in the middle of the night because… you needed your rest and…” He glanced at Abby and blurted, “Because I was afraid the phone ringing would wake up Gibbs and I didn’t want him to get pissed at me.”

Tony looked from McGee’s face to Abby’s. She was grinning and just about rubbing her hands together in glee. “I don’t… Why would calling me wake up Gibbs?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Abby said, rolling her eyes. “Everyone knows you two are sleeping together. Tim didn’t want to wake Gibbs up because he gets so cranky. Okay? It’s out in the open now, so stop being so embarrassed about it, Timmy. You, too, Tony.”

“Out in the open?” Tony asked, staring at his friends.

Tim protested, “I’m not embarrassed. I mean, it’s obvious you two are crazy about each other.” Tim didn’t quite roll his eyes, but he came close.

Tony had a hard time speaking, and when he did, his voice sounded croaky. “What do you mean, everyone knows…?”

“Now who’s Mr. Oblivious?” McGee teased. “We suspected years ago. I helped Abby, but she’s the one who confirmed it.”

“It?” Tony squeaked.

Tim nodded. “Yeah, you know, that you and Gibbs are sleeping together. You’re an item. Partners. Boyfriends?”

Abby smiled sweetly, pleased with herself. “I tracked your movements for a couple of weeks, and did some scientific research. I blended in with the natural habitat in order to observe the animals in the wild. That’s when I observed the size of the hickies on your neck. Man-sized.”

McGee said with an impish smile, “Plus, your stories about going out with women grew more frequent, and you made sure to tell all the details to Ziva, because, as we all know, she’s the worst at keeping a secret.”
“I know,” Abby exclaimed, looking at Tim. “How is it that our profiler couldn’t see what was in front of her face – sorry, Kate – and our resident Mossad spy can’t wait to blab the latest gossip at the water cooler? Who hired these people, anyway?”

Tony’s mind was whirling and he was afraid he was going to faint. “But… but… how long have you known? Not that there’s anything to know,” he was quick to say.

Abby and Tim looked at each other and Abby said, “Two years ago?”

Tim agreed, “Yeah, around the time you went undercover with Jeffrey White. I remember Kate was worried sick and trying not to show it, and Gibbs was… well, let’s just say that was as bad as I’ve ever seen him. He was mainlining coffee and shouting at everyone that they had to locate you immediately.”

Abby said proudly, “Only I figured out you two were hot for each other long before then.”

Tony wondered if these two too-smart-for-their-britches people were simply more observant than most, or if he and Gibbs had been that transparent. He shook off his thoughts and gave a casual wave of his hand. “Well, of course I’m hot, but what was it you allegedly found out about this supposed affair between me and my boss?”

“You were like a puppy, Tony,” Abby said offhandedly. “You were following Gibbs around with your tongue hanging out, right from your first day at NCIS. I saw definite signs he was equally as interested in you when…” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “Yeah, it was when Gunnery Sergeant Atlas went missing and you ended up locked in a cell in the sewers. Gibbs really freaked, in his own stoic way, when you got sandbagged.”

“So, now it’s out in the open, and—” McGee said.

Tony interrupted, protesting with raised hands, “Hang on a minute there. Nothing is out in the open. This is all conjecture. And, for the record, I’m denying everything.”

His friends snorted and laughed, but after they settled down, Tim assured him, “We’d never tell anyone, Tony, and the truth is, you two are really good at hiding it. All your undercover experience has really paid off. I’ve never heard any rumor about you and Gibbs. Never.”
“And besides,” Abby said sweetly, “We know how much you two love each other. Seeing you together at the hospital, when you were so worried about Gibbs. The way you wouldn’t leave his side. The way he wouldn’t let go of your hand. The grumpy-love way he has with you. You know, we were worried about him, too. Of course you were extra special concerned because you’re so close to him now and you two are having what’s probably the best sex ever, or it would be when Gibbs isn’t recovering from a knife wound and—”

“Abby, stop!” Tim said, trying to stem the flow of words.

Abby insisted, “We wouldn’t do anything to hurt you, either of you. I’d never tell a soul, and neither would Timmy.”

Tim nodded. “Never. Scout’s honor!”

Tony could see they were both sincere, and after his heart stopped pounding and he toned down his panic, he was both relieved and rather touched. “I’m really glad to hear that because if anything leaks, you know it’s Gibbs you’ll have to face.” They both nodded and he could see the spark of fear in their eyes. “And you’re right. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I feel blessed that Jethro cares about me in the same way. And I love working with him, but even better is being able to go home with him and cook dinner and do ordinary things, like a real family does, you know?”

“Aaaw,” Abby said, reaching out for Tony’s hand. “So, now we know that you know that we know… everything. So now that you two have been living together for a year … don’t you think it’s about time you guys invite us over to dinner so we can observe you in your natural habitat? I’d love to see you two in the kitchen, cooking together, washing the dishes…”

Tony laughed a little and immediately McGee asked, “What’re you laughing at? I saw that!”

“Saw what? I’m just amused that you believe that I wash the dishes.”

Abby looked at Tony through narrowed eyes. “You’re lying.”

Tony scoffed good-naturedly. “Am I? You really think I wash dishes? Look at these hands!”

Abby said, “You’re deflecting, Tony. So… have you been living together less than a year?”
“No, look at his face! *More* than a year,” Tim said excitedly, as though he was taking part in a game show, and he got points for guessing the correct answer.

Tony felt himself flushing. “Okay, okay, more than a year,” he allowed. They started guessing how long, going back and forth, and squabbling a bit, so finally he held up a hand and said, “*Two* years.” Of course that started a whole new discourse on Gibbs and whether or not he was romantic, and was that all fake with Lt. Col. Hollis Mann? But when Abby started speculating about the more intimate aspects of their relationship, like who was on top, Tony put a stop to it. “Just remember than anything you say to me gets repeated to Gibbs. Like I said, you’ll be dealing with him. And you will not like it. And besides, if this gets out, we will be split up, or we’ll lose our jobs. And I really *really* do not want to get kicked out, or shipped to some remote location where there’s no TV or internet connection.”

When they had all calmed down, McGee asked, “How is the boss doing, really? He says he’s okay, but sometimes I see him moving a little slow. And he never takes the stairs any more.”

Tony shrugged. “That’s just his bad knee acting up. Jethro’s fine otherwise, or else Ducky wouldn’t have signed the papers, letting him come back to work. He’s good, honestly.” His friends said they were glad, and expressed, each in their own way, how they were happy for them as a couple. And, once more, before they left the restaurant, Tony made them swear (‘on a stack of pancakes”) that they would never say a thing to anyone.

That night, lying in bed next to Jethro, who was sitting up, reading, Tony told him about his conversation with Abby and Tim. Gibbs was quiet for a while, but in due course he grunted and said, “Pot roast. Next Sunday for dinner. You invite them.”

“Really?”

“Sure. They’re family,” Jethro said. He put down his book and removed his reading glasses.

“They seemed concerned you came back to work too soon. I told them you were fine, all healed up. Ready to go.” Tony made the sound of an engine revving and saw Jethro trying not to smile.

“You trying to get me revved up?” Jethro asked.
They’d made love a few times since Jethro had recovered, though Tony had been careful to avoid touching the site of his injury. Jethro said it was a little tender but he good, overall. Tony smiled enticingly. “You feel like cranking the old shaft?”

“Who’re you calling old? Just grease up my ball bearings and I’m good to go,” Jethro said with a grin.

“Ooooh, are we talking about blow valves here?”

“Stick shifts,” Jethro said with a nod.

“Well, between your drive shaft and my rear end…”

“C’mere, you,” Jethro said with a laugh. He grabbed Tony’s ass and gave one cheek a squeeze. They kissed and laughed some more, and when Tony got up to get the lube, Jethro said, “Bring your collar, too. I want to see you wearing it.”

Tony did as his lover asked, and sat on the edge of the mattress so Jethro could do up the small latch on the gunmetal silver collar. Jethro’s warm lips kissed the nape of his neck, his hot tongue licked behind his ear, and Tony melted with a groan. “I love you so much,” Tony whispered, climbing on top of his man.

Jethro took him in his arms. He looked serious when he said, “You once said you don’t believe anything unless you have proof.”

“I meant on a case,” Tony said. “Rule 8: Never take anything for granted.”

“I know, but I think you need something tangible that shows we’re committed to each other.”

“Well yeah, I guess, like the collar,” Tony said, wondering where this was going.

“I’ve been thinking.”
“Uh oh. Should I be worried?”

“Not much else to do when you’re laid up—”

“But you’re fine now,” Tony was quick to say.

“Yeah, I am. Look, I was talking to the doc and he suggested you could come along for the next session.”

“You want me to see your therapist? Is there something wrong? Is this couples therapy?”

“Hang on there. Hell, you know I hate talking about myself, but he’s helped me sort things out. You haven’t started to deal with the things that bastard did to you. I know it gets all twisted up inside and you think nobody can do anything about it, but that’s not true.” Jethro waited and then said, “I want to help you. I love you.”

Tony was about to say ‘No and hell no,’ and ‘I’m not crazy,’ and ‘I can handle my own problems, thank you very much,’ but instead, what came out of his mouth was, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

Tony nodded. He thought of Stefan, and being raped and tortured by him, and the ugly scars on his hips, from being sliced with a vegetable peeler, that would never go away; his preoccupation with bondage and the way he’d sought out pain for so many years; and the way Jeffrey sometimes haunted him in his dreams. “I know I’ve been carrying a load of… crap around. I want to deal with it so we don’t have it hanging between us. So, okay.”

“I love you,” Jethro said, kissing him deeply. They slipped out of their shorts and faced each other, Jethro stroking Tony’s hips, touching the scars that Tony would never talk about.

Tony’s fingers wandered up to the collar around his neck, the symbol of their love and devotion, of Jethro’s commitment to him, and of his commitment to Jethro.
“You like wearing the collar?” Jethro asked, searching his eyes.

“I love it,” Tony replied.

“Well, maybe…” Jethro kissed him and pulled away slowly. “Maybe we can do the rings, too.”

“What?” Tony’s brain was a bit foggy from the kiss.

“The collar is for us; it’s private. Rings would be public.”

“You mean… wear them so people can see them?”

Jethro nodded. He took Tony’s hands in his. “I have a friend, has an old inn on Cape Cod.”

“An inn?”

“I thought, this summer, a week there.” Jethro cleared his throat.

“I don’t… I don’t understand,” Tony said helplessly.

Jethro took a big breath and said, all in one go, “Will you marry me, Anthony? We can get married in Massachusetts and–”

“Yes, Jethro, I will marry you,” Tony said, grinning. God, it felt good to be in love, and to be so loved. “I will share my life with you, all of it, my good side as well as my bad side, which is a lot bigger and darker, and full of unresolved issues, than my good side. I don’t think you have any idea what you’re in for, but if you’re willing to take a risk…”

Jethro rolled on top of Tony. “More than willing. And I know you, Tony. I know you well, and I love you so much it scares me sometimes.”
“Don’t be scared.” Tony smiled and took Jethro’s face between his hands. He gave him a lingering kiss, and then another, drinking him in.

“I don’t want to lose you,” Jethro whispered.

“You won’t.”

“I messed up every other–”

“You won’t.” Tony said steadfastly. “I won’t let you mess it up.” He clasped the back of Jethro’s neck and pulled him down for a deep kiss, parting his legs so he could settle between them. Their tongues met and battled, Tony pushing his tongue between Jethro’s parted lips. God, he loved to hear him moan.

Jethro ran his hands up and down Tony’s sides, sucked on one of his hardened nipples, and then the other, until Tony was arching into him, gasping and begging for more. Their cocks slid against each other; Jethro gave a thrust and then another and Tony thrust back, crying out, “I need you inside me.” Jethro took hold of Tony’s wrists and held them firmly at his sides, and Tony squirmed against the unyielding restraints. He moaned, “Oh God,” because this – being physically held down by the man he loved – was so much hotter than being tied up by someone he barely knew. He was rock hard and aching, his hands clenched at his sides, unable to escape from Jethro’s unforgiving grip. “Fuck me! Hard! Please, fuck me already. Just do it! I’m not going to last.”

Jethro released one wrist only long enough to guide his erection to Tony’s hole. He entered him slowly, holding Tony down, kissing him, sucking on his tongue while Tony bucked and twisted against him. Only when he was a moaning, quivering wreck did Jethro start to move, setting a torturously slow rhythm, grunting with every thrust and making low sounds of pleasure when Tony sucked on the side of his neck. “Tony, fuck, Tony…”

Hearing Jethro say his name in that low, desperate voice turned Tony on like nothing else could, and he begged Jethro to “Fucking get going!” Jethro did, pounding into him so hard it was killing him. He was so close, so fucking close, and then Jethro stiffened and ejaculated inside him in hot spurts, and right away Tony lost it, shaking helplessly as he came.

Afterwards, Tony clung to Jethro, panting, “Jethro… Jethro…,” overwhelmed with emotion and release. Jethro embraced him like a lover, and held him like a baby. He kissed the inside of Tony’s wrists, so fucking gently, and stroked his hair away from his sweaty forehead while murmuring, “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’ve got you,” and that was the first time Tony truly believed they’d be all right.
“Jethro?”

“Mmm?”

“Gold.”

“Hmm?”

“I’d like matching gold rings.”

“Whatever you want, Tony.”

«•»«•»«•» the end «•»«•»«•»

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading my story. It's always an interesting experience to create a story based upon artwork that you choose through a challenge like the Reverse Bang. Obviously, I hope you enjoyed it, and I would really like to hear your thoughts on the story. Things you like? Things you didn't like? Maybe I dropped the ball somewhere, or you think a scene should be expanded upon? Concrit is good, positive comments are great. Looking forward to hearing from you!
( I am just starting a new story for the NCIS Big Bang, And I'm sure I will have some short stories to share meantime. You can always PM me with ideas. )

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!