Betrayals

by SASundance

Summary

Abby and Cate’s faked gay cowboy photo of Tony was supposed to be a joke – a tit for tat reaction for DiNozzo discovering a wet T-shirt photo of a younger Caitlin Todd. But when the faked photo is accidentally transmitted to the whole of the DC office the consequences are catastrophic.

Notes

Warnings: This story deals with child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, assault and homophobia. Every story needs a bad guy be advised that in this story Tom Morrow is not a tolerant empathetic individual – he’s a bigoted jerk. This is the team is a toxic dysfunctional family and there will be deaths of several main characters by the end of the story. This is a Tony-centric story.

This is an older story written in 2013 and based upon the episode Conspiracy Theories in season 2. Don’t Ask Don’t Tell was still in effect. BuckeyeGirl00000 lent her beta skills to
the story and all errors are my bad. It has a minor cross over with two Criminal Minds characters.
Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo was furious.

Furious with his frat brother for letting slip a stupid nickname that he's always hated and what made it worse was that his frat brother Steve Adler had known full well that was the case. Just because his NCIS partner Caitlyn Todd had been seeing Steve didn't give him carte blanche to divulge personal stuff to his girlfriend about a frat brother and friend. Quite the opposite because Steve had broken the code that he'd sworn to uphold and betrayed his frat brother for a casual affair.

The betrayal by his frat brother would be seen by the Alpha Chi Delta Society if they ever found out about it, as an extreme transgression indeed. It could have extremely serious, even life changing consequences and he would find himself completely ostracised by past, present and even future members of the fraternity. It could potentially contribute to genuine monetary penalties, essentially making life for Steve Adler incredibly difficult. What happened in the fraternity was supposed to stay within the fraternity, not even betrayed to spouses and certainly not for a casual lay. Tony couldn't help wondering what it was about himself that caused people he trusted to betray him over and over again.

He was also extremely pissed off with his partner Cate who didn't have to blab that stupid name to all and sundry in the bull pen. She’d done the college thing and knew how fraternities and sororities operated; how could she divulge his stupid pledge name like that to simply score cheap points off him? She would have elbowed him to death if the shoe had been on the other foot and he'd revealed something so personal about her, supposing he'd learnt about it while dating one of her sorority sisters. He could just imagine how outraged Cate would be if it happened to her.

Cate would have a complete meltdown if she ever knew that Steve had been less than chivalrous in how he talked about her to Tony too. She probably wouldn't believe that Tony had actually punched his frat brother in the nose to stop him bragging about their extra-curricular activities. Since he regarded Cate as the sister he'd never had, it nauseated him when Steve started giving graphic details about their sex life. His fraternity brother doing that had gone way too far.

Knowing that Cate considered she was a good Catholic girl and knowing she was definitely on the prudish side, he knew she would be completely mortified if she thought that Steve was talking out of turn. Tony had had every intention of gently breaking it to her because he thought she should know. After her disloyalty over the Sex Machine nickname though, he decided to damn her; she didn't deserve him looking out for her. In fact, he was so freakin angry with her that he showed her 'that' photo he'd found on the wall of the bar down in Panama City when he was down there with his frat brothers for their annual spring break reunion.

He couldn't believe it, when he saw it up on the wall of the bar where he'd been carousing with his frat brothers for their annual spring pilgrimage to Panama City. As he headed off to the men's room, he encountered a photo of a younger Cate Todd taking part in a wet t-shirt competition and rather scantily clad, staring back at him and the rest of the world to perv at. Looking at the photo he felt a mix of emotions including embarrassment and astonishment since Cate had been so vitriolic about the objectification of women and his chauvinist attitudes.

To find her partaking in something she had been so scathing about was shocking to him. His drunken wicked side also recognised that it was something he could use to torture her with, if she got too smug and holier than thou. Not an unlikely scenario knowing his partner. He took a digital copy of the photo and vowed right there that even if he did tease her with it, he would never betray her by showing it to their colleagues and embarrassing her.
By the time he'd returned home, he'd sobered up and thought more about it and Tony had decided that he shouldn't tease her with her youthful indiscretion even if she could be a total prig at times. He figured it was her convent school education and he decided not to call her out on her hypocrisy. He had plenty of his own secrets that he didn't want his colleagues to know about either and trust was important to him. Actually, it was something he continually struggled with on a daily basis. He didn't trust easily and therefore it was important to him that he also didn't betray the trust of people who were important to him.

As annoying as Cate was at times, she was a teammate and his partner and Tony cared about her. So, while he would happily tease and embarrass her, there was a line that shouldn't be crossed. Plus, he knew she would be deeply mortified if the photo was to surface at work. Even if he didn't show it around she would be embarrassed enough that *he'd* seen it. *Especially* that he'd seen it.

This was why he was damned incensed when Cate crossed that line with hobnailed boots on and unfortunately his over-reaction ensured that everybody now knew that it was his Achilles' heel and they wouldn't hesitate to use it against him. Of course, she couldn't possibly know why he'd reacted so badly to the name but damn her to Hell, she had no right to share that stupid moniker with everyone. That was not watching his six and he'd immediately retaliated with a vicious counter hook to her soft underbelly revealing to her that he had the wet T-shirt photo of her in Panama City which he had been on the brink of deleting.

It was war as far as he was concerned but Tony still had his principles. While he might tease her gleefully about his plans to reveal the photo to the team – or that he'd put it up on the plasma for all to see, it was something he knew he would never actually do. Ever! He could never deliberately and knowingly hurt someone who mattered to him, even if he was furious with them. Still she didn't have to know that, and he was a good enough actor that she never thought otherwise, either.

He wanted her to sweat about it even though he knew he should have risen above the betrayal, turned the other cheek and all that crap. With the benefit of hindsight, he really wished that he'd done just that.

Unfortunately, he didn't have hindsight and he was also off kilter, so he lashed out because he was hurting. She’d hurt him, and Steve hurt him too.

Stupid, stupid idiot he berated himself because while Cate had started it all, he knew that payback never ended well, and he should have let it go. Should have known that it would simply escalate - and it did. In between Cate being alternately pleading and whiny then snarky and vengeful, she was sneaking around with a smug expression of her face and whispering constantly with Abby. They’d stop as soon as he came into the room and it was plain that Cate had planned some sort of payback, but he had no idea that she'd go that far.

If blurting out the ‘Sex Machine’ nick-name was crossing the line of betrayal, then what followed was the Judas Iscariot of betrayals in Tony's book. He was incandescent with rage and sickened with her treachery.

When Cate had shown him that stupid doctored gay cowboy photo of him, she had no idea how close he came to hitting a woman for the first time in his life. Something he'd always sworn he would never emulate from his father's many odious qualities, no matter what the provocation but he came close. Probably the only thing that saved Cate was his self-awareness that if he started, he probably wouldn't be able to stop. Cate seemed to have no idea what she'd done, but as a former Secret Service agent and one-time law student, she should have known that her behaviour was totally unacceptable in any workplace.

As far as he was concerned, no one had betrayed his sense of trust so badly since he'd found out his
partner in Baltimore was a crooked cop. And he wasn't even ready to deal with the fact that Abby had betrayed him too because there was no way that Cate had the computer skills to photo-shop that photo so that it looked kosher. If anyone ever saw it, it could make working at NCIS extremely problematic if not impossible.

He'd panicked and threatened to email everyone the wet T-shirt photo to blackmail her into deleting that piece of crap before it did any more damage than to their partnership and in resurrecting his barely slumbering demons. When they'd deleted on three as agreed, on the spur of the moment he'd decided to get her back by letting her think he'd sent a copy to Gibbs. The reality was that he'd sent him a copy of his report, but the beep of the boss' computer obviously made her think Tony had reneged on their agreement and they both took off at a run for the elevator.

He hoped she'd have a really unpleasant night wondering about Gibbs reaction. And that was really mean, but he knew damned well he was in for a tough time himself after he got home.

He resolved to tell her tomorrow that he'd actually deleted the picture and had simply sent Gibbs his SFA report on the murder investigation of Petty Officer Jessica Smith instead. Let her stew about it tonight, she so deserved it.

Tony made his way home, stopping to pick up some takeout Japanese at a new place not far from his apartment even though he wasn't sure if he was even hungry. Food was simply a distraction and he sure as hell needed that tonight.

~Betrayals~

When Gibbs saw his two agents bolting for the elevator he was surprised. Actually, he hoped it meant that they'd finally sorted out whatever it was that was eating them. Tony had had a real bug up his ass with Cate today and it surprised him. While he had basically ignored whatever it was that had DiNozzo so furious and freaked out, as if he's seen a ghost and Cate who was ten times more snarky than usual and sneaking around with Abby, he hoped that they'd sort it out amongst themselves. He absolutely hated having to talk and deal with all that emotional crap. If it wasn't sorted soon he'd probably bang their heads together and sort it out that way. Still maybe he wouldn't have to step in and referee, judging by the way they'd departed together in such a hurry.

When he noticed that he had two new messages on his computer he checked them, forgetting about the quarrelling agents when he saw the two messages from DiNozzo and Cate. He opened Tony's and saw with a nod of approval that it was the final report on the Petty Officer Smith murder they'd been working on. He scanned it roughly because Tony's reports were always of an excellent standard and admirably succinct. That never ceased to amaze Gibbs because DiNozzo could talk a blue streak without even trying, yet his reports were the height of brevity.

When he thought about it, working in several large city PDs, Tony would probably have had much more paper work, due to higher ratio of cases than he did now, even as his senior field agent, so he would have needed brevity to get through all the workload. Maybe it was where he developed the time-honoured work smarter not harder dictum. Gibbs went ahead opening Cate's email, expecting her report too, forgetting he'd already been handed it earlier on and lacking computer savvy, he failed to notice her email was not a document file but a photo until he opened it up.

What he saw shocked him! His first thought was what the hell was Tony thinking, letting something that compromising get loose for anyone to see? While his second thought which managed to penetrate through his befuddled brain was why the devil did Caitlin Todd have the photo anyway or perhaps more relevant, why did she decide to send it to him?

Finally, when he managed to stop gawking at it long enough, he decided that it explained DiNozzo's
over the top skirt chasing frat boy persona. He was obviously trying to hide the fact that he was gay, which, since he worked in law enforcement all these years, was a really smart strategy. Especially smart because he now worked as a federal agent in a quasi-militaristic organisation that also dealt with two branches of the Armed Forces that weren't exactly warm and fuzzy with the concept of homosexuality. Which in and of itself was ironic because there were plenty of gays and lesbians in the Marines and Navy in his personal and professional experience, just as there were in everyday life.

While he personally had no problem with DiNozzo being gay and working for him, he knew that many law enforcement personnel didn't necessarily share his liberal views. He wondered again about Cate and her motive for sending him the photo. She was a pretty straight-laced individual and pretty religious to boot so perhaps she disapproved of DiNozzo's sexual preference and decided to out him to the boss. She probably thought as a hard-assed Marine he'd can his ass for being gay.

He was pretty disappointed that she had him pegged as a bigot and she was supposed to be a profiler for Pete's sake. Maybe she was after DiNozzo's job, in which case, she was in for a shock.

Gibbs decided that the best thing was to simply delete the photo and forget that he'd ever seen it, if he could. Well perhaps pretend he didn't see it would be the best he could do, but he really doubted that he could forget he'd seen it. He still couldn't credit that DiNozzo could be so stupid as to allow himself to be photographed in such a blatantly camp context which would set homophobic pulses racing if they saw it. Maybe he should talk to him about being more discreet although as a cop he really should have known that already.

Actually, although he would never admit it to anybody else, he was more than a little hurt that DiNozzo hadn't trusted him enough to tell him the truth about his sexual orientation, but he trusted Cate. They had been together for almost four years now and he really had thought he had managed to earn DiNozzo's trust but while he felt hurt, a part of him felt an overwhelming sense of relief too. He had always secretly wondered if he was responsible for Wendy Miller leaving DiNozzo on the eve of their wedding because he'd offered the young detective a spot on his team and he'd moved to DC.

He had wondered if moving to a new city plus the fact that in his first few weeks on the team had been the deal breaker. Gibbs had worked him into the ground as he was wont to do with anyone who worked with him, even as he was attending training at FLETC he'd given him cold cased to read up on. But now it was clear why Wendy had called off the marriage; she must have discovered he was gay and that lifted a burden off his shoulders. He hadn't realised 'til now that it had weighed so heavy upon him.

Gibbs decided he'd order Todd to destroy all copies of the photo and tear her a new one, too. He shook his head and wondered if this was what the pair had been arguing about during the case, as he hit what he thought was the button to delete the photo.

Unfortunately, in his ignorance of all things technological, never mind computers, he inadvertently managed to send the picture to the entire DC staff of NCIS instead of deleting it. Although it was a colossal mistake to make, it was hardly surprising because Gibbs often found it challenging to do anything more complicated than boot up the computer when he arrived every morning. If there was anything more challenging, he would normally get either Abby or McGee to fix it for him, so while his intentions to delete the damned photo had been honourable, it was a understandable mistake. But one with far reaching consequences.

Unfortunately, he was far too slow in recognising those consequences when they occurred and subsequently, failed to act until it was too late.
Tony sat at his piano playing as if his life depended upon it and in a way it did. He was trying and failing to keep his demons at bay. He'd managed only a few bites of Japanese food before he felt his stomach lurch in protest and he needed to heave up his entire stomach contents. He'd tried to take his mind off the awfulness that was his day since Cate spilled to everyone that much despised name he'd earned at OSU. God how he hated that stupid sobriquet and he wondered if Steve Adler had enlightened Cate how he'd come by the name or if she'd simply made assumptions based on his frat boy persona.

After several hours of playing, he felt calm enough to curl up on the sofa with a cup of Earl Grey tea. He tried to numb himself further, by watching some of his favourite episodes of Magnum PI before he fell into a restless sleep on the couch. As he’d feared, his recurrent nightmare was lying in wait until his defences were down.

…He was in the showers, his senses overwhelmed by the powerful stench of bleach from the institutional bathroom, as his blood pressure and respiration soared along with his sense of helplessness. The large rough hand covering his mouth, while being held in place up against the cold tiles by the superior body weight, terrified him along with a familiar, overwhelming pain that threatened to break him in two and would have had him curled up in a foetal curl, screaming his heart out but for the body pressed up against him pining him so he was unable to move. All he could do was scream soundlessly into the large and sweaty palm that covered his mouth and squeeze his eyes closed tight and pretend to be somewhere else until it was finally over...

Tony eventually awoke to excruciating pain from his hip, as he lay on the floor of his living room. That's when he realised that he'd fallen off his couch in the throes of his nightmare and banged his hip on the solid wooden coffee table. He decided that he'd no doubt have a colourful and painful bruise there although he couldn't really bring himself to care right now. As was normal, after he awoke from that particular bete noire, within minutes he was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack was fully five minutes before he was able to gain control over his treacherous body. For someone like Tony who craved personal control over just about everything, it was extremely distressing to lose power over himself like that.

Tony had always had, what he considered to be the misfortune of being an exceedingly beautiful child growing up. It had garnered him a great deal of attention, most of it unwelcome especially as attention wasn't forthcoming from the only two individuals who really mattered to him. Although when his mother was away with the pixies and insisting he dress up in sailor's suits, he could have done without that type of attention. Sure, there had also been the old friend of the family, never married and who had paid him far too much attention when he was little. Fortunately, it had never gone beyond being made to sit on the sicko's lap and the occasional time when the pervert had managed to rub up against him. Luckily for him, that was as far as it had gone, and Tony was too young to know what was occurring except that he knew that "Uncle Guido" was creepy and he tried to avoid him as much as possible.
Then after Tony's mother died, when he was eight years old, his father had become even more emotionally withdrawn from his son, if that was even possible; turning instead, to his infatuation with the bottle as he avoided facing his loss. Finally, at nine and a half years of age, Senior had shipped him off to an expensive boarding school where he was utterly homesick for Manuela their cook and housekeeper and still heartbroken over the death of his mother. Despite her being quite unbalanced at times, it was all he knew, and he'd adored her. Of course he didn't know it at the time, but such a vulnerable and withdrawn little boy was rife for the pickings, by a predatory athletics coach. Later as a seasoned cop he could see exactly how easy it had been for a ruthless pederast to prey upon him.

His coach would arrange for Tony to have extra training sessions, so he could begin the grooming process away from prying eyes. Praise and attention was pretty much all it had taken to have the little boy eating out of his hands and when he finally graduated to groping and finally raping him in the showers, the creep had made good and sure that there was no one around to help him. Using the typical paedophile MO of threatening Tony if he told anyone what was going on, Tony became even more withdrawn, until several months later; his drama teacher finally broke through his impenetrable defences and managed to win his trust. Gradually he began to confide in her, little by little and when she figured out who was molesting him, she'd reported the assault to the School administration as stated in her employment contract.

In a classic case of protect the perpetrator and the reputation of the institution (read protect the bottom line profits) of the swanky private school, at all costs, Senior was encouraged to withdraw Tony from Pennington so he could receive appropriate treatment and 'heal' in private. Moreover, it was agreed that it wouldn't do him or the school's reputation any favours, if it was reported to police because it would attract negative publicity. Senior was no keener to have the whole sordid matter come to light either, fearing the effect on his business and personal reputation should anyone find out about it. The coach was quietly dispatched before any other victims might come forward and embarrass the prestigious boarding school. Finally, the drama teacher was also pressured to move on too, when the school administration manufactured complaints about her performance. While she was outraged at how she was being manipulated, she was also a single parent and needed the reference they promised her if she remained silent, so she could obtain another job, hence she acquiesced to being blackmailed. Although if she had known that the coach's molestation hadn't been reported to the police as the school had assured her, then Jane Waters never would have gone along with the cover-up.

Tony returned home with his father and instead of ignoring him as was his custom; Senior badgered his small son with constant admonishment that he must never tell anyone about what his coach had done to him. How that sort of thing should never happen to a DiNozzo and if Tony told people, they would know that he’d asked for it because he was a pretty boy and a weakling. He said that people would hate him if they ever found out. And so, Tony had grown up knowing he was weak and that he was to blame but that he also had to hide that fact at all costs. All by himself, he figured out that he could never let anyone ever get close to him like his coach had. When he returned to a new school later in the school year, he was completely closed off and wary of everyone and became more introverted than ever.

Frustrated at what he saw as his son's continued weakness when he remained so introverted, fearful and unsociable, Senior decided to send him off to Military School at the tender age of twelve to toughen him up and make a man of him. During his years at the Rhode Island Military Academy, while he remained constantly on guard, he quickly learnt to pretend to be the sort of son that his father demanded. He had no choice if he was to survive. He joked, he laughed, he played pranks and played down his academic leanings. He also continued to focus on sporting endeavours, while making sure that he was never alone with any male teachers or coaches at any time whatsoever.
In fact, sport had soon become his salvation. It was inevitable for a bunch of teenage boys with rampaging hormones in an all-male school, to experiment sexually. Whenever those activities arose, Tony would always slink away, seeking sanctuary from his friends and finding it on the football field, the basketball court, the athletics track or swimming laps in the school's Olympic sized pool. He’d spend solitary hours making his body obey him and grow strong. Always athletic, he became even more skilled and the refuge he gained in his sporting activities; helped him to gain some much-needed confidence in himself.

Then when he was almost seventeen, a new extremely young and attractive music teacher called Wendy Miller, joined the staff and took an unhealthy interest in Tony, who was taking piano lessons. Although sport obsessed, he had continued to play the piano as he'd done since he was very small because his mother had played and wanted her son to play too. Although he loved music and had taught himself to play guitar too, it was also a way of maintaining a connection with his dead mother.

Tony, having very little exposure to girls his own age, up to that point, quickly developed a crush on his new music teacher, who was only five years older than he was and extremely pretty, if very immature emotionally. Unfortunately, she chose to take advantage of both her position of power and his vulnerability to female authority figures and she promptly began an affair with her very promising student. Something they managed to keep secret for several months. The affair finally came to an end, when Tony found the strength to attend Ohio State University and follow his dream of a professional career in sports rather than going to some Ivy League college and walk away with an MBA as his father had decreed. He had no intention of tying himself to his father and his business for the rest of his life and his talent for sport was his ticket to freedom. Wendy had chosen not to follow him to Ohio and their breakup affected him deeply.

All of a sudden, after living a highly regimented life and being socially isolated by circumstances and choice for so many years, Tony found himself with an unlimited degree of autonomy and freedom. Suddenly, finding himself popular and having a de-facto family of frat brothers, he was rapidly subsumed by the culture of dating, partying and belonging. Still vulnerable because of the breakup of his first relationship with Wendy, notwithstanding that others might see it as a highly inappropriate and dysfunctional one, Tony was still very shy and reticence with girls. A fact, which combined with his sporting prowess and good looks, made him highly attractive to the opposite sex, although it wasn't only females that found him irresistible.

With his pretty boy looks and toned physique he was equally popular with plenty of his gay male peers as well and he found himself constantly fending off their unwanted advances.

Tony was not homophobic, he had high school buddies and now frat brothers, plus football and basketball team mates who were gay, and he didn't have a problem with it. And while he had kept his promise to his father and never told anyone about being raped as a child, as he matured he'd tried to process the molestation and read as much as he could on paedophiles and their victims. He knew that there was absolutely no connection between homosexuality and pederasts, yet whenever there was any suggestions from a male of a sexual nature, be it a look, touch or verbal invitation, innuendo or flirting, it caused an immediate flight or fight response. Technically the fight response was usually replaced by him freezing because it triggered flashbacks to the attacks by his coach.

Intellectually, he knew that guys hitting on him, was no different from girls doing the same thing and that what had happened to him was because the pervert was a sick, twisted sack of excrement, not because he was gay, yet his body knew differently. Unfortunately, it didn't go unnoticed by his frat brothers that he was very popular with both sexes or that he freaked out when guys made passes at him. Unable to hide his distress when guys hit on him, he soon earned the Sex Machine title and inevitably the name came to be associated in his mind, with the trauma that he'd endured as a child.
In an effort to discourage men from trying to seduce him, he adopted a persona of a dedicated skirt chaser and he found that as his reputation spread, and his air of vulnerable innocence waned somewhat, the number of advances that he received from men began to decline too, although never truly cease. Once he left college and was attending the police academy and then as a newly minted rookie, he found that he once again needed to play up his skirt chasing, womanising ways to convince many of the cops and recruits that he was a genuine red-blooded heterosexual. Again, with his looks, many people immediately and wrongly assumed he was gay and once again he found himself fending off unwanted advances when he went out socially, something which inevitably caused a spike in the frequency and severity in his flashbacks and nightmares. It also meant having to endure more than the usual amount of hazing by homophobic cops who made his life a misery until they were finally satisfied that he wasn't a closet gay.

Tony never truly managed to lay that suspicion to rest though, as he would refuse to engage in gay bashing of other cops or the general public and would often befriend the few openly gay or unintentionally outing cops. The fact that he had been such a big college football and basketball hero did help his credibility with the bigots, although he had no intention of telling them that several of his talented teammates had been gay. The bigots believed in the stereotypes that equated testosterone with ‘manly’ sports so they tended to give him a free pass on his pretty boy looks and stupid dumb eyelashes. At least they did after he had survived his trial by fire hazing, even if they were always on the lookout for evidence that he'd fooled them.

When he went to Baltimore with a gold shield and plumb gig as a homicide detective, in addition to the usual hazing that any newcomer attracted, he also found himself the subject of certain offensive rumours. Due to his exceptionally young age when he'd obtained the rank of detective and the fact he was given the highly prized position working the homicide desk, the gossip was that he must have slept with the right people to get it. Given that women tended to be woefully under-represented, if present at all in the upper echelons of the Baltimore Police Department, the implication was that he'd have to have slept with male superiors. As he fought once again to lay to rest the rumours about his sexual orientation, he wished he didn't love being an investigator so much, since one of the downsides of working with his colleagues was that so many of them were threatened by homosexuality.

He also wished that he didn't freak out whenever a gay guy made a pass at him, but at least he has some sort of excuse for his reaction even if it wasn't fair or logical. Truthfully, he liked most of the gay and lesbian cops a lot better than the homophobic rednecks that found their way into law enforcement and liked to beat up people who were weaker than them.

Tony was burning himself out trying to keep up with the case load in Baltimore which was one of the larger cities in the US and also had one of the highest murder rates and trying to earn and maintain a reputation as a skirt chaser, so that the gay bashers would leave him alone. When he finally ran into Wendy again in the course of an investigation, they both happily decided to resume the relationship that they had begun when he had been under age and it wasn't long before they decided to move in together. This also took some of the intense strain off him as he no longer had to maintain an active and highly visible dating and social life.

He took to domestic bliss with a mixture of relief and delight, being essentially a homebody even though he had such a limited experience of actually living in a real home. To be able to go home at night and eat a home cooked meal that Wendy or he had cooked or even made together and then cuddle up together on the couch while watching a movie, was utter bliss as far as he was concerned. At long last, he was letting down his guard emotionally and he felt confident enough to propose to Wendy, which she eagerly accepted. Everything was great at work as well, with his new partner Danny who he'd instantaneously gelled with. Soon they began to forge a closure rate on their cases which quickly garnered admiration from their superiors and intense jealousy from their peers.
Still, life was good. Tony was looking forward to marrying Wendy and they'd even started talking about kids together. Frankly he didn't think he was anywhere near ready but before Wendy, he'd always thought that having kids was something he needed to avoid with his genetic pedigree and upbringing. He had two strikes against him when it came to nature and nurture and he thought that he could never be a good parent.

Yet with Wendy, she had made him see that he was not the result of his father's genes or his mother's either or the pathetic job they'd done in bringing him up, if you could even call it that. She highlighted his empathy and patience, his enthusiasm and his lack of interest in all things material or monetary and how much love he had to give her, and the young detective had started to believe that maybe he could become a good parent after all. He decided before they took any radical steps that they should get a puppy to practice on, since he'd never even been allowed a pet as a child and he figured it was better to practice on a pet that would be less easy to screw up.

Tony didn't think that he could be happier; what with his job and relationship going so well and he'd started to think about them buying a little house with the eponymous white pickets. That's when he'd happened to run into Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, literally when he cannoned into him, wrestling him to the ground so he could cuff him and drag his ass down to the precinct. By the end of the case that they'd ended up working together as a joint operation between NCIS and Baltimore PD, he had resigned from his job after discovering the partner who he'd been beginning to trust so deeply, was a corrupt cop.

And while Wendy had initially been enthusiastic about their move to DC, by the time he'd completed his training as a federal agent and commenced his first few weeks as Gibbs newest junior agent, Wendy had left him, practically at the altar. He supposed he should be grateful that at least she'd called it off the night before their wedding and not at the church but he hadn't felt too much like being grateful. Indeed, looking back with the benefit of hindsight almost four years later, a successful marriage and healthy relationship was not something that would have been possible, in light of the inappropriate way it had begun. Yet at the time, at RIMA and later in Baltimore, all he knew was that she was the most important thing in his world and he loved her so much. Still, that knowledge did little to temper his feelings of pain or betrayal.

In the course of a few short weeks his life had gone from being perfect to losing a partner and because of Danny's corruption, his job as well and now the woman he loved and planned to spend the rest of his life with, dumped him hours before their marriage. The two people who he had begun to trust with his life and his heart had betrayed him and all he had now was a lonely new life in a new city and a new job as a federal agent. Granted that Gibbs, Ducky and Abby seemed to be incredibly competent and had welcomed him with open arms, he still resolved to never again allow anyone to gain his unconditional trust ever again. He would build back up the walls that he had slowly been tearing down and stop letting people in. He couldn't deal with the double betrayal and he intended to make sure he never had to ever again.

As a probationary agent, although he had warned Gibbs that he would not tolerate being addressed or treated like a probie, he knew that he would face the inevitable hazing that he'd encountered in his previous three precincts. He understood the distain that the Feds had for cops and how every new agent was hazed as a rite of passage, but he also understood that there was more to it. Since NCIS was a quasi- militaristic organisation with strong ties to the military, once again his so called 'pretty boy' appearance would be treated with homophobic suspicion. So again, he fell back into his chauvinist skirt chasing persona and solemnly promised himself to never again allow anyone to gain his unconditional trust ever again. He would build back up the walls that he had slowly been tearing down and stop letting people in. He couldn't deal with the double betrayal and he intended to make sure he never had to ever again.

He settled in, endured the hazing, put down tentative roots and made friends, ever careful not to let
anyone in or let them know how vulnerable and weak he really was. Tony used humour, pranks, distraction, and deliberately offending people, acting like a goofball and playing down his intelligence to achieve those ends. Sometimes it hurt so bad to know that he was so successful in making people, even those who he admired and wanted to admire him too, underestimate his potential, skill and intelligence.

When the pain got too much, then he'd ruthlessly remind himself how it had felt when Danny and Wendy had betrayed him but in the last almost four years at NCIS he'd let his defensive walls slip just a little and found himself trusting Gibbs and his team somewhat despite his best intentions and resolve. Not unconditionally mind you, but a lot more than he intended to and a lot more than was prudent.

If ever he needed a reminder that he could never afford to let down his guard and trust them too much, it was the fiasco today, first with that damn stupid name, bringing up all those memories he tried so hard to suppress. He'd learnt that he'd never forget but he could often suppress them if he tried hard enough. But the pièce de résistance was that horribly cruel, fabricated photo which two people that he thought were his friends, who had gone out of their way to hurt him with. If someone had seen it, if Morrow had seen it, if any one a bunch of homophobic types had seen it, it could have destroyed his career.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Gibbs has really blown it big-time and rather than apologising which is a sign of weakness he decided to ignore it.

Gibbs sank into his chair, anxious to get his case report finished wishing it was the end of the day so he could go home to his basement and think and it was only 0900 hours. It would be a long time before he could retreat to his man cave, his womb-like sanctuary where he could tune the world out. The week following his innocent mistake in trying to get rid of the evidence of Tony’s poor judgement, had been a nightmare. When Tony had come in and opened up his email and discovered it in his in-box and saw that it had been sent to all recipients in the DC office he had all but fainted despite his claims that DiNozzo's don't pass out.

When he finally managed to get himself under control Gibbs had watched as he tried to maintain his professional mask, but his eyes, those huge green wounded cocker spaniel eyes, stared at him with such defeat, betrayal and disillusionment that he couldn't bear to look at his senior field agent. Gibbs felt guilty, he knew he had balled everything up and made life so much more difficult because of it. Apart from causing him pain, he had managed to place his senior field agent’s career in jeopardy.

He couldn't forget the expression in DiNozzo's eyes that told him plainly that he had let him down. Even when he went home at night, when he tried to escape in the time honour activity of sanding which was supposed to soothe him into a state of nothingness, even when he lay down and closed his eyes as he tried to sleep. He'd seen the same emotion when Tony discovered his partner, Danny Price's duplicity back in Baltimore and even now, after four years, that hurt would still appear at even the mention of Price's name. Gibbs couldn't bear the thought that DiNozzo felt the same way about him now. He also didn't like the way he was acting; so jumpy, nervous and looking over his shoulder constantly like he expected to be accosted; he looked as if he wasn't eating or sleeping either. And because he was feeling so lousy, so guilty about his part in the whole FUBAR mess, Gibbs reverted to his default setting of being a bastard with a double B - on steroids.

Worse still, he not only got angry with Cate who deserved it for sending him that damned photo in the first place, but he was an uber bastard to DiNozzo. Mostly because he couldn’t bear to see those green eyes staring back at him like he’d destroyed their partnership. He refused to listen when Cate had tried to make excuses about the damned photo; simply roared at her to shut her up and gave her every single crap job he could think of.

As far as he was concerned, there was nothing she could say that would excuse her behaviour and Jethro knew that if Cate had been a guy, he’d have taken him downstairs into the ring and well and truly whoop their ass until they fell into a crying heap. And then Gibbs would have kicked their butt some more. Unfortunately, there was no way he was going to take out his anger on a woman that way with corporal punishment in the guise of ‘training.’ His personal code of conduct wouldn’t permit it although this was one time he wished he could.

So every time that DiNozzo tried to talk to him, to ask him why he would send the photo out to everyone, instead of simply telling his second that it had been an honest mistake and apologise, he had turned his ire on Tony and berated him viciously for been so stupid for posing for the photo.
Even when DiNozzo had come up with the totally crap-assed response that the photo was a fake, he'd just snorted and cuffed him upside the head and told him to can it with his lies; that it was time to accept responsibility for his own poor choices. That he'd made his bed and now he had to lie in it.

Ducky had tried to talk to him about his attitude and treatment of the team and his concern about DiNozzo but Gibbs had stormed off and refused to listen. Truth to tell, the disappointment in the medical examiner's eyes at his betrayal of DiNozzo was too much like looking into a mirror of his senior field agent's devastated green orbs and he couldn't contain his fury. Nor could he simply confess that his technological incompetence had resulted in a goat rope of monumental proportions. He simply got more bastard-like and took it out on the whole office, although those closest to him suffered exponentially. Which really said something, because his behaviour, his obsession over Ari Haswari getting the best of him had resulted in his behaviour becoming unbearable, long before this debacle.

And now it was 0930 and DiNozzo was late. Not just caught in traffic or I had to stop for coffee boss or I had a flat tyre late, but I'm gonna fire your worthless ass, late and Gibbs was fuming. He would normally get Cate to call DiNozzo and tell him to get his sorry ass into work ASAP but that wasn't an option. The tension between the pair was unbearable and he couldn't blame Tony, nor would he if he was in DiNozzo's shoes, welcome a phone call from her inquiring about his whereabouts.

He could ask Abbs to call him he supposed but he'd noticed that DiNozzo seemed to be extremely angry with their favourite Goth girl too. He really wasn't sure what that was all about, since he knew that Abby was extremely open minded about sexual practices and alternative lifestyles. He'd had to shut her down on numerous occasions when she given him more information that he could cope with. There was no way she would tease his SFA or reject him for being gay; the pair had always been close friends before. Yet he'd noticed that she also seemed more subdued this week and he wondered if it was simply because of their disagreement; perhaps she'd been angry because Tony had deceived them all. Her number one rule after all, was *never lie to Abby*.

So, that only left McGee, to make the damned call and find out where the hell DiNozzo was, since he hadn't deigned to turned up for work or even call in. Not that Tony would be exactly ecstatic to hear from the probie either. Seriously, Gibbs was close to head smacking Tim into next year because he thought the whole gay photograph fiasco was a huge joke and took every opportunity when he thought his boss wasn't around, to dig the knife in and twist it round without mercy. McGee obviously saw it as payback for the unorthodox methods Tony used to toughen up the greener than grass young probationary field agent, as opposed to the time-honoured method of hazing that was the norm.

Although Tony had endured the pretty exhaustive hazing that taken place when he joined NCIS without complaint apart from a world-weary acceptance, he clearly wasn't a big fan of the technique and opted for teasing and pranks to toughen up his probie. Gibbs knew he also protected McGee from hazing from the other field agents as well. As much as no one wanted to work with Gibbs who's second B was for bastard, a place on the MCRT was still a much coveted one and the hazing was usually brutal because of it. There was a lot of resentment over McGee, not helped by him constantly throwing his education in everyone’s faces either.

"McGee, find out where DiNozzo is and tell him I said to get in here ASAP if he knows what's good for him."

As McGee croaked out a nervous "Yes Boss," and reached for his phone, Gibbs snuck up behind him.
"And McGee, if I hear any more teasing of DiNozzo about that damned photo, I'll stick my boot so far up your ass you won't need any of that fancy smancy colonic irrigation crap you and Abby were talking 'bout last week. That goes double for you Agent Todd. Do I make myself clear?"

McGee's Adam's apple bobbed up and down alarmingly before he managed a nervous. "Yes Boss."

Cate just nodded and Gibbs glared at her. "And once I locate my senior field agent, we are gonna have us a long overdue talk about Rule 1 Agent Todd. It's nobody's business but his own if he's gay, Cate and I won't tolerate your homophobic behaviour on my team."

Cate's looked perplexed as she processed his comment before a look of horror appeared. "But Gibbs…"

"I said we'd talk once I know what's happened to Din…"

The ding of the elevator interrupted them as they all swung round to watch the doors opening, expecting to see Tony rush out, full of apologies and excuses for coming in late and not phoning. As the elevator doors opened they were disappointed to see the familiar if irritating figure of their favourite FBI agent, emerging from the elevator, with a sombre expression on his face.

Gibbs looked at Fornell and barked, "Make that call, McGee. My office, Fornell?"

Fornell glared daggers at Cate. "Nope Gibbs, the director's office," and set off for the stairs at a fair clip, with Gibb's in tow wondering what the heck was up with Tobias. What was his problem with Todd and what the hell case was going on, that they needed to talk to Morrow about? It looked as if his talk with his agent was going to be postponed, if they had a joint case with the FBI and he hoped that McGee managed to locate Tony. It seemed that Tobias had called ahead because Director Morrow's personal assistant smiled and waved them in.

"He's expecting you Special Agent Fornell."

Fornell barged in and shook hands perfunctorily with Tom Morrow, Director of NCIS.

"Did you get hold of the security footage for the last week that I requested Director?" Tobias wasted no time beating around the bush and dived right in.

"I did Special Agent; do you want to view it now?" Morrow asked the grizzled agent.

"Yeah I do. Did you watch it yet?" he asked casually, although there was a predatory glint to his eyes as he stared at the Director.

"No Fornell, I only got my hands on it, just before you arrived." Morrow replied looking rather uncomfortable.

Gibbs noticed that Tobias seemed unusually reserved with the Director, while he felt rather a chill towards himself as well, from his old friend. He decided to take a leaf out of Fornell's book and stop the beating around the bush.

"Why are you here Tobias? Ya on a case?"

"I'm investigating an attack on a Federal Agent. I didn't see DiNutso down in the bull pen, Gibbs," he said changing the subject.

Gibbs frown, "He's late, hasn't come in yet. You're not suggesting that he had something to do with the attack because ya crazy Fornell."
The FBI agent glared at the man who shared an ex-wife with him, as well as their obsessive drive to put dirtbags behind bars. Gibbs decided that if looks alone could kill, he and Tom Morrow would be six foot under right now and he wondered what had got up Tobias' ass.

"Well, let's see Gibbs," and the FBI agent clicked on the remote control which proved to be the NCIS shower amenities block and he fast forwarded it until he came to the time he'd been looking for and pressed play. Gibbs and McGee came in, drenched in sweat and heading to the showers. Fornell fast forwarded as Gibbs gave him the squinty eyed glare and hit play when DiNozzo came into the shower, equally hot and sweaty and ready to jump into the showers. By the time Tony had grabbed what he needed from his locker and hit the showers, Gibbs who always took 3-minute showers was finishing up and McGee wasn't too far behind him.

Tobias had skipped through the in between stuff and focused on McGee stepping out of the shower and getting dressed. After he left and Tony was alone, he pressed play once more and watched as three figures came in wearing baseball caps and hoodies and they grabbed Tony as he was getting out of the shower and dragged him to a spot that wasn't a blind spot but was close. All three men were very careful to keep their faces away from the surveillance cameras while they proceeded to physically restrain him even as he fought back ferociously.

Suddenly he froze, and Fornell looked across at Gibbs and Morrow who were both looking green and highly uncomfortable. After the assailants left, Tony remained frozen for several minutes before he finally managed to dress and leave the showers. Gibbs remembered that day; they'd been training in the gym. Tony had been right behind them on the way to the showers but must have been delayed on the way to the showers and ended up coming in as they were finishing up. He hadn't turned up in the bull pen for almost forty minutes and Gibbs had almost called him out on spending too much time in the shower, even though that behaviour was out of character. He remembered how spooked he'd been and how he had tried again to speak to Gibbs in his office and he'd fobbed him off.

Gibbs remembered thinking that his second looked desperate and there was a look of longing on his face and he'd given him short shrift with a head slap and bug up his ass to get back to work. He wanted to head slap himself for being such a bastard; he'd broken one of his own damned rules, Rule 8- never assume. That would teach him for being stupid enough to listen to scuttlebutt.

Flashback:

He'd been prowling around early as was his habit when he heard DiNozzo's and his own name mentioned, so of course he'd done his Marine stealth trick, as he shamelessly listened in.

Essentially, the consensus with the junior agents present was that DiNozzo had spread his legs and opened his mouth for his boss, in order to not only get a place on his team but to win his promotion as senior field agent. Others expressed the belief he was probably exchanging sexual favours for special treatment from the Director although their form of expression was way cruder than Gibbs' paraphrasing. He was getting ready to spring amongst them to frighten the crap out of them before committing hari-kari upon the lot of mediocre, narrow minded, mentally challenged, foul mouthed bigots masquerading as federal agents. Then he caught someone saying something about unrequited love, which pulled him up in his tracks.

The dissenter cited Gibb's infamous Rule 12 to argue that the team leader would never use DiNozzo as his toy boy… well actually he used a more objectionable term but maintained that Gibbs was a man's man, a real Marine who didn't swing that way. He claimed that anyone could see through, that DiNozzo had a giant sized terminal crush on his boss. Why else would he put up with being treated like a stray dog and not just accept all the kicks and putdowns but he actual seemed to appreciate being hit by him. Why would anyone let themselves be constantly and publicly screwed by the boss...
when he was in a foul mood, rather than go and work for someone who valued him? The only logical explanation was that he was in love with him; even the way he ran around after him constantly looking to please him and gain the tiniest of acknowledgments was obviously because he was head over heels in love with Gibbs and several of the "agents" agreed with his analysis.

As furious as Gibbs was with the rabble, it had nevertheless struck a chord with him. Not the vile filth about Tony offering sexual favours, he knew how much crap that was and he wanted to make them all suffer for even thinking of that heap of shit but the unrequited love? Somehow, despite the source, they had still managed to plant a treacherous seed of doubt in his mind and Gibbs found himself fertilizing and watering it; turning a tiny bean into a rampaging beanstalk! Realistically, he was the first to admit that he was a total bastard to work for and Tony always seemed to forgive him, no matter how much crap he dished out. No one else would put up with being treated the way he treated his second in command, so maybe he did stay because he was in love with Gibbs.

It would also explain why Tony had never told him he was gay and if that was so; then he was going to have to let him down carefully without hurting his feelings or making him think he was homophobic because he would lose the best agent he ever had. He really didn't want to have to break his heart, but he could simply not reciprocate DiNozzo’s feelings like that. If anything, much as Gibbs didn't want to admit the truth and he always bit anyone's head off when they dared to mention it, he did feel protective of the young agent but in a purely paternal manner like he would for any of the young and promising Marines he’d taken under his wing.

Somehow, he would need to let him down gently, but his pity and sorrow was warring with his feelings of betrayal that DiNozzo had hidden his orientation from him and anger that he should let Todd get hold of such a compromising photo. He thought DiNozzo was smarter than that.

End Flashback

So, when his usually brash and confident agent wanted to talk to him in his office and seemed ill at ease and nervous and was looking at Gibbs like he was his last chance at redemption, he blew it. Like the damned stupid egotistical bastard that he was, he wouldn't listen to him to see what he wanted because he’d broken one of his most important rules. He'd assumed that Tony was going to declare undying love for him and so he'd told him he didn't have time to talk and to get back to work.

And as Fornell skipped forward to two days later, Gibbs recalled that they'd worked a murder scene where they'd been searching for the murder weapon in an alley behind a series of eateries. He'd ordered McGee and DiNozzo to go dumpster diving and they'd both needed to shower when they got back so he'd sent them down to take care of business and instructed his SFA to drop off the gun they'd located on his way. He remembered Tony whining and asking why Cate couldn't do it, but he glared at him and given him a direct order. Now as he watched Tim preparing to leave the shower block, clean and changed into fresh clothes as Tony came tearing into the showers, it was blatantly clear why DiNozzo hadn't wanted to drop the gun off at the lab. He hadn't wanted to be down in the showers on his own.

And with good reason it would seem because within a minute of McGee's departure, three identically dressed individuals slipped into the amenities block and grabbed his SFA again waiting til he was distracted to overpower him for a repeat of what had gone on before. When he was physically being restrained and they were wailing into him in retaliation, he fought like a man possessed but the moment that the wandering hands took liberties that they shouldn't, he froze like a deer trapped in the middle of a busy highway by approaching headlights. Even when he was on his own once more, he seemed to be trapped inside his head and took some time to become aware of his surroundings.

Fornell stopped the tape and looked across at the Director. "This is my copy, I assume? I want my
forensic scientist to examine the footage."

The director frowned. "I hardly think that this matter is serious enough to warrant the attention of a senior special agent, Tobias. It may technically fit the definition of an assault but it hardly merits investigating. Granted that there was a bit of rough housing going on and some sexually inappropriate touching, but it would be more appropriately dealt with by Human Resources, with a seminar on sexual harassment as I told Agent DiNozzo. I have already organised it, so you see Tobias, your further involvement is unnecessary although I think your dedication is admirable."

The look Fornell gave him was pure poison but before he could respond Gibbs was on his feet, getting up into Morrow's personal space.

"You knew about this and did nothing? Why the hell wasn't I informed?" he yelled in full blown gunny-mode.

"I did do something, I involved HR and the mandatory training will take place early next week. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. I told DiNozzo that after pretending to be something he wasn't for four years, he had to expect some blowback from his colleagues and the quickest way to stop it was to just suck it up and it would eventually blow over. You might want to ask yourself why DiNozzo didn't come to you instead of me, Gibbs."

Gibbs already knew the answer to that particular question; he had and he'd blown him off just like the Director who clearly had some archaic prejudices that had no place in a modern federal law enforcement agency. Before he could formulate a reply, due to his murderous rage he saw Fornell curl his lip with disgust and realised that it wasn't just Tom that was the subject of Tobias 'ire.

Before he could rip his friend a new one he was floored by Fornell's reply.

"Said I was investigating an attack on a federal agent. Didn't say I was investigating that particular assault in the showers although having seen the security footage, I will be pursuing this one too, to the fullest extent of the law."

Fornell paused a beat.

"I wanted to watch the footage because I need to identify the dirtbags since they're my number one suspects in the attempted rape and attempted murder of Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo."
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Gibbs discovers that ignoring your problems just makes everything worse. Much, much worse.

The Director of NCIS turned a ghastly shade of green and looked like he was about to lose his breakfast as he grabbed an opened bottle of water. He swigged it down nervously, as he regarded his infamously volatile colleague, probably wondering how long it would take Gibbs to explode.

It didn’t take long.

“God damn it Fornell! Why the Hell didn't ya tell me someone tried to kill my agent? You knew I was looking for him and you said nothing. Where is he; is he okay?"

"Didn't tell ya cuz until I saw the security footage you were all potential suspects," he ignored the howl of fury from Gibbs and continued. "And no, he's not okay! He's recovering from surgery to repair a tear in his liver and they had to remove his spleen. He's a mess to be honest, not to mention the obligatory DiNozzo concussion and impressive array of contusions across his torso, arms and legs, many of which are defensive wounds."

His eyes narrowed as Gibbs got up into his face, puce with rage and the vein above his eyebrow was pulsing alarmingly; as sure sign that the gunny's blood pressure was off the charts.

"I'm his emergency contact, why didn't they inform me?"

Fornell glared back at him, totally unintimidated by the fury. "Because he was conscious and capable of signing his own consent forms by the time they decided that they had to take out his spleen and repair his liver surgically and secondly, he instructed us not to inform anyone at NCIS… And before you go off like a bear in a bear trap, he said that he can't trust anyone at NCIS anymore. That's why, he called me, and I don't intend to let him down."

He glared at the director and Gibbs. "DiNutzo said you sent that damned photo to the whole damned building Jethro and when he tried to tell you it was a fake you didn't believe him. He tried to tell you about all the harassment and the assaults including the shower episodes but you wouldn't listen to him. Why Gibbs? Why would you treat the kid like that? I know YOU aren't a homophobic bigot." He shot a meaningful look at Morrow.

Gibbs scowled at him. "Because god damn it, Tobias I fucked up alright? I tried to delete the damn thing. I never meant to send it to the whole friggin building. I didn't even know ya could do that. Okay? I would never deliberately hurt DiNozzo, you must know that?" He looked at his friend, pleading for redemption.

The FBI agent continued to glare, his contempt apparent." And yet, you did hurt him Jethro. You hurt him when you didn't believe him about the photo being a fake, Gibbs and you hurt him again when you wouldn't listen, when he tried to tell you he was being threatened and molested. He
couldn't even go to the head without being harassed by agents wanting him to resign.

“All because you were too damned stupid, too stubborn to explain that you made a mistake and tell the kid you were sorry. It was more important not to break Rule 6 than it was to do the right thing and you ended up breaking plenty of other rules of yours including the most important one; to always have your partner's six."

He shook his head and when he continued, there was an almost melancholic quality to his speech. "I know you don't care what I think but since we go back a ways I'm gonna tell ya anyway Gibbs. I do NOT think it is a sign of weakness to apologise when you've done something wrong, like forgetting your wife's birthday or sending a faked photo of your partner to the whole dang staff instead of deleting it cuz you're too freakin stubborn to learn some new- fangled skills. It's NOT a sign of weakness to apologise when you hurt someone you care about, even if you didn't intend to hurt them."

His eyes stony – Gibbs only saw antipathy.

"But it IS a sign of weakness to be unable to apologise when you've done the wrong thing. It IS a sign of weakness to allow your own pride and a dumb-assed rule, to stand in the way of you doing the right thing. Doing the decent thing, the honourable thing when you've done wrong and need to acknowledge it, to make it right. I think it takes a courageous person, a strong person, a hero who is able to admit when they fucked up and try to fix it."

Disgusted, he turned his attention on Morrow. "DiNutzo said he came to you numerous times and you told him to suck it up. He told you that photo was a fake; that he'd been set up but you didn't investigate his allegation. You offered him a job reference if he wanted to move on…Well apart from investigating the rape and attempted murder, I'm also authorised by my superiors to look into the matter of the photo-shopped image. It could be connected to the crime and I suspect that Internal Affairs will wanna know why you didn't investigate his claims about the photo. Your dinosaur-aged attitudes and inaction almost cost him his life and the irony is that the homophobic attitudes of a small but vocal minority of NCIS resulted in Tony being almost gang raped and killed for being gay, which isn't a crime by the way, but he's probably straighter than the self-righteous homophobes.” He looked pointedly at Morrow who seemed to miss the irony.

"There's no proof that the photo is a fake, Fornell. Of course he's going to claim it is, since he's been hiding in the closet for so long." The Director argued cynically as he attempted to defend the indefensible.

"You just don't get it do you. I know it's a fake because I had my experts examine it and they said it was done by a pro using the latest software. The sort used in law enforcement and forensics, the sort that the FBI and NCIS use for creating biographies for undercover operatives." He smirked at the NCIS director who looked extremely uncomfortable.

Gibbs frowned, wondering why Abby hadn't noticed that the photo wasn't kosher. As Tony's biggest champion and one of the foremost forensic experts in the US, he would have thought she would have spotted it straight away. Then he dismissed the thought when the grim reality struck him that he tried to come to terms with the truth. That someone had set him up and that when he tried to tell Gibbs, he didn't believe his agent. He always knew that Tony was hiding something and when that photo turned up in his damned email he thought he'd finally discovered DiNozzo's secret. From that point on he'd simply forced the facts to fit his supposition.

"Sounds like you know who is responsible, for setting him up Tobias?" Gibbs probed, trying to stay calm enough to get the info he needed. He was going to make them wish they’d never been born – no one messed with his team and got away with it.
"Fornell nodded, "Well yeah, Gibbs but don't expect me to tell ya, cuz you won't believe me. I have someone preparing warrants to obtain the auditing records of everyone who accessed the photo editing software program in the week leading up to the photo being distributed. I just need to track it back and prove who was responsible.

Tom Morrow must have felt himself getting backed further into a corner because he sniped, ""Since I wasn't served with a warrant for the photo, I'm left to assume you Fibbies have taken to hacking into our computers, Fornell."

Fornell smiled smugly. "Nope, didn't need one. Some of your people emailed it to some of ours; probably sent it to a whole heap of other people too. But unlike the vacuum of moral leadership here though, our superiors issued an edict advising there would be harsh disciplinary action if people were found in possession of the photo or distributed it to others and our IT department deleted it from our servers."

Watching the director he stated, "They're also real keen on recruiting Tony to a taskforce investigating a serial killer - seeing you're offering to give him a reference, Director. The thing is that these smaller agencies can often be insular while larger federal agencies such as the FBI have to be much more inclusive, more accepting of differences. Perhaps Special Agent DiNozzo might feel more comfortable there, seeing how he has been treated here this week."

The FBI agent looked across at his friend, waiting for him to launch himself at him. He counted down… five four three two…

"Damn it Tobias, he's mine, you're not gonna steal him, he belongs with me."

"Not any more Jethro, you gave up your right to him when you let him down this week. Rule 1 remember? He's a free man now."

"Well see about that. I'm gonna go talk to him. What hospital's he in?"

"Not gonna happen, Jethro. He's under the protective custody of the FBI til we catch his attackers and besides he doesn't wanna talk…"

The intercom buzzed before the directors PA. "Excuse the interruption Director but Damian White from security wants to see you. He says it's about Special Agent DiNozzo, Sir and it's urgent."

Morrow cursed the timing, with Gibbs and Fornell there he could hardly engage in a bit of spin doctoring if the information didn't present NCIS in a positive light and he cursed Fornell, Gibbs and he cursed Damian White especially.

~Betrayals~

As Gibbs finally left the Director's office with Fornell in tow, he was shaken to his core and felt older than a frail octogenarian and very, very defeated. What he heard from White just sickened him. Once it was clear that the security guard had information pertaining to DiNozzo's assault, by tacit agreement they had left the questioning to the FBI agent. Gibbs strongly suspected by the feral gleam in Tobias' eyes, if they'd tried to stop him then he'd probably have pulled out his gun and shot them both. The story, as it emerged certainly wasn't pretty.

Damian White was a fresh faced twenty something, in his first real job since gaining his security guard training and he knew how lucky he was to be working for a federal agency and not as a rent-a-cop down at his local mall. He dreamed of one day joining the police force so he was thrilled when Gus Richards, twenty year veteran had singled him out and taken him under his wing. Still, what
was happening with some of the guys in the security department wasn't right. He knew it but he also
didn't want to make enemies. Damian had seen what had happened when he was at school if
someone tried to stand up for the gay kids against the gay-bashing homophobes; they got labelled as
gay too and were pounded into the pavement.

That was his rationalisation for not saying anything about some of the security guards who had been
harassing Special Agent DiNozzo, in the amenities block. He also heard scuttlebutt that people were
also giving him a hard time in the head and elevators, because it didn't have any surveillance
_cameras. Damian knew it was wrong, he knew that Tony was a great guy and didn't deserve what
was happening to him but he was afraid to do the right thing. So, he had stayed silent. That was until
he found out that about the attack on Anthony DiNozzo before he came into work this morning.
Talking it over with his girlfriend, he knew that he had to come forward and report his team mates to
the director.

At that point in his narrative, Fornell had leapt in furious. "How the Hell do you know about
DiNozzo being attacked, White? He's in protective custody and I made sure he was admitted under a
false name."

Damian had looked freaked. "Um… well my girlfriend works at Bethesda; she's a nurse. Special
Agent DiNozzo sorta got her the interview after I mentioned she was new in DC and looking for a
job. He said he'd talk to his friend in HR."

At this point they all heard Fornell huff in exasperated frustration, "Damn the DiNozzo network, it's
worse than the Mafia." While Gibbs smirked, amused despite the seriousness of situation, at the
exasperated Fibbie and looking for all the world like a fond, proud parent.

"Welcome to my world, Fornell."

White continued, nervously keeping his eye on the two furious agents. He never expected when he
came up here, that he'd have to confront the FBI and the terrifying Special Agent Gibbs.

"So, when my girlfriend Lorna saw that he'd come into the ER last night, when she started her shift
this morning, she called me. She made me come in and report what I know. She gave me a heap of
grief, for not doing it sooner. Guess I'm in big trouble?" He looked nervous.

Fornell had growled at the kid, "Not half as much as many others White, as long as your story
checks out. You should have reported them straight away but at least you did the right thing in the end.
Just remember that saying 'about all that is necessary for evil to exist, is for good men to do
nothing' is never more apt than in this situation." The kid looked at him as if he had two heads.
"Guess not hey?" The Fibbie exchanged an outraged look with Gibbs, wondering what the devil
kids were learning in schools these days, before continuing.

"There will be an internal investigation as well as legal proceedings, I suspect," he shot a pointed
look at the director, "and people will be charged."

The rookie security guard looked terrified. "So, I guess if I knew something about that photo that got
Tonyouted in the first place, I should probably tell someone too?"

Fornell had looked across at Gibbs and shook his head. "Naw kid, we know who sent it out to
everyone and it was a mistake. A stupid mistake I'll grant you but an honest one, made by a
cantankerous ole dinosaur." He smirked at the scowling Gibbs across the conference table.

"No I wasn't talking about Special Agent Gibbs, Sir. I meant, who put the photo together. See… one
of the guards has a crush on her and well… he's kinda stalking her, hoping she'll change her mind
and go out with him. He was hanging out watching her and saw her faking up that photo and putting Special Agent DiNozzo in the picture and taking out the other gay dude. He also watched her on the security footage cuz she was working on it between doing other stuff and I saw him watching her and asked why he was watching her all the time … and that's when he told me 'bout the stalking 'cept he didn't call it that and the photo."

"You saw her doctoring the photo, White?" Fornell questioned him.

"Yeah," he quavered nervously, as Fornell's expression was that of a predator mercilessly stalking prey.

"You and the stalker freako both knew that it was a fake photo; so why the devil didn't you tell everyone that DiNozzo isn't gay?" he shouted at the young guard who flinched, as his eyes filled with tears.

Gibbs looked equally appalled that someone had done this deliberately to his senior field agent and enthralled at the animalistic ferocity of his peer. It seemed that he wasn't the only one that went around making people cry or piss their pants; Fornell could do it too. Who have thunk it.

"Because I figured that she was like his BFF and if she was doctoring up a photo like that, that he must be gay. I mean she would know somethin' like that, better than anyone."

Fornell looked at Tom Morrow and his friend. Gibb looked like he wanted to kill someone and normally he would have pounced on the witness by now, metaphorically scruffing him and shaking him like a cat with a mouse, demanding to know who 'she' was. Yet instead he dithered and seemed afraid to ask, like he already guessed who it was and didn't want to face it. Morrow was looking apprehensive and puzzled so Fornell took the bull by the horns.

"Who faked the photo, Damian?" Fornell leaned forward, keeping an eye on the two other men in the room, concerned that the messenger might be in danger of being shot.

White was a rookie yet despite his inexperience even he was aware of the tension in the room, which might have explained the stuttering. "umm th…that crazy Goth ch…chick Abby Sc…cuito."

Gibbs recoiled, and his face went white while Director Morrow flinched like he'd been given an electric shock as his eyes popped open. Fornell smirked, Morrow certainly hadn't seen that one coming, but his gaze softened somewhat when he exchanged glances with Gibbs. Abby Sciuto was his favourite, she was like a daughter to him and to find out she had done something so damaging, so damned wrong to DiNozzo, he must be feeling his loyalties being tested to the max. Fornell couldn't help wondering where his loyalty would lie if he had to choose sides.

Fornell had just one more question. "So there's security surveillance in the lab, correct. And that means there's footage of Abby working on the photo?"

Damian nodded, "Yeah after that terrorist took people hostage, extra security cameras were installed everywhere, well almost everywhere.

Gibbs shoulder slumped, probably knowing that even if he wanted to, with security footage, he couldn't protect Abby from this. Fornell wondered if Gibbs would even want to. Morrow looked even more worried and no doubt he was already trying to figure out how to save his own butt.

The FBI agent still wanted the auditing records that the IT department kept as part of their brief to ensure that government employees didn't abuse the multi-million computer facilities and the state of the art software programs for personal use or unauthorised investigations. To this end, usage was
routinely monitored, but having actual footage and the testimony of two witnesses was good news, it meant that he would have extra evidence to hand over to IA proving the set up and that Morrow's out-dated morals and inaction was in part responsible for DiNutzo getting attacked.

It didn't get the FBI agent any closer to finding out who was responsible for putting DiNozzo in the hospital, but it did support DiNozzo's statement that he's straight. If someone had sent a written article stating that DiNuzto was gay, even as a joke, then most people seemed to understand that it was libel and against the law, yet the manipulation of multimedia images seemed to be viewed as harmless fun. Well DiNutso sure as hell wasn't laughing!

It was outrageous and a real mess and had also revealed a real festering sore of homophobic intolerance within NCIS that needed to be cleaned up. It was ugly and had no place in a federal agency in the twenty first century. It was time the Powers That Be scoured and cleansed the Agency of that type of filth and made it a safe workplace for the gay and lesbian employees who worked there.

As he followed Gibbs down the stairs, he pulled out his cell phone and ordered Agent Timmons to obtain a search warrant for the security footage in the lab and he enquired how DiNutzo was doing. He saw Gibbs listening in and when he hung up, he took pity on him.

"Physically, he's doing better. Sleeping comfortably; but emotionally he's still a mess. Practically jumping outta his skin."

"Tell him I'll see him later Tobias."

Fornell glared at him. "No Gibbs, he's not up to seeing anyone from NCIS right now."

A very frustrated Gibbs balled his fists and glared at him, realising that the FBI agent was resolute, and he knew from experience that Fornell wasn't intimated by his tactics.

"Do you think that you could manage to deliver a message from me, Fornell?" he growled sarcastically.

"Nope! I will tell him you'll see him when you're ready to tell him you're sorry for a) being such an ass b) not believing him and c) not having his six."

And with that the FBI agent headed to the elevator, leaving a fuming Gibbs behind, looking ready to disembowel someone...anyone. Fornell smirked; imaging how much 'fun' it would be to work with Gibbs for the next few hours, although he wasn't too worried. Just as long as it wasn't him that Gibbs was gnawing on, he reckoned any of his team was fair game at the moment.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Gibbs, feeling guilty, tears the team a new one.

As Gibbs swept into the bull pen, his features stony and his arctic blue eyes sparking with fury, the remainder of his team leapt up to report. Probationary Field Agent McGee stuttered and stammered before telling Gibbs that, "Tony still wasn't answering his land line or cell phone and he had the cell phone switched off so I couldn't trace him. Sorry Boss, I'll keep trying. Do you want me to put out a BOLO on his car?"

Gibbs had forgotten that he had tasked McGee with finding DiNozzo, not surprising it had slipped his mind though, considering what he had heard and learnt in the last hour or so. Hell he felt incapable of even stringing two thoughts together right now. He looked over at the probie and said, "No, you can stop looking. And McGee, I want everyone in the conference room ASAP. Inform the others. I'm going for coffee."

He ignored the snort and the sotto voce snark from Todd, "Of course you are."

Gibbs hoped that by the time he got back from his coffee run he would have managed to get himself under control. He whipped out his phone and called a contact at Bethesda to see if he could find out DiNozzo's room number but just his luck, Shari-Lee Jenkins was off on a ten-day holiday to Tahiti. He slammed the cell phone shut and glared at the barista who almost dropped his coffee in alarm.

Back in the conference room, everyone was waiting nervously for him. Usually, when they had team meetings, they would meet in the lab but Gibbs wanted to be on neutral territory when he broke the news and confronted Abby and Cate. Apparently they must have discussed the situation and appointed Ducky as group spokesman, who unsurprisingly for such a voluble individual, wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Timothy has informed us that you have halted the search for Anthony? I take it that you have located him Jethro? Where is he? Is he alright?"

Gibbs glared at them all before softening his gaze as he finally stared at the M.E. "Nope Ducky, he's not. He's recovering from surgery in Bethesda because some sick perverted animals beat the crap outta him, came close to killing him and they tried to gang rape him too."

He watched Abby and Cate exchanged guilty looks, so just to plunge the knife in further as Abby's eyes filled with tears, he added "the FBI are treating it as a hate crime and they're convinced it's because the dirt bags hate gays." He was irrationally pleased to see the sharp intake of breath from Cate, as her face lost all colour while Abby burst into inconsolable tears.

The medical examiner clucked apprehensively, "Do we know what his condition is Jethro?"

Gibbs shook his head. "Not a lot Ducky. They had to remove his spleen and he apparently has a tear to his liver. Apart from that, I don't know squat, except he was severely beaten and concussed.

Ducky was dismayed, "Jethro, why haven't you gone down there to see how the lad is doing; you
know he doesn't have any family." He exchanged meaningful looks with the senior agent. 

Feeling guilty that he'd made such a mess of things, Gibbs reverted to type and got defensive. "Because I can't, Duck; don'tcha think I would if I could?" he yelled at his team. "The FBI won't let me, they've got him under protective custody, he's not even admitted under his own name, damn it! Can't even find out what room he's in"

He pounded the table as if it was a dirt bag needing to be beaten into submission and everyone jumped except for Ducky who merely looked pensive. Meanwhile Abby sobbed even louder and his two agents exchanged guilty glances.

"Jethro, I shall endeavour to use my contacts to find out about young Anthony. He needs his team to be there for him, at a time like this. How anyone could think the lad is gay, beggar's belief. Not that there would be anything wrong if he was but there are other people who are more likely to play for the other team looking at them superficially," he mused looking around at the team intently.

Gibbs guessed he was talking about Cate’s misandry, Abby Goth lifestyle or McGee’s wimpiness. Maybe he was talking about himself – the stereotypical bachelor who still lived with his mother and wore bow ties. Gibbs had heard the speculation about Duck from time to time.

"When I was studying medicine at my alma mater, my best chum batted for the other team and he was absolutely brilliant in chemistry. I would have never gotten through my first year of medicine without him and his tutoring. He went on to become a brilliant researcher and a thoroughly wonderful all-round chap…"

Gibbs interrupted Ducky's prattle about his medical chum before he could begin describing his research experiments in minutiae that would cure a chronic insomniac.

"Damn straight he needs his family Duck, 'cept the problem is we let him down… well maybe not you and now he doesn't want to see us. Can't blame him and that bastard Fornell's gonna try and persuade him to jump ship to the FBI. I can't lose him, Duck."

The medical examiner looked shocked and puzzled. "How have you all let him down Jethro, well apart from you circulating that horrendous photo of him to every man and his dog?" Abby's sobbing increased in intensity until it became difficulty to have a conversation without shouting.

Gibbs glared at his agent and his surrogate daughter. "Something you two want to come clean about?"

"It's my fault he nearly got killed Gibbs. I took his face and put it in that stupid photo."

"It's my fault too because I asked Abby to fake the photo for me, to get even for that wet T-shirt photo of me." Cate admitted guiltily.

"What wet T-shirt photo would that be Cate? Don't tell me my SFA faked a photo of ya cuz I'm not gonna believe it." Damned if he would jump to the wrong conclusions about DiNozzo again.

"The photo he found of me taking part in a wet T-shirt competition, while I was still in college. He found it when he went down to Panama City with his frat brothers. He sent it to you when I sent you the fake photo that we created."

"DiNozzo never sent me any photos Cate, just his case report. And why would he threaten to do that. What did you do to him?"

"What makes you think I did something, Gibbs?" Cate snarled at him, rattled beyond measure to hear
that Tony hadn't revealed her youthful indiscretion to their boss. He'd behaved honourably in the face of her abominable behaviour.

"Because I know him, Cate and I also know he was acting incredibly out of character, all day long. What did you do to him? He wouldn't have threatened to show your photo otherwise and if ya need further proof, well it's obvious … 'cause he didn't carry out his threat even when he was damned pissed at ya. What started it, damn it?"

"Because I told everyone his college pledge name, alright?" she yelled angrily.

Gibbs looked confused. "Yeah and?"

"Well his frat brother told me one night after I threatened to… well he told me."

"He got upset about some damned stupid nickname? What the hell is wrong with you all?" Gibbs leapt up and paced so he wouldn't attack anything inanimate or corporeal.

Ducky leapt into the conversation. "Jethro, perhaps I can shed some light on the matter for you. I know you were firmly ensconced in the Marines and missed the whole college experience as a young adult but I suspect that like the fealty that is inherent in the Marine Corps, when you join a Collegial Fraternity, then you also take an oath to maintain silence upon frat business to anyone outside the fraternity."

McGee who had been silent until now, chimed in. "As Tony would say, it's like Fight Club. You know…what happens in Fight Club stays in Fight Club. Same thing with fraternities; what happens in the Frat stay in Frat, or it is supposed to. What Adler did is pretty serious infraction of the oath he took, Boss. They'd kick him to the curb if Tony reported it and he'd be ostracised and reviled by all his frat brothers."

Before Gibbs had a chance to speak, Ducky joined in again. "I'm sure that Anthony would see his behaviour as a shocking betrayal and we both know how he regards the qualities of trust and betrayal. Not to mention why when he does give his trust, it is such a big deal for the lad when it's betrayed."

He looked across at Gibbs and they engaged in a silent conversation consisting of knowing looks and pain-filled gazes before Gibbs nodded.

"I gotcha, thanks Duck." His old friend smiled sadly.

"So Cate, he said, "did you know about the frat code of silence when ya 'persuaded' his frat brother to betray his confidence?" He saw the angry and embarrassed expression as she jutted out her jaw belligerently. "I'll take that as a yes, Agent Todd."

Gibbs was beyond angry and he was also bitterly disappointed with his team and he included himself too for the FUBAR situation that they found themselves in. He was surprised that he felt ambivalent about his pair of offenders. Part of him wanted to be to rip them a new one or put them over his knee and tan their hides but the part that knew how much trouble they were in, wanted to protect them from it. On the other hand, another part of him felt that to be concerned about their welfare was incredibly disloyal to DiNozzo when he was lying half dead in a hospital bed. Plus, he was already feeling guilty about his inadvertent part in this and then his stubborn refusal to acknowledge that something was very wrong, so all in all he was feeling very confused by his mixed emotions.

Gibbs wasn't good at dealing with his emotions, save one and in his frustration; it was easier to revert back to his default emotion of anger. He needed to wrap up this little meeting before he exploded. He
needed to be home in the basement sanding, so he could think. So he could calm down. He glared at the team.

"Can't tell ya how mad I am at you all or how disappointed I am. Thought DiNozzo was your friend."

Abby didn't say anything, simply cried harder.

"Tobias knows 'bout the photo and is investigating and there's also gonna be an investigation by IA. Won't just be looking at the attempted murder; they'll start with the photo. Gotta tell ya Abby, there's enough evidence and couple of witnesses too. S'not looking good." Gibbs shook his head and looked across at Ducky, who was looking shocked to his core.

"My goodness Abigail, you're a very smart young lady, how could you do such a thing." Ducky stared at the face that was ravaged by tears. "And who are you crying for, my dear child? Ask yourself that."

Instead of stemming the tide of tears, it amped up the intensity, although it was a very pertinent question. Gibbs turned to his agent, ignoring Abby even though it was killing him. He wanted to make it all better for her but he couldn't.

"Tobias hasn't mentioned you, Cate but I would bet he knows. 'Specially the way he glared at you when he came in. You need to come clean. You owe DiNozzo that much. It'll come out cuz I won't protect you."

He closed his eyes, so he wouldn't have to see their guilty, pleading looks. He really was a sucker when women turned on the water works, especially when it was someone he cared about.

"If you'd done the decent thing when this first happened and fessed up, tried to fix it, I might have been able to make it go away. As it stands, I'm not sure if you'll get to keep your jobs and to be honest, not sure I care. You weren't watching your partner's six and I taught ya better than that." He felt a stab of guilt because he hadn't been watching Tony's six either.

"And I gotta say that when other things come to light Cate and they will, this is gonna look like a concerted campaign against DiNozzo. Your teasing him about being in the Village People when he was undercover or how you took every opportunity to make him feel and look small for kissing that guy who killed Chris Pacci. It was inappropriate behaviour even then, not least cuz of Chris being dead and him and Tony being pals but add it to the photo and the other jokes…Well I didn't study law at college but even I can tell it looks pretty bad."

"Not to mention my dear, the way your elbows seem to find their way into Anthony's ribs almost daily," Ducky chimed in disapprovingly. "Jethro is correct, I fear. It looks like the photo is part of a plan to make working here so difficult, he resigns." He paused before verbalising what Gibbs had also been thinking. "I do trust that that wasn't your intention, Caitlyn?"

Ducky was pained at having to ask the question of her, yet knowing how ambitious she was, because no one reached a position in the Secret Service at her age, guarding the POTUS without a healthy dose of ambition, it needed asking unpalatable as it was. Yesterday he would have scoffed at the idea but he would have also never entertained the possibility that she and Abigail would mock up such a damaging and hurtful photo either.

The outraged agent was only able to manage a, "How can you ask me that Ducky?"

Gibbs cut in harshly, "Get used to it Agent Todd! Might be the first to ask but Duck's not gonna be
Scowling at McGee too, Gibbs decided to call him on dogging DiNozzo all week.

"And don't think I was so distracted with my own crap, I missed all the jokes about being gay you fired nonstop at DiNozzo's. A couple I could ignore but flogging a dead horse. That's not okay. It's putting the boot in when someone is down and out."

Gibbs gave him the death ray glare. "You have a problem with homosexuality, ya better speak up now Probationary Special Agent. I'll find you a different team if working with DiNozzo offends ya."

McGee looked like he was ready to cry. "Yes boss but just to clarify, I don't have a problem with people who are gay. I would never joke like that with someone who really is."

Gibbs shot him a look that was pure enema material, guaranteed to scare the crap out of anyone. "You sayin' that it's ok to harass someone about being gay, if they're not? And how did YOU know that DiNozzo wasn't gay?"

"Nnno Boss, not okay. Won't happen again and how did I know Tony isn't gay? Well, I've seen him get hit on by guys quite a few times when we go out for drinks and he freaks out when they touch him. Sort of freezes and gets this deer in the headlight expression but not the 'OMG my secret is about to come out of the closet' look. It's a please, please go way and leave me alone before I fall apart sort of look. Since I've seen him joke and work with lots of gay people here, I know he isn't homophobic, but I just know in my gut he's not gay either. I figured the photo was fake and Abby admitted it was, when I asked her."

"Then why all the teasing, MuhGee?"

"I decided to get some payback for all the teasing and pranks."

"What about you Duck? You knew it was fake too?"

"Ducky regarded him calmly, "I suspected it must be – it was so outrageous and young Mr Palmer explained how easy it was to dummy up compromising photographs these days. I had no idea that we had vipers in our own bosom though," he glared severely at the recalcitrant pair. "I did try to talk to you on numerous occasions, my boy but you were not in a mood conducive for discussion. If I had realised that you were under the misapprehension that the photo was genuine, I would most assuredly have made it my priority to set you straight my friend."

The violent flush and grimace by the senior agent, told the medical examiner he had hit the nail on the head. Gibbs pushed away the self-doubt and the guilt; there'd be time enough for that when he was alone in his basement.

Gibbs used his death ray glower and turned it up to force ten before skewering McGee with it.

"And let me set you straight about all the teasing and pranks McGee. If you lost that chip on your shoulder about being bullied for being geeky as a kid, you might see that unlike then, DiNozzo's teasing and pranks serve a purpose. First time you worked for us you practically puked your guts up when you saw the body in the acid? You remember?"

McGee nodded nervously. After eight months working for him full-time, he was still terrified of Gibbs when he was on a tear. Today though he’d reached an entirely new level of scary. Even worse, it wasn't something that his boss felt could be dealt with by delivering a Gibbs slap. Gibbs felt compelled to string more than a couple of words together and everyone was going to pay the price for his sacrifice.
"I ordered Tony to get you off my crime scene before you contaminated it because then I would have shot ya. When you started, DiNozzo convinced me to let him toughen you up his way rather than the Marine way. Wasn't convinced it would work but he protected you from *my* style of training. Hell, he not only protected you from me but also from other agents having a go at you. To get to you they were gonna have to go through him and he wasn't going to let that happen."

"And guess what, Elf Lord? It's working. Ya don't puke your guts up at crime scenes, don't crap your pants when a big, bad Marine yell at ya or LEOs try to push you around. One day, you'll be able to interrogate a dirtbag who’s a bully or scaring the shit outta you and not shake like Jell-O. He’s teaching ya not to react when someone yanks your chain or lose your focus."

Ducky decided to lend his support to the senior field agent's unorthodox training methods. "Caitlin can tell you that her own first training lesson with Anthony before she even worked with us, which was delivered by unorthodox means; about why we take photographs and also sketch at a crime scene which was courtesy of some girly magazine he found lying around. He told her that while the photo showed a great deal of detail, it was impossible to determine her correct dimensions from a photo, which was why we also sketch. While Caitlin was rather disgusted at his choice of teaching aids, we were on Air Force One at the time, I thought it was quite brilliant myself. What say you, Jethro?"

"Yeah Duck, gotta say his methods ain't exactly textbook but they get the job done. Not so green as you were McGee, and I don't want ta shoot… not all the time, so yeah, I guess it's working." He smirked evilly, and McGee swallowed nervously.

"And just so ya know, you're not the first loner kid that got his butt kicked at school by bullies. Happened to me but I joined the Marines and learned to kick their asses." He glared at them all daring them to say anything.

Ducky nodded. "I was bullied because my father was a doctor and instead of playing with the other boys in the village after school each day, my parents insisted I come home and study Classical Greek and Latin in preparation for entering Eton. And they also used to make fun of me because of my name and the fact that my mother was extremely overprotective of me when I was a boy. But I refused to let bitterness rule my life, lad."

Gibbs smirked, imagining his friend as a young boy in Edinburgh, with Mrs Mallard checking to see if he had clean knickers before sending him off to school.

Gibbs was serious again as he thought about Tony. "And let me tell you something about Tony. He went to boarding schools as a little kid and then was sent to Military Academy when he was twelve. Ya reckon he wasn't bullied, McGee?"

The ME interrupted again, having had his own experiences with boarding schools straight out of Dickens.

"My goodness Timothy, those institutions make bullying seem like a Sunday school picnic. Hazing is a real art form, I remember how at Eton it was a case of toughen up real fast or be preyed upon for the entire duration of your school career. Not forgetting, Anthony also had to endure hazing at three different Police Departments every time he started at one, as well as the shellacking the dear boy survived when he joined us.

“As you well know, Federal agents do not like the constabulary and they gave him a very hard time as they emphasised the lesson that he wasn't as good as them. Any wonder it fosters a mindset that perpetuates the miserable practice by promising the victims they can get their own back by preying on the new recruits. " 
Fearing that Ducky was preparing a treatise on the origins of hazing, Gibbs got things back on track.

"If anyone deserved to get a bit of their own back on a new probie then DiNozzo did McGee, but instead he protected you from me and all the others. You were so soft, I wanted to send ya to boot camp to whip you into line, but he convinced me to let him toughen ya up.

“That pity party you throw yr'self makes you whiney and belligerent and it blinds you to the truth. Instead of being a friend to him when he was in trouble…” He couldn't finish because he had let him down too.

Gibbs directed his final comments to the trio. "When DiNozzo was down and needed you all to have his six, ya stabbed him in the back. While you were all having so much fun at his expense, all the gay bashers crawled outta the woodwork and made his life a living hell. Every time he had to use the head or showers.”

He was so furious he could find his words. He wanted to hit something or someone. Hard

Ducky leant over and patted Gibbs on the shoulder. "We'll find them Jethro and make sure they pay for their contemptible behaviour."

Damn straight! I'm gonna see every single one is hunted down like the rabid dogs they are." He run out of steam and his voice cracked with the way he had been abusing it, yelling like a drill instructor.

He scowled at the trio, sadistically pleased to see he'd reduced them all to tears and growled. "Get outta my sight, all of ya. Can't tell you how much you've disappointed me."

He shared a look with Ducky as they watched the team scarpered like frightened rabbits. Ducky correctly interpreted his look as don't go, I need to talk. Ducky looked shell-shocked and when they were alone, he smiled gently.

"I know that was very difficult for you, Jethro. As Anthony is wont to say, you are indeed a functional mute but it needed to be said and I'm proud of you, my friend."

"Don't be Duck. I let him down too. Gonna take a lot to fix things, if they can be. Think I'll head home to the basement; get my head on straight but can ya do something for me?"

"Consider it done, my friend, I was already planning on using my contacts to find out more information about Anthony. You did say it was attempted rape?"

"That's what Tobias said Duck but there's also the attacks here in the shower; what they did was bad enough." He noticed Ducky's distress. “Sick bastards knew they were being filmed, they didn't give a damn!”

"Good grief, Jethro, how could this happen in this day and age? Why on earth didn't Anthony tell someone?"

Gibbs felt bile rise up to his throat. "He did Duck, he reported it to Morrow twice and he told him to suck it up or to resign. And he tried to tell me but I thought he wanted to tell me something else, so I wouldn't listen to him. I let him down," and he strode off leaving a heartsick doctor behind.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Ducky and Tobias rally around DiNozzo as he recuperates from the savage attack.

Tony was conscious when Tobias turned up at Bethesda. Well perhaps to call it consciousness might be this side of hyperbole but for someone who would cheerfully declare himself fine even with his guts hanging out, it was an accurate enough description. As he stared up blearily at the spare figure of the FBI agent propping up the door frame, he tried to smile. It was a shadow of his usual grins which could generally light up a block but Fornell appreciated that he even made the attempt.

He stared at the NCIS agent. "You look a lot better than the last time I saw you, DiNutzo."

This caused Tony to chuckle slightly, before grimacing. "Ow Fornell, don't make me laugh, it hurts too much."

"What the hell was so funny 'bout what I said?"

"Nothing, Tobias," the NCIS agent assured him, "but Gibbs always greets me when I wake up in hospital with those immortal words 'ya look like crap, DiNozzo' and I guess I was thinking you could give him some lessons in bedside manner."

"I could give him some lessons in a lot of things including phone etiquette. Doesn't mean he'd take my advice though. He's pissed with me, cuz I won't let him see you. Bet he's already trying to find out which room you're in."

Tony pulled a face, conceding that a thwarted Gibbs was a grizzly-bear and an angry one at that and yep, he'd be busy right now, trying to make an end run around Fornell.

"Thanks, Fornell, I appreciate you running interference for me. I just can't deal with him right now. 'Having my six' means more than him simply running in and acting all concerned once my ass has been kicked. Not ready to forgive him."

Tobias smirked, "Sure kid, he won't get in til you're good and ready to have him here. Think I might have found out part of why he behaved like such a bastard…well more of a bastard than usual," he corrected. "Damn silly fool didn't mean to send that piece crap out to the whole damn office. He was trying to delete it," he shook his head in disgust that any fed could be so clueless. "But it doesn't explain why he acted like such a jackass afterwards. Sure rule 6 was a factor but there is more going on with the damn idiot, I feel it in my waters," he declared ironically.

Tony frowned. It was comforting to find out that Gibbs didn't intend to send that photo to the entire staff and he could imagine how pissed his boss would have been at the cock-up. Yet it didn't explain how he could a) not believe him when he said I'm not gay it was a set up and b) refuse to listen when he needed to tell him about the harassment. The guy could read tells and body language better than anyone he knew, it was what gave him such an edge in interrogation techniques. Tony been such a mess he wasn't capable of masking his responses this week like he did normally. How Gibbs could not know how desperate and freaked out he'd been and yet he'd turned his back on him, well that was unforgivable. Where the hell was his famous gut?
"Good to know, Tobias. Although as you say, it doesn't explain or excuse his actions later on."

"Told him that I'd let him see you when he was ready to break rule 6 and also explain the rest of why he let ya down. Figured it will be a cold day in hell before he is ready to break his precious rule 6. It should give you all the respite you need while you're in here, DiNozzo. By the way, just to clarify; embargo on visits by NCIS personnel that include Ducky too?"

"He tried to talk some sense into Gibbs more than once. Probably should have Gibbs slapped him instead, although maybe not, since the boss hasn't exactly been rational since the whole Ari fiasco. Especially since Cate somehow managed to get kidnapped, trying to appropriate a vehicle for a pursuit." He rubbed his eyes and started to fall asleep again, "Ducky can come…if he wants, Toby," he mumbled before falling into a drugged doze again.

The next time he woke it was early evening and he recognised the dulcet English accent of the medical examiner speaking softly to a nurse, who was taking his temperature and blood pressure. Ducky always reminded him of his mother with his cultured accent even if he was technically Scottish. Growing up in England meant that the Celtic burr was absent from his speech unless he deliberately spoke that way and in consequence his upper crust accent sounded much more like how Tony remembered his mother speaking.

His mother wasn't particularly maternal but when he was sick, she would sometimes bring up a plate of homemade soup to his bedroom and stay with him while he ate it. Of course, it was soup that their cook, Manuela had made but, still it had been nice. He smiled as he smelt the delicious aroma of soup coming from his bedside table and he knew that Ducky had brought it in for him because there was no way that the institutional gloop that was generously referred to as hospital food could smell that heavenly. It smelt like a fresh tomato and basil soup and although he had little appetite it was light enough for him to manage about half a cup. While he was eating and listening to Ducky's gentle prattle, Fornell stopped by to see him, happy to see that the ME had dropped everything to be with him.

Feeling stronger than earlier and less under influence of meds, he was keen to know if they'd managed to find out who had attacked him. Unfortunately, he'd been unable to tell Fornell much about what had happened as he'd been grabbed by more than one assailant when he was going from his car to his apartment and whacked over the head losing consciousness. Afterwards they had proceeded to beat and kick him and had slashed and removed his clothes, obviously in preparation for the intended rape. Luckily one of Tony's fellow residents had come home and driven into the parking bays and interrupted their plans. Luckily one of Tony's fellow residents had come home and driven into the parking bays and interrupted their plans.

The dirtbags fled dropping a half empty packet of condoms in their hurry to get away. Forensics had pulled a set of fingerprints from the packet and run it but so far, they had no hits. They'd also collected various pieces of evidence from the scene including a boot print and some DNA from his leather jacket. They were still waiting for the DNA evidence and Tobias didn't feel it was the right time to explain that the DNA had been pulled from numerous samples of saliva where he'd been spat on.

He had people examining video footage to see if they could find where they had gone after running away. Tony's neighbour was trying to provide them with descriptions, but it had been dark, and he'd only seen 4 attackers - though there may have been more - for a few seconds. He'd been more focused on the fact that they were sans trousers or had them at half-mast.

The fact that he'd narrowly escaped a gang rape was something he'd chosen not to share with Tony tonight in his highly anxious state. He did inform him though that with White's assistance, he'd had identified the creeps who had assaulted him in the showers and Gus Richards, Dave Andrews and
Carl Mendez had already been charged with assault.

Further charges were imminent, and they'd been stood down pending the outcome of the legal proceedings and Fornell was working on getting one of the trio to flip on the others, so that they didn't have to rely solely on Damian White's testimony. Soon as they had the DNA results back, they would know if they were also involved in the attack outside Tony's apartment. Fornell told Tony that he would need give a statement tomorrow if he was feeling up to it. He was still dozing off every few minutes and jerking awake in a panic, his eyes darting around the room constantly. He was sweaty and nervous, jumping at every loud noise or unfamiliar voice and he looked exhausted.

Tobias was going to wait until later - but he decided impulsively that it would be better to bring it up now, especially with Ducky here too. Knowing that he had options would give him a sense of control that had been taken away from him this past week.

"So... kid, what are your plans when you're fit for duty? You want to go back to NCIS and more importantly, Gibbs team?"

Tony looked lost. "I'm not sure right now Fornell. I don't feel safe there anymore and I'm ashamed that I'm a freakin Fed and I can't defend myself, not at work and then I let myself get jumped at home."

Ducky exchanged a glance with Fornell. "Anthony, how have you been sleeping since this whole disgusting mess began?" He looked at the young agent. "Not much, I would surmise by your failure to respond and even a blind man can see you haven't been eating. You have lost a significant enough amount of weight for it to be quite obvious to all and your flight or fight response is on speed dial my boy.

Shaking his head sadly, he said, “You surely realise that sleep deprivation of the degree that we are talking about is analogous with being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. I would hazard a guess that any sleep you managed to grab was not restful but subject to nightmares, based on your poor-quality sleep I’ve observed since I arrived."

He noted the alarm and guilt on the senior field agent's face and exchanged a significant look with Fornell. There was something more going on apart from the assaults. Ducky had long had his suspicions about the young agent's childhood. He patted Tony comfortingly on his blanket-clad leg.

"Don't worry my friend, you didn't let anything slip but it was obvious that you were dreaming and that they were not pleasant ones. Your secrets are safe Anthony, unless you want to share them. I would be honoured to listen because despite what your father has inculcating into your psyche as a youngster, secrets are always better shared and talking is much better than trying to repress them."

Fornell jumped in to change the subject before Ducky could push too hard,

"What Ducky is trying to say is that just because you are a bad assed Fed, DiNutzo it doesn't mean that you shouldn't expect a safe work place or that you can defend yourself from attacks by multiple assailants. That's why we don't work alone in the field. We rely on a partner to watch our back but this week all the people who should have been watching your back, let ya down, kid."

He looked at the medical examiner, hoping he would support him on this. "NCIS is gonna have to answer a lot of hard questions DiNuzto. There's gonna be IA investigations," Tony grimaced at the thought knowing that Abby and Cate were going to be in a lot of trouble, "Charges are going to be laid and there is going to be a lot of political fallout and I suspect some very long overdue changes that I hope with make it safer for people to work there, regardless of their sexual orientation."
Tony tried to lighten the mood, muttering about taking lemons and turning them into lemonade.

Tobias gave him a slight grin. "My point is that it's gonna take a while for those things to happen and while they do, it might not be easy being there in the interim. I've been authorised by the Assistant Director of the bureau to talk to you about a temporary secondment to the FBI National Taskforce for the Patchwork Killer. You've worked a couple of high profile serial killer cases in Baltimore and frankly the FBI could use your expertise right now. We've hit a brick wall."

Tony looked interested. The Patchwork killer had targeted very young male prostitutes and after killing them he would stitch a piece of skin taken from the last victim onto the epidermis of the latest victim. Speculation abounded on the background of the killer, with a medical background, someone from the fashion industry, even the sex of the killer being all being debated and hotly disputed amongst law enforcement professionals. Despite the strongly sexual component which many serial killers shared, he was still tempted by the offer Fornell was holding out to him. Getting away from NCIS and the people who had betrayed him for a while had plenty of advantages right now.

Fornell could see Tony was definitely thinking about it, so he pushed a bit harder.

"Apart from the issue of us being there to watch your six and keep ya safe, since we don't have the dirtbags that tried to kill you yet, it's not going to be easy working with Abby and Cate during the ongoing IA and any other internal investigations. Of course, you already know that if ya want it, you have a permanent place at the FBI and I'd love to have you on my team but if you decide to go back to NCIS then fine. I still think some time away while they administer an institutional enema to the whole damned agency to clear out all the crap, would make life a hell of a lot easier for you."

Tony nodded slightly, looking over at Ducky to determine his thoughts on what Fornell was proposing. The elderly medical examiner smiled a little sadly.

"Anthony, much as I will miss you if you join the task force, I too believe that a temporary change may be the best thing for you at the moment. You will hopefully feel less vulnerable in a new environment for now and Tobias is correct that while change is long overdue, the process will not be easy for many people and they may not accept the changes willingly. I think that you need both calmness and security to help you recover from this traumatic situation."

Tony nodded. Ducky made sense.

"I will always be there for you even if you are working across town for a while. I am confident that once Jethro reconciles his errors and makes his peace with you, he will be there to support you too. This Ari Haswari business has had him decidedly off kilter for quite a while now, although I'm sure I don't have to tell you that. He will not be best pleased by your absence, but when he calms down, he'll support your decision."

His emphatic declaration had Tony and Tobias exchanging amused glances that silently spoke of the ass whooping Ducky could and would deliver to his old friend if he didn't get with the program.

"Besides, dear boy, absence makes the heart grow fonder and I'm certain that you'll be much more appreciated after you return, if you decide that it is what you want to do. But you don't have to decide to do anything right now. Take a few days while you recuperate."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tobias decides it's time to poke the bear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tobias stood at the top of the basement stairs, wondering what sort reception he was going to get. Honestly for the last eight months or more, Gibbs had been even more difficult to cope with than he was normally and while he was a not exactly a pussycat on his best days, Fornell was glad he didn't have to work with him on an ongoing basis lately. He would have shot the guy months ago if he had.

The fed had a bag of Chinese takeout as a peace offering for what he was about to tell Gibbs and he also hoped he could get the silly bastard to open up about why he'd treated the kid like shit this week. He was absolutely certain there was more going on than he had revealed already. Leroy Jethro Gibbs was the ultimate human iceberg; nine tenths was hidden below the surface.

"Ya come to lecture me some more Tobias, or to gloat?"

"Yep, absolutely! I also come bearing gifts cuz at the moment if someone didn't feed you, you'd starve to death. Also came to give you a Sit Rep."

He didn't mention that he had some news to impart that definitely wouldn't go down well. He'd already checked just to make sure Gibbs had locked his Sig away upstairs before he headed down to the basement. Hopefully he didn't have a backup stashed down here. "Got any beer upstairs?"

"Few in the fridge."

"Don't bother getting up, just cuz I brought the grub, I'll run upstairs and get it. You relax, Honey." Fornell grumbled, jokingly.

A couple of minutes later, he returned with the four cold bottles he found in the fridge which was now completely empty, apart from a shrivelled up looking carrot. Heavens only knew how long it had sat in there. He decided the next time he stopped by he'd bring some staples to fill up Gibbs fridge. If Gibbs starved to death, he'd have no one to bitch to, about Diane's alimony. It wasn't as if he really liked the cantankerous taciturn bastard or anything. It was purely for selfish reasons he'd make sure Jethro ate something every once and while.

Once he' knocked the top off the bottles and handed one to Gibbs, he picked up a box of noodles with shrimp, and he settled in to eat in a somewhat companionable silence. After he'd eaten enough to take the edge of his hunger, Tobias began to speak, telling him about the case and the evidence they'd collected so far. Gibbs wanted to fault him because he wanted to be the one in control, the one to find the cowardly bastards who had hurt DiNozzo but he knew that wasn't about to happen. He had to grudgingly admit, purely to himself of course, that Fornell had done good. He desperately wanted to know about the scum who had been assaulting Tony in the shower block and in typically impatient mode he interrupted to ask about Richards, Andrews and Mendez.
Fornell rolled his eyes, used to Gibbs impatience and his lack of manners.

"So far, Andrews claims to have an alibi for the attack outside DiNutzo’s apartment. Says he was with his girlfriend watching a movie so we’re going to check out their alibi at the cinema. The other pair says they were home alone and we’re checking their associates too. Once we get the DNA results back from the crime scene we may be able to tell if any of them or others from the security staff or other NCIS employees was there. The results are due back tomorrow and I'll get a statement from DiNutzo then. He was better tonight…"

"Yeah Tobias, Ducky gave me a sit rep," Jethro replied with a touch of pique.

"Gibbs, are you pouting?"

Jethro glared at him. "Marines don't pout, Fornell."

The Fibbie chuckled, "Oh yeah you are so pouting, Gibbs."

"Fine then, what do ya expect? You're keeping me from seeing DiNizzo. He doesn't belong to you."

"Not keeping you from him Gibbs, just respecting his wishes," he spoke carefully. "Did Ducky tell you the kid's a mess?"

"Yeah said he can't sleep, having nightmares. Dropped weight in a week, no appetite and seems about ready to jump out of his skin."

Tobias chose his words carefully. "You saw the tape in the shower, Gibbs. What did you make of his reaction? I mean he stares down dirtbags with guns and knives every day, it's like he's got nerves of steel."

Gibbs nodded, "Sometimes I think he's got a death wish, he's so reckless. Certainly possesses scant regard for the sanctity of his own skin but has plenty for everyone else. So yeah, it shocked me, when he froze like that; like he was spooked, or somethin."

Fornell looked at him, "Or he was remembering something that had happened to him. I showed the tape to Ducky and he called it dissociation -separating himself off from his environment. He explained it was a way of coping with trauma. You see him do that before?"

Gibbs just shook his head. "You're saying this is related to something that happened to him before?"

Tobias looked sicken, " Maybe…It sure looked like he slipped into that state like a reflex, like he had plenty of practise and he seemed pretty deep into it… took time to come back to himself again. And it might explain why he didn't kick the crap out of them, like he was doing when they were hitting him."

Gibbs recalled what McGee had said, Well, I've seen him get hit on by guys quite a few times when we go out for drinks and he freaks out. Sort of freezes and gets this deer in the headlight expression but not the 'OMG my secret is about to come out of the closet' look but a please, please go way and leave me alone before I fall apart' sort of look.

Neither of them spoke for the longest time and then Fornell decided to broach the topic that would send Gibbs reaching for his Sig Saur.

"So anyway Jethro, I told the kid that the Assistant Director want to second him to the Patchwork Killer Taskforce. I think he's going to accept because he doesn't feel safe working at NCIS at the moment. And if what we think happened to him before did occur, it would explain why he is so
nervy, it would have brought up a heap of memories that he might not even be aware of."

If looks could kill, Tobias would have been dead before his body hit the floor as Gibbs got up and poured himself a measure of bourbon, not offering any to his erstwhile friend. Although he couldn't argue that Tony was obviously feeling unsafe at NCIS and for that he had to bear quite a large measure of responsibility, Gibbs didn't want him going over to the dark side. He knew once the FIBbies got their sticky fingers into him, he'd never get him back again. Not without one hell-of-a fight.

Tobias was shocked that Gibbs hadn't tried to disembowel him, slit his throat or at the very least, take a swing at him. Instead he seemed to be broody, an unusual sight for the FBI agent and as he watched him pour another healthy slug of rot gut that he drank, and then another, he reckoned Gibbs would soon be paralytic. Maybe now would be a good time to try and break through his perpetual stoicism and get to the bottom of his behaviour while he was introspective and more importantly, under the influence.

"Jethro, apart from the fact that as DiNutzo would say, you've been off doing your Captain Ahab impression for months now, not sleeping or eating properly, why the hell didn't you listen to him, when he came to you asking for help? Ya gotta know how desperate he had to be to actually ask for your help?"

Gibbs felt his inhibitions at a low ebb, probably helped along by the large quantity of alcohol he'd scoffed in short order, but he felt an uncharacteristic need for understanding. So somewhat shocked, he found himself confessing his hurt when he saw the photo that Cate had sent, thinking that DiNozzo didn't trust him as much as he thought he had. But at the same time feeling relieved because if Tony was gay, then he didn't need to feel that he'd broken up Tony's impending marriage.

How he'd been stupid enough to listen to scuttlebutt about Tony having a crush on him, ignoring Tobias' guffaw of laughter and shooting him an evil glare. And although he wouldn't admit it to him, while it sounded perfectly logical at the time, it now sounded ridiculous when he said it out loud. He also confessed that he was angry at him for being dumb-assed enough to pose for such a dangerously provocative photo. That by being angry with him; he didn't have to feel so bad about not being able to delete it like he'd intended.

"Go to bed tonight and sleep for a change. Eat regular meals. Get your shit together; clean up the mess at work. I shouldn't have to tell you that determination, focus and drive to solve a case or track down a dirtbag terrorist, is vital for an investigator but blinding obsession to the detriment of all else is dangerous.” He stared hard at Gibbs.

“You’ve lost your perspective Jethro, and your team is in danger of imploding. Drop the obsession with Ari. He’s already won if he destroys everything you value, even if you do catch him."

He saw the stubborn expression and tried again. "He's got'tcha breaking your own rules left and right. Rule 1 got broken big time when you stopped looking out for Tony and you forgot about rule 8 too when you took that photo for granted, you should have double checked if the picture was genuine or not. And Ari has you breaking rules to do with his case too, what about Rule 10 never getting personally involved on a case? Plus, don't forget about Rule 11 as well, when the jobs done, walk away and for now it is done, so damn it Jethro, walk away! Look after your team and regroup. You're a Marine, you understand the necessity of a tactical retreat in war and if you're right about him, then this is war."

Tobias walked over and screwed on the top of the bottle of Jack and put it back on the upper shelf. "After you've gotten a good night's sleep, figure out what you're wanna say to the kid. You betrayed his trust and if you want it back, you hafta earn it the hard way. I know you never cared enough for
your ex-wives to fight for them, but you're going to have to fight for him if you have any hope of getting him back again. And before you punch my lights out, that ain't a comment on your masculinity Gibbs, it's an observation about how much more important Tony's come to be than any of your exes ever did in watching your six, on the job and off. I don't even what to imagine what ya going to be like without him around to keep you on track."

He ignored the scowl that was directed at him when he reminded him that Tony wasn't going to be around and continued doling out advice which he hoped Jethro would at least thinking about.

"When you're ready to start mending what you broke, let me know and I'll talk to him about you getting two together. If he's up for it, I'll be your envoy and argue for you. He's going to go home and stay with Ducky and Mrs Mallard in a few days. Safer there until we catch that pack of sick bastards who attacked him, and he can't go home on his own initially for medical reasons."

"Safer here with me Tobias. I can protect him, Ducky can't."

"Well obviously, he'll still be under FBI protective custody until we find the sickos that tried to kill him when he is staying with the Mallards, Gibbs."

Gibbs set his jaw stubbornly. "Don't care! He's still safer with me watching his six than Ducky."

Tobias rolled his eyes knowing that this was always going to be an issue. "That may well be, but the truth is he doesn't feel safe with you anymore, so that isn't going to help him recover. If what we suspect did happen, then he's really gonna need to feel safe but he also needs to have control. Forcing him to come here so that you feel better, isn't gonna help him heal."

Seeing Gibbs looked unconvinced he added the clincher. 

Besides Ducky will be able to make sure he's healing properly if he's staying with him. Hopefully he might talk to him too."

Gibbs growled. "Ya can snarl at me all you like, Jethro. I'm not scared of you, never have been; bastard too, remember? The ball's in your court now; with all the rules you've broke lately, I can't see why it's such a big deal to break one more. Just tell him you were a damn fool and you're sorry. Don't forget your precious Rule 5; you're wasting good if your pride gets in the way of admitting you were wrong. It's up to you."

Fornell stood up, stiff from perching on the wooden sawhorse and headed up the stairs. 

"No more rotgut Gibbs. Go to bed and sleep on it. I'll call and give you a sit rep tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

Just a recap of The Rules mentioned in this chapter:

Rule 1: Never screw over your partner

Rule 5: Don't waste good

Rule 6: Never apologise, it's a sign of weakness
Rule 8: Never take anything for granted

Rule 10: Never get personally involved on a case

Rule 11: When the job's done, walk away.
Chapter Summary

Abby gets taken to task as Gibbs starts the long and extremely painful process of extracting his head from his ass.

Gibbs was up at his usual early hour after taking Fornell's advice even though it was Saturday and the team was off rotation this weekend. He'd even slept in his bed last night, instead of the couch or at his desk for the first time in many months. Granted, he was so wound up after the tense discussion he and Tobias had had in the basement, he'd reached for the Jack and poured another healthy measure, but something stopped him actually drinking it. He knew that Tobias was right. Drinking would just allow him to wallow in a mire of self-indulgent pity and let him blame every man and his dog for this mess instead of stepping up and owning his own contribution. So regretfully, he'd poured the Jack down the sink and changed into his running gear and gone out for a punishing run instead, running until his body and mind longed for the oblivion of sleep.

This morning he'd woken feeling a heap better for actually getting some good quality sleep. The first time in such a long while, he couldn't even remember the last time he'd actually manage five full hours without interruption. Now that he had three cups of coffee in him, he felt half human and realised that he'd pretty much forgotten what normal felt like. He guessed Tobias was right and he had been running himself into the ground, physically and mentally. How else could he have really believed that Tony was gay and never picked up on it in almost four years they'd been together?

Sure, when he'd seen the photo, which normally he would have checked out to ensure it was genuine; he had jumped to conclusions because of his damned stupid pride. He'd always seen himself as the one person who saw through DiNozzo's act. When confronted by such a monumental secret he felt stupid to think that maybe he'd been fooled into seeing their partnership as being more than a working one. Yet ultimately, there'd always been this nagging certainty that Tony was hiding something from him, from them all.

When confronted by 'that' picture, in his distracted and exhausted state, Jethro had just assumed that that was what he'd been hiding. Now in light of the discussion with Tobias plus Ducky's insight into DiNozzo's weird behaviour, it looked as if what his SFA had been hiding was something much, much darker. That his freezing the way he had done; signified something horrific in his past which he'd desperately tried to hide. Gibbs gut told him that this was the secret that Tony had been guarding so desperately. The one he never wanted anyone, not even his partner to know.

Gibbs wondered if it had happened when he was a kid or when he was older. Somehow, when he spoke about his childhood, which wasn't frequently, Gibbs thought that there was something strange about his parents. He'd always had suspicious that Tony had been physically abused by his father although DiNozzo always swore up hill and down dale that his father never laid a hand on him - that he was always too drunk. But that never sat right with Gibbs. His Rule 7 - always be specific when you lie, was one rule that he never needed to teach his protégé, DiNozzo had it down pat long before joining the team.

In fact, DiNozzo had a heap of rules regarding lying that were part of his undercover success. Gibbs
had often wondered why he had so many rules about lying. Was his success working undercover simply a transferable skill that he'd applied from early childhood. He couldn't help speculating about whether Anthony DiNozzo Senior had used something other than his hand to hit his son with, like a belt or a stick or worse. Now in light of what he knew, Jethro had to wonder if he'd molested him instead.

Deciding to do some laundry and some other simple housekeeping, which he hadn't been able to focus on for the last week, he thought he'd take Tobias' advice. He’d get himself in hand and do the mundane but necessary stuff like going to the grocery store and buying some food. It was getting too damned embarrassing when a Fibbie was bringing him food to make sure he didn't starve. Next thing you know, Tobias would be telling everyone that he needed help wiping his ass, if he knew the bastard. He might be a friend sort of, but he’d never hesitate to get one up on Gibbs, if possible.

After he finished one load of laundry and put in a second load with all the linens and towels, he decided to clean out and defrost the fridge, well clean the fridge, as there was nothing but a lonely shrivelled up carrot that he didn't remember buying. Probably needed carbon dating. Feeling a simple sense of accomplishment at the sparkling clean fridge and freezer compartment just waiting for some actual food to fill it, he decided that he'd clean the stovetop too. He lost himself in the mindless activity of scrubbing and it wasn't til he smelt an alluring scent of freshly baked bagels, he became aware that Ducky had entered the house. He was shocked that he could be so unaware of his environment and the Marine felt really pissed at himself.

He was definitely operating below par, even with the five hours sleep under his belt but at least not being aware that Ducky had entered his house armed with breakfast, was not a serious breach of security in itself. Yet it was a serious indication that he'd become distracted and way too focused upon a single entity and that he needed to get a grip and start paying attention to his body. As lapses went, letting an elderly medical examiner creep up on him, paled into insignificance in relation to the amount of rules he broken in the last weeks and months. As they sat down to breakfast together, Ducky looked across at him searchingly.

"I must say Jethro; you look a lot better rested than I expected you to. In fact, I haven't seen you look so collected for a long time. I half expected you to have crawled into a bottle of bourbon in your basement or stormed Bethesda in an attempt to find young Anthony."

"I nearly did but Fornell kicked my butt and told me to get my ass into gear, so I went for a run and managed five hours sleep instead. Tobias also told me what you said about DiNozzo disassociating. He thinks that Tony was molested sometime in the past."

Ducky looked grave, "It is quite possible, Jethro. The lad has certainly been hiding something, as we both know. He is rather a basket case at the moment. Tobias didn't enlighten him yet about the perverted intentions of his attackers. He's extremely anxious as it is, so we thought it better to wait until he had to."

Gibbs grimaced. "Yeah that's what I thought too, Ducky. How did this end up such a mess? Why did this have to happen to him of all people?"

"You know Jethro; I asked myself the very same question yesterday after you left. When I finally cooled down enough I went to see young Abigail to see what she had to say for herself, since she was sobbing insconsolably during the whole interlude when you were dressing them down. I was hoping for some sort a reason for her behaving so disgracefully."

Gibbs looked at him with the eyes of a pained parent. "Did she have a reason Duck?"

His eyes were equally desolate. "Yes, Jethro quite a few but none that could excuse her actions, I'm
afraid."

~Flashback yesterday afternoon~

Ducky found himself obsessing over Abigail Sciuto who was one of the smartest people he knew, and he had known a lot of smart people in his lifetime. He didn't understand how she could do something so stupid but moreover how she could do something that could cause someone she professed to care about, so much harm. It didn't make any sense and with all her ridiculous caterwauling earlier, she hadn't been predisposed to talk about her motivations but Ducky was nothing if not insatiably curious.

He decided to investigate when he had some down time and track her down in her lab. A part of him still wanted to take her a Caf-Pow; it was such an ingrained habit for the men on the team to cater to her every whim and he was no better. He knew though that he shouldn't be rewarding her bad behaviour, so he went in empty handed, even though a caffeine deprived Goth lab rat was a scary thought. Almost as much as Gibbs and no coffee.

When he approached the lab he immediately noted the silence, which was bizarre because he couldn't remember the lab ever being without music before except for the time when Chris Pacci had been killed. Entering the lab had been eerie then and it was definitely eerie now. He went in and found a very chastened forensic scientist, in keeping with the overall subdued atmosphere in the lab. Contrary to the norm, where every man and their dog could sneak up on Abby, this time she heard his footsteps and lifted still tear wet, pale green eyes to scan his face.

"Come to get an answer Ducky?"

He was perplexed. "An answer, Abigail?"

"You asked me earlier who I was crying for. So I've tried to figure it out. I was crying for me, because I felt so bad about what I'd done, but also because Gibbs was so mad at me. Madder than he's ever been at me before and also crying for Tony because he nearly died, and I felt guilty that I was responsible. Except that means that I was mostly feeling bad about Tony, though doesn't it? Because of me and what I did, which almost got him killed which made me feel bad, so really I was feeling bad for me. I wasn't feeling bad for him and that was just so selfish so I'm trying hard not to feel bad for me but to feel bad for Tony, if that makes sense. Does that answer your question Ducky?"

"Er well perhaps Abigail but I am still curious. Why didn't you come to Gibbs or myself and 'fess up when it first happened, before all this unpleasantness? It looks much worse than if you'd told the truth. Not to mention you could have saved Anthony a great deal of pain. It would have been the right thing to do, especially for a good friend."

"It was never supposed to get so out of hand, not supposed to go out to the whole building Ducky. I never thought it would go so far."

Ducky shook his head. "That was rather naïve, my dear since the whole point of that grubby piece of trash was to threaten to reveal it to everyone, in order to control Anthony. I don't think that you could honestly believe that. What was the real reason, Abigail?"

Abby sighed, Ducky was in no mood to let her get away with crap. "Because I've always been Gibbs favourite, alright Ducky, but I knew that he would be mad at me, really, really mad. Ever since that monster Ari shot him, he's been so angry all the time and he never goes home or eats properly. He even gets annoyed with me and he never used to.
“He Gibbs’ slaps Tony really, really hard sometimes and I was scared that if he found out what I'd done, I wouldn't be Gibbs' favourite any more. Now that he's got Cate and McGee, everything has changed. He used to spend time with me but all he cares about now is staring at that stupid picture of Ari every moment he can, even now that he knows who he is.”

Ducky nodded; he could also relate to Abby's frustration with Jethro’ all-encompassing obsession about Ari Haswari. He had been nagging Gibbs for months to stop wallowing in guilt and anger and focus on the present. Goodness knows, Gerard had been his assistant and had been grievously wounded but Jethro was behaving as if he'd been personally emasculated and he wondered why it had become so incredibly personal between the pair when Jethro and Ari had barely spent any time together. Certainly, there were matters that demanded his attention to do with team dynamics, which he was ignoring in favour of his current obsession.

Looking back in hindsight, Gibbs had gone from being partners with Anthony as a two-man team to doubling the members of his team in the space of a year, adding Caitlin then Timothy but he wasn't focused on the team or its dynamics, lately. Even though Abby was thrilled to have another female, she was also jealous that Cate might usurp her affections with Jethro as well. It was a case of sibling rivalry that fed Gibbs ego as they competed for his attention. Likewise, Timothy was constantly shoving his degrees in everybody’s faces to shore up his insecurity and Abigail was probably feeling like a jealous elder sibling having to compete with the novelty of a new super smart baby brother. She certainly complained frequently about him bragging about his qualifications.

Meanwhile, Tony was doing all the paper work required of his position as senior field agent and trying to train the two probie investigators as Gibbs didn't have the patience yet he was getting nothing but disrespect from them in return. Partly because they both thought they were great investigators but also because the mutually respectful rapport Tony had enjoyed with Jethro had disappeared with the arrival of the two newbies. Now Jethro treated him more like a probie than trusted partner, forcing him to compete alongside the two newbies for acknowledgement. In the old days he used to call Anthony by his Christian name but since the team expanded it was all DiNozzo and head slaps.

Ducky was sure that Anthony felt unsettled by the changes too. Yes, technically he outranked the junior agents’ as the senior field agent, but it didn't translate to appropriate treatment or respect, by anyone else on the team. Perhaps if Gibbs had concentrated more on building his new team than tilting at windmills, he might have been able to nip this whole sordid affair in the bud.

Damn the man, as a Marine gunnery sergeant, he knew all the tricks to motivate his agents to want to work for him and get the job done yet he'd forgotten that a team is never created equal and must have followers and leaders. He knew full well that there were good reasons for the chain of command and not just having one Gunny and a bunch of grunts. Yet by not creating the necessary distance between Anthony and the juniors, they felt they had a right to behave as if they had equal status to the experience agent.

The medical examiner knew damned well that Gibbs would never allow an environment where his subordinates would try and torture him with such a piece of filth, yet he'd tacitly encouraged a situation to develop where Cate and Abby felt safe to behave in such an outrageous fashion.

"…and I just figured that Tony would suck it up. After all, he's always super- gluing Timmy's keyboard. He couldn't whine when we played a prank too. I truly thought it would all go away in a day or two and Tony always forgives me but when I tried to apologise to him he wouldn't forgive me. He yelled at me and wouldn't accept my apology. He demanded that I tell everyone it was all a sick joke." She was crying again and stamped her foot in frustration.
Ducky considered the enigma that was Abigail Sciuto. Abby was quite a sunny lass for a Goth but for all her brilliance she could be quite immature at times, especially when she didn't get her own way. Did she really not see the difference between super-gluing a keyboard and destroying a man's reputation? Dear Lord, Jethro was not doing her any favours by over-indulging her.

"Well I'm happy that he didn't forgive you and you shouldn't be surprised either. How many times have you had people discriminate against you on the basis of your appearance or make hurtful comments about the way you dress, my dear? You know quite well how cruel people can be, but it IS your choice to be a Goth and act and represent yourself the way you do. Anthony wasn't given that choice and you made him out to be something he's not. It's not as if you haven't heard the odd homophobic comment about him, his looks and designer clothes to know that the homophobic types here would be just waiting for evidence that he was homosexual. I don't see why you would choose to humiliate him in such a cruel fashion."

"But Ducky, he was torturing Cate with that picture and we wanted to teach him a lesson."

Ducky clucked disapprovingly. "I think perhaps you should be a little more circumspect with your choice of words, my girl. What Anthony endured was far closer to torture than a mild degree of embarrassment that Caitlyn was subject to but nevertheless, you certainly achieved your aim, Abigail. Anthony has learnt a lot of lessons this week courtesy of his team mates and fellow workers."

Ducky started ticking things off, "That people he trusted cannot be trusted. That someone who professed to be his best friend betrayed him and his team did not have his six. Not one of them. That people he worked with would harm him for absolutely no logical reason, so if that was your aim then you should be proud of what you achieved, Abigail." He was not going to soft soap her behaviour or to allow her to rationalise what she'd done either.

"But just remember, that photo of Cate might have been a source of embarrassment for her but she made the choice to pose for it. No one forced her into taking part of that foolish competition, but thousands of young women do it all the time. If she wasn't so holier than thou about her brand of rather militant in-your-face-feminism, she would realise that nobody would have thought any worse of her over that photo if she hadn't made such a fuss over the foolish pastime."

Ducky shook his head at Abigail's pigheadedness. How could someone so brilliant be so obtuse?

"But there is a big difference between that picture and manufacturing a photo to deliberatively damage someone's reputation and livelihood. Not to mention that it endangered his life. " He shook his head in disgust and looked at the black pigtails that were shaking again as she started crying softly.

"And don't forget that she actually started the whole thing by revealing private information about Anthony that she had gained access to by some rather grubby methods because she wanted to get a reaction of him. Caitlin was far from innocent in her own predicament, my dear child." He told her sternly.

“And I'm afraid you are complicit too and must accept the consequences. It may well be that it has cost you the friendship of a stalwart and loyal young man and your job and reputation although I would hope that that would be a secondary concern. I hope it was worth it."

~End of flashback~

Gibbs stared at his friend. "Do you really think that the team dynamic contributed to this FUBAR mess Duck?"
"Honestly Jethro, if you had had your head on straight and were more attuned to what was going on, I'd hope you would have treated Anthony with more respect. If Caitlin and Timothy did not view themselves as his equals which we both know they are not in terms of rank, skills, experience or innate talent as an investigator, they probably wouldn't dare to do half the things you let them get away with, my friend."

He got up from the table and poured another cup of tea for himself and another of coffee for Gibbs. "I still find it incomprehensible that Abigail would contemplate aiding and abetting such a reprehensible act. I thought of all people, she would see the inherent wrongness in what they did. Yet even now, I fear she still does not fully accept the enormity of what she and Cate did. Do you think that they will be fired Jethro?"

"Not if Morrow has anything to say about it Duck. I never realised it until now, but the man takes homophobia to Everest-like proportions. His attitude sickens me and makes me feel dirty just being in the same room. When DiNozzo went to him for help, he tried to get him to leave, offered him a reference if he left quietly. I hope that he told Morrow where he could shove it."

Ducky was curious about why Jethro had refused to listen to Anthony when he had turned to him for help. "And what was your excuse my boy? You said yesterday that Anthony came to you for help and you turned him away. Why would you think he would make something like that up, he would rather cut off his right arm than admit to you of all people, that he wasn't fine?"

"I didn't disbelieve him Duck, well I guess I did when he told me about the photo, but I didn't give him a chance to tell me about the harassment and assaults - so I didn't actually disbelieve him about the assaults. I would have believed him if I had bothered to listen. I was frightened that he was going to tell me something else that I didn't want to hear, so I didn't let him speak to me."

The Marine sat hunched over his coffee, his head in his hands waiting for his old friend to ask but there was only silence. He finally couldn't bear the silence anymore and lifted his head to find the sad gaze of his friend upon him.

"I listened to trash and the filth that they spewed Duck, about how DiNozzo was desperately in love with me and I thought that was why he'd never told me he was gay. And I was scared that he was gonna confess his feelings for me and then I'd hafta break the kid's heart. I was kinda glad in one way that he was gay, cuz then Wendy breaking his heart wasn't my fault because I offered him a job in DC but cuz she found out she liked men."

Duck snorted in disbelief and muttered something about offered him a job, his arse, more like wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Anyway, even if I was happy to think I wasn't the cause of their breakup, I was pissed he'd kept it secret from me. That he'd managed to fool *me* and I felt like I'd lost face. Part of me didn't want to hurt him, 'nother part was so damn pissed at him for making me look stupid. Couldn't believe he'd been so dumb to pose for such a blatantly camp photo after hiding so successfully in the closet.

He paused, and the ME remain silent. Too much chatter would irritate the taciturn Marine.

“So, I yelled at him. Wouldn't listen. No wonder he doesn't want to see me. I can't blame him; now he's alone and it's my fault."

He scrubbed his face with his hands before staring at his old friend with a remorseful expression. "Almost four years I've been trying to convince him he could trust me and now I've blown it."

"Oh Jethro, where was that eponymous gut when you needed it, when Anthony needed it? How in
the world could you believe that he was in love with you? Anthony loves you, but IN love with you romantically? It isn't like you to be influenced by gossip, Jethro especially when it comes from bigots and imbeciles. And if you were going to be influenced by others, such a shame you didn't listen to myself and Anthony who were counselling you stop obsessing upon Haswari. I believe he likened your quest to Melville's classic 'Moby Dick' and that seems to be sadly apt."

Gibbs, though kicking himself for his tunnel vision was getting exasperated with the constant references to a damn whale. First DiNozzo when Cate went missing, then Fornell and now Duck.

"What the hell's so important about a stupid book, Duck?"

"Surely you read it when you were at school, Jethro?" He saw the nod but also the perplexed expression on his friend's face but decided not to explain. "No mind, come to Reston House tonight and have dinner with Mother and I. We'll watch the movie afterwards." He could see that Gibbs was going to refuse. He wasn't the most sociable of individuals after all, so the medical examiner decided to sweeten the pot.

"I can give you a Sit Rep on young Anthony's condition and you can also check out the security arrangements for when he leaves the hospital."
Tony woke up from the light doze that he was permitting himself because he didn't feel safe enough to fall into anything that resembled proper sleep. It was something that he engaged in while working undercover when he had no one able to watch his back and this was certainly a situation where he couldn't let his guard down either. Despite the fact that Fornell had arranged protective custody, he was still feeling incredibly vulnerable. They wouldn't permit him to keep his gun in Bethesda and he didn't have his knife.

He'd filched a knife and fork from his breakfast tray and had stowed them under his pillow, giving him a small modicum of reassurance. As he had laid here catnapping he'd been dreaming… well perhaps more of a daydream about the last time he'd been in hospital. He'd been whacked over the head by a dirtbag with a lump of hardwood - a 2 x 4 to be exact and ended up unconscious for almost eighteen hours. When he finally regained consciousness, his room had been filled to overflowing with his team and Abby had been petting his hand as he fought through his disorientation at finding himself in an unfamiliar environment.

He pushed aside the memory. It was too painful to contrast between then and now. Once again, the Goddess Fate had flipped him the bird as she stepped up to teach him that he could never afford to get close to anyone. That it was just asking to get his heart busted wide open so everyone he thought had his six could take turns in doing the 'stomp' on it. Much safer to let everyone think he didn't have one and push them aside by being an obnoxious pain in the butt.

Lost in thought he almost didn't notice the door of his room opening but even so, he reached automatically under the pillow and emerged with the knife as Ducky walked through the door.

"Goodness me dear boy, I didn't mean to startle you. How are you feeling today?"

Tony placed the knife back under his pillow, a detail that didn't go unnoticed by the medical examiner, who also noted that he looked very pale and tired.

"Fine Ducky, when can I get out of here?"

"Your surgeon wants to keep you under observation for a further day or so to ensure that the repair
to the hepatic tear is holding, Anthony. The risk of bleeding with the liver is significant and he is concerned that you were somewhat anaemic before the injury. You haven't been looking after yourself.”

Sitting down on the ugly vinyl hospital chair, he said, “I'm going to prescribe you some vitamins and we will devise an iron rich diet to help you recover your strength when you are staying with us. I do hope that Mother's corgis would disturb you. They do tend to bark at the drop of a hat.”

"Actually, the idea of having eight early warning systems, sounds incredibly reassuring. I might even be able to sleep knowing that they are on the job."

"Well candidly my boy, it would be gratifying to think that they were serving a purpose apart from eating and defecating. Actually, they are admirable companions for my mother, but they do tend to be rather yappy. I understand the Cardigans are meller in temperament. If only mother's namesake Queen Victoria had preferred the tailed variety."

He trailed off looking closely at Tony and observing the tell-tale signs of pain around his mouth and eyes. He stood up and went to study the medical file hanging on the end of the bed and frowned exasperated.

"My word! No wonder you're in pain Anthony. You were due for analgesia more than three hours ago and refused it. Pain can interfere with wound healing and depress the immune system and the fact that you no longer have a spleen means you need to be especially careful about protecting your immune system." He scolded gently, "I insist that you take your meds so you can recover fully."

Tony adopted his stubborn look. "They knock me out Ducky and I need to stay alert. I can't afford to let my guard down in here. When I was a cop I discovered that a hospital can be a dangerous place for a vulnerable person. It isn't just opportunistic infections that strike in hospitals, its criminals and there are just too many strangers hanging around a hospital ward."

"So I take it that is the reason for arming yourself with cutlery? You have several competent federal agents protecting you, my boy." He noticed Tony's nervousness, understanding his difficulty in trusting anyone at this point. "Would you take them if I stay here and make sure that no one who isn't supposed to be here gets past your sentry while you sleep off the effects of the pain meds? The quicker you recover from your surgery, the sooner you can get out of here, you know."

"I can't ask you to do that Ducky. You have to look after your mother."

"Well you didn't ask Anthony, I offered. Mother is off with her nurse companion for a visit to a day spa. They were planning on having a mud wrap." He grimaced at the thought. "Ludicrous that she will pay good money to do what she used to tan my backside for playing in, when I was a little nipper. I understand that you can also have some sort of massage involving hot rocks being plonked upon your body and people actually pay for it. I do believe people are become more foolish every day Anthony although it seems to amuse Mother."

"I shouldn't have to have you sitting here watching me sleep, Ducky. I'm fine," Tony protested uncomfortable accepting help. It made him feel weak which he was.

"Please Anthony? Consider it a favour. It will make me sleep easier tonight, my boy if I'm not so worried about you."

~Betrayals~

Ducky watched over his sleeping charge. Anthony having agreed to take a dose of pain medication,
was currently sleeping off the effects which always affected him making him reluctant to use them. He knew he hadn't played fair because Anthony cared about his friends' comfort and well-being - usually a lot more than he did for his own. But although he did feel bad for taking advantage of Anthony's propensity to feel responsible for other people, his inner physician felt happier that Anthony wasn't trying to fight through his post-operative pain. He knew that this was going to be an on-going battle though.

Ducky knew as Anthony's personal physician he could have insisted, and he would have finally capitulated and taken the analgesia, but he felt it was important to empower the young man, who was obviously feeling powerless and feeble at the moment. Giving him choices, just as he had offered his home as a sanctuary for his recovery was also an important part of Anthony dealing with the psychological damage that had been caused as a result of that dreadful photograph. Taking back control would help him to rebuild his life and he was grateful that Tobias had offered him alternatives to returning to the MCRT last night. Choices were an important part of him feeling that he had control and that was healing.

Hopefully Tobias had some good news to share with him once he woke up from his drug induced sleep. He had sent Ducky a text to say they had a break in the case and would stop by later on with a sit rep. He knew that the FBI been waiting on some DNA results that had been pending, so with a little luck they would be able to arrest the sick individuals who had hurt the senior field agent and then Anthony could begin to put this miserable mess behind him.

He pulled out the book he had brought with him from home this morning. He settled down to read, happy that his young friend was getting some much-needed rest although it didn't last long. He glanced at Tony as he muttered, distressed and probably dreaming of some disturbing incident so he laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder to ground him and murmured platitudes softly in his ear.

What a mess it was. Anthony was isolated and anxious, his trust which had slowly been burgeoning in the team since arriving from Baltimore more than three years ago, was lying in tatters. And frankly, who could blame him? He had always reminded Ducky of a wild colt, wanting to trust people and accept the offered kindness and hospitality but shying away before he could take that final step to accept food.

Despite his adroitness in social situations and his ability to put people at ease, he always tended to keep others at a safe distance from himself. Yet at the same time managing to effortlessly inveigle his way into people's hearts such as his, Jethro's and it would seem Tobias too. Never trusting anyone enough to let them see his vulnerabilities, he showed the world a carefully crafted concoction of cockiness that prevented anyone from getting too close.

Although when he'd first come to DC he had been less guarded but then that was before his fiancé had left him on the eve of their marriage and he had become wary of even those individuals who had been gaining his trust. Ducky recalled how he had finally bounced back from the aborted wedding and morphed into the devil may care, playboy jock which was all most people saw when they looked at him, including his psychological profiler partner. Abby though, should have known better, she *did* know better having known him from before his new and improved frat boy guise which seemed to make her transgression all the more shocking. He was disappointed that she hadn't expressed concern for Tony's condition, at least Caitlin had inquired about him yesterday when she'd come to see him, seeking he believed his absolution, albeit like her concern, it was far too late for either.

~flashback~

Ducky was finishing up the autopsy report for PO 1st class Suzanna Clausen, her death had initially
been thought to be suspicious until Ducky had ruled it an accidental death due to an aortic aneurysm. Once he'd dotted all the I's and crossed his T's, he called Jack Stevenson the SFA for Balboa's team to let him know that the report was ready, hanging up the phone he was a little surprised to see that he was no longer alone. Caitlin Todd stood uncertainly looking him up and down, evidently unsure of her welcome under the circumstances.

Ducky looked into her dark brown eyes which seemed to be conflicted and gave a nod. "Did you wish to speak to me about a case, Caitlin? No? Then what can I do for you, then?"

"I want to know if you really think that I had an ulterior motive Ducky and wanted to get rid of Tony?" she looked at him with reproachful, wounded eyes.

"Well my dear, I'm fear I am willing to give it serious consideration after learning what you did. I wouldn't have said so yesterday but then again, I would never have imagined that you would have hatched a foul plot to hurt Anthony either. Even if you didn't actively plan it that way I have to wonder, if when it did get so out of hand, did you then see a way to seize Anthony's job? You didn't get to be one of George W. Bush's personal body guards without being ambitious, as well as being good at your job. You also make no bones about the fact that you think you are Anthony's equal as an agent and investigator."

"No of course I didn't Ducky, I just never realised how homophobic agents are at NCIS. The Secret Service is much more accepting."

"Is it my dear or were you just as clueless about attitudes to homosexuality when you worked there as you have been in the last eighteen months here? Not a particularly good look in a profiler, is it to be so clueless. Perhaps you are simply in denial, my dear."

Cate looked at Ducky closely. He was usually much more circumspect, but he seemed to have taken this issue to heart, even when taking into account his fondness for DiNozzo. She sighed, "Maybe you're right Ducky, I guess I should have been more aware and it isn't a great excuse. I suppose I thought that Tony would just laugh it off."

"Caitlin, don't you think that is a rather pathetic excuse to offer up? Surely you wouldn't have bothered to set up the photo if you hadn't truly thought that it would bother Anthony. Why else have you been teasing him about the other incidents with the transsexual Commander Voss?"

He looked disappointed. "I must say that I have always had a soft spot for you, My Dear but this behaviour has definitely made me lose respect for you, probably because I can find myself identifying with what Anthony has had to deal with. Well obviously, not the threatening and assault of course."

Cate looked sharply at the medical examiner, wondering what he was going to confess.

"You think I don't hear the insinuations, gossip, and the suggestive looks at my expense over the decades. A man of my years, who still resides with his mother and has never married or the fact that I tend to dress in a slightly eccentric manner all are fodder for jokes about my own sexuality, Caitlin. I made a conscious decision many years ago not to wear my heart on my sleeve and broadcast my personal tragedy makes me a target for the homophobes. The fact is that my young bride and our unborn son died during childbirth almost 45 years ago" His voice quavered a little.

"Oh, I haven’t been targeted physically, more like being the object of derision and scorn. You think I haven’t heard the scuttlebutt from some quarters that my autopsy assistants are chosen for their physical assets and gender rather than their credentials for the job."
He looked over at her briefly before resuming his melancholy musing. "I can easily understand how
the bigoted ignoramuses could look at Anthony with his looks and his focus on grooming and jump
to stereotypic conclusions." Scowling uncharacteristically, he observed, "Especially with that blasted
photo out there like an albatross around his neck. Like me, he refused to wear his heart on his sleeve
and therefore few people here know how devastated he was when his fiancé left him at the altar but
then again he is very private person."

Ducky noticed her surprise. "I should not have let my tongue run away from me like that Caitlin and
I would appreciate your discretion, but you surely didn't buy Anthony's playboy act did you? It is
just a reaction to having his heart badly broken, not too long ago. I hope you won't let me down and
reveal that I told you."

Cate shook her head. "I guess my behaviour this last week hasn't exactly assured you that I will
respect your confidence... but I solemnly swear to God that I will Ducky." She had picked up her
silver cross as she vowed. "I'm can't believe that I never picked up his womanising as being a
defence mechanism. Considering my speciality as a psychological profiler, that is extremely
embarrassing."

"Well many people have tried to suss Anthony out and have failed spectacularly, young Caitlin. He
is a remedy against one getting too cocky and you should never underestimate him."

Cate could see the questions that remained unanswered in the gentle blue eyes of the dapper Scot.
She knew it was probably going to be tough ones but maybe if she was honest with him, he might
give her details about Tony and keep her in the loop.

"Go on Ducky, you have something you want to say,"

"Well I don't understand how you could do what you did. Even if every man and his dog had seen
your photograph, it wouldn't have jeopardised your career nor would anyone have ever physically
threatened you or your life because of it, so I can't excuse your behaviour. Not to mention that you
poked the bear Caitlin. You were very cognizant of what you were doing. I wonder if there is more
to the pledge name than we know. Did his fraternity brother reveal anything more about it?"

He looked at her searchingly as she coloured with embarrassment. "Steve might have mentioned that
he didn't like it," she answered grudgingly.

He shook his head in disgust. Well what I would like to know is after working as an investigator on
Gibbs' team, you know very well that the truth will out in the end. Even if you didn't send out the
photo to everybody, you were culpable for it being circulated, so why didn't you step up
immediately? Admit it was a sick practical joke although I'm not sure that it qualifies as such."

Cate sighed, wishing he didn't have such a knack of getting straight to the heart of the matter. For
someone who waffled on about every subject possible, he had an unfortunate habit of also being able
to cut straight to the chase when it suited.

"But I tried to tell Gibbs." She objected strenuously. "He kept telling me to shut up Ducky and then
sending me out to do every disgusting job he could think of. He made me shampoo the tyres on the
truck for Pete's sake and clean dog crap off everyone's boots. How was I supposed to own up when
he wouldn't listen to me?"

"Not exactly a terribly convincing argument and definitely one beneath your intellect. You could
have sent him an email, written a report and left it on his desk. Even better you could have sent
around an interoffice memo announcing an Alan Funt type 'gotcha' that would have extricated young
Anthony from the unforgivable mess you’d created but you chose to stay silent. So, what was the
real reason you didn't try too hard?"

"Wow Ducky, you don't mince words do you? But I guess I can't really argue with you when you put it like that.

"What was the real reason then, Caitlin?"

"I think I was scared since I already have one black mark against my name even before Gibbs hired me after having to leave the Secret Service for conduct unbecoming. I wasn't sure that I could survive two such lapses in judgement and keep my job. I did try to talk to him but he's been so obsessive and so scarily angry because of Ari. He's still furious with me ever since I confessed to him that I could have stabbed him but hesitated when I had the chance, because of his eyes even though I turned out to be right about him. I guess I didn't want to make him even angrier at me or worse to disappoint him again."

Cate contemplated the autopsy ceiling before continuing. "I give DiNozzo a hard time about acting like a puppy dog trying to please his master at every turn, but damn it, I'm no better. I have a great relationship with my father, I was his baby girl and I see him pretty frequently so it's not as if I have 'daddy' issues or anything. Yet it's like Gibbs has this Messiah-like complex working for him and we all trip over our feet trying to impress him and curry favour and it's not healthy. Teamwork should be about more than one-upping each other."

Both of them were for silent for several minutes, as they contemplated the shambolic situation that she and Abby had created and wondered if anything could be salvaged.

"Will Tony be okay, Ducky?"

The medical examiner looked very defeated and tired as he answered. "Honestly Caitlin, I'm not sure if he will be."
CHAPTER 10

Chapter Summary

Fornell has some important information about who was responsible for the attack on Tony.

Several hours later Ducky heard a knock on the door and placed his book down on the bed, knowing that the FBI agent on guard wouldn't let anyone in without permission. Sure enough, Tobias entered the room looking highly agitated. He looked at the supposedly sleeping form and raised an eyebrow questioningly at the elder ME.

"Not asleep Fornell, just meditating, Tony quipped without opening his eyes.

"Good to know, DiNozzo, good to know. I always thought that you could do with more meditation. Let me know when you're done. We'll talk." Fornell replied, playing along.

"Already have Tobias, what do you got?" His forehead wrinkled in pain at the familiar words that were usually a prelude to a serving of verbal diarrhoea accompanying any forensic report by Abby.

Unsure of what had caused the dark expression to cross his features, Fornell grabbed the free metal framed plastic moulded chair with his foot and pulled it close. Sitting down, he pulled out a collection of photos which he handed over to the NCIS agent.

"You recognise any of them, DiNutzo?"

Tony looked at each photo carefully before moving on to the next one. He pulled out one. "I didn't see who attacked me, but I think I've seen this guy before. I just can't remember where. Who are they?"

Fornell tapped the photo he'd singled out. "His name is James Anderson and he's officially a professional body builder although the cops suspect he's selling steroids out of the gym where he works out. He could see that none of this was ringing any bells. His sister works at NCIS her name is…"

Tony groaned remembering where he'd seen Anderson before. "Sarah Anderson from the Accounts Department."

"Yeah DiNutzo, you ever met him?"

Tony shook his head. "Nah never. I saw his photo on her desk. We went out a couple of times, but it was nothing serious. What's the story; what did I ever do to him or his homies?"

Tobias shook his head. "Seems they're twins. He saw that damned photo of you and apparently decided you'd been using his sister for cover and he got it in his head to defend Sarah’s honour. Got four of his gym junkie buddies together and they decided to teach you a lesson. So, even if you hadda been up to par DiNutzo, five muscle bound Neanderthals hyped on 'roids, well even a bad assed Fed like you didn't stand a chance, so stop beating yourself up. Okay?"

Tony nodded slightly. "How did you get them?"
Fornell snorted. "Criminal masterminds they ain't, DiNutzo. We collected DNA samples off your leather jacket and got a hit. Declan Rimes seems to have a conviction or two for dealing steroids and various performance enhancing substances and Anderson dropped something at the scene with his fingerprints all over it. When Rimes realised he was going down he dropped his friends into it for a lesser sentence quicker than rats deserting a sinking ship.” He looked sickened.

We arrested all five of them earlier and they were charged with the attempted rape and murder of a federal agent. Your neighbour managed to ID one of the others. They are going down, don't worry,” he urged seeing the panicked look on Tony's face.

"Attempted rape?" he managed to choke out, looking at Ducky.

"Don't worry, Anthony your Good Samaritan of a neighbour, drove up at the most fortuitous moment although I guess it would have been even luckier if he come before you were rendered unconscious." Ducky reassured him.

"So how do you arrive at attempted rape then, Fornell?" he questioned.

Tobias looked across at Ducky, doubting that it was a good time to be having this conversation but then again, it probably never would be. He took a deep breath.

"Enough evidence, Tony. Anderson dropped a half full box of condoms beside you when he fled the scene and they'd slashed your clothes, not the EMT when they were working on you. Mr Singh claims that when he pulled into the parking bays the men were all partially clothed and we have a statement from two of the gang that nothing had happened but that they had planned to…” he looked at Ducky and Tony before continuing "… all take part."

He watched as DiNutzo's mask slipped into place and he couldn't really blame him. To know that but for the random luck that a neighbour happened to come home at the right time, he would have been gang raped while unconscious and totally vulnerable or unable to fight back was terrible for anyone. For a law enforcement individual used to being a saviour rather than a victim, it was completely shocking and would be extremely difficult to come to terms with. But if what they suspected about what had happened to him in his past was correct, then this wasn't going to help him deal with the attack either.

"Guess I owe Gupta a bottle of Scotch then. Not only saved my life but my ass too," he said neutrally, referring to his neighbour who had turned up at just the right time. "Thanks for tracking them down, Tobias. Did Sarah know about the...attack?"

"She claims not to know, and Anderson swears he never told her. There's no evidence to suggest that she knew what her twin intended to do," he looked at Tony who was sounding rather strained. Ducky could see that he was about ready to shut down on them to try and process everything he'd heard. "Unless there is anything pressing, perhaps we should let him get some rest for now. Thank you for finding those monsters and making sure they will pay for what they did Tobias."

"Sure Ducky, I still need to take his statement, but I'll go and grab a coffee before we do that. Can I get you two, anything?" he asked politely.

Tony looked up. "Yeah, can you get me my knife, Fornell?"

Fornell was going to make a sarcastic remark when he caught the ME giving him an intense look, and then shake his head very slightly. "I rather think that his knife might help him relax while he's here Tobias, otherwise he will be tempted to collect a whole bed-full of eating utensils.” He said
"Ah well that could be a problem since it is still being processed by the lab but DiNutzo, I'll get one of mine that I have in the car. I'll bring it back later." He noticed the tension drain a little from the agent’s posture and couldn't really blame him. He'd feel vulnerable too in the kid’s situation and would want to have his trusty Glock with him if he was in hospital after someone tried to beat him to death. He'd make sure Tony had one of his back-up pieces when he went home tomorrow.

He made a mental note to check with him where he had them stashed in his apartment because a seasoned undercover cop and agent like Tony would have a veritable arsenal stashed away in case he ever needed to disappear suddenly. He wondered if he should involve Gibbs in that little errand to make him feel warm and fuzzy. Then again, give the guy an inch and he'd take a mile and try and to force himself upon the kid. Now that they had both sets of scumbags and he was less under the influence of all the drugs, it was hitting him just how close he'd come to bleeding out.

Knowing that it was all the fault of his teammates and his superior's refusal to listen; must be devastating to him and obviously he didn't want or need to face Gibbs right now. Fornell couldn't change what had happened to him, but he and Ducky could make sure that Tony didn't have to face any of them before he was strong enough. He'd swing by and retrieve the gun himself tonight after he checked to see if DiNutzo wanted one when he was discharged, to take to with him to Ducky's home. Although he doubted that he would need it, it would make the kid feel safer and that was equally important after the week he'd had to endure.

He nodded to Ducky, "I'll bring you back a tea Ducky although I can't promise it will be Earl Grey."

Ducky nodded gravely. "That's what I get for living in a coffee obsessed country, dear boy. None of you have any appreciation for the finer things," he teased.

~Betrayals~

Ducky had reluctantly left the hospital when Tobias returned to take Tony's statement about the assaults at NCIS and the brutal attack on his life outside his apartment. They had not talked when Fornell had gone off to get a coffee as Ducky could sense Tony needed to deal with everything that had happened in the last day or two. Contrary to people's beliefs, he didn't feel the need to fill every silence with allegories and anecdotes. Donald Mallard could do strong and silent moral support when it was required and when he left Tony for the evening, he assured the young agent he'd come to regard as family, he would return in the morning.

Tony had protested rather weakly, that now that his assailants had been caught he didn't need babysitting any longer and would be fine to return to his apartment on his own. Ducky had quickly scotched that thought, pointing out that he was being discharged several days early purely because he was under the supervision of a doctor. He also pointed out that if Gibbs discovered he was home alone, he would try to drag him off to his own house to look after him. Surprisingly, he gave in with very little protest and Ducky would have felt more comforted if he'd managed at least a pout or whine, but he seemed resigned and un-Tony-like.

As Ducky made his way from Bethesda he resolved to get Anthony's spare key to his apartment from Jethro tonight. That way he could pick up some of his gear that would make Anthony feel more comfortable whilst staying with Ducky. The medical examiner decided to make sure to grab some of his classic movies from his rather eclectic collection that they could all enjoy. Perhaps Casablanca and the like would trump his mother's constant obsession with that blasted episode of Jeopardy. If he had to listen to Alex Trebeck again anytime soon, he would pitch the bloody television out the window.
As his Morgan, the grand old dame purred her way towards Alexandria, Ducky's thoughts drifted back towards the conversation that had taken place between him and Gibbs newest recruit last night before he left. Truly he'd never intended to have a heart to heart with the two junior agents. Yes, he'd been driven to confront Abigail and find out why she'd done what she had but then he also had known her a lot longer and had much more of an emotional investment in their friendship. Like Jethro, he had paternalistic feelings for the young Goth but even knowing that there could be no justifiable excuse for what she had done to her friend, he still had hoped she could say something that would explain the inexplicable. Of course she hadn't and his heart had hardened not just towards her but the rest of the team, including the young probie Timothy.

~Flashback yesterday evening~

Ducky decided to call in and see if anyone was still in the bull pen from Balboa's team as he made his way out and down to Bethesda to visit Anthony. Tobias had called and told him that DiNozzo had consented to Ducky being added to the list of approved visitors and was gradually becoming more lucid as he recovered from surgery. Tobias had also observed that he could probably do with having a friend close by so Ducky was impatient to leave. Unfortunately, he'd forgotten to mention to the team leader that Susanna Clausen's mother and her sister where coming in from out of state to identify her and claim her body. Ducky was hoping that one of Balboa's junior agents could meet them at the airport. On the way out, he noticed McGee stabbing at his keyboard with a sour expression on his young face. Stopping, to say goodnight, he enquired as to what was the matter with the young agent.

"I don't get why I'm in so much trouble, Ducky. I didn't have anything to do with the photo, so why is Gibbs pissed with me."

Ducky regarded the young probationary agent with a frown. "It concerns me that as a federal agent, you would need to ask that question Timothy. You are supposed to know the law and that photo and its distribution was fraudulent and therefore unlawful. The fact that you knew that it was a fake and even after it was distributed you remained silent, knowing full-well that it was damaging someone's reputation, makes you an accessory to the fraud after the fact. You had a duty to speak up and you didn't. That is what Jethro is so angry and disappointed about."

The young agent blanched, as he considered the consequences of pissing off the legendary Leroy Jethro Gibbs. Ducky noticed how his former expression of pique was rapidly being replaced by one of horror as it became apparent that something else occurred to him.

"Oh my goodness Ducky, I never stopped to think that the dummied up photo was fraud. I just didn't think. Tony comes from some very serious money - he could sue us all for damage to his reputation and possibly wilful endangerment if that attack proves to be a hate crime. With his family's money, he can hire the best attorneys and tie us all up in litigation for years. He could bankrupt us without raising a sweat. My father will be so disappointed at the shame to the family and probably even disinherit me. Apart from that I can kiss goodbye to my plan to be Gibbs new senior field agent in 2006 and the Director before 2015. How could I have been so stupid?"

Ducky stared at him, disgusted that Timothy had been party to a situation that had nearly cost his team member his life and he was worried with how it affected him. He almost admonished the young agent but decided instead not to disavow him of the notion that Anthony had the vast financial resources of his father's empire behind him. If it gave the Probationary agent the screaming heebie jeebies about what they had done, then at least Timothy was punishing himself, even if it wasn't for the noblest of reasons.

"Of course, that wasn't the only thing that Jethro was upset about, Timothy. You are supposed to be
a team and watch each other's backs. Alone you are vulnerable and have to rely on each other to do your job, which can be dangerous. It is important that each team member knows that they can depend on the team to watch out for them when they can't do it for themselves.”

Casting a jaundiced eye at the youngster, he pressed.

“Just imagine if you will, that when you were in trouble and your team was supposed to be watching out for you and keep you safe, they suddenly saw that you needed help and they turned their back on you. Worse still, instead of helping, they decided to join in and help the people who were trying to harm you. How would you feel then, young Timothy?”

"I guess I'd feel that I'd been betrayed by my team Ducky."

"Exactly, Timothy, exactly."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Gibbs comes to lunch at Ducky’s to talk to Tony and has a run in with another alpha male.

One week later

Tony could feel Ducky’s concern as he watched him continue to wear a hole in the pure wool carpet, pacing up and down as he tried to calm his anxiety. He had decided that it would make sense to meet with Gibbs before he went back to his own apartment tomorrow so that he had some moral support for their first meeting since he was assaulted. Even though Ducky and Fornell had told Gibbs that Tony had decided to take a leave of absence from NCIS and accept a secondment to the FBI serial killer task force, he was expecting Gibbs to try and change his mind. Tony knew that when it came to his mentor, he had an irrational and utterly immature need to please the man, who frankly, was impossible to please.

That and the man knew all of his insecurities and could manipulated him effortlessly. He was pretty sure he would try to use every last one of his vulnerabilities to sway him into doing what he wanted. Hopefully having Ducky to watch his back would help him resist any undue influence Gibbs might exert.

Tony was looking forward to going home and trying to get himself back under control; since he felt like he needed to rebuild his defences. Ducky and his mother Victoria had coddled him and he’d also really enjoyed the novel experience of having two classic film aficionados to watch some of his classic films with. However, he did need to get back into a rhythm before he returned to work in a week and he needed to get used to being on his own again.

He knew he was going to be anxious, probably would be for a long time yet, even though all the assailants had been rounded up and charged. An official announcement had also been made at NCIS regarding the non-genuineness of the photo and the unacceptable behaviour of many of the staff necessitating some long overdue changes and many acres of trees being sacrificed to rewrite HR protocols and produce training notes for staff training sessions.

Yet, Tony was a pragmatist and he knew that once someone had formed a strong opinion, it would take a hell of a lot more that a simply proclamation from the ‘Powers That Be’ saying that he had been set up, to change those attitudes. Especially if it came to trying to change the attitudes of those people who had always suspected that he wasn’t straight and had felt vindicated in that belief when the photo came to light. Psychologists called it cognitive dissonance and rather than have to deal with the uncomfortable situation of knowing that they had made a mistake or were wrong, it was easier for individuals like Morrow to believe that they were right all along and everyone else was incorrect.

They would assemble every little piece of evidence, like every time he hadn’t responded to a woman who had flirted with him, every time he might have gotten physical with a guy during bouts of hand to hand combat on the mats or made physical contact with a man, even if it was completely innocent. They’d catalogue anytime he’d joked with a male in such a way that they could construe as having sexual overtones and use every incident to prove to their own satisfaction at least, that he was gay. Basically, the more he tried to deny the damned photo, the more it would be grist to the mill to them.
Just more proof that he was hiding or in denial. Basically, anything but to have to confront the unpleasant truth that people had been taken in by the photo, anything but to admit that 'they' had been wrong.

What it all boiled down to, was that he was going to have to remain on guard for the foreseeable future because gay bashers would always see him as the epitome of everything they despised, no matter what he did. It was also highly likely his presence would provoke further resentment from the cronies of the three security guards who would blame him for the trio being dismissed and incarcerated. Not to mention, the possibility of Sarah Anderson's friends and co-workers who would blame him for her deciding to resign her position rather than to have to face the situation – face him. All in all, Tony wouldn't be taking his safety for granted any time soon if he went back to NCIS.

He sighed, mentally abusing himself for throwing himself a pity party, when in reality this was probably just the tip of the iceberg of how many fellow cops and feds had to battle every single day because they’d been gay or lesbian. That prompted him to think of a gay cop he worked with in Peoria when he was just starting out, a beat patrol officer Riley Peters. Riley had helped him settle in, as a nervous rookie and shown him the ropes but he had always seemed to be looking over his own shoulder since his co-workers seemed to take an unreasonable offence at his sensitive disposition and less than brawny physique. Riley had apparently suffered one hell of a beating a few months after Tony's transfer to Philadelphia PD and although it was apparent to anyone with a brain that it had been some of the more homophobic cops that he worked with, no one was ever charged. Riley ended up transferring to a tiny sheriff's department which had a combined staff of eight where he managed to find a safe haven.

Tony still stayed in contact with Riley although it was generally a once a year phone call and he decided that when he went home he would get in touch with Peters. While he had plenty of other gay cop buddies he could talk to and non-gay cop buddies for that matter, he thought Riley was most likely to understand how he was feeling right now and would support him. He was kinda short of a social support network and although Ducky and Fornell had been terrific to him and he appreciated it, he was missing the sort of support that he normally relied on from Gibbs and Abby. Riley was a friend and understood what it felt like to be a cop and feel like he wasn't safe in his own workplace.

Shattering his contemplation of ancient history and what the future held for him, he realised that he'd been so zoned out he'd totally missed Gibbs pulling up in his truck and coming through the front door. That was until Victoria Mallard's brat pack had yapped up a storm, and in getting underfoot had managed to trip Gibbs up, while Tyson had lived up to his breeding, and latched onto Gibbs' heel. Tony realised that he was going to miss having the corgis around to act like his early warning system. He also felt furious with himself for letting his guard down and not realising that someone had made it right to the door.

He realised that he was clutching his borrowed knife in his hand when he saw Ducky and Gibbs eyeing him with alarmed expressions and he slipped it back into his jacket with an apologetic shrug. He also noticed Gibbs taking in the fact that he was wearing his ankle holster and his back up gun and he glared at him, daring him to say something about it. He knew that this was supposed to be a chance to mend some fences but he wasn't going to let the guy start telling him what to do. He'd lost that right when he'd more than lived up to his name and forgot about watching his six. If Gibbs thought that he'd just waltz back into Tony's life as if nothing happened, he had a real shock coming for him.

Luckily Ducky stepped in and suggested that they all have a seat while he got everyone a drink. Ducky and Gibbs were drinking a home brewed draught beer that was the latest hobby of the eccentric ME while Tony was sipping a sparkling water. Even if Ducky had consented to him
drinking while taking medication, he didn't want alcohol to cloud his thinking and reactions. Victoria, who had decided to grace them with her presence, was genteelly sipping on a Pimm's and dry ginger ale and giving Gibbs the third degree.

Some days were bad days for Victoria Mallard, who would be in a paranoid, fearful state, threatening all and sundry with the carving knife she claimed to have stashed upon her person, specifically in her brassiere. These emotions were ones that Tony could easily identify with at the moment, but other days were better; she could be flirty and slightly inappropriate around anything with a XY chromosome. When that happened, Tony had to watch out for wandering hands and he exchanged an amused look with Ducky; it was clear that today was a flirty day and that Gibbs was seemingly the focus of her lust.

Apparently, she 'recognised' him as a long-lost lover and proceeded to pursue him with a relentlessness that was somewhat scary to witness. Meanwhile he took evasive Marine manoeuvres to avoid overly eager nonagenarian hands, while Ducky tried in vain to control his waywardly libidinous mother and became progressively more embarrassed. Tony watched amusedly, as the alpha male of the corgi pack, Prince Albert come in and rapidly sized up his competition for Victoria’s affections. Before Ducky could prevent the inevitable car wreck, the dominant male had sauntered over, cocked his leg against Gibbs and proceeded to mark him with urine, effectively sending a message to him and everyone else that he was top dog, not Gibbs.

In the chaos that ensued, Tony sat back and watched, trying hard not to smirk while poor Ducky looked as if he wanted to die of mortification and hustled to banish the unruly offender and defender of Victoria’s affections. Victoria immediately took the opportunity for a pre-emptive grope of Gibbs’ ass as he made a retreat to his car. Fortunately, Gibbs had a change of clothes in the car, well fortunately for Victoria as his spare clothes were his work-out gear and plainly she was a 'legs' kind of gal. She was having so much trouble keeping her hands-off Gibbs in his shorts that Ducky ended up plying her with several glasses of sweet sherry during their luncheon.

Presently, the alcohol went to her head and she decided to lie down for an afternoon nap and Gibbs and Ducky both heaved sighs of relief although Tony was rather disappointed. He was also so glad he'd stuck to track pants while he'd been recuperating with them.

Once lunch was finished, Tony steeled himself for the unpleasant confrontation that he knew was inevitable. He had already discussed it with Ducky and he’d agreed to stay around as a third wheel to Gibbs and Tony's meeting. He had been somewhat reluctant, but Tony was pragmatic enough about himself to know that he would instinctively jump to obey Gibbs orders and he knew that the Boss would not be happy about him working on the FBI taskforce. He knew that having Ducky around would make it even more uncomfortable for Gibbs who hated talking at the best of times, but he was too afraid to talk to Gibbs alone since he knew Tony's weaknesses far too well. While he might be being unfair to his boss… former boss… possible future boss if he was to return... it was simply a matter of self-preservation having Ducky as backup. Just like he wouldn't go into a fire fight without wearing a flak jacket either.

Truth be told, this wasn't about Gibbs feelings - it was all about him. If he didn't put himself first then nobody else was going to. The last couple of weeks had once again reinforced that message, loud and clear. If needing to have Ducky nearby to keep him resolute and true to himself made him seem needy, then so be it, even if he looked weak. Right now, that was exactly what he was. As they all sat down in the Mallard living room, and all three men looked like they'd rather be anywhere but sitting down talking, Tony took a deep breath and decided it was up to him to get the ball rolling.

"So how 'bout I start then Gibbs? I know Fornell and Ducky have already told you and Director Morrow has also been informed too but now I'm officially informing you that I'm taking a leave of
absence and accepting a secondment to the FBI Patchwork Killer Taskforce. I regret that it leaves you short a Senior Field Agent and I understand that you will need to fill my position. I want to thank you for the opportunity that you gave me Gibbs, I appreciate it."

Gibbs scowled, "Not that simple DiNozzo, I'm not looking to replace you. Your job will be waiting for you."

Tony shook his head. "While I appreciate the sentiment, I'm not even sure that I will come back, Gibbs. I don't feel safe working at NCIS anymore."

Gibbs face reddened and at a guesstimate Tony figured that his default emotional response of anger might be ready to make an appearance in lieu of dealing with embarrassment, regret or sorrow. "Okay, so ya want to hear me say I'm sorry, DiNozzo? I let you down. I didn't have your back. Ya don't need to go; I'll make sure you're safe."

"Gibbs I do appreciate you saying sorry because I know that you think that it makes you weak to do it but an apology is also more than just saying the words. It's also about meaning it too and it's also about timing. As a sniper you should know that the most technically perfect shot isn't worth crap if it comes too late after the target has moved. I know NOW that you didn't deliberately send that damned photo to the entire staff including the cleaners. BUT you did. If you'd come and explained and broken rule six when it could have done some good or even if you meant it, we mightn't be in this situation right now.

I get that it isn't your fault, you didn't create the problem, but you also weren't part of the solution. As my supervisor, I was supposed to be able to come to you to report what was going on. As my partner you're supposed to be watching my six - yet you did neither of these things. And I still don't know why you would listen to me why I tried to talk to you. Now you want me to trust that you will keep me safe if I go back to work?"

Gibbs sat with his head down, and his hands clenched as Tony spoke. His face continued to redden, and Tony was glad that Ducky was on hand. He didn't want the guy to stroke out and he shuddered to think about the stress Gibbs placed on his circulatory system. Luckily, he was supremely fit for someone his age but still it wasn't healthy to deal with his emotions by getting angry all the time.

"You know me as well as anyone does." Tony continued, "I don't trust people easily and *if* I do, it takes time for it to develop and even then I find it almost impossible to ever completely trust anyone. You betrayed my trust and I'm not saying that you were the only one or even that what you did was as bad; Cate, Abby and Morrow did too but somehow you and Abby managed to hurt me worst of all. Probably because I trusted you both as much as I've trusted anyone in a very long time.

He looked defeated. "I'm sorry Gibbs; I can't trust you to make sure I'm safe anymore. I can't even trust me any longer. If I can learn to do that, maybe I can learn to trust you someday…"

He was interrupted by a large bang and Tony leapt into flight mode in a state of panic.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Gibbs finally realises how perilous Tony’s situation is and Ducky attempts to offer some much needed advice.

A car had backfired down the street while Tony was speaking to Gibbs about trust issues, interrupting their long-awaited talk. Gibbs was astonished when his seemingly collected, senior field agent leapt a mile into the air twisting as he went, to land on the ground but with his gun and knife clutched in each hand. Gibbs could see that Tony's eyes were dilated and his nostrils flared as he took in deep heaving breaths.

Shocked to the core, Jethro glanced across at Ducky, who didn’t seem surprised at the unusual reaction from his agent who Gibbs had seen stare down the barrel of a loaded gun without so much as blinking. As Ducky matter-of-factly informed Tony that it was a car backfiring and ignored him as he got himself under control, he silently shook his head to warn against Jethro commenting. Tobias and Ducky had both told him that DiNozzo was a mess emotionally, but this was so much worse than he expected. This was someone showing clear signs of PTSD and Gibbs had seen his share of that over his years with the Marine Corp.

"Be back in about fifteen minutes," Tony called to them a while later as, armed with two dog leashes and two of the younger corgis, Leopold and Alice Maude, named after Queen Victoria's offspring, he set out to burn off some of the excess adrenaline still coursing through his body and to try to collect himself in private.

Gibbs looked at Ducky in dismay when they were alone. "You said he was in trouble but I had no idea that he was this bad. I'm no shrink but I recognise PTSD when I see it. He's not ready to start back at work, what idiot signed off on that, for Pete's sake?"

Ducky handed him another homebrew. "He hasn't been cleared for field work Jethro, not for several weeks if then. He's going to be familiarising himself with the evidence of the case and believe me there is plenty to keep him busy. You know as well as I do, my friend that he has the sort of brain that has to be kept active or he goes crazy. He also needs to feel useful and he knows that he has a rare talent for finding clues. Anthony feels an obligation to use it to help others."

Seeing Gibbs open his mouth to argue, he carried on over the top of him. "Add to that the anger, helplessness and loss of control he is experiencing about being hurt, when he is a trained federal agent and a sense of mastery and achievement will be a very important part of his healing process. He will be working with several of the FBI's most gifted profilers too and they will be keeping a close eye on him, I'm sure."

Gibbs set his jaw stubbornly and drained the amber bottle of its remaining beer.

"He’s safest with me Ducky. Ya know how reckless he can be and PTSD will just make it worse. I can watch him, I know him better than anyone. Not like some stranger can do half the job I can and apart from all that, he belongs to me, I found him and brought him to DC."
Ducky regarded him exasperatedly. The man truly did hear only what he wanted to.

"That may be true about him belonging to you before and being best placed to watch his back but that was in the past, I'm afraid. Didn't you hear him, Jethro? He doesn't trust you anymore and he doesn't feel safe at NCIS. Oh yes, you of all people can probably convince him to return because you know his vulnerabilities better than anyone.

"You know how if you appeal to him to return for the good of his team mates or because you need him to watch your six, he will return, in spite of it not being what he wants or needs at the moment. He needs to put himself first for once; he needs to feel in control, not compelled. He needs to learn to trust himself again, not rely on you."

Gibbs leapt to his feet and started to pace, much in the same fashion as Tony had done a few hours before. He had thought that he was resigned to giving Tony some space before trying to entice him back to the team but seeing him in the state he was in, had stirred every single protective cell in his body, to try to fix things for him. Partially it was his dormant paternal genes that made him determined to intercede to protect – like when Gerald was wounded, but his main motivation was guilt, pure and simple - he felt an overwhelming compulsion to fix what he'd broke. He'd always believed that there was nothing that he couldn't do if he wanted it badly enough and he very much wanted Tony back, whole again and everything to go back to normal.

"Come on Duck, you've seen him. He needs help. What do you expect me to do? Sit on the sidelines while he's hurting? I can't do that… I won't do that. He needs his family, he needs me."

Ducky shook his head, cursing the stubbornness that was such a menace and also at times an asset. "You may be right my boy. Anthony definitely needs a family but he doesn't need you to be his boss at the moment. He needs you to be a friend much more, now. Be the friend that he needs and work on earning back his trust. I know that he never got a chance to finish asking you, but he needs to know why you turned your back on him and refused to listen. Tobias and I have respected your confidence - but he wants to know... he needs to know."

"You need to explain before he can start to trust you again and it won't happen overnight. I know how difficult it is for you to exercise patience but remember it is just as difficult for Anthony to learn to trust himself as well. Just know this; if you push him too hard, he will push back and you may just drive him away forever."

Ducky picked up his cell phone to check that there were no messages waiting before sending a text message. Tony had said he was only going be a quarter of an hour and it was getting on for 25 minutes. He heaved a sigh of relief when Tony texted back that he was nearly home. He realised that Jethro was watching closely. He held up the message before realising that Gibbs wouldn't be able to read it.

"I sent him a message and he replied that he's almost home."

"Since when do you text, Duck?" he asked surprised.

"Since forever, Jethro. Technology is not my enemy. You should befriend it too, embrace it. Texting is a mighty handy tool when you don't want to talk to someone who is I believe you say, a motor mouth." Gibbs saw his mouth curve into a wry smile but he couldn't tell if Ducky was being ironic or not.

"And since when does DiNozzo like dogs, Duck?"

The elderly doctor frowned at his friend. "He has always liked them; they just don't like him usually."
The fact that Mother's corgis don't like anyone apart from Mother meant that he didn't feel pressured to be liked and over the course of the week, they all became quite cosy. Apart from forging a bond with the little flea bags, the fact that they have even better hearing than him and will bark when they hear the slightest noise, is of comfort to him at the moment. If he was permitted to have dogs in his apartment building I would offer to lend him one of the little monsters when he goes home.

He looked over at Gibbs knowing he'd be ready for some caffeine, "Come along Jethro, let's go and put some coffee on for you. I'm not sure if Tony will be ready to pick up your conversation when he comes in. He's probably feeling very ashamed of his reaction, feeling like he is weak. It might be better if he doesn't feel like we are waiting to assess his state of mind. He'll find us in the kitchen if he wants to keep talking."

As he followed behind, the promise of a fresh brewed coffee impossible to resist, Gibbs asked, "Has he said anything about being molested Duck?"

"No nothing Jethro, I've tried to steer the conversation in that direction but he hasn't taken up my offer to talk. I'm hoping that he'll agree to talk to someone in time." The ME set up the coffee maker with a coffee blend that he thought his friend would appreciate.

"Dammit, I need to be doing somethin' Duck. Why won't he let us help him? Why the hell does he have to be so stubborn?" The distraught man slammed his fist down on the kitchen bench wishing it was one of the people who had hurt his senior field agent.

The ME smiled in fond exasperation at the man that epitomised stubborn. "You do so tempt me Jethro but I will refrain from stating the obvious. As to not letting us help, you know as well as I do that he has entrenched issues when it comes to trusting others and hates appearing weak. Being told that crying, passing out, asking for help and apologising are all signs of weakness, it is hardly surprising. And there is something that you can do, you know."

"Yeah and what the devil would that be?" Gibbs demanded as he impatiently grabbed hold of the brewed coffee and poured it into a mug while regarding his friend with a jaundiced eye.

"Create an environment that he will feel safe in, my friend. One he'll want to come back to. Ask yourself why his teammates felt it was acceptable behaviour to engage in with a supervisor. There is no way that they would have dared to behave that way with you so why did they think it was permissible to do so with Anthony."

"Okay, so why do you think that is?"

Duck poured himself a cup of black Lapsang Souchong tea, a smoky tasting black tea from the Fujian Province of China and considered before he answered obliquely, "As your erudite elder statesman, Benjamin Franklin paraphrased, "A little neglect may breed mischief...

For want of a nail, a shoe was lost

For want of a shoe, the horse was lost

And for want of the horse, the rider was lost..."

Seeing the bemused and irritated expression on Jethro’s face he sighed at his denseness.

"Stop chasing Ari Haswari. If he is evil like your gut is telling you, then you need to be ready for him when he comes back. Look after yourself and the team so that you are strong enough to take him
out. Your obsession is little short of self-indulgent and destructive.” He paused to consider what he felt needed to be said. "I don't know if I mentioned it, but Caitlyn also came and spoke to me after you rightly ripped into her, as did Timothy?” He looked at Gibbs who nodded.

Ducky pointed to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair and sat down. "I could be wrong but I had the impression that both of them are extremely ambitious young people. McGee has his sight set on becoming SFA in three years and the Director in fifteen. Caitlin worked with the President and I believe that they think that they are on a par with Anthony. And don't bite my head off but frankly you don't treat your senior field agent any differently to the probie and the junior agent on the team.

“You make them all compete for your approval and I know that you think that competitiveness is a good thing but I believe that collaboration and complementing of each other's strengths are equally valid attributes on a team and need an equal weighting in forging effective teamwork. You would hardly make a private compete with a sergeant, I'm sure.”

"That's just crap, Ducky. I don't treat DiNozzo the same as the probies." Gibbs protested with his trademark scowl.

Ducky raised any eyebrow mildly. "If that is truly the case, then tell me, why do they feel they have the right to lecture him about how to conduct investigations like they did in the attempted rape case of that unfortunate Marine's wife Mrs Rawlins? It was probably the first time either of them had investigated a rape case for goodness sake and yet in his ten years as an agent and a cop, especially a beat cop he would have been involved in scores of rape cases, probably more than even you my boy.

“Then there was the time that Timothy refused to listen to him when he tried to warn him about poison ivy during a search for evidence. You also let a probationary agent run an investigation and you've never allowed your senior field agent to do that. Not sure if you are aware or not, but you call Anthony by his last name now that the team has expanded, and you never used to do that. Even when Caitlin was first here you used to call him Tony but he's gone from being your partner to at least in the eyes of the rest of the team, your third probie."

"Didn't let McGee lead the investigation Duck, I was supervising him in a training exercise," Gibbs stated.

"That may be so, but did he know that he wasn't leading the investigation and more to the point did Caitlyn, Abby and Anthony know it too?"

Gibbs head was starting to ache from the workout it was getting from the myriad of emotions he was experiencing. "You saying they planned on getting rid of DiNozzo with that photo, Duck?"

"Oh goodness me no, at least I really do hope not but you can't tell me you haven't wondered the same thing? I think… I hope that it was more a case of them viewing him as an equal if not, inferior crony to their own superior abilities and therefore fair game. Caitlin has also spoken to me of her contempt for Anthony's compulsive need to please you, but she confessed that she feels driven to compete against him to win your approval, too. Clearly young Timothy isn't nearly as lacking in esteem as we assumed since he has shown himself to be headstrong and unwilling to listen to someone with a wealth of investigative experience. Maybe he needs less building up than we all assumed and needs to be taken down a peg or two."

"Abigail has often complained that Timothy is wont to parade his academic qualifications in people's faces a little too freely and given that we know that she has enough of her own, so she isn’t insecure about her own academic pedigree, so I think that that is telling. Taken all together, it points to problems with team dynamics. It would seem that adding two new team members who are ambitious and driven to get ahead has changed the dynamic that you had. If the team is going to recover... if
indeed they retain their jobs, you need to focus on dynamics and perhaps some training in working as part of a team rather than in competition with each other. If they lose their positions over this terrible incident and you hire new agents, don’t repeat the mistakes of the past, create a place of safety and respect for Anthony to come home to.

When you foster such a strong aura of competitiveness on the team, it would behove you to remember that while Anthony may act cocky and confident, constantly taking him to task for his so-called lack of focus in front of his subordinates, creates feelings of insecurity and doubt within him. Paradoxically, it creates in Cate who has a very healthy self-esteem and young Timothy who is not so lacking in confidence as we thought, the impression that Anthony's competence is being called into question.

“It may even be reinforcing their rather inflated sense of competence. On the one hand, after dressing him down in front of them, you want him to train them to your exacting standards. Honestly, Jethro you make it difficult for him to earn their respect. Remember when the Director wants to ream you out about some transgression, imagined or otherwise, he does not do it in front of your team.

Ducky picked up the coffee pot and poured another cup of coffee he had bought at a farmers’ market a few weeks ago which was a delightful Ethiopian blend. He thrust the coffee mug at Gibbs. "It might also be prudent to bear in mind that if you are going to blatantly play favourites, it is going to cause ill-will. Abigail may be well be your favourite, but you are spoiling her and allowing her to get away with far too much bad behaviour. If you must play surrogate papa, then it's time to give her and the other agents boundaries, starting with the fact they are not Anthony's equal in rank or skills. At the least you must insist that they respect his position if nothing else."

"In the space of one year you went from having just Anthony and having a mature professional partnership to doubling the size of the team but since Timothy and Cate joined us, Ari had been very much your focus. You eat, breathe and sleep retribution, my friend. Create a team where Anthony's experience and skills will be acknowledged instead of mocked, where he can thrive.

And in the meantime, be his friend, take him a pizza and watch a movie with him, play his beloved basketball with him, earn back his trust day by day and let him talk if he wants…or not."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Actions have consequences but unfortunately not everyone’s actions are treated equally.

Secretary of the Navy, Philip Davenport reached across the table and poured another healthy measure of his favourite single malt Glenfiddich whiskey and handed it to Jonathon Gold, the Secretary of Defence. They had decided to meet at Jon’s estate to discuss the results of the Internal Affairs, JAG and FBI investigations respectively. Each of the reports were equally critical of the culture that currently existed within the Naval Criminal Investigative Service and recommended a thorough cleaning out as an appropriate measure, starting at the top.

Various charges were pending on the three ex-security guards who had been fired. Criminal charges were also recommended for Special Agent Caitlin Todd and Forensic Scientist Abigail Sciuto and summary dismissal for both employees although Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, currently on secondment to the FBI was apparently somewhat ambivalent about pressing charges.

IA felt there was ample evidence to warrant charges being laid and that it was important to send a message of zero tolerance for misappropriation of government equipment, fraud and endangerment of a federal agent. They also recommended formal reprimands for Special Agent McGee for failure to report the offenses of his colleagues and Supervisory Special Agent Gibbs for failure to investigate his team member's assertions that the photo was faked. The three investigations also made recommendations that Director Morrow's actions in failing to investigation Special Agent DiNozzo's claims and his failure to protect his agent from assault and harassment in the workplace. They all concurred that it amounted to an offense serious enough to warrant dismissal and criminal charges.

The Director of NCIS, Tom Morrow had, on the other hand, made recommendations that the two women undergo career counselling, attend mandatory anti- discrimination and sexual harassment training, and finally serve a month's suspension without pay. Davenport and Gold were keen to clean out not only the two women but get rid of Morrow too but knew that as much as they would like to fire his sorry ass, that they probably couldn't afford to lose Morrow’s wealth of contacts and intelligence experience in the current political climate, post September Eleven.

Morrow had also cultivated an impressive array of contacts on the Hill that made getting rid of him extremely problematic. Gold was also an extremely wily operator, not to mention being extremely ambitious. He had no intention of airing any of their dirty linen over the faked up gay photo, which basically would also bathe himself and Philip in a very negative light. It would also necessitate him calling in markers and political favours to keep this away from the press and courts as well. At the moment it was forty - love to Morrow versus SecNav and Davenport in their less than successful stoush to clean up NCIS.

Both he and the SecDef were in total agreement that although Director Morrow was excellent management material, his discriminatory and old fashion views had no place for an Agency Director in the naughties. The problem was that with his years of invaluable experience and success, especially after 9/11 and the War on Terror, they couldn't afford to throw him on the scrap heap either. Yet they also couldn't allow him to retain the position as Director of NCIS, as it would be correctly seen by the agency and the Security and Law Enforcement communities as tacit approval
for his out dated and inappropriate attitudes. He had failed in his Duty of Care, not just to Special Agent DiNozzo but to all the gay and lesbian personnel who worked for the agency and ignoring the recommendations of the independent investigations would set a dangerous precedent.

Apart from which it was important to be viewed as inclusionary and progressive if they wanted to climb higher up the food chain. And Gold and Davenport wanted to climb right to the very top of Capitol Hill.

Morrow had brought down maximum embarrassment upon NCIS and while they couldn't afford to publicly castigate him, they could get creative. Few people in the know would misinterpret the fact that he was given a sideways transfer which may appear on paper to be a promotion, to Assistant Director of Homeland Security. In reality, it was a demotion and he would be placed on probationary status and monitored closely. They could use his skills, contacts and knowledge to help fight the War on Terror, but his career had effectively been halted – he wouldn’t ever get another promotion. Once they rounded up the lunatics and religious extremists that bombed the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, which surely couldn't take longer than another year or two at most, Morrow would be politely informed that it was now time to retire.

Meanwhile, while Morrow may have saved Agent Todd and Ms Sciuto's bacon for now, called in favours to prevent them having charges laid against them, once Morrow was replaced as the director, Sec Nav extremely keen to kick Todd to the curb. This was the second black mark against her name for sexually inappropriate behaviour and he wanted to make an example of her, to let others know that that sort of behaviour wouldn't be tolerated. Plus, her profiling had contributed to two deranged bombers being allowed to explode bombs on a navy ship and a contractor’s HQ, resulting in massive repair bills.

Perhaps they could 'persuade' Morrow to take her with him as an aide when he transferred to Homeland Security. As a former Secret Service agent, she had the background to work in the Homeland Security agency.

Abigail Sciuto was another kettle of fish however. In many ways her culpability in the matter was much more serious than Todd’s since she was the one who had actually created the photo that started this whole mess. On the other hand, she was a civilian and although she was a brilliant forensic scientist she was apparently a bit of a flake. Supposed a 'Happy Goth' which would seem to be an oxymoron, who was also into an eclectic mix of aliens, vampires, New Age crap, bowling nuns and working for the charity Habitat for Humanity. She was a civilian but Todd had taken an oath to uphold the law and apart from her status as a federal agent, Todd also had knowledge of the law after studying law for a year at college, unlike the kooky scientist.

The unpalatable truth was, despite Abigail Sciuto's failure to observe the dress code, her overly exuberant behaviour which frequently skated over the boundaries of sexual propriety and a stubborn insistence that her lab be bathed continuously by music that was obnoxious and loud enough to shake loose teeth, she was one of the foremost forensic experts in the country. She was better than good in her chosen field and responsible for cracking many cases that would otherwise go unsolved. Much as he would like to fire her ass, Davenport really couldn't afford to discipline her, apart from the sanctions that Morrow had already decided should be imposed on her, not even if it admittedly had been little more than a slap on the wrist. He decided that he would have a serious talk to Gibbs about keeping her in line though since she had adopted his team.

Hopefully, getting rid of Agent Todd along with Director Morrow would be a huge wake up call to Ms Sciuto. He would also order the new director to hire another forensic scientist to ostensibly assist her but it would also serve to keep an eye on her behaviour. She wouldn’t be able to use agency property or time to pursue personal vendettas or pranks that caused so much angst that she disrupted
The pair, while fairly confident that they had made the best out of a bad situation, knew that it was still morally dubious, they couldn’t afford to take Morrow on directly and that any media attention could change the situation very rapidly. They were just hoping that by going along with Morrow and not prosecuting Agent Todd and Ms Sciuto, no one would make the connection to the two criminal cases against Anthony DiNozzo.

The only potential fly in their ointment right now was their victim, who thankfully so far at least, had been unwilling to make waves but as he worked through his recovery following the attempted murder, at least according to the shrinks Gold had consulted with, he may well change his mind. To this end, Jonathon Gold, ever the consummate politician with his eye firmly set on a job much higher up than his current job as Secretary of Defence, had taken steps to protect his future.

People said that it was a small world and he’d always felt that that was self-righteous balderdash but perhaps someone was indeed watching out for him. As luck would have it, he held an ace up his sleeve, should Special Agent DiNozzo ever decide to press charges or to be persuaded to take civil action against any of the parties involved.

Coincidentally, as a young attorney he had worked for a prestigious law firm who numbered Pennington Grammar amongst their much-valued clients. When this whole unfortunate situation arose at NCIS he’d recognised the name immediately, mostly because he had been keeping track of Anthony DiNozzo since that vile little athletics coach had decided to use his position to prey on the young students of one of the most exclusive private schools in the country. As an idealistic yet quite naïve young lawyer, he’d wanted the school to report the crime to the relevant authorities but had been overruled by his senior partners since the school did not want the bad publicity. Instead he’d been directed by the partners to recommend to the school directors to get rid of anyone who had knowledge of the crime and bury the evidence.

The law firm had bought in a high priced "Fixer" who’d dealt with the problem of Coach Baxter, by digging into his employment background until they found a working-class family from a decade whose son had been molested and were more importantly, in desperate financial straits. He’d encouraged them to come forward and lay sexual molestation charges against the paedophile coach with a number of financial incentives including a full college scholarship for their son.

They all knew Baxter was a serial offender and as long as he went away, it didn't matter who made the accusations. Once inside a federal prison it was highly probable that Baxter would never see the light of day and that was exactly what happened in the dog eat dog world where rock spiders were reviled and frequently seen as fair game in the pecking order. Baxter had lasted eleven months before being stabbed with a shiv, ironically in the showers where his attacks on his victims usually took place.

Although the fixer had ensured that they hadn't allowed him to get away with his crimes, while still protecting the reputation of the school, nevertheless their action had still left Pennington Grammar open to litigious action by not reporting it. Yet, even more of a concern to the school than a lawsuit, was the negative publicity that could result if it got out which would be extremely damaging to the institution that had been educating the sons of the finest families in the country for generations.

For a number of years, one of Jonathon Gold's duties, based on his law firm's risk analysis had involved keeping track of the three main protagonists, although Coach Baxter's demise helped to reduce the overall risk of the scandal. The drama teacher who had uncovered and reporting the abuse and the victim Anthony DiNozzo, had been placed under surveillance on a regular basis. They had
hoped by monitoring them, they could predict if either decided to report the attack to the authorities and take ameliorating action before any damage could be done.

Over the years Jonathon had compiled an especially thick dossier on Anthony DiNozzo Junior who’d been shipped off to another expensive preppy boarding school within months of the attacks but without receiving any therapy. While on the one hand, not involving a psychiatrist meant that there was one less individual that knew details that they had to worry about, there was a down side. It also meant that not receiving help for such a traumatic event placed him at much greater risk of psychopathology according to their tame therapist. Which in turn made it less easy to predict his behaviour or his reactions as he matured. As time went by and his behaviour seemed to remain stable, it was judged that the risk decreased to the point of him suing was negligible.

Ironically, as Jonathon's political career took off, he personally became more paranoid that this situation could end up costing him his tilt at higher office, should his own part in this scandal ever come to light.

Every time there was a scandal involving institutions accused of covering up paedophilia, Gold would break into a cold sweat and the nightmares would commence once again. There had also been one terrifying false alarm when he’d been notified that Anthony DiNozzo had eschewed his blue blood roots and attended the Police Academy instead of an Ivy League education before shockingly joining the Peoria Police Department. Within weeks of starting there, he had started looking for Coach Baxter using police resources and discovered that the monster had been slain in prison fifteen years before. Although he hadn’t seemed interested in pursuing a civil suit against the school, the fact was that he’d been disinherited by his imbecilic alcoholic father. Meaning he was more likely to decide to pursuing damages than if his father had not cut him adrift from the family fortune.

So, while the law firm and the school had long ceased maintaining their monitoring of the former Pennington Grammar student, Gold had continued to pay a private investigator to keep an eye on Anthony DiNozzo. It was fortunate that he had because he now had enough ammunition on him from Baltimore PD that he failed to report his corrupt partner to IA. Plus even more leverage about some highly questionable ethical actions of his mentor and some said the man who’d become his surrogate father - Leroy Jethro Gibbs, which could be used to persuade him if necessary.

Should DiNozzo decided to engage legal representation, which would have been recommended by his union representative and considered litigation against Director Morrow and NCIS, then the Secretary of Defence would use the dirt file he'd compiled to protect the agency and himself. Davenport was initially appalled when he’d been apprised of the existence of the file - but Gold had skilfully highlighted how bad publicity could easily affect Philip’s career aspirations as well. Of course, Gold was a smart enough litigator to clothe it in 9/11 rhetoric about how much damage it would do the War on Terror and how at times like these, ethics and individual needs and rights must be subjugated to the greater good.

As much as Davenport abhorred the thought that they use the file to exert pressure on DiNozzo to prevent any law suits, his taste of political power had become an addiction that had ultimately corrupted him. Fortuitously, Anthony DiNozzo seemed to have no interest in suing anyone, more than likely because his traumatic childhood had left him with a pathological need to blame himself for all of the misfortunes that befell him.

Gold was hoping he could keep his file locked away and their hands and consciences relatively clean. Although there was no predicting how the federal agent would feel about things if the perpetrators were not held accountable in a court of law, as per the recommendations of numerous investigations. Only time would tell if the Secretary of Defence would need to use a little friendly persuasion or not, but he was confident that it wouldn't be a problem.
Having decided everyone's fate, Davenport and Gold moved on to the last agenda item - the two candidates they were considering for the new NCIS director. One that was more appropriate. Davenport decided to summarise each of the candidates briefly.

"Special Agent Jennifer Shepard has field experience. She served in a MCRT lead by Gibbs and also worked with him in Special Ops missions in Europe before working closely with Mossad. She's younger and politically savvy, so I think she would be an excellent replacement. Special Agent Leon Vance has been recently appointed as Assistant Director in San Diego and also has experience as a field agent. He is a great proponent of technology and computers in moving the agency into a golden age in the new millennium. He has a vision."

"SecDef. nodded approvingly. "Both are good choices Philip. Both are considerably younger and invested in change which after this unfortunate situation, we can all agree is a good thing and long overdue. They both are extremely ambitious which means they are going to be easy to influence should we need it, since they will be beholden for the appointment and in maintaining our good graces."

"Also, because Shepard is a woman and Vance is African American, they'll be much more easily persuaded to work with us and listen to what we want because they are both pragmatic enough to realise we are appointing them to the position of director because they are symbolise the changing of the guard from the old WASP stereotype of power to one that is more modern. Both belong to a minority; they'll be grateful for the opportunity and far more co-operative than Morrow."

"Okay Jonathon, all good observations. Clearly both have a number of things going for them but I have to choose one. As long as they both clear the obligatory security checks and that seems likely, the question is, is one candidate better than the other? Technically, Leon Vance has the seniority, but he hasn't been in the job that long either."

"Well, to use the vernacular that you as Secretary of the Navy should appreciate - the scuttlebutt is that Shepard may have been doing the horizontal mambo with Leroy Jethro Gibbs in Paris. And even if that is a gross exaggeration, he has worked closely with her and she knows and understands him. Apart from this miserable fake photo fiasco, Gibbs is being one giant pain in the ass over that whole Ari business. Having Shepard in charge, she can probably keep him in check, especially if Haswari has to return to the US as is expected."

"Nice one Jonathon," Sec Nav smiled his approval. "And with her close links to Mossad and the David family, especially working with Ari Haswari's half-sister Ziva David, it would seem like she has a few advantages over Leon Vance at this point of time. Gibbs showed when he shot Ari that he is a hothead who refuses to follow orders when it suits him. No doubt, Jenny Shepard has more chance of containing him, so we don't end up in a diplomatic incident with the Israelis. I think, pending her security clearance that we have our new Director of NCIS."

"Excellent, Philip I'm glad we are in agreement. I suggest that we don't move too quickly, in demoting Director Morrow. While he will be told at the appropriate time that he is being demoted, we don't want to make it a public flogging either. Like I said, until we get a handle on the terror threat, we need him and people like him even if we don't like what he stands for."

SecNav was keen to clean up the mess at NCIS and he wanted Morrow gone ASAP. "So how soon are we talking about, Jonathon?"

"Well Philip, unless things change with Mossad, I say let's leave things for a month or two. I have to make some changes and open up a vacancy at Home Security. If the situation with Haswari heats up,
we can always move up the timetable."

The two politicians sealed the deal with another glass of single malt and a couple of fine Cubans. As Jonathon Gold was lighting up he added. "And for God's sake and everyone else's Philip, do us all a favour and send that damned dinosaur off to do an intensive FLETC course on computers before he does anymore more damage. He apparently can't even program in numbers on his speed dial on his cell phone. The man's a menace!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tony has a visitor looking for him at NCIS, unaware he is working at the FBI.

The elevator pinged, and everyone glanced up to see petite, fair haired young woman accompanied by a recently hired security guard, step out of the lift together and approached Gibbs' desk.

The guard was nervous as he addressed the feared leader of the MCRT. "Um Sir, Mrs Rowens said that you know her and told her to contact you if she needed help?"

Gibbs' scowled at the newbie. "Don't call me Sir, I work for a living, Marcos," he barked having to glance at the security guard's ID, knowing that despite being new, DiNozzo would already have familiarised himself with all the new hires and known their life histories, if he was here.

The newcomer flushed, angry at himself for slipping. If he'd been told once, he'd been told a hundred times not to call Gibbs, Sir. It was all in the orientation package given to all new staff that no one should ever call Special Agent Gibbs by the epithet 'Sir' and what did he do? He'd gone and done it the first time he had to open his mouth to the man.

"So Special Agent Gibbs is it alright for Mrs Rowens to be here?" He thankfully remembered the second rule about dealing with Gibbs, which was to never apologise to the man.

Gibbs grunted and that was good enough for Marcos. The guard smiled at the woman, who he had decided must be a masochist to actually request to see Leroy Jethro Gibbs. To each their own, although to be fair, Gibbs was her second choice as she'd originally requested to see Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo and only after being told that he wasn't available, had she'd asked to see Special Agent Gibbs instead. As he made his way back down to the reception area, he remembered that he had to make a special record of anyone who was requesting information on Anthony DiNozzo.

Marcos knew that the special agent was on temporary assignment with the FBI and he'd heard the scuttlebutt about what had happened. He knew that opinion was still pretty evenly divided about whether he was or he wasn't. Marcos also heard that he'd almost died when an ex-girlfriend's brother decided the agent had besmirched his sister's reputation. Her dumb as shit brother had well and truly trashed her standing at NCIS and she'd decided to leave and start afresh.

Anyway, they were on high alert now in case anyone else decided Agent DiNozzo was fair game - shutting the barn door after the horse had bolted much? And with several ongoing investigations into the behaviour of the security staff and other staff at NCIS being scrutinised minutely by both IA and the FBI, everyone was antsy. Also, as he told Mrs Rawlins, no one seemed to know if or when Special Agent DiNozzo was coming back.

The security guard was back at the desk with his partner and monitoring the security cameras, when he realised that Laura Rowens had returned to the Foyer area and appeared to be in distress. The diminutive blonde seemed somewhat fragile and was twisting a lace handkerchief around and around on her constantly moving hands, while she seemed to be breathing rather heavily and trying not to cry. Marcos approached her gently and led her toward a chair while he looked around for assistance. As luck would have it, Dr Mallard was strolling across the lobby on his way out to take what he
referred to as his daily constitutional, which was apparently a poncey English way of saying he was going for a walk.

Calling him over, Marcos heaved a sigh of relief because the woman seemed to be escalating to a full-blown panic attack. The medical examiner hurried over and quickly grasped the situation. He sent the security guard Hendy off to get some cool water and he began to speak in a soothing, lowly modulated tone, coaxing Laura into slowing her breathing, taking deep breaths and relaxing. He placed his immaculately starched snowy white handkerchief soaked in cool water, at the base of her neck and throat while strokes gentle slow circular motions on her back with his other hand.

As she managed to calm down, he started a discourse on his latest hobby of propagating African Violets that Marcos thought was boring enough to put a homicidal maniac to sleep, although it did seem to be working on the distraught woman. When Laura was finally calm enough, Marco had helped escort her down to Dr Mallard's office where he heard him offering to make her a cup of tea and arrange for her to get safely home again.

Marcos was happy to relinquish Mrs Rowens into the care of Dr Mallard and he went back to monitoring his cameras, wondering if he would be allowed to take his break soon.

~ Betrayals ~

"So, my dear, may I ask what we owe the pleasure of your company?" Ducky enquired after getting Laura Rowens settled in a chair in his office with a cup of peppermint tea.

"I was looking for Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, Dr Mallard."

"I see, may I ask why Mrs Rowens?" Ducky asked, confused.

"Call me Laura, please. Well, I have been visiting my sister out of state while we waited for a new house on base to be assigned after the… um break in's and I told Tony I would call him and let him know when I was back in town." She looked at him and could see how confused he was.

"Tony encouraged me to go to a support group for victims of crime, Doctor. My husband is still deployed, so he went with me the first time and he calls me, to check and make sure I'm okay. But he hasn't been in contact lately and I've tried calling his cell, but it's disconnected. Then when I asked about him at the front desk and with Special Agent Gibbs' team they all acted really weird and said he isn't available although the special agent, the young baby-faced one, he did say he's changed his cell phone. And he refused to give me the new number."

She stopped her explanation and stared at the medical examiner pleadingly. "Is something wrong with Tony? Please, I have to know."

"Someone tried to kill him some weeks ago, my dear but he is recuperating. If you would like to leave your number, I'll let him know that you were asking after him. Can I ask what promoted you panic attack, Laura?" Ducky asked concerned.

Laura dropped her head, refusing to make eye contact and she mumbled so Ducky and Jimmy Palmer who was also surreptitiously listening to the conversation, had to strain mightily to hear her response. "I'm doing better Dr Mallard but when I was up there with Special Agents Gibbs, Todd and McGee, I… I just saw myself in the interrogation room again and… well I started freaking out."

Ducky patted her shoulder gently and murmured words of comfort. Later after Laura Rowens had departed and Jimmy had some spare time to chat to his mentor, he asked about what Laura Rowens said.
"Why does she need to go to a support group, Dr Mallard and why did seeing Team Gibbs cause her to have a panic attack? She didn't actually get raped or anything, did she?"

Ducky stared at his young assistant, surprised he could be so dense. "Because Mr Palmer, first off, Mrs Rowens was threatened in the most primal fashion imaginable, in her own home and forced to shoot a man to defend her own life. I hope you never need to do that Jimmy, but it would send many a mere mortal into therapy for anxiety and traumatisation. And her panic attack when faced with Jethro and the team is simple. Those lowlife criminals went out of their way to besmirch her character and imply that she was an adulteress and murderer. As a result of that, she was forced to undergoing interrogation by Gibbs while she was still highly traumatised."

He smiled to rob his words of any barbs. "You my young friend, can't even cope with him being mildly peeved with you when he comes down to Autopsy. Do you really need to ask about why someone who is a victim of a heinous injustice and had her life threatened, could find it so damaging to be accused of killing someone and attempting to kill her would-be rapist?

"Good gracious, having to deal with a determined Gibbs in interrogation is not something I would wish upon my worst enemy, let alone a vulnerable young woman who is a victim of such violent and sadistic individuals. And can you imagine the horror of returning home to find a pair of eyeballs in your kitchen not to mention an MP waiting to take you into custody on suspicion of murder?"

Jimmy flushed to the roots of his curly brown locks and shook his head, embarrassed that he hadn't thought about it properly before opening his mouth. "I'm sorry Dr Mallard, my mother often says I have foot in mouth disease," he suddenly looked extremely sorry for the young wife of Major Rowens even if he couldn't understand why Tony would be so solicitous though.

Ducky was under no illusion as to why Anthony had expressed his concern about Laura Rawlins. As a former cop, he'd dealt with many victims of crime, yet it had never seemed to desensitise him to their suffering. He'd always been empathetic to the travails of others. Still, he happened to know that Anthony was angry with himself for not pursuing his gut when it came to suspecting Laura's would-be rapist. He'd suspected him right from the start but had been pooh poohed by the others and when the bogus emails have been found, had allowed himself to be diverted.

He had been beating himself up for not insisting on reading them himself. He'd tried to read them, only to be told by Cate that she was the profiler and he didn't need access to them. That was despite the fact he was her superior or that he had a great talent for finding clues in evidence that others couldn't. Ducky knew that Anthony was more than just a pretty face, he had training at Quantico in content analysis, so it was quite possible that if he'd been given access to those fraudulent emails he'd have found some anomaly.

Aside from content analysis Anthony also had a rare combination of people skills and cynical street smarts. When it came to anything of a sexual nature, he was dubious that Caitlin could run rings around the man, especially since she seemed quite squeamish when anything of a sexual nature arose.

Caitlin was a conundrum as a profiler, since much of the work of one focused upon sexual proclivities and motivations and yet as the result of her parochial education, she was a terribly prudish and repressed young woman. Blushing and embarrassment was not exactly a good look for a psychological profiler, any more than a young rookie puking his GI tract up was at a crime scene was good for an investigator’s credibility with their more seasoned peers. She also seemed to have a very unfortunate tendency to bond with suspects and believe their protestations of innocence.

It hadn't just been the rapist Jeremy Davison who’d managed to sweet talk her. There was the amnesiac, Suzanne McNeil - the murderer and mad bomber, who had been left for dead in a shallow
grave. Despite warnings to the contrary not to get emotionally involved, Caitlin had imprinted on her almost instantly, insisting on taking her home to her own apartment and adopting her like a stray puppy or kitten. It was why Ducky would back Gibbs’ gut that Ari was a sick bastard and not a good guy doing what he had to, to stay under cover, rather than trust Caitlin's profiler intuition that his eyes were kindly therefore he was a good guy. There was no reason to shoot poor Gerald, other than sick depravity and Ducky, like Gibbs was not taken in by the monster's lies or his eyes for that matter. Personally, the ME felt they were as empty as the cadavers he spent his days dissecting.

For some reason, in the case of Laura Rowen’s' rapist Caitlin seemed to bond with the rapist, believing him when he claimed that the young Marine wife had set him up. It was possible, even probable that her preconception had coloured, maybe even prejudiced her reading of the emails supposedly written by Laura, when they were fabricated by the would-be rapist and his accomplice. Without maintaining an open mind to analyse the evidence, it was always easy to miss vital clues and it was important to keep reminding oneself that people could and did get hurt when they got it wrong. Her rather sanctimonious and prudish decision to refuse Anthony access to that evidence, while grossly insubordinate, might also have caused Laura to be viewed as a suspect without proper justification and that was a terribly shame. Mrs Rowens was a lovely young woman.

Ducky tucked away Laura's phone number, deciding that she might help Anthony as much as he had supported her. He knew that the agent was out of state until the end of the week and he would send him a text message inviting him to come out over on the weekend for a meal. He could pass on Mrs Rawlins' message when he saw him and perhaps suggest again that he talk to a counsellor.

The medical examiner huffed in exasperation. He didn't know who was more anti mental health professionals, Jethro or Anthony? Although to be fair, the young agent didn't discriminate; he hated medical doctors with an equal passion as well.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tony gets a temporary new partner and a good friend.

Tony sat on the lumpy bed in an unmemorable Denver motel, his back against the headboard, watching CNN with his current FBI partner. The continuous news station was running the breaking story that the Patchwork Serial Killer had been apprehended that night by two federal agents as he left his job as a vet technician at a small veterinary clinic in downtown Denver. The resolution of the case had caught everyone by surprise. No one back in DC had expected the connections that Tony had ferreted out in his own inimitable fashion to actually lead them to the killer. If they had, they’d have sent a posse of FBI agents down to Denver to investigate. Instead, it was a party of two, just himself and one of the Behavioural Analysis Unit profilers, Derek Morgan.

Morgan was also on loan to the Patchwork Killer Taskforce from the BAU, along with two other colleagues, Senior Supervisory Special Agent Jason Gideon and Dr Spenser Reed. In Tony’s opinion Gideon was an analogous version of Gibbs - albeit a profiler rather than an investigator. Of course, he didn't seem to have the latent anger issues that Leroy Jethro Gibbs clearly possessed but they both appeared to have earned a fearsome reputation among their peers, with rookies scarcely daring to speak their names without a sort of hushed reverence. Personally, Tony found Gideon unnerving and had given him a very wide berth while the third profiler, Dr Reid was a ludicrously young wunderkind, who was clearly Gideon's protégé. He looked about nineteen at most and was preternaturally thin to the point that Tony thought he'd fit right in on Ducky's autopsy table. The NCIS agent found the child genius with his child-like devotion to his mentor to be a little too close to home for comfort and avoided him too.

Somehow though, Tony who was always uncomfortable around profilers, psychiatrists, and psychologists, was surprised at how quickly he felt comfortable with Derek Morgan, who he soon discovered, had also been a cop before joining the FBI. Although Morgan worked with the Bomb Squad in Chicago and Tony had been a detective, they still shared a similar cop mentality and had, by a tacit mutual agreement, paired up as partners when going out in the field. Considering his current issues with betrayal and trust, it had been a welcome surprise to find that he could fall into such an easy partnership with the profiler. It was also helping him regain a sense of control over his world and apart from that, he really enjoyed Derek’s company.

After watching the media coverage for a while, needing to unwind and fielding calls from various task force colleagues which Tony was more than happy to leave to the FBI agent, they had ordered a pizza from an all-night pizza joint. Sated, they settled into their respective beds for a well-earned sleep. Tomorrow they would head back to DC and the inevitable mountains of paperwork involved in wrapping up such a high-profile case. The task force would soon be disbanded but first they had to make sure that all their 'T's were crossed and their 'I's dotted.

Once asleep, Tony found himself again trapped in a never-ending cycle of ineffectually trying to fight off his coach while his other teachers and his father stood around watching. In his nightmare, they were yelling at him to suck it up and to remember that he mustn't tell anyone, because they
would hate him. He knew it was a screwed-up memory but sometimes now when he dreamed that dream, Gibbs, Abby and Cate would be there as well and while they would look sad, they also didn't help, merely turned their back on him when he pleaded with them.

Tonight, the nightmare morphed into the vicious attack he'd endured outside his apartment, with Tom Morrow physically holding him down while he yelled at him in what he could only describe as Gibbs -gunny style that he deserved this because he'd been lying to his workmates.

Feeling a strong, comforting hand on his knee, he finally managed to open his eyes to see Morgan's sympathetic brown eyes watching him carefully. As the inevitable panic attack began to take hold of him now he was conscious, he started to hyperventilate, Derek took charge and coached him through the episode with understated authority and compassion. As Tony focused on the man's slow, even breathing, attempting to match it, he wondered when he'd given the game away.

Had the FBI profiler seen through Tony's rather brittle, flimsy façade from the get-go? Had it been as they spent more time together, partnering up and frequently bunking together for trips out of state, chasing down leads? Had it only been tonight when the perp had finally been caught and he'd let his guard down, since there'd been less to occupy his mind with? He honestly didn't know. He tried to keep the existence of his nightmares to himself, but it was hard, when you were sharing a room with someone and living right under their nose. It was entirely possible that Morgan had noticed earlier on, he supposed and simply ignored it until now.

Tony didn't know but now once the panic attack subsided after Derek had handed him some bottled water, he'd confronted him about them. Sure, he'd tried to brush Morgan's concerns off by explaining the nightmare and accompanying anxiety attack as the inevitable upshot of what had happened to him. Anyone who'd been attacked outside their own apartment block would feel nervous too, but Derek Morgan was good. Shit, he didn't know if it was their shared background as cops who had become feds, his empathy and his own emotional ouchies, his profiling skills or just that Tony really needed to talk. Whatever it was, he found himself reluctantly spilling his guts about his anger and hurt caused by his team mates treachery. About his sense of betrayal when Gibbs had turned his back on him, after he'd given his boss unswerving loyalty and he had slavishly watched his back for the last four years.

He figured that although Morgan was good, it was probably also a question of being in the right place at the right time. Serendipity, was that the term? What really shocked him though; was that Morgan managed what no one else had managed in the past two decades. He found that his new and soon to be ex-partner, managed to breech the most impenetrable of defences, with frightening ease.

Against his will, he found himself revealing what had happened at Pennington Grammar, so long ago and had been terribly relieved when Derek seemed almost matter-a-fact about what Tony revealed. He was terrified that when he looked into the profiler's face, he would see pity there or disgust. Tony wasn't sure which emotion would be worse, since he abhorred being thought of as weak or pitiful. Both Senior and Gibbs in his own way had made it plain that real men should be neither weak nor pitiful. Yet to be regarded with disgust; that was beyond his ability to endure and the adult, the rational ex-cop and capable, competent federal agent knew that he had nothing to be ashamed about.

He knew that he couldn't stop that sicko paedophile coach from assaulting him, nevertheless the emotional development of a small nine-year-old boy had been arrested at the point of the first of many rapes and he never recovered or matured as he was supposed to. That little boy, still believed what had happened was his fault. Nine-year-old Tony knew without doubt that he deserved it, since his coach had told him so, over and over again. He knew it to be so because his own father had warned him that no one must ever find out what had happened. That if anyone was ever to discover
what he had done with Coach, he would be reviled.

And then, the behaviour of a great many of his colleagues over the last several months had done little to dispel that notion. To hate someone with such vehemence and totally irrational hatred, simply because they had been born hardwired to be attracted to the same sex, was irrational and hateful. To go so far as to assault, threaten or try to kill someone because they were perceived to be a little different was not acceptable, but it also sent the implicitly abhorrent message that gay people were subhuman – abhorrent.

Since paedophilia was frequently lumped together with homosexuality, it stood to reason that child survivors were desperate to retain anonymity lest they also be branded as subhuman and abhorrent too. In his case, having a parent that was desperate to ensure that the whole "sordid episode" his father's words not his, was never revealed lest he bring shamed upon the DiNozzo family name, its message worked its own insidious type of canker on a young and impressionable mind. It convinced an extremely vulnerable and lonely young Anthony DiNozzo that there was something inherently flawed about him and it was imperative to hide that fact from everyone.

Even in adulthood, that mindset was impossible to escape - so even as he unb Burdened himself of his most shameful of secrets for the first time as an adult, he was terrified that he had made the biggest mistake of his life. Derek Morgan's lack of response, his matter-of-fact acceptance of Tony's account without question, his enquiry about what had happened to the animal that had stolen his innocence and ability to trust others, served to reassure him that the person he had finally chosen to trust with his long-held secret was a sound one. Afterwards, he had slept better than he had for ages; at least since that damned photo had destroyed his comfortable existence as an NCIS agent.

Now, after awaking and experiencing another flashback in the motel shower, as he focused his attention on matching Morgan's calm and even respirations, he thought about the similarities between him and Derek. Not just the fact they were jocks who had both been looking at professional careers - in football for Morgan and basketball in his case - when they had both suffered career ending injuries. Rather than give in to their disappointment, they had both decided to channel their passion into a career in local law enforcement so that they might serving others. Then, more parallels as each of them had become federal agents working their way up the ranks and showing leadership qualities.

Recalling the Gibbs' dictum that there was no such thing as co-incidences, Tony couldn't help thinking that their meeting was fated. He also couldn't help wondering if their similarities went even further; curious about Morgan's ability to make him talk when others had tried and failed. He wasn't stupid, he'd seen the angst filled looks from Ducky, Gibbs and Fornell, it was the same one that many a shrink had worn over the years as they tried to get him to speak. Yet he'd never cracked, never even thought about spilling his guts until now. So now he had to wonder what it was about Morgan that had been the key.

Moving back into cop-mode, he recalled the estimated incidence of sexual assaults against male children and realised that from the standpoint of probability alone, he must have encountered other survivors of paedophiles over the years. Even on the various police department he had worked for or at NICS - or at the FBI. When his chest no longer felt like it was going to burst, and he could speak again without his voice quaking, Tony asked the question, giving his new friend the chance to deflect if he wanted to.

"Thanks, I'm okay now. So, you ever work with SVU when you were a cop or was it someone close to you? No one's been able to get past my defences before, you're good man," he probed delicately. "And you're also a good man."

Morgan stared back at him implacably, "Brother's under the skin, Tony but you figured that out,
didn't you?"

Tony felt guilty for prying. "Sorry Derek, forget I asked."

"Hey don't sweat it. Just didn't want to use it as emotional blackmail to get you to talk."

He then proceeded to explain how he had grown up in a loving but impoverished background without his father and ended up finding trouble with crime gangs. How a mentor that happened along and had kicked his butt into shape, at the same time he molested him and a score of other young boys. While superficially, they had very different upbringings, with Tony's extremely privileged background very different from a poor African American kid from Chicago, both were missing a positive male role model in their lives. But both boys craved male attention and thus were utterly vulnerable and rife for any paedophile that happened along. Morgan was just lucky that he had a cohesive and supportive family who helped him through the tough times, whilst Tony had had Senior and a series of boarding schools.

Tony had no illusions which of them had been the richer one growing up, despite superficial appearances.

They sat drinking coffee and swapping stories from college ball games, cases they'd worked over the years as cops and feds and Morgan regaled him with stories about the rest of the profilers who worked at the BAU. He could tell that there was something that the profiler wanted to say but did feel free to, so he told him to spit it out.

"Have you ever tried to find out about the individuals who managed to hush up your assault Tony? Did you ever get in touch with your teacher that reported it, and do you know if Baxter had his position terminated after you went home? Were you ever curious, because I'd personally like to nail the bastards that sent you away thinking that there was something wrong with you, just so that their precious school’s reputation wouldn't be tarnished?"

Tony shook his head. Once he'd discovered that the sicko Baxter was dead, he'd felt an overwhelming sense of relief and he'd tried to put the entire matter behind him. Yet he could see that it might be helpful to actually look into the matter with the eye of an investigator and see if there was anything he could salvage from that horrific time. Perhaps he could track down his old drama teacher and thank her for stopping the abuse. He agreed that since he wanted to, Derek could look into the case with his kooky technical analyst buddy Penelope Garcia from the BAU to find out what happened to the other people involved in the cover-up. He knew that his new friend would be discreet and not reveal his secret.

Deciding a change of topic was in order, he broached the issue that had been troubling him for weeks now.

"Gibbs wants me to come back to the team." He snorted amused by the banality of that particular statement, "Actually he never wanted me to go on secondment in the first place. Says he's working on the team, to fix what went wrong and reinforce my position in the chain of command. Thinks it helped cause the situation"

Derek remained impassive. "Have the people responsible been held to account, yet?"

"The security staff have been dismissed and charged. The others who created the photo or turned a blind eye to it, are waiting on the recommendations from IA, the FBI and JAG. Scuttlebutt is that the investigations have been completed for a while and SecNav and the Secretary of Defence are sitting on the recommendations. As far as I know Abby and Cate were suspended without pay for 30 days but I think that is likely to be the extent of it."
"And can you live with that, Tony? More importantly, can you work there again, work with them?"
The profiler stared at him empathetically. Maybe it was a cop thing, but it meant a lot to know that
your partners could be depended upon to watch your back. Few cops lasted the distance working
with people that you didn't trust.

Tony had been asking himself this very question for weeks now. Could he go back and work with
them again? Usually he was quick to forgive people that wronged him, especially people he worked
with but for some reason he was having a lot of trouble getting past his anger and feelings of
betrayal. He'd had similar feelings about his partner Danny Price in Baltimore which was why he left
and he wasn't sure if he could overcome the betrayal now. More importantly, with Director Morrow
at the helm, he wasn't sure if he should even bother.

He thought back to the last couple of months since he started on the task force…Gibbs had taken to
dropping by with takeout after work or on the weekends. He'd bring his workout gear and they'd go
running together, starting with a few blocks the first few times after Tony’s surgery. Tony realised
that Gibbs had figured out that he was nervous about starting his running again and was offering
company and support even though neither of them mentioned his obvious nervousness at crowds and
loud noises. He'd even watched the odd movie with him, especially if it was a John Wayne or
Harrison Ford offering.

After their abortive attempt to hash out the reasons behind Gibbs appalling lapse in judgement and
poor behaviour, they had discussed it at length a few times. He could see how Gibbs could be
harbouring guilt about breaking up his impending marriage with Wendy, but Tony didn't even know
why she called off the wedding the night before the ceremony. For all he knew, she was fed up with
him because he didn’t put the cap on the toothpaste, not because he had decided to change jobs and
bosses for Pete’s sake. Yeah it had hurt him and so he’d dramatically changed his persona to protect
himself, even more that he had previously. And the skirt-chaser jock was born.

Maybe Gibbs should be paying more attention to his own interpersonal relationships though,
including those with his team and work more on his ginormous-sized dose of grandiosity to think
that Wendy dumped him for working with a bastard. In fact, as bad as it hurt at the time to be
dumped and the way it happened just sucked, he belatedly reached the conclusion that it was better
than waiting til they were married for her to leave him. It still didn’t excuse Gibbs for not believing
him though.

Tony was also finding it difficult to deal with the ludicrous excuse that Gibbs had decided that Tony
hadn’t told him he was gay because he had romantic feelings for Gibbs, which weren’t reciprocated.
When Tony had bitterly demanded to know how he’d reached such a ludicrous notion, he was
shattered to learn that Gibbs had been listening to narrow minded gossips – probably the same people
who would have joined in on the attacks on him, given half a chance. Apparently, his colleagues
were of the opinion that the only reason why he would let Gibbs treat him like dirt was because he
was besotted with him and letting Gibbs use him for sex.

What did it say about his pathetic need to win Gibbs approval that he would rationalise his boss’
abuse of him as demanding Tony be the best agent he could be. In hindsight, he realised what had
always been plain to everyone else - no matter how much blood, sweat and tears he gave Gibbs it
would never be enough. Tony would never be good enough.

It was why he gave the brilliant young profiler, Dr Spencer Reid such a wide berth. He could see
how dysfunctional his relationship was to his mentor, Jason Gideon. It was just too close for comfort
to the relationship he’d had with Leroy Jethro Gibbs – too one-sided, too much hero-worship, too
little mutual respect for it to be healthy.
Being a glass half full kind of guy, he'd decided if there was anything positive to be taken away from the mess, it was that he now had tangible proof that the mighty Leroy Jethro Gibbs' was capable of butt-headed thinking – despite his infallible gut. Not that he was prepared to give Gibbs a free pass over his misplaced guilt. Every subsequent decision he'd taken based on that dumbass thought, had inexorably driven him down the road, further away from Tony and watching his six.

But if there was one philosophy that had gotten him through some bleak times, it was that you had to find the little ray of sunshine in the midst of the storm. He was really trying hard to hold onto that attitude. It wasn't easy.

Gibbs talked exhaustively, well for someone who was effectively a functional mute anyway, about how he was working on restructuring the team. How he'd made sure when they had a case where they needed a fourth team member, he'd picked a hard-ass, by-the-book SFA to fill in TAD so they could help slap the juniors into shape. More important for Tony, Gibbs had confessed that he'd been remiss in not supporting Tony as the next in line in the chain of command within the team. He was now working hard to be more inclusive and to collaborate more with his second in command and not to be so secretive. Ducky had been working with him as well to develop strategies to foster cooperation and collaboration and mentoring of strengths and weaknesses.

All of which was rather shocking to Tony, not to mention gratifying. Yet he was also still struggling emotionally to let go of the hurt and sense of betrayal that he felt when Gibbs had turned his back on him, at one of the most desperate times in his life.

Did he really want to go back to the MCRT and if he did go back, the question still remained as to whether he could ever be able to trust any of them again to watch his six?
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Derek Morgan proves he has Tony’s six.

Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo leaned back into his leather seat aboard the FBI Learjet and sighed contentedly. They were heading back to DC and the weekend was beckoning and he'd even made plans for a change. With the case being wrapped up, he was probably going to keep his date with Paula and he was surprised that he was actually looking forward to it. Now after months of secondment, with the sadistic sexual predator who'd been killing victims for almost a decade caught, the taskforce formed to catch him would be disbanded. Tony would face a major decision about his future and he hoped that Paula Cassidy would help him make his decision.

All in all, it had been a tough couple of months. Dealing with that damned photo, the subsequent fallout from Gibbs sending it to the whole of NCIS and its impact upon every facet of his existence, the emotional and mental abuse, multiple physical attacks, his recovery, the difficult decision to take indefinite leave from NCIS and join the FBI taskforce. All of which had taken its toll on him. He hoped the worst was over.

At first, heading off to the Hoover Building every day instead of the Naval Yard had been difficult, almost impossible really, especially since he was still trying to regain his confidence and control his rampaging panic attacks. Sure, he'd managed to ace his Mandatory Psych Eval so he could return to work, even if he was confined to the office until he was physically healed, but seeing that several of the FBI's top notch profilers were also assigned to the taskforce, that made it more difficult to maintain the pretence that he was coping. The pressure of knowing that he couldn't afford to slip up was exhausting and stressful. He had to call on his vast repertoire of undercover skills to maintain the sham that he was recovering and moving on.

The truth was that the nightmares of what had happened to him at Pennington Grammar had returned full force and was stalking him continuously. Although he was always battled the occasional nightmare, especially after he worked cases of child molestation or abuse he had managed to mostly supress them, especially since he joined the Peoria Police Force and managed to discover that Baxter had been killed while in prison. Now, after the latest series of attacks, the nightmares about the months of abuse he'd endured as a child were back with a vengeance. Tony wasn't sure if it was because of the Patchwork Killer case or whether it was solely the effects of the attacks he'd endured after that stupid damned photo saw the light of day. If he had to hazard a guess it was probably a combination of the two.

Still, as horrendous as the whole Patchwork Killer case was, he had been grateful for the intellectual challenge it presented. He always excelled at figuring out puzzles and as he was confined for almost a month to the office, he wasn't exposed to the raw realities of pain, suffering, blood and gore which even the most graphic of crime scene photos couldn't truly capture in full. Even when he was finally cleared to return to full duties, he found he welcomed the return to the familiar realm of field work despite the nature of the crime scenes.

In some ways, it felt like he was visiting a foreign country without his NCIS team mates, especially
Gibbs. By default, he found himself teaming up with an FBI profiler from the Behavioural Analysis Unit who was a former cop. Derek Morgan was a great person to have following you into a tight situation and he had a sense of humour, which was always a bonus as far as Tony was concerned. They’d shared an athletics background even if the Fibbie was built like a muscle-bound jock, a defensive footballer to be precise with the muscles that went along with that while Tony had a more classical athletic physique, built for speed and grace rather than force and power. Somehow though they clicked.

Now with the case cracked wide open and the Fibbies needing to interrogate the killer to obtain a confession and find if there were any other victims they didn't know about, there wasn't a lot for Tony to do, bar the endless paperwork. The eggheads from the BAU would no doubt prod, poke, analyse and show inkblots to the sicko pervert, quite possibly for many years to come, looking at why and how he became the monster he was now. Before that the profilers would be occupied, assisting Fornell, who as one of their wiliest and experienced interrogators, had been assigned with getting a confession leading to a slam dunk conviction.

Tony was pretty sure that the taskforce members would probably want to go out tonight for drinks and dinner to celebrate catching the dirtbag… er the perp before everyone went back to their individual jobs again. Almost as if Derek could read Tony's mind, he nudged his knee.

"Are you up for drinks and dinner with the others tonight, Tony?"

He looked at the FBI profiler, sitting opposite him, slouched in his leather seat and grinned. He really liked how being on the taskforce meant they got to use the FBI jet, it sure beat travelling by military transport. "Yeah, I guess so, unless I don't get my report done in time," he replied thinking about how Fornell had been rubbing the private FBI jet in his face using it as an incentive to try to tempt him to stay with the FBI permanently. The BAU had also been clamouring for him to stay on and join them too.

Morgan nodded, "You give anymore thought to the notion of joining us at the BAU, Tony?"

"Wow was the guy psychic or what?" Tony wondered "Yeah, but I don't know that I'd fit in man. I'm an ex-cop and I'm not exactly academic material."

"That's crap, man! You have post grad qualifications, you have to, to be a SFA at NCIS and I know for a fact that you got some real decent scores in profiling, not to mention hostage negotiation. You'd also be our most highly qualified agent with firearms and weapons and along with me, the most capable in unarmed combat. Actually, seeing you've had partners who were a Marine, or bodyguard to the Commander in Chief, you probably could kick my ass."

"Exactly, I'd just be the brawns to you guys' brains."

"HEY! There's nothing wrong with your brain. You’re far from just being a jock. You have a way of arranging evidence in a way that no one else does and you can find new clues and leads. Trust me; you'd be a huge asset for our team."

The NCIS agent shrugged, not convinced. "Haven't decided what I'm going to do yet, Derek. Fornell said he's looking for a new 2IC and wants me to come and work for him." Tony thought that it might be a more comfortable fit, if he decided to leave NCIS but then again if he joined Tobias, he might have to work with Gibbs' MCRT since Fornell always got the short straw when it came to joint investigations. He smirked knowing that was because no one else would work with Gibbs. Working for Tobias might make it a bit awkward if he had to work with his former teammates but still it didn't happen every day.
"Can see where that might be a good fit, but then again if you came and worked for us, it'd be a new start." Derek frowned. "It'd be a fresh challenge and maybe that's what you really need to do right now, Tony and it would be good for our team too. Look, the way you assembled the facts and then threw all our assumptions out on their ass. That's what broke the case and it’s why the Big Chiefs were busting their asses to get you on the taskforce. You aren't afraid to think outside the box."

He saw the dubious expression in his temporary partner's eyes as he attempted to convince Tony of his worth. "We were all so damned sure that Craig Sheridan had an 'either or' background. You shook us up and made us question our assumptions, arguing he could be both and was choosing his vics from people he came into contact with in both his personal and professional life. What made you figure out he was a vet tech or that he'd been taken from his mother when she was arrested for statutory rape?"

Tony shrugged self-effacingly, "Cmon Derek, you profilers had already done the heavy lifting about his maternal background. Mommy liked sleeping with under age adolescent boys and when she got caught and went to jail, Sheridan lost his mother, so instead of blaming his mother he blamed the victims for destroying his 'happy' childhood. I simply pointed out to your geeks, sorry your technical analysts that just because they couldn't find anyone that fit the parameters that you'd already defined, didn't mean they didn't exist. Computers can make it easier to track dirtbags but it can also limit us if we allow it to."

"It just meant we needed to look elsewhere. Wealthy families will go to extreme lengths to ensure that the skeletons in their closets will never see the light of day. Persuading their "daughter-in-law" to stand trial under her mother's maiden name was sneaky but somewhat predictable if you spend any time around the rich and powerful. Burying a paper trail between her and the Sheridan family was sneaky but definitely not unexpected."

Derek interrupted Tony's attempts to downplay his role in solving this case "Yet, without your urging, we'd never have kept looking for the connection. Until we started combining his movements as a locum vet tech, which made him highly mobile with his bizarre hobby, we couldn't find a way to tie the perp to all the crime locations. It was you that made the difference since you think way outside the box."

Morgan stood up and walked over to grab them both a coffee before returning to the seat and conversation.

" You still haven’t explained. What made you think he might be a veterinarian or a vet tech? Are you psychic or something? And how did you know about applique?"

Tony rolled his eyes, before answering, "Nope, not psychic. Wasn’t anything so dramatic. Process of elimination; we weren't having luck with the medicos, the funeral industry nor butchers or abattoir workers and I remembered that our Autopsy Gremlin." seeing his temporary partner's confusion he elaborated, "The ME's assistant at NCIS…. I call him Autopsy Gremlin.

"Anyway, he used to work in a vet clinic when he was a teenager, before going to Med School. Combine that with the whole super clichéd, sociopathic serial killer stereotype about them getting off inflicting pain and suffering on animals. It isn't just a love of animals that attracts some people to the profession, sadly." The tall agent stood up after taking a mouthful of coffee and pulling a face, before walking over to the coffee tray and helping himself to sugar.

"Did anyone ever tell you, that you suck at making coffee, man?" he asked teasingly. "You'd get on fine with Gibbs ya know. Sure you're not a Marine?"

The handsome FBI profiler smiled benignly, recognising the teasing for what it was; simple pressure
relief and also a sign of how much Tony like him and felt comfortable around him… now. He remembered back to when Tony first joined the taskforce, how stilted and polite he’d been with them all. Derek had realised as they found common ground and mutual respect, that his joking and teasing increased and figured out it was reserved for people the NCIS agent liked and admired.

Meanwhile, Morgan knew that if he remained silent, Tony would eventually return to the topic they’d been discussing. Sometimes you just had to let him take the scenic route, but he was learning that the detour was generally worth the wait. Sure enough, the FBI agent's patience was rewarded

"Oh well, we can't all have refined palate's I suppose. You no doubt have other talents, D. Just lucky you don't need to go undercover as a barista anytime soon." Tony smirked obnoxiously.

"So where were we…um…the craft connection, specifically the applique crowd, right? No doubt expecting me to regale you with stories of an upper crust English born mother dragging her son, the poor little rich boy around with her for high teas and sewing circles?" He quirked an eyebrow at the profiler who’d been envisioning exactly that image.

““Well sorry to disappoint but my mother wouldn't have recognised a pair of embroidery scissors from a thimble, but she did play a mean game of polo and was obsessed with bridge and mint juleps.” He gave a rather brittle sounding laugh before rubbing his dominant right hand over his face, composing himself again before continuing.

"A much more prosaic excuse than my silver spoon upbringing, I'm afraid.” Tony tried not to think about her dressing him up in those hated sailor suits. “I worked a homicide case in Baltimore where the victim was into quilting; and not the sort that lives on your bed, either. These were works of art – fine art actually. Interviewed a fair few guys that were into it, too and when that Quilt Exhibition coincided with several slayings it was too coincidental not to investigate. We got lucky, we'd never have found him if he'd stuck to stalking his prey where he worked. Would have been next to impossible to track him when he was itinerant."

"Okay, I can see it wasn't second sight, but I still don't see how you figure out he was taking trophies other than the sub cutaneous sample of skin from his victims?"

Tony looked at Derek, to check that his soon to be ex-partner wasn't stroking his still highly fragile ego, in light of what he had revealed to him back in Denver. That would amount to pity, something he definitely didn't want or need. Confident it was just the profiler's incurable nosiness, he shrugged.

"Sleight of hand and distraction is kind of my specialty, Derek. Something I learnt as a kid and then perfected, working undercover. When I wanted to hide something important from someone, I gave them something else to focus on instead. The patchwork skin was always a message to us so we knew that it was his work; he wanted the credit for it. But taking a scrap of fabric from somewhere that went unnoticed, that was a trophy for him in it true sense. Incorporating it into his applique was his way of preserving it for posterity. Exhibiting it publicly was just more evidence of his grandiosity but then you're the profiler, Derek. I'm sure you're much better qualified than me to speak to his pathology.

Morgan nodded, thinking that although he didn't want to hassle Tony right now, his abilities and insights would definitely complement the existing skill-set on the team and decided to drop just a few more cookie crumbs to tempt him.

"You have what the BAU is looking for DiNozzo, street smarts, trivia and culture hidden deep down in that happy-go-lucky pretty boy act." Morgan words were teasing although his tone conveyed his seriousness.
Tony grinned at him, mischievously. "I'm also available for wedding, parties and bar mitzvahs too, you know."

"We'd make a great team for you," the profiler pressed.

Tony was reminded of the question that Morgan had posed last night at the end of highly charged emotional outpouring of pain and angst.

And can you live with that, Tony? More importantly, can you work there again, work with them? Damned if he knew!

His phone beeped, interrupting his never-ending internal debate and he checked to see that Paula Cassidy had sent him a text asking him to video call her ASAP. She had urgent news for him. He frowned. His friend was due back from the gulf today on the USS Kennedy as part of the Armed Amphibian Strike Group where she'd served as Agent Afloat. He'd promised Paula if he was in DC and could get away, that he would go down to Norfolk to welcome her home and they'd planned to spend the weekend together. He'd sent a text to her yesterday to let her know he was in Denver and wouldn't make it back in time, but he'd catch up with her later on.

Tony might not be psychic, but he knew that something was wrong, and it had to be bad if she wanted him to video call her immediately.

Derek glanced at Tony, noting the federal agent's pallor and obvious anxiety. "What's up Tony?"

"A friend just sent me an urgent text. I think something bad has gone down cuz she wants me to conference call her. She's the Agent Afloat on the USS Kennedy and they're supposed to be docking at Norfolk, today."

His friend gestured to the laptop. "I was just going to chat to Penelope about Pendleton Grammar. Be my guest. If you have the number, she can set it up for you."

Tony gave him a look of gratitude. "Thanks Derek, I don't think I can wait til we get back, to find out what's wrong." He fidgeted impatiently, his gut churning at a rate that would do Gibbs proud and he had a terrible feeling that something really bad had happened.

Finally, he heard Penelope say, "Okay Tonio, I have Special Agent Cassidy standing by for you from the USS Kennedy. Go ahead Caro."

He was aware that Morgan had stood up and moved to the other end of the jet to give him some privacy before Paula appeared on the screen in her office on the Kennedy. Staring at her face, DiNozzo knew whatever it was, it was really terrible.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The major case response teams TAD senior field agent reflects on the progress of Gibbs' attempt to instill respect for the chain of command into his junior agents and Paula has some bad news for Tony about the team.

Tony studied the face of his colleague, friend and sometimes lover as she stared back at him from her cramped office aboard the USS Kennedy, and immediately he could see the strained, almost haggard features and that filled him with an unspeakable dread.

"Hey Paula, what's wrong?"

She grimaced. "Have you talked to anyone from NCIS in the last 24 hours, Tony?"

The feeling of dread was moving up from his belly like an icicle, attacking his heart and reaching up into his throat and extending down to his bowels as well. Oh God, someone's dead!

"No Paula, tell me, please!"

"Terrorists attacked the Norfolk pier where the Amphibious Strike Group was arriving, there were families gathering to meet the ships. They stole an unmanned drone, NCIS managed to shoot it down but not before a number of civilians including children and a baby were killed and scores more injured. We believe that Ari Haswari is behind it and it's looking like he is really a rogue Mossad agent and needs to be taken out. Needless to say, his handler and supporters are still protesting his innocence or at least advising caution."

"Aside from the civilians, how many casualties are we talking about, Paula. Are you okay?"

Paula smiled, although it looked forced. "Just the terrorists and a few agents got superficial GSWs, nothing serious, I'm okay. But Tony there was an ambush of two Naval pilots yesterday, one of whom was involved in the drone program. The terrorists murdered him and took his hands for a biometric scan to arm the drone and create a missile."

Paula stuttered to a stop and Tony knew she had something even worse to tell him.

“What happened that you don’t want to tell me, Paula?”

“Gibbs’ team was called out to investigate the crime scene and Ari had rigged the car. McGee inadvertently triggered it when Cate ordered him to search the trunk. God Tony, I'm sorry. I really wish I didn't have to tell you this."

Tony felt as if he was frozen as all the blood drained from his body to be replaced by ice as he listened to the chaos that Ari had brought down upon the MCRT and felt his vision greying. He heard a roaring in his ears and head and he felt like he was about to pass out. He clung tenaciously to the last threads of consciousness, his brain replayed the hated words of his father, telling him that DiNozzo men don't pass out. Somewhere in the background he could hear Paula yelling out to him,
but he felt as if she was too far away for him to reach. He was focusing on not letting go of the last thread connecting him to reality.

Dimly, he felt arms wrapped around his shoulders, guiding him to the bench seat where Derek made him to stretch out and hurried away to grab a blanket to throw over him, before grabbing a mug of hot sweet tea and ordering him to sip it.

In the background he could hear Paula and Morgan talking, Paula delivering a succinct sitrep while the profiler asked sharp, insightful questions. After a bit he had a sense that the tables had turned, and Derek was the one supplying information while the NCIS agent asked the questions.

Finally, when the shock subsided somewhat, he managed to force down the panic and maelstrom of emotions and he re-joined Paula and Derek at the laptop, mortified by his breakdown.

"I'm sorry I had to be the bearer of such bad news, Tony. I thought someone else might have informed you already.

~ Betrayals~

The day before at NCIS Bullpen

Special Agent Cassie Yates was seated at Tony DiNozzo's desk surveying the two junior agents critically. She'd agreed to help out Gibbs as his TAD while Tony was off playing with the big boys on the joint taskforce. At a loose end with the completion of her undercover operation, Cassie was waiting for her new team to be assigned. One of her agents was getting back from his deployment as Agent Afloat at Norfolk this weekend and her probie was graduating in a couple of weeks from FLETC. When Gibbs ask her if she could help whip Todd and McGee into shape, she thought it would be an amusing way of passing the time. Although her first boss Chris Pacci had been pretty tight with Gibbs, she never really worked on his team before and thought it would look good on her CV.

Still, as much as agents all felt that a stint serving on the' MCRT was good kudos professionally, it was the measured opinion amongst the other senior agents that the gig as Gibbs’ SFA sucked. Despite his legendary status in NCIS and other alphabet agencies, he was notoriously difficult to work for. Some agents felt he was best suited to working with a partner as his successful spell with DiNozzo for more than a year demonstrated. He had a genuine respect for Tony and they had a partnership that encompassed friendship and collaboration, which made them renowned as a team. Their close out rate had been the envy of everyone within NCIS and outside it, as well.

That was until the MCRT went from a partnership to an actual team of four. Gibbs seemed incapable of making the transition which included maintaining a clear-cut chain of command. Gibbs turned into a micromanager, unable to trust or delegate tasks to his senior field agent that weren't simply scut work. Tony went from being a mature and trusted partner to having to play the clown to draw all of Gibbs ire and frustration away from the rest of the team.

It certainly wasn't something DiNozzo’s colleagues aspired to or envied him at all and Cassie and the other senior agents watched Tony’s frustration as the once cooperative relationship between the two men disappeared. Gibbs would set off to gather information from the scientists or other sources, leaving Tony well out of the loop, while his boss adopted a 'knowledge is power' attitude and that in order for him to be an effective team lead, it was important that the left hand rarely knew what the right was up to. Then when he had enough information, Gibbs would assemble his team and demand answers from then then as they started to give him answers he would sweep in with all the puzzle pieces ala Hercule Periot to show up his agents with his superior brilliance.
The problem was that there were agents who remembered the days where Tony and Gibbs worked as a two-man team who knew that Tony was more than up to the challenge of keeping up with Gibbs. They also knew that the SFA could have easily shown him up to the juniors by revealing his tells and trick and put the pieces of cases together publicly since he hadn't suddenly lost his insatiable curiosity or flair for investigating. Yet, Tony stayed loyal to his partner and had his six, not just in the field but by maintaining the new role Gibbs had thrust him into as dumb jock whose role was to be the fulcrum for Gibbs' pathological anger.

Cassie had worried that while Tony was a gifted agent, if he was forced to hide his talents and play the fool, that eventually he would start to believe that he was defined by the role Gibbs had forced him to assume. Although she wasn't anywhere near as accomplished or experienced in undercover work as Tony, she knew that eventually, the fiction started to meld into reality, even for DiNozzo. And that would be a tragedy in her humble opinion.

Yates wasn't sure why Gibbs was such a different animal when he led a team, as opposed to how he was when he was one half of a partnership. After all, he had a long-standing military career and achieved the enviable rank of gunnery sergeant in the Marine Corp, so he must have dealt with chain of command. It didn't make sense. Then again, she equally couldn't understand how such an unreasoningly impatient individual could have become a sniper, much less such a successful one. Leroy Jethro Gibbs was certainly a paradox, wrapped up in a conundrum bound up in a gold-plated enigma.

Suddenly she'd had a mental image of Gibbs as a turduckin, that stupid 'culinary' creation where a turkey was stuffed with a duck which had been stuffed with a chicken. She'd nearly lost her breakfast as she visualised Special Agent Turduckin toting a Sig Saur and a cup of joe, all dressed up in a flack vest and NCIS cap and wearing a platinum ID bracelet, striding around the bullpen shouting SitRep…grab your gear and don’t call me Sir.

She had to give herself a mental head slap to stop the ridiculous imagery from hijacking her mental processes. The soon to be team leader wondered if her Walter Mitty type flights of fancy were a stress response to her impending promotion or if she was simply losing her marbles.

When Gibbs come to her wanting her to fill in as SFA, Cassie has turned him down at first. She didn't want her own confidence battered right before she stepped up to the challenge of managing her very first team, even with the cachet that came from working with the eponymous Gibbs. The risk was just too high in her opinion.

She also doubted she was as mentally tough as Tony who'd achieved legendary status for his ability to handle long term undercover roles. But to her surprise, Gibbs had explained… actually explained which could almost if you squinted hard enough, be seen as him pleading...okay maybe if it was any other mere mortal, she concluded. He told her he was working toward having a clearly defined chain of command within the team and he wanted someone as SFA who would whoop Todd and McGee's butts into line.

Against her better judgement she reconsidered because she wanted to help make things better for Tony should he come back. Although she wasn't sure that he would or should, she agreed to fill in until her new team was assigned to her. Gibbs assured her that he had already started the process with several hard assed SFA's but that he thought that Cassie's style of leadership was more simpatico with Tony's which was authoritative rather than his own authoritarian approach. She also had agreed, contingent upon Gibbs not only supporting her management of the junior members of the team but that he treat her position with the respect it deserved, not cutting off the flow of Intel about cases like he did with DiNozzo. Now as she sat at Tony's desk, she reviewed how successful she'd been in achieving those goals.
Cassie had to admit that Todd and McGee were a tough pair of nuts to crack. McGee looked like a
gEEK and well heck he was one and she'd be the first to concede that he was first rate at wrangling a
computer and its bits and bytes, but he was deceptive too. He looked and acted like a terrified green
rookie around Gibbs and had a soft puppy-dog look that made you want to pat him and give him a
hug to reassure him. She'd soon discovered that he was nowhere near as lacking in esteem as he
seemed, and he was just as likely to snap at you if you tried to give him advice. He could also be
infuriatingly smug and unwilling to take directions from anyone that didn't make him shit his pants.
Tim knew he was highly intelligent and unless intimidated by the sort of gunny physicality and
mental mind games favoured by Gibbs, he seemed to have no respect for his superiors. While she
wasn't a profiler, she wondered what that spoke to about his relationship with his father and what it
had been like growing up.

She also noticed that McGee had a serious Achilles heel, he slavishly worshiped at the altar of Abby
Sciuto, who although a person who went around hugging everyone and acting like she was Mary
Poppins on Caff-Pow was, at least when it came to sexual liaisons, extremely dominant and
controlling. Not a person to be crossed, especially when she had the backing of Director Morrow and
was also seen as Gibbs' gal, who was highly protective of her. Apparently, she and McGee had a
short-lived affair but since Abby favoured bad boys who could dominate her own alpha personality,
Cassie wasn't all that surprised that McGee hadn't held her interest for long as a sexual partner. He
was too submissive but if she was reading him right, the poor schmuck would remain Abby's slave
for life. Always hopeful that he could rekindle her lust for him, mistaking her easy familiarity, flirting
and friendliness for something more.

Cassie liked and admired the Goth forensic scientist well enough; well she had before she'd been
mean spirited enough to conspire with Cate Todd to dummy up that damned photo. With the
situation with McGee she couldn't help but wonder if Tim had been attempting to win Abby back by
siding with her and Todd instead of reporting her over the faked photo. Was it simply misplaced
loyalty to her or was there something more personal between McGee and Tony that prompted him to
leave a team mate's back exposed. Whatever it was, and it was probably a combination of factors,
Cassie was getting distinctly fed-up with his complacency and conceit when he was a mere rookie.

She rather thought that there might be some envy towards Tony if McGee's carry-on over that letter a
few weeks before had been anything to go by. She'd come in, maybe six weeks ago, just before
she'd taken up her position as TAD filling Tony's job and still trying to size up the pair she was
supposed to be whipping into shape. McGee had been waving around a letter that looked to be
manufactured on expensive card and the script revealed fine calligraphy as he tucked it into the
bottom draw of Tony's desk along with various other things that had been accruing for him, awaiting
his returned.

Cate looked interested, "What was that Tim?"

McGee smirked, "Oh another love letter for DiNozzo, from one of his bimbos. I can't believe how
many he's received since he was attacked. Don't they know that he's fine now and back at work?
And not working here. You'd think that they stop sending them by now, wouldn't you? As if we
don't have more important things to do than play postman for DiNozzo. And would you believe it, a
SWAK no less; how clichéd is that?"

Cate smirked and shook her head although she refrained from comment, which surprised Cassie
since in the past she was always ready to criticise their senior field agent's dating habits. Maybe she
had changed her attitude, or she could be worried about her future at the agency and was keeping her
head down.

McGee couldn't help himself though, a rather patronising grin on his face. "Only DiNozzo would go
out with a girl who was so dumb that they couldn't even remember his name, just that he was a special agent. He'll be furious that they forgot to add the 'Very' descriptor, though. Of course, any woman with anything approaching a normal I.Q, wouldn't be caught dead with someone like him, so it's hardly a surprise. What is shocking; is that he is seeing someone who can actually spell and doesn't use crayons when they write."

Cassie smiled unpleasantly, wondering how amused Paula Cassidy would be at McGee's description of her since she qualified as one of Tony's girlfriends. Paula and Tony were looking forward to spending the weekend together when the USS Kennedy arrived back from the Gulf next month. While they weren't exactly advertising that they were seeing each other, it wasn't a state secret either. Cassie gathered from Paula, the chief sticking point was Gibbs since she and the supervisory special agent clashed big time over several cases but with Tony off working for the FBI, that wasn't really a problem right now.

Cassie made a mental note to share McGee's insights into Tony's girlfriends’ attributes with Paula when she was back on dry land again. No doubt she'd get a laugh out of it.

A few weeks later, Cassie was thinking about the letter that McGee had placed in Tony's desk. She frowned in concentration, something didn't ring true with that scenario of the SWAK being one of many get well cards sent by well-wishers. The exquisite calligraphy didn't match up with someone who would forget Tony's name and the fact that it was expensive stationary didn't gel either. Resolving to check it out and planning to ream McGee out for making assumptions, she wandered over to her temporary desk and started to open the bottom drawer.

Just then Gibbs swept into the bullpen and barked, "Gear up! Dead Petty Officer in Rock Creek Park," and they leapt into action like a well-oiled team. Cassie promptly forgotten the letter and there it had remained for the last three weeks, overlooked til now, tucked up in the bottom drawer that she never opened since it held all of Tony's personal possessions.

Now sitting here, cursing her faulty memory and deciding that she really needed to get a PDA like Cate Todd’s Blackberry before she took over her new team, Cassie opened the bottom drawer and went to reach in to investigate that damned SWAK amongst the hundred odd cards that had been sent. Looking at the linen stock that would have cost a pretty penny and the exquisite calligraphy she knew something was off about it when Gibbs strode into the bull pen and threw the keys to the truck at McGee and told him to go gas the truck. He handed Cate a slip of paper with an address and told her to inform Ducky his presence was required before turning to Cassie and explained.

"Call came in from Virginia State Police about two dead sailors out on Route 17 near Frederiksberg. Apparently, it was an anonymous phone call. Let's go."

Cassie stuffed the envelope back into the drawer with all the other cards and grabbed her backpack and lit out after Cate and Gibbs, neglecting to properly close the bottom drawer of Tony's desk. Caught up in the case she forgot about the SWAK sitting patiently waiting to be opened and with the events that ensued, Cassie Yates didn’t give the letter another thought until it was far too late to prevent what came next.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

The team gets called out to a case and Ari’s handler pays a visit to NCIS.

As she sat quietly in the truck as Gibbs drove in his usual suicidal fashion to Fredericksburg, Cassie Yates continued to muse on the members of Gibbs team, mostly as a diversion from letting her life flash before her eyes. Gibbs really needed to attend a remedial driving course.

Her thoughts turned to Caitlin Todd, the former Secret Service agent who was feisty and an ardent feminist. Cassie smirked, bossy, opinionated, schoolmarmish, superior and overconfident also worked too, as words to describe the junior agent. Cassie wasn’t sure if it was due to her parochial education or not but like Gibbs; she seemed to feel that it was acceptable to express herself physically when annoyed or frustrated with her teammates. But where he wielded a palm to the pate, Cate used her elbows to deliver sharp jabs to an equally vulnerable target, the solar plexus.

Cassie had already warned Cate about her elbow jabs being unacceptable and had written a report outlining its inappropriateness in the workplace and submitted it to Gibbs, but she wasn’t all that optimistic that it would do any good. Mainly since she had also pointed out that it was difficult to sanction Cate’s behaviour when her boss went around hitting people on the head. Still she had warned Agent Todd that she wouldn’t hesitate to write her up if she saw her do it again, after noticing McGee rubbing his sternum vigorously a couple of times.

As mad as she was that Cate was using her expensive taxpayer funded training in personal protection to physically harass her workmates, Cassie as someone who liked to consider herself a feminist, also found herself objecting to Cate’s hypocrisy. She’d noticed that Cate only seemed to use her elbow jabs for males and despite her feminist rhetoric, Cassie was damned sure that that was because she knew that none of the men that worked with her, would strike her back or make a complaint. Maybe in Cate's book, that made them chauvinists because if Cate was a guy and done it, they'd clean her clock immediately and that was how she rationalised her behaviour. Whatever, it didn't excuse the behaviour in Cassie's opinion. It was unprofessional and wrong on every level.

Now that they arrived at the crime scene, she was bossing McGee around again and Cassie rolled her eyes, wondering at the sibling rivalry in the Todd family. According to her file, she had two brothers and an older sister who was a psychologist. Cassie wondered if she had gone into profiling to try to one up her sister although if that was her goal, she didn't think that Cate had been particularly successful. After reviewing her cases and personally observing her profiling effort since Cassie had been filling in, she wasn't as impressed with her abilities as Gibbs was...or Cate.

In Cassie’s estimation Cate wasn’t able to distance herself emotionally from the people she was profiling plus as far as she was concerned, Cate had faltered badly when it came to her ability to assess Anthony DiNozzo, seeing only what he had wanted her to see. Perhaps she was a better profiler when staring at the dossiers of terrorist suspects or assassins bent on taking out the POTUS. When it came to using profiling as an investigative tool in the MCRT though she was too emotional and unable to dissociate herself enough to use it effectively.
As Cassie made her way cautiously down the hillside towards the convertible where the two dead sailors were waiting, she could hear Cate holding forth about Tony and wondering if he would return. While the scuttlebutt was that Cate had been stricken when Tony had been attacked and almost killed, as time went by her remorse seemed to wane. Cassie thought that the fact that the usually forgiving DiNozzo had refused to talk to his teammates might have disgruntled them quite a bit; she knew that Abby was equally unhappy about being shunned. Now that the various investigations had been completed and the findings expected to be announced at any time, she suspected that the pressure was getting to Cate. True to form, she had fallen back on her time-honoured method of coping, namely sharp tongue sarcasm directed at her favourite target, one Anthony DiNozzo.

In fact, Cassie could hear her and McGee discussing him as navigated the steep hill.

"Come on Cate, you must miss him too. He nearly died after all and you were pretty upset." McGee observed looking at his teammate warily.

"We're NCIS agents, McGee. There's a chance we might die every time we walk through the door.

"Yeah but it was because of us, he almost died. I knew it was wrong and I didn't say anything. I'm an idiot!

"It's not your fault Tim, you didn't attack him. Look if you want to think about something, think about all the times Tony has insulted us, invaded our privacy. The fact that he almost died owing us money."

The Probie smirked. "That's true; he can be pretty obnoxious..." Cassie heard him sigh. "Do you miss him as much as I do?"

"More..." Cate admitted. "It's part of his charm. He's like an X-rated Peter Pan."

McGee nodded agreement. "Do you think he'll come back to NCIS Cate?"

"I'm not sure." Obviously disturbed at revealing so much, she seemed to change tacks. "You do know he told all the girls downstairs that you were gay; said it cut down on the competition."

"That bastard!" McGee scowled vehemently.

"Hold onto that feeling and you're going to be just fine." Cate smiled smugly.

"You want to know what he said about you?" he enquired.

"Hmm?"

"That you tried to sleep with him while you were in Paraguay."

"I...will...kill...him!

Cassie rocked up behind the two agents. "My advice would be that you both get to work before Gibbs kills you both. And McGee, I would remind you of Gibbs' Rule #8 before you call your SFA a bastard. I have never heard any hint from the girls downstairs that Tony told them you were gay, so I wouldn't be too quick to jump to conclusions. Always double-check."

She glared at the former secret service agent. "I hope you can back up that assertion you just made, Special Agent Todd. You seem to have a bit of a pre-occupation with the issue of homosexuality. Oh, and for the record, the next time you want to torment Tony about kissing that UA transsexual
sailor, think about how you'd feel if you unknowingly kissed the killer of your friend and colleague. Tony was sick to his stomach, not because of the suspect's gender but because of the memory of Chris lying in the elevator with his gut slit wide open."

"Regarding Paraguay; if he did tell McGee that you wanted to sleep with him then that was inappropriate but again, Rule #8 applies. Personally, I think that Tony should have told McGee what really happened on the mission. How you almost blew Tony's plan to track Purcell when you refused an order from your superior to hand over an NCIS issued work phone in front of one of the suspect. Or how you questioned why he should be lead agent despite the fact he is your superior in both rank and experience.

As to your desire to kill him, I'd say you already had a damn good attempt already. I'm sure with your religious education you've heard of the Golden Rule; you might want to reflect on that."

Cate shot her a look of pure spite and when she saw McGee's look of bemusement Cassie suspected that her elbows were itching to connect with McGee's solar plexus, but she didn't dare. Instead the junior agent scowled at him and started barking out orders, as if she was senior field agent.

"McGee, check the trunk. Nobody touches the bodies until Ducky says all clear."

Cassie strode back up the hill back to the crime scene truck after deciding to retrieve the fingerprinting kit to take fingerprints and handprints from the car although the chances of the killer not wearing gloves were negligible. It was nothing more than an excuse to get away from that 'pair' before she lost her temper completely. She admitted that she was pissed with them both but screaming at them certainly wasn't Cassie Yates style. Still she couldn't not say something although she regretted that crack about Todd's attempt to kill Tony though, so she'd apologise to her later. Special Agent Yates didn't ascribe to Gibbs' philosophy on apologies.

Making her way up to the road where they'd parked, she noticed that Gibbs had walked over as the ME's van to greet Ducky. As per normal, he was engaging in a fairly robust debate with the hapless autopsy assistant Jimmy Palmer about their circuitous route in getting to the crime scene. She smiled and waved at the pair before ducking into the back of the truck to retrieve the equipment, taking lots of deep breaths trying to keep calm. How Tony had tolerated getting bossed around by these newbies she didn't know. She wondered how they would like it if she started ordering Cate around when she was supposed to be running a protection detail or McGee would like her giving him directions about him trying to break a data encryption code.

As she took a deep breath and took a step down, there was a loud roar then a millisecond later a fierce explosion that knocked Cassie off her feet and she saw a flaming tyre flying through the air and smash into Gibbs while he was talking on his cell phone. Ducky clutched his head and collapsed while Jimmy was knocked off his feet too. As she finally managed to regain her feet she looked at the three downed men not sure what to do first. When she saw Palmer started to rise to his feet she breathed a sigh of relief and called out instructions, her extensive training finally kicking in.

~ Betrayals~

The Mossad Officer strolled into the bullpen looking around at the empty desks and feeling frustrated at missing the MCRT. She was desperate to talk to Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, but they were obviously out in the field. The woman, dressed casually in cargo pants, tank top and shirt, her curly hair cascaded riotously down to her shoulders, wondered if she should wait around or come back later. Pulling out her cell phone she sent a text message to Special Agent Jenny Shepard to see if she could find out whether they would be back soon.

Ziva David had worked with Jenny Shepard quite a lot in Europe in the last twelve months and
Shepard had also developed a close relationship with Ziva's father who just happened to be the Assistant Director of Mossad. Although it hadn't been officially announced yet, Jenny was about to be appointed as the new Director of NCIS and Ziva's father, Eli was keen to take advantage of their mutually beneficial relationship. Eli's plan was to place his daughter onto Gibbs team although Ziva wasn't too sure why he was so keen on her joining what was essentially a team investigating naval crime. She could see if he wanted her to go into the Counter Intelligence, Counter Terrorism sections or Special Operation Projects but still, her job was to follow her father's orders, not to question him.

Although Jenny was enthusiastic about the plan, the bee in the lotion was Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He was not happy that Mossad's operative Ari Haswari, as part of an undercover operation to infiltrate Hamas had taken NCIS personnel hostage in their Autopsy. Ziva who was Ari's handler as well as his half-sister knew that Ari had made a bad enemy of Gibbs when to maintain his cover, he'd shot one of the autopsy techs and Gibbs, no less in the shoulder and threatened one of Gibbs agents and the Medical Examiner. Gibbs had sworn to extract revenge even after being read in that Ari was Mossad and against orders had shot Ari in the shoulder as retribution.

Ziva wasn't sure why the NCIS agent had reacted so violently to her brother unless it was because he felt that he hadn't been able to protect his surrogate family. Ziva knew because of her compiling Intel on every member of Gibbs team and realised his Achilles heel was that his daughter and wife were killed by a drug cartel when his wife witnessed a murder and was going to testify. Gibbs had nearly destroyed himself with the guilt that he had been on deployment in Kuwait and the Mossad officer had identified this weakness as something for Ari to play on if he needed to manipulate him. But Ziva didn't think Gibbs harboured any paternal or romantic feeling for the autopsy assistant, so she was puzzled at his attitude.

Ziva's father had suspicions that her brother had gone rogue and he had ordered her to take her half-brother out but do it in such a way as to win Gibbs' loyalty, so she could join his team. She didn't believe that her brother was a rogue agent though and was determined to prove him innocent but to do that she needed to persuade Gibbs to stop persecuting her brother and give her time to save him. She was also not averse to the idea of getting out from under the thumb of her father either. She could understand why her brother preferred to work under cover since it meant that he was out from under their ruthless father. She knew that appealing to Gibbs as a surrogate daughter; she would be able to make herself invaluable.

Jenny had told her that one of Gibbs agents would be leaving soon, let go for the misuse of agency and that there would be a place vacant on the team. The only problem was that the vacancy might not become available for some time yet and she was desperate not to have to return to Tel Aviv. Ziva had heard that Gibbs' 2IC was currently on secondment at the FBI following a sexual harassment incident by his team mates and she had heard the rumours that he was thinking of accepting a job offer with one of the other agencies.

Perhaps if she could encourage him to move on, she could follow her father's instructions sooner than expected. Looking around the spy decided to go through Agent DiNozzo's desk, to see if there was anything there that she could use to her advantage. She could befriend him and convince him to take up one of the job offers he had received. Although she had prepared fairly comprehensive dossiers on the MCRT for Ari, if she wanted to manipulate Agent DiNozzo into leaving Gibbs team, it could be the smallest detail that could swing the deal.

She already knew he was a rich, playboy who liked to play the class clown. Ziva had christened him Agent Meatball since he wasn't exactly the smartest individual, he was what the Americans referred to as a jock and she was confident that her Mossad training would help persuade him to leave the MCRT without too much effort. After all, she was highly trained and had a lot of aptitude for what she did. Ziva was confident that she would very soon have created a spot for herself of Gibbs little
She took several photographs off his desk and his workplace space to study afterwards and noticed the bottom drawer was half opened. Looking around to make sure no one was watching, she hastily rifled through the bottom drawer which seemed to have a pile of personal stuff including various t-shirts and button-down shirts and a large pile of mail perhaps a hundred or more envelopes. They looked like cards and Ziva decided that she would grab a pile and examine them later on in the Israeli Embassy. Her intelligence had revealed that Anthony DiNozzo liked to, how the Americans said … he liked to play the pitch but if the mail was from a single source, perhaps he had a serious girlfriend. If that was the case, her plan to seduce him would need to be abandoned and another approach would need to be found.

The Mossad spy quickly grabbed up a selection, confident that no one would notice that she'd taken any, she had been careful to mask her actions for the security cameras. Hopefully once she was done with them she would get a chance to put them back again and no one would be any the wiser. Closing her bag casually she waited for a while longer; impatient to take the personal effects from DiNozzo's workspace and analyse them. The sooner she got rid of him from the team, the sooner she could get out from under her controlling father.

Looking at her watch, she realised that she needed to go. She was meeting her brother in a so-called random rendezvous to pass him his new identity. It was time to go; she'd catch up with Gibbs later.

Standing up she walked slowly and calmly out of the bull pen wondering if, when she joined Gibbs' team, would she ever get used to the hideous wall colour? It felt like she'd crawled inside a giant pumpkin. Deciding to take the stairs she started dreaming of the apartment she would find and how she would cook dinner for Jenny. Perhaps she would invite her new team mates for a house heating party.

She could make her specialty, cholent - slow cooked beef with potatoes and beans.

~ Betrayals ~

Cassie looked across at Jimmy, who was looking like he might throw up any second but was on his feet nonetheless and making his way to Dr Mallard. She raced over to Gibbs who was lying partly underneath burning rubber from a tyre. Kicking it away with her boot she dropped down to see if he was still alive. Gibbs had a pulse, but he was unconscious, and she raced back to the truck to grab some bottles of water to pour on his burns, along with their first aid kit.

Pulling out her cell phone she called 911 for multiple ambulances, noting that Todd and McGee hadn't shown up and that couldn't be good since it looked like the car must had been rigged. After calling for the EMTs Cassie called NCIS Dispatch to advise them they had agents down and help was required ASAP.

Heading back to Gibbs with the first aid kit, she grabbed the scissors and cut away his smouldering NCIS jacket, shirt and undershirt to get access to his burns before covering them with clean dressings and dousing them in water. Jimmy rocked up and looked at Cassie questioningly. She knew he was medical student, but she didn't know how much skill he had although she guessed he was feeling panicked to be in charge of such a medical crisis.

"S'okay Jimmy, take some deep breaths. I've called for help - so we just have to hold on. How's Dr Mallard?" Cassie started trying to assess what had happened.

"I'm n...n...not sure, he's got a huge egg-sized lump on his head and he clutched it just before he collapsed. What happened, Special Agent Yates?"
"Cassie, no time for formality now Jimmy and I'm not sure but I think that the car must have exploded. I didn't smell any petrol fumes so there's a possibility it was booby-trapped. Can you stay here and wait with Gibbs and Ducky while I go and check on Agents McGee and Todd?"

Cassie needed to assess if the scene was safe for the emergency workers' that were going to be crawling over the site anytime now. Taking several deep steadying breaths to prepare for what she might find, Special Agent Yates steeled herself as she stepped over the edge. Wondering what she was about to see, she cautiously started down the hill.

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As Tony and Morgan deplaned from the FBI jet when they touched down in DC Fornell was on the tarmac with a black SUV, waiting for them. He took one look at DiNozzo's expression and figured he knew about the terrorist attacks. He'd debated long and hard about whether or not to call him, but he figured that Tony would tie himself in knots being so far away and not able to do anything and anyway, it was a waiting game at the moment. Tony looked askance at the FBI agent.

"No change, Tony. I'm here to take you to Bethesda. I figured you'd want to head straight there?" Fornell inquired.

"Thanks Tobias, can you drop Derek off somewhere?" Tony asked quietly.

Derek shook his head. "Not leaving my partner, and before you say anything about the case being closed, it aint over til the fat lady sings. Since we haven't gone to the opera yet I'm still your partner so shut your mouth, cause I'm watching your back."

Fornell could see DiNozzo consider Morgan's words before giving him a tight smile and a nod. He knew that the two ex-cops had hit it off which was why they paired up in the field, but he sensed a new level of protectiveness in the profiler's demeanour and was surprised that Tony wasn't objecting. Then again, the NCIS agent was looking like a gust of wind would blow him over and he wondered if it was Director Morrow who'd had informed him about his team.

"Who called, Tony?"

Tony shifted his gaze from the horizon momentarily, to stare at him as he answered, "Paula Cassidy."

Fornell nodded, knowing that the pair were in a relationship of sorts that Gibbs didn't exactly approve of. Jethro and Cassidy were like oil and water, they would never mix but Fornell admired Paula, she had moxie. She and Gibbs didn't see eye to eye, but he hadn't chased her off yet.

Awhile later they stood at Gibbs’ bedside, listening as the doctor outlined his injuries. He had received deep partial second degree burns to his back which would require a skin graft and was in a coma from a head injury. They assumed that it had occurred when his head collided with the road and the doctors had diagnosed a severe concussion. They were hopeful that he would regain consciousness soon.

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Frankly, the doctors weren't sure why he'd even slipped into a coma but Fornell was kind of relieved since he didn't have to worry about Gibbs trying to muscle in on the investigation, not that he wished his old friend any harm. It was more a logistical issue since Ari was FBI's mess to clean up and Fornell wasn't going to rest until he had put a bullet through the bastard's heart, assuming he could locate it. At least with Gibbs unconscious, it made protecting him easier than if he'd been awake and trying to leave against medical advice.
They had already checked on Ducky who had been hit by a piece of shrapnel from the car, possibly a spark plug, or something similar and he also had a nasty concussion, although he’d regained consciousness fairly quickly. Fortunately, that was the extent of his injuries and he would make a full recovery but as a mature individual, the effects of a concussion would be far more debilitating. Still he’d managed to reassure Tony with a ghost of a smile and a slurred greeting that with some rest, he would be fine. Of course, his speaking provoked dizziness and nausea and the elderly ME ended up vomiting violently which the two FBI agents and Tony knew from experience was extremely painful when concussed. Telling him to rest and not to worry they left him in peace, reassured that in time he would recover.

Caitlin Todd was still in the ICU but incredibly lucky to have even survived the bomb blast to this point, even though she had suffered internal injuries, a detached retina and the obligatory bruised brain. She had come through a marathon surgery to stem the internal bleeding although surgeons hadn't been able to save her left kidney and they were concerned about damage to the right one too. It seems that the only reason that she survived was due to a pathological phobia to snakes and a highly sensitive flight response. According to Cassie Yates when she found Cate, she had been quite a distance from the bomb scene and muttering about a snake and she had to get away.

Now as they watched Gibbs' monitors displaying his deep level of unconsciousness, Tony looked at Fornell, feeling a white-hot anger but outwardly remained calm. It was time to stop Ari Haswari.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The hunt is on to find Ari before he has a chance to kill anyone else.

“I want in on the FBI investigation, Tobias. It's time to hunt that bastard down and take him down.”

Fornell pulled Tony out of Gibbs room and stared at him searchingly, trying to determine his state of mind but he was not so proficient at reading DiNozzo, especially an implacable DiNozzo making full use of his famous masks. The only tell that gave a hint that he was not calm was a metallic glint to his normally bright eyes. Somehow, Tobias had the distinct impression that Tony wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"And if I refuse DiNotzo?"

Tony looked at Derek and Fornell before shrugging. "Then I'll write up my report for the taskforce, renounce the secondment and I'll find him myself. Last time, the pencil pushers, bureaucrats and the politicians let him get away with that bloodbath in autopsy. Who is to say that it won't happen again? Rule #18 Tobias, I'm going hunting. The question is, are we hunting as a pack or am I going lone wolf?"

Fornell considered what the NCIS agent had said, but he also assessed how he said it and was satisfied, at least for now, he was in control. "If I agree to you joining the investigation and it does make sense because NCIS will demand a joint investigation knowing Morrow, then I want your word that you will follow orders."

Tony gave a bitter laugh. "I can't do that in good faith, Tobias, and you wouldn't believe me if I did but I do promise to tell you if I decide to go off the reservation. Apart from Cassie, that madman has taken down the whole team and she wasn't a part of the original team when he first took hostages and butted heads with Gibbs. Once he finds out that he survived, he won't stop until he kills him. You saw what that bastard did."

"He didn't take out all the team, Tony," Morgan pointed out mildly. "You could be a target too, since you were involved in the two previous episodes from what I understand."

Tony shook his head, "Nah he's not interested in me but for some reason he has a real hard on for Gibbs. And he seemed to forge some sort of weird relationship with Ducky and Cate. Ducky I can sorta get since they both attended the same medical college but Cate? She thought he had kind eyes, what sort of profiler gets taken in by someone's eyes?"

The three men were silent as they pondered this imponderable.

Morgan finally looked across at Fornell, "Which is why you need me, too. We need a real profiler to analyse this asshole and figure out what his next move is going to be and if I'm right and Tony is a target too, then I need to be there to watch his back."

"Alright Morgan, point taken. For now, you're both on my team but I reserve the right to change my mind, including locking you down in protective custody if I deem it necessary, Tony." Fornell
stipulated, noticing that Tony just shrugged. Still figuring that Gibbs would kill him if he didn't keep an eye his... well at this point he wasn't exactly sure what Tony was to Jethro. Still whatever he was, the fibbie knew that if anything happened to him, Gibbs would take great pleasure in making him suffer, slowly and painfully. For better or worse he was stuck with DiNozzo, but he wished he was still in Denver doing something safe like tracking down homicidal serial killers.

Leaving the hospital - they got back in their car and headed back to DC.

Gentling his voice just a tad since he knew that Tony hated being thought weak, Fornell asked. "Where to, then? Back to the FBI or to NCIS with me? I need to talk to Director Morrow and Special Agent Yates. I can drop you off on the way."

Tony looked at Derek and grimaced. "I'll come back to the Naval Yard, Tobias. I need to see Abby and McGee. And Cassie too, I guess." He gazed out the window, impassively and Fornell bit his lip knowing that this trip back to NCIS would be difficult for a number of reasons, not withstanding that he hadn't been back since the whole fake photo fiasco. Frankly the veteran agent wasn't sure what to expect. As far as he knew, Tony hadn't talked to anyone about his PTSD attacks, so he really didn't know if it was a good idea to take him back but on the other hand he didn't think he could stop him either. If he was going to go to NCIS, surely it was better if he and Morgan were there to support him if he needed it.

Obviously able to read some of the concerns he had, Tony spoke while still staring out the window. "It'll be fine, Fornell. Can't say it will be a social call or anything but the main reason I haven't been back there before now isn't because of panic attacks. My friends have told me over the years that I have this really bad habit of forgiving people, no matter what. One of my girlfriends was a psychology professor and according to her, I am so desperate to have family that I let people treat me like crap and believe them when they say their sorry. Then apparently I let them hurt me again." His fingers drummed nervously on his knees, revealing his agitation.

"I stayed away from the office because I knew that the moment I talked to them and they said the magic word, I'd forgive them. So, I didn't read their texts or emails or snail mail or take their calls and I stayed away from the workplace. Ducky says that I have to demand respect and stop being a doormat. Stop giving people permission to treat me like shit… well he didn't put it quite like that.” Flashing Fornell a look that was desolate he asked, “All seems petty and inconsequential now, doesn't it?"

Fornell flashed him a quick look that expressed distress. "Please, Tony, tell me you're not feeling guilty for not being with the team when it went down? Or damn it, feeling guilty for not saving them?"

"Guilty…no but sad, mad, pissed? Well hell yeah, all the above. Even if I had been there, it wouldn't have changed anything. I mean if Gibbs didn't pick up the booby-trapped car with his famous gut and stealthy Marine ju-ju or Cate with her secret service training, then a simple dumb street cop like me would never have found the bomb either. But at least I can make sure that it's the last time Ari hurts anyone. I'm going to be his worst nightmare."

Fornell looked back at the FBI profiler curiously. Although DiNozzo seemed quiet and restrained he was clearly exuding a force that anyone with half a brain would ignore at their peril and yet there was something different about him, too. He seemed somehow more centred, less jumpy than he had been prior to heading out to Denver and the veteran agent wondered what had happened during their absence.

Had it been the arrest that had helped him get his mojo back again? Whatever it was, it was good to see him making progress and regaining his equilibrium. Since Fornell knew Tony had never been, as
Tony described himself, "a dumb street cop", there'd be time to work on his self-image when Ari was six foot under.

Changing the subject, he asked. "Did you know that Gibbs had been in a coma before, Tony?"

Tony snorted, "You're asking me about Gibbs private life Tobias. I'm sure you know more than I do. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have known that you two knew each other and shared an ex-wife. You both did a pretty good job of pretending not to know each other when I first met you and I've still got gravel rash scars on my butt from when you chucked me out on the beltway, thank-you very much."

"Well yeah, sorry about that but in a poker game you don't show your hand and we both shared the same goal of freezing out the Secret Service, so I had to pretend I didn't recognise Gibbs and Ducky. Course I thought I'd be able to snatch the body out from under Jethro's nose until he pulled that switch. I was so mad when I found you in the body bag that I kinda lost my temper. Hot Latin blood and all that, you know how it is kid."

"Humph," Tony snorted, so not mollified but returned to the topic of Gibbs' coma regardless. "You're saying that you didn't know about Gibbs' family either, Tobias?"

Fornell shared another glance at Tony before tearing his eyes back to the road again but it was enough for Tony to see his confusion, hurt and anger since he made no attempt to shield them from him. "Not a clue. You?"

"Well no but in hindsight, there were clues I guess. The fury when a family were victims, or a parent was taken away from their kids or kids that were left orphaned. And how he has no people skills but with kids they all think he's Santa Claus. But no, not a damned clue either." Gibbs' protégé grimaced thinking of how obsessively secretive Gibbs was but expected his team to be an open book to him. He was still unhappy that Tony had never discussed the enormous elephant in the room with him about his panic attack.

Recalling an instance in the bullpen, he continued trying not to let the hurt bleed into his voice. "In fact, Cate even made a joke once about him being married four times and he lied to her, to us… said he was only married three times, so yeah it has come as a complete shock. It kinda makes his sticking his noise in my personal business pretty damned hypocritical. But then pot and kettle was always a game he played pretty well." He folded his arms and shut his eyes and despite his efforts to the contrary, his body language spoke volumes to the FBI agents.

He was feeling hurt and confused and Fornell could certainly empathise with that. He might not work so closely with Jethro or as intensely, but he'd known the man almost from the time Gibbs started working for NIS after leaving the Marine Corps over a dozen years ago and Gibbs had never said a word about that part of his past. The veteran Fibbie thought about the neurologist who had been in examining Gibbs when they had first arrived at Bethesda.

Standing by the door waiting for him to finish, they watched the doctor pat Gibbs gently on the shoulder and tell him it was a small world and they'd catch up later. Tony had exchanged smirks with Fornell, reminded of Ducky's conversations with his patients.

After coming over and introducing himself as Dr Todd Gelfand the Chief Neurologist, he explained that he'd recognised Gibbs from treating him for another coma when he was still a Marine twelve years ago. He'd arrived back at Bethesda after being injured in an explosion in Desert Storm in Kuwait and had remained comatose for nineteen days before waking. In fact, the current coma was spookily similar to the previous one, in that Gibbs clinical symptoms didn't seem to be sufficient to explain why he had become comatose.
The doctor commented that he’ been very depressed when he woke up and mused that it might be a dissociative episode in both cases, since his clinical symptoms didn't explain his coma this time, either. Seeing how surprised Fornell and Tony had been, Todd hastened to assure them that it had been perfectly normal to be depressed at the death of his wife and child, anyone would be. He wondered if there was anything particularly bothering him now which might be causing him to dissociate this time, too.

Fornell had snorted before commenting that it was hard to figure out what Gibbs was feeling at the best of times but when it came to anything troubling him, he played things close to the vest. Seeing that he hadn’t ever mentioned his dead family that was definitely the understatement of the year. He flashed a glance at DiNozzo who had that closed off look that Tobias had learnt at his own peril meant, back off buddy and wisely he decided to do just that. Yet once they were speeding towards the Naval Yard he couldn't help quizzesing Tony to see if he knew.

"I guess if he confided in anyone, it would have been Ducky," DiNozzo concluded his tone carefully neutral and Fornell figured he was as pissed at Jethro as he was to find how little he really thought of their partnership.

~ Betrayals ~

Entering the foyer of the NCIS building Tony could tell that everyone was staring at him, he just wasn't sure if they were glaring or welcoming stares but was very glad that he had Fornell and Morgan with him. Their presence had made it much more bearable to come home but as uncomfortable as it was this first time, even if he was on his own he would have come back to see those who were left and help find the lunatic that had tried to annihilate Gibbs' entire team. With a relieved smile when he realised that the security guard on duty was Damien White, he waited til they’d been vetted by security and the trio entered the elevator. Fornell was heading up to consult with the Director and glanced across to see whether Tony was going to accompany him.

"I'm gonna pass on making nice with Morrow, if it's all the same to you Tobias. I'll go and see Abby and McGee; I guess maybe catch-up with Cassie and Jimmy too.” He looked over at his partner who was exchanging meaningful glances at the veteran FBI agent. "Guess you're with me, Derek?” Tony stated.

"Good guess, Tony." He said gently.

"Look, don't think that I am not appreciative of your company, but I need some time alone with McGee, so you can wait outside, if that's okay?"

"Whatever you need Tony, I'm just here to have your back."

Tony nodded, "Yeah, I know Derek and I appreciate it, truly."

They paused outside of autopsy and Derek gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Remember that I'm here if you need anything."

Tony entered to find Jimmy Palmer pottering around two charred bodies that were sans their hands and Tony concluded that these were the unfortunate Navy pilots. McGee was standing in the shadows looking on, silently. Jimmy looked up and smiled at Tony.

"Hey Tony, can I help you?"

"No Jimmy, I just need to see McGee.” He looked at the autopsy assistant.

“Oh...right. He’s in number six. I’m sorry Tony, but it was fast – he wouldn’t have know what was
happening.”

Tony nodded in acknowledgement. “I hear you did great at the scene. You're going to make one awesome doctor, one day, Gremlin. Glad you were there watching everyone's sixes.”

He watched as the young gawky man seemed to swell at the compliments and he smiled, knowing that you could overdo the praise to the point that it was meaningless. Still it also was possible to be too Gibbsian and starve people of positive reinforcement, especially on days like this that make you wonder why you bother.

Jimmy nodded and slipped out unobtrusively.

Tony looked at McGee. "Hey Probie."

McGee stared at him, dispassionately. "What are you doing here, Tony?"

"I'm on the FBI team to hunt down that bastard Ari. We are going to get him, I promise Tim. He's not going to get away with this."

McGee didn't seem convinced. "He's been pretty much doing as he damn-well pleased, DiNozzo. What makes you think you’re going to get him this time?"

Tony detected along with the anger a fair degree of disdain which he chose to ignore. If anyone was entitled to be pissed off it was the Probie.

"Because he's gone rogue now, Tim and Mossad are distancing themselves, so he won't have their help to hide from us. He's letting his hatred of Gibbs interfere with his mission. Not sure why he hates Gibbs so much and I'm really sorry you and Cate got caught up in their feud. My temporary partner on the taskforce is a profiler from the BAU and we're going to tear Haswari apart and figure out what makes him tick. They have a solve rate as good as ours, so WE WILL GET HIM." Tony vowed, staring seriously at McGee to convince him that them they were committed to taking down the sociopathic monster.

McGee stared into the senior field agent's eyes, seeing the conviction there and nodded, seemingly convinced in Tony's sincerity. "Thanks Tony and speaking of apologies, I need to tell you I'm sorry. It was a stupid and mean thing to tease you and not have your six when the girls ganged up on you. I should have manned up and spoken for you and I'm ashamed that I didn't."

"Okay Tim, I can't lie and say that it didn't hurt but I accept your apology. I guess I thought of anyone, you wouldn't... ah look forget it. We can't change the past so let's focus on the future. Bygones, Probie?" Tony asked, hopefully.

"Sure Tony, I can do that and I'm sorry that you ended up in hospital but I'm glad you're on the job with Fornell, to catch Ari. That lunatic needs to be taken down once and for all. o get him for me."

“Oh, we will, Tim.”

~ Betrayals ~

22 hours Earlier

Mossad Officer Ziva David made her way back to the characterless motel room where she was staying although she had originally intended on returning to the Israeli Embassy. That was before she had met with her half- brother, Ari. As his Mossad handler, Ziva had to pass him his false identity documents and although she had never truly accepted her Aba, Deputy Director of Mossad, Eli
David's orders to dispatch Ari because he believed the Kidon operative had gone rogue, she was suddenly feeling anxious. Ari was her big brother and she remembered growing up with him and her little sister Tali. How he had always taken care of them and protected them from their father's wrath and excesses if he could. Given her orders, Ziva was determined to prove his innocence since she didn't want to terminate him which was why she had gone to try and make Special Agent Gibbs see sense and stop his illogical hatred and pathological pursuit of her brother.

Yet what she had seen in her brother's eyes had left her with doubts for the first time, ever. When she had talked about her plan to try and divert the obsessed NCIS agent from his witching hunt, she had seen a strangely familiar gleam in Ari's eyes that she knew well. Her father had a ruthless streak that combined with a madness and fierce ambition, which made her tread very carefully around him whenever he was in one of his moods. Ari on the other hand, had always been so very loving and gentle to his sisters, charming and clever that she had never felt the same need for caution with her brother. Until today!

Today she had been disturbed and her absolute faith in her brother's incorruptibility had for the first time faltered as she began to question if she was wrong about her Ari. Ziva hated herself and her father for putting those doubts into her head. She needed to get her head on straight and heading into the Embassy seemed like a bad idea, so she returned to the cheap motel instead.

Feeling intensely disloyal for mistrusting Ari, she decided to focus on something else instead, ignoring her feelings. Ziva was desperate to escape the clutches of her father and his twisted machinations that were warping her existence and that of her brother. She resolved to get herself onto the NCIS team as soon as she could.

Grabbing her rather voluminous handbag she upended the various items she’d appropriated from DiNozzo’s desk onto the double bed’s cheap pink floral comforter. Staring at several framed photos which seem to be of people who worked for the agency, a coffee mug with the words, American Pie on it, she nodded, recognising the song title by a folk singer and a juvenile looking stapler which bore out what she has determined. Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo was a self-indulgent, soft playboy who relied on his looks over any real talent to obtain his job and she smiled, confident that he should be infant games to push out of the MCRT.

Ziva was confident he would be easily replaced by someone with her skills and talent. She felt confident that a week or two would be all she required before Gibbs' had forgotten his name.

Staring at the 30 odd envelopes she snatched from his desk, she really hoped that he was as much of a commitment phobic as his dossier suggested so she could use some simple seduction to convince him to move on. In her experience, it was always easiest to lead a man around by his dick.

Pulling out and plugging in a portable device she always carried with her, she steamed open the envelopes. She intended to reseal them and return them when she had finished with them.

The Mossad officer wasn’t surprised that most of the mail were cards from females but there were quite a few from males too and she wondered if she had missed anything in her Intel gathering although the get-well messages from men seemed to be missed you at the game or let's catch up for a beer messages so probably not. The cards from the females were all flirtier or wanting to cook him dinner or look after him and Ziva felt much more confident that seduction 101 was going to be the way to go.

Feeling a sense of calm come over her in the belief that soon she would have an out from under her father’s digits, one which was even sanctioned by her father but first she had to make sure her brother was cleared. Picking up an expensive looking envelope that had a lipstick silhouette on the front and back, assuming that this was a cultural thing she was curious to see what was inside. It was
probably a love letter and the cynical voyeur in her couldn’t resist reading it. Americans really did waste so much time in the mistaken belief that attraction was anything more than a simple chemical reaction and exchange of DNA. It was quite pathetic.

As she drew out the letter, a fine spray of fine white powder rained out in the air and over Ziva and she read the letter swiftly, wondering if this was some sort of joke from Anthony DiNozzo’s friends, since the alternative seemed far too surreal to contemplate.

A joke seemed unlikely but really – the plague? And a crazy woman demanding they investigate the sexual assault of her daughter – well that seemed unbelievable. If it was some terrorist jihad; that was something that she could accept but an angry mother wanting to kill NCIS agents because her daughter was raped by a sailor, that was absurd. Not to mention how unlikely it would be for a civilian who was not a terrorist to get hold of the plague, so it was either a joke, and a poor one at that, or it was a bluff. More than likely it was some sort of harmless substance such as talcum powder, cornflour or rice flour. All were possibilities.

What if it isn’t a joke, Ziva? A small voice of reason was demanding that she not ignore this situation. Yet how could she report this without letting the Americans learn that she was spying on one of their own agents and how would she explain that? She couldn't tell them the truth, it would ruin everything and her father with be furious about the loss of face to himself, to Mossad and to her reputation and she would lose the opportunity to escape from him.

So she tamped down the voice of reason, reminding herself of the raft of inoculations that were given to Mossad operatives since terrorists were increasingly using bio-terrorist attacks, especially for foreign embassies. Ziva’s inner voice was also telling her that all Federal Agencies since 9/11 and the spate of letters sent through the mail with suspected anthrax, have brought with it new protocols where mail is irradiated to kill biohazards like anthrax and the plague. She had nothing to be worried about.

Deciding she would have a shower, the Israeli assassin grabbed a towel and a clean set of clothes, resolving that she would finish checking out DiNozzo's mail when she was clean, since the powder had settled in a fine mist over her hair and skin making her itchy. Stepping into the shower she switched on the water and stretched luxuriously as the heat started to caress her skin as she reached for her honey and jojoba body wash gel.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The FBI begin to close in on Ari even as he causes more chaos for those who Gibbs cares about.

As Tony left Autopsy he smiled at Palmer who was standing in the corridor making polite if awkward conversation with Derek Morgan who in turn was leaning casually against the wall, with his arms crossed.

He began speaking as he approached, "Thanks for that, Jimmy. Cassie said you really kept your head out there, yesterday."

The young ME Assistant looked self-conscious but pleased with the compliment. "Um, thanks Tony. It's real good to see you again. I'm sorry about what happened," he babbled awkwardly.

Tony wasn't sure if he was sorry about what had happened yesterday, or he was referring to the whole photo fiasco but he did know that Jimmy was a nice guy. "Thanks Gremlin. I'm on my way to the lab, so I'll see you later."

Leaving Palmer, who went back into autopsy they headed to the lift and Derek glanced at him as they walked. "So, you okay?"

Aware that McGee was trailing behind them, he responded to the inquiry. "Yeah, I guess so. Weird being here under these circumstances, ya know? But it's not about me and that kinda makes it easier and harder at the same time, ya know? Harder for me to stay angry and easier because I'm not so much the focus. Anyway, when we get to the lab I might need your help. I'm not sure how that's gonna go."

As they all stepped into the elevator the FBI profiler, nodded. "Whatever you need, I'm here."

The remainder of the trip to the lab was made in silence apart from their footfalls which moved in concert, another reason why they had gelled so well together in the field. Steeling himself for what he knew would be an emotionally difficult encounter; Tony sighed and entered with Derek on his six. The lab was uncharacteristically silent apart from the periodic sniffing sounds that were coming from the forensic scientist as she worked. Tony cleared his throat and Abby jumped slightly, spinning around. Her face showed signs of copious crying with her eyes and nose red and swollen, traces of mascara forming black track marks down her cheeks and when she saw Tony her eyes widened in surprise.

"Hi Abby," he managed. "This is Derek Morgan; he's from the BAU and was on the taskforce with me. We are investigating the… bombing with Fornell. Derek, this is Abby Sciuto, forensic scientist."

Uncharacteristically for the Goth she ignored the handsome profiler. "Tony, are you coming home soon?"

He sighed and looked at Morgan. This conversation was always going to be a difficult one since what he wanted to say was tempered by what had happened yesterday, which made much of it
untimely. Yelling at her seemed highly inappropriate under the circumstances. In fact he even felt guilty having this conversation at all when there was a monster to bring down. "I'm not sure, not sure that this *is* home anymore Abby. Maybe it never was."

The forensic scientist came running over, intent on hugging him but pulled up short as she realised she no longer had the right to do so. "And that's so my fault but this IS your home and I'm sorry that I hurt you. I never thought it would go that far."

Derek snorted disbelievingly but stayed silent, letting him speak.

"That's what I don't get Abby. You are one of the smartest people I know, so I don't understand how you can say that or how it could possibly be true. And apart from your intellect, I thought of you as a good friend. Friends don't do what you did."

Abby took a deep breath then said "I know, what I did was horrible, stupid, disloyal, unprofessional, shameful and a whole lot of wrong. I'm really, truly sorry and I wish I could take it back. I would if I could and I'm sorry that you were hurt because of me. Will you ever be able to forgive me, or have I ruined our friendship for ever?" She looked at him pleadingly with big teary eyes.

Steeling himself against capitulating like he always did, he shook his head. "I don't know Abbs, but due to your and Cate's actions I lost what felt like my home when I was attacked by a gang of Neanderthals who damn near killed me because of a so-called joke by you and Cate. So, forgive me, if I'm having troubling putting it behind me.

"I'm still having nightmares and panic attacks and the shrinks say that's likely to be the case in the foreseeable future." He revealed with a forthrightness that was totally uncharacteristic of him since his favourite refrain is 'I'm fine.' Looking at her as dispassionately as it was possible under the circumstances, her said, "But that's not why I'm here. Right now, we need to focus on catching the bastard that did this. Ignoring her look of dismay, he continued, "We'll talk about it some more, later."

Sighing mightily, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He glanced across at McGee who was watching him intently and exhaled deeply, knowing that there was more than just one elephant in the room.

Looking at her again he continued, "We can talk about it again at some point. I'm sorry about Tim, Abs. I know you two were close to him, but we're gonna take Ari down. That's why Derek and I are here. We are going to find Ari, make sure no one else dies." He promised, restating his earlier vow to McGee.

She nodded as the tears came, obviously overwhelming her and silent sobs wracked her thin frame. Tony stared helplessly over at McGee wondering again, if he was a figment of Tony's subconscious as a psychiatrist had claimed, like when he had started having visions of his dead mother as an eight-year-old or if he was able to communicate with those close to him who had just crossed over, as a psychic had told him once. Finally he figured that it didn't really matter if McGee was there in the lab or was a hallucination, he still had a promise to keep to the young agent.

Swearing softly to himself, he shared a torturous glance with his task force partner before resigning himself to providing Abby with physical comfort. Awkwardly Tony crossed the floor and wrapped her in his arms, albeit reluctantly and with an awkwardness that had never existed before.

As Abby grabbed hold of him like someone drowning, he realised how uncomfortable he felt to be this close to her and he knew that he couldn't simply forgive everything this time, but right now he could compartmentalize which is what he did when he was undercover. He frequently needed to get
up close and personal with people he despised and as a cop and agent he often had to comfort perfect
strangers in incredibly intimate situations. Seeing and holding vulnerable victims and families was
incredibly personal for everyone concerned, so he tried to think of Abby purely as the grief-stricken
victim that she most assuredly was and not the forensic professional who had hurt him deeply and
unleashed a world of hurt.

It suddenly struck him as he held the sobbing woman in his arms and rubbed her back very clumsily
in a pale imitation of her Silver Fox, that Ari would be furious because Gibbs wasn't dead. They'd
learnt after arriving at NCIS that some dumbass pencil-pusher had released that information to the
media. Basically, they’d just sent the lunatic an open invitation to have another shot at Gibbs and
Tony had no doubt that given the slightest opportunity, he would try again.

Abruptly, as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end, Tony became aware that they were under
observation and not by his ghostly Probie - he was conscious of something truly evil. There was no
way to explain how he knew, he just did and impulsively he pushed Abby to the floor and covered
her body with his own, shielding her as he realised that they had been standing in front of the street
level windows that made Abby's lab such an airy place to work and also such an easy target.

A split second after hitting the deck, the first of several bullets shattered the glass, sending shards
flying everywhere and Derek spun into action, killing the lights and crawling to the large refrigerator
that had cast an eerie blue glow over the laboratory and pulled the plug. When the darkness
descended, Tony scrambled into a crouch, grabbing Abby by her belt and waistband, sliding her
across the floor, trying to make her as small a target as possible while getting her out of the line of
fire.

Once they were in a less vulnerable spot she grabbed him again and wrapped herself around him like
a limpet, her hands roaming and fondling his butt and other parts of his anatomy. Even though the
part of him that had been deeply hurt by someone he had viewed as a good friend desperately
wanted to push her away, to scream at her for taking such liberties, he resisted. The professional
investigator in him prevailed, understanding that the adrenaline rush she was experiencing, as well as
the knowledge that she had come close to dying, had overridden normal boundaries of propriety.
Still, her wandering hands were triggering for his PTSD and he had to viciously clamp down on his
emotions since a freak out was not wise when they were under fire from a murderous monster.

Gently attempting to put some space between their two bodies which were currently plastered against
each other, he reached into his pocket to grab his phone and call to security and Fornell.

Gently picking glass shards out of her dishevelled hair and clothes, he attempted to disengage
discreetly as people, including the building security staff, started to pour through the doorway. With
them were Fornell, a petite, red-haired woman who was quite amply endowed and Tony couldn't
help wondering irreverently if they were real or not, inopportune speculation which he wryly
observed was mostly due to his adrenaline fuelled brain, He wondered how long before the
inevitable crash now that the danger had diminished.

More people arrived including agents Ron Balboa and Cassie Yates. Derek rose to his feet, crossed
over and helped Abby to stand. Tony flashed him a grateful glance as the FBI agent took off his
leather jacket and placed it over her shoulders, figuring that she might go into shock. The red headed
woman took control, demanding a Sit Rep and Tony looked askance at Fornell who shrugged.

"Tony, meet Director Jenny Shepard who has replaced Director Morrow as the new Director of
NCIS. Director, meet Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, Senior Field Agent of the Major Case
Response Team and currently on secondment to the FBI special Task Force." Tobias smirked a little
at Tony's shocked expression. It had been a jolt when Tobias found the new Director ensconced in
Tom Morrow’s old chair. Not that he was mourning Morrow’s departure, but it did seem an odd time to switch horses in the middle of an attack on NCIS agents.

Realising that now was not the time to demand answers, Tony proceeded to deliver a report on what had occurred assisted by Morgan with Fornell and Shepard asking questions.

"Ari?" Tobias probed.

"Yeah; it's too much of a coincidence, otherwise." Tony confirmed.

Shepard looked dubious. "Why? What would he hope to gain by killing a forensic scientist, an FBI and an NCIS agent? Convince me, Special Agent DiNozzo."

"Well, first off Director, Abby Sciuto is not just an NCIS Forensic Scientist but as far as Gibbs is concerned, she's his surrogate daughter.

“I suspect that after some brain-dead moronic bureaucrat released the news to the media that Gibbs survived the bomb blast, it riled him up to know he didn't succeed and now I think he's decided to go after anyone close to him.”

Fornell was smirking but it was Morgan that spoke up. "I was just in the wrong place. I wasn't a target, at best I would have been collateral damage, but I believe Tony could easily be his target too. He's Gibbs 2IC as well as his friend, from what I understand."

Tony shook his head. "No, I'm not the target," he insisted stubbornly.

Tobias looked at him seriously. "If not you, then who do you think he will target, DiNozzo? We need to get the drop on him and that means anticipating him, not reacting after the fact."

Tony and Derek exchanged intense stares agreeing to brainstorm the issue. "He's going to be pissed that he missed Abby today. Probably pissed at you, Tony for saving her and even if you're right about not being a target before this, I think you probably changed his mind after today," Morgan declared.

Tony shrugged, "Yeah maybe, but right now he will be pissed like you said and wanting to take out that anger and frustration on someone. He couldn't hang around here because the area will be saturated with security and feds. He'll also be smarting that he didn't manage to take down all of Gibbs team yesterday. The feared Kidon assassin has twice failed now and from what we know, he has to be feeling emasculated. I reckon rather than setting his sights on Palmer, Yates or me, he'll go for a softer target. One he's tried to kill and failed. He'll want to redeem himself".

Fornell frowned, "Ms Sciuto, you are to stay in the evidence garage under protection since there are no windows for sniper attacks and it has a retinal scanner. We'll double our protection detail for Dr Mallard, Agent Todd and Gibbs. I believe you're right Tony, it wasn't smart to announce their miraculous escape from the car bomb."

Tony looked at Abby. "Do what Tobias says. Stay in the evidence garage with Balboa's team." He looked at McGee who nodded, silently acknowledging he would watch over her and Tony felt reassured that she would be safe here. "Fornell, we need to get back to Bethesda too since we both can recognise him. Something tells me he'll try and infiltrate and target Cate, Ducky or Gibbs."

Cassie Yates stepped up and Tony startled since he hadn't realised that she was there. "I'll go with, Tony." Looking him in the eye, she continued: "If you'll have me."

He looked at Fornell, who nodded his assent.
"Okay Cass, let's go."

As they raced toward Bethesda Naval Medical Center, they debated about which of the three individuals Ari would target.

"My money is on Gibbs," Tony asserted. "It not like he has a chance of taking all three of them out, so he's the most likely victim since they have a mutual hate society going and it's one helluva exclusive club. No room for anyone else."

Fornell nodded. "Yeah, I agree but we have to assume that he'll go after Todd and Ducky too. I'd hate to guess wrong."

Tony grinned but it wasn't his usual megawatt smile, this one was hard, almost feral and the other agents looked at him in surprised since he rarely let people see his dark and dangerous side. "True, Tobias so it's lucky we can spread out to try and spot him. Cassie, I've no doubt you could recognise him in a heartbeat if Gibbs has still been running that picture of him on his computer screen," he speculated.

When she grimaced in agreement as he continued thinking out loud, "Thought so. Well you and Derek take Cate and stay with her til we can beef up security since Derek doesn't know what Ari looks like. What about you, Fornell?"

The FBI agent knew better than to suggest he watch Gibbs six when Tony was around so he offered to shadow Dr Mallard instead. Tony flashed him a grateful look, while he still had residual feelings of hurt and betrayal towards his team leader and he wasn't sure if he would ultimately leave or stay with the MCRT, he still cared about Gibbs. He had pulled him out of a very dark time and place in Baltimore and taught him a lot about being a Fed even if Gibbs' teaching style was by osmosis, so he still felt loyalty to the man and damned if anyone else would watch his back while he was still around and capable.

Tony hoped that they hadn't given Ari too much of a head start by hanging around and engaging in endless post-mortem debates while Ari made his way to Bethesda. Which reminded him of the new Director and he wondered when she taken over.

"So Fornell, what happened to Morrow and when did Shepard take over NCIS?"

"He's gone to Homeland Security according to Shepard, as an Assistant Director but she sort of hinted that it's disciplinary action over his failure to act appropriately when you reported the fake photo They couldn't sack him even if they wanted to, and they did want to DiNozzo, because of all his friends on the hill and his security contacts. So, I guess they decided to demote him instead. And Shepard assumed control today, just hours before we got there which is why I had no idea there'd been a change at the top."

The three other agents listened keenly as Fornell told them what he'd managed to glean in the time he spent with the new director, who was frankly a blank page to them all.

"Any idea of what her background is, Tobias?" Tony asked knowing that Cassie was curious too but probably didn't feel comfortable asking the FBI agent for information on their new director. Tony had no such compunctions and anyway, he kind of had a foot in both camps these days. At some stage he would have to make a choice but not today.

Tobias smirked, "She said she was Gibbs' probie and his protégé. I kind of got the impression that they were very close."
"Feisty red-head…well yeah but don't forget Rule # 12," Cassie protested.

Morgan looked confused, so his three traveling companions recited faithfully, "Never date a co-worker."

Fornell exchanged a wry gaze with Tony who leered suggestively. "Of course, Gibbs might not have had Rule # 12 back then Cass. Hell, she might actually be the reason for its existence." Tony mused as he looked over at Fornell. "If they were partners, how come you don't know her?"

"She said it was when they were in Europe on Special Ops, so it must have been between Diane and Stephanie," as if that explained everything and when Tony thought about it, he guessed it did.

"Bit arctic between you, I suppose?"

Tobias grimaced. "Ice age," he admitted.

Changing the subject before Cassie or Derek wanted to know why, Tony turned back to more prosaic matters. "Well I hope Director Shepard is going to tear whoever it was that issued the press release about Gibbs et al survival, a new one. That just made everything that much more complicated."

With a strange expression on his face Fornell responded. "Somehow I doubt it. It might be awkward," he sniggered.

Tony stared at him for a moment before putting two and two together. And he groaned, "Shepard released the news, didn't she?"

"Yep!"

Cassie and Derek chuckled, and Tony pouted. "Well that's torn it, no pun intended. But hey it WAS a damned stupid thing to do. Let's just hope that it doesn't cost anymore lives. And speaking of, let's not forget that Haswari is a qualified doctor guys, so he's more than likely to pose as a doctor. Make sure you checkout guys in scrubs and white coats, hell even guys in maintenance uniforms."

With several more minutes until they arrived, Fornell checked in with his protection detail and determined that so far there had been no attempts for anyone unauthorised to gain entry, which was reassuring. The team leader reminded everyone to stay vigilant and informed his agents that they were on their way to provide back-up since they had reason to believe that Haswari would make an attempt to kill the targets. When they arrived, Fornell didn't bother to park the SUV, pulling up in the emergency parking area and flashing their badges at the security, the four federal agents took off running. Tony took the stairs to the High Dependency Neurological Ward, Cassie and Morgan headed to surgical ICU and Fornell to a general medical ward to guard Ducky, all of them keeping an eye open to try to spot anyone or anything suspicious.

Tony was getting that indescribably uncomfortable feeling that Gibbs was in trouble and he pushed his quad muscles to climb faster, knowing that the elevator would have been quicker if it had been available but not prepared to wait. Panting as he careened up three flights of stairs, he erupted out of the stairwell doorway and raced down the hallway. He immediately noted that the FBI agent supposed to be guarding Gibbs door was absent and his anxiety kicked up a notch or two. Grabbing his phone and his Sig he called Fornell and yelled that the guard was missing, before slipping the phone in his pocket but not hanging up.

Quietly as possible, he engaged the doorknob and started opening the door - relieved that it wasn't locked. Someone was standing beside Gibbs bed next to the IV pump holding the IV port setup in
one hand and a syringe full of a clear substance. Certain that the tall man with his back to the door was Ari, Tony adopted a firing stance and called, "Federal Agent! Move away from the patient and drop the syringe immediately."

Gibbs' bete noire swung his head around in irritation. "Agent Meatball, I didn't expect you to get here so soon. In fact, I thought you were off playing with your little friends in the FBI"

Tony's lips thinned as his finger tighten on the trigger. "Step back Haswari and drop the syringe, unless you want me to shoot." The terrorist didn't back off and Tony advanced into the room, his aim unwavering and ready to shoot if Ari moved a muscle towards the IV setup.

"I am sorry about Special Agent McGee; I didn't want to kill him." The killer apologised, dispassionately.

Tony felt furious but knew that he was being goaded so he focused on not losing his temper. Gibbs was relying on him to watch his six. "Why did you target Gibbs and his team?" he asked to keep Ari talking but more than ready to double tap the bastard if necessary. He had promised Probie so he was going to make damn sure the bastard didn't get away this time.

"To cause him pain." The terrorist replied, impassively.

"Did he piss you off that much?" Tony asked, wishing that Gibbs had kept a lower profile but realising that it was probably like telling the sun not to shine.

"Not him, my father. Gibbs has the misfortune of reminding me of the bastard."

"Ah - so he didn't marry your mother, huh?" Tony taunted trying to annoy Haswari.

The rogue Mossad Officer laughed, sardonically. "That's what makes me a bastard not him. From the moment of his birth he groomed me to be one thing...his mole in Hamas. He sent me to Edinburgh to become a doctor, so I could work in the Gaza camps alongside my mother. When he had her killed, I had no trouble joining the Iz Adin al Kassam."

"You really don't believe your father had your mother killed?" Tony wondered if this guy was really a sandwich short of a picnic like he sounded, yet his own father had done his best to screw him up and he could empathise, if so.

"It was a retaliatory Israeli strike, on a day I was in Tel Aviv, visiting him. After decades of planning, he had his mole in Hamas. He never knew how much I hated him. I wish I could see his face when he realises he created not a mole but a monster, eager to strike at the heart of Mossad and Israel."

The man was right about being a monster. To murder the baby-faced Probie and he came damned close to killing Cate too, who with only one dodgy kidney would never be cleared for field work again, just to make Gibbs suffer because he reminded him of his father?

Why hadn't he taken his anger out on his father instead of making innocent Americans pay with their lives. Tony remembered he'd killed an FBI agent and wounded another in the hostage situation in NCIS last year and of course he shot Gerald and Gibbs. Despite that, if what he said about his father was true then in spite of being a monster, his father must bear responsibility for what he knowingly created and Tony couldn't help feeling a little sympathy for this monstrous individual standing before him.

"Yeah, I almost feel sorry for you."

Ari Haswari stared back at him "And I for you, Agent Meatball."
The assassin dropped the syringe that he held clutched tightly in his right hand, no doubt to convince him that he was going to surrender, when Tony saw a flash of silver from the sleeve of his left arm and he fired two shots from his Sig as Ari threw his wicked looking serrated knife, left handed which he had concealed up his sleeve.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Eli David was about to have a really rotten day.

Mossad Officer Ziva David stepped out of the shower and reached for a bath towel and an extra one to wrap her wet hair in, as she dried herself quickly before she donned her favourite yoga pants and a long sleeve T-shirt. Ziva was still feeling somewhat tense after opening the 'fake' biohazard letter although a little part of her couldn't help but wonder if it was indeed genuine. Settling on the bed, she thought about her brother and her misgivings, which unsurprisingly led to her reminiscences about her childhood and her little sister Tali. She had lost her sister when she was just sixteen, in a terrorist attack.

Feeling increasingly maudlin as she thought about her innocent baby sister, the Mossad spy rose off the bed and went to her duffel bag and retrieved the childish picture book that had been Tali's favourite story when she was a little girl. No matter how many times Ziva would read it to her sister, the Israeli fairy tale The Red Slippers about the little girl, Rosy-Red who had a pair of magical red slippers, Tali always wanted to hear the story one more time before she went to sleep with her favourite stuffed kitty. The child's picture book evoked happy memories of their time together and Ziva carried it with her constantly as a reminder of her beautiful sister and the happy times she had spent with her. She also recalled special times when their elder brother would settle down to listen to the simple story with an indulgent smile on his face when the three siblings spent time together.

Her thoughts returned to the much-loved patchwork cat, Gila that had been Tali's transitional object as a toddler and she had insisted on sleeping with her long after her need for a security blanket had passed. Ziva still carried Gila around in her voluminous handbag too and feeling uncharacteristically disconcerted between her doubts about Ari, and the threatening letter she rose again from the bed and retrieved Gila cat from her bag. Clutching the fabric cat that was a little the worse for wear between her shoulder and cheekbone, Ziva read the fairy tale aloud and felt the usual soporific effects of the simple story as she crawled under the bed covers and blocked out reality for just a short time.

Waking many hours later, she groaned as she became aware of a frightening lethargy. As she crawled out of bed, she was very surprised to see she had slept through the night. Grabbing the television remote control, Ziva switched it on and cursed that she couldn't get ZNN on the TV since this was a very modest Mom and Pop style motel complex. She preferred to stay in places that weren't high-profile, five-star hotels since their security systems were usually very primitive and it helped her fly over the rainbow. When she was on the run, she would opt to stay in the type of flea pits favoured by street crawlers and their Jonnies since anonymity was paramount in such situations. Thankfully she wasn't on the run, so she’d picked this shabby but clean motel.

Cursing that she couldn't get the 24-hour news channel, she had to settle instead for the local DC channel, knowing that they would have a morning news program. While they wouldn't have any international news unless it was a big story, she was a news addict and especially when she was on a mission Ziva liked to keep up with current events.

Seeing Jenn Shepard reading a prepared statement as the Director of NCIS was definitely a shock!
Ziva realised that events had moved faster than her father or Shepard had anticipated if Jenny had been appointed as the newest Director of the NCIS. An agency that for some reason which remained obscure to his daughter at least, her father seemed to favour over the more obvious counter intelligence organisations like the CIA. Focusing on what her friend and sometimes partner was saying, she realised Jenny was announcing that the Major Case Response Team had survived a crime scene blast that had been booby-trapped with a car bomb. There had been with only one fatality and several injuries ranging from serious to fairly minor ones.

The report caused a frisson of dread to wash over the Mossad assassin, but she quickly dampened down her treacherous thoughts that Ari had tampered with the crime scene. He was undercover and there was no way he would risk the mission simply to get petty retribution on Gibbs, who was after all, just another arrogant asp sniper anyway, unlike the élite operatives of the Kidon unit. She wondered idly, which one the NCIS agents hadn't survived the bombing. After compiling intelligence dossiers for Ari so she felt like she knew them quite well.

Still as much as she refused to entertain for an hour, the idea that Ari had anything to do with the attack on Gibbs' team, she decided to contact him. She was his handler, so she was within her rights to know what he was doing. Ziva sent him a text to contact her urgently before she crawled back into the bed to wait for him to respond.

Feeling nauseous and chilled to the bone, she piled on blankets and tried not to think that it was because she was finally starting to believe that Aba might have been right since that would mean she would be forced to dispatch her own brother. Focusing on the television, the young woman waited for Ari to call or text her back. By the time the news started reporting a terrorist attack on the Naval Base at Norfolk with the death of several terrorists, Ziva knew that she needed to go and talk to Jenny Shepard and find out who had been involved.

Not even realising that she was still dressed in her sleeping clothes she gathered her bag and phone, sent another text to Ari and several to her other DC contacts to see what they had learnt about the terrorist attack. Shaking and finding it hard to breathe she wondered if this was what it was like to have your heart-broken. Ironic since her father had done an excellent job of making sure she wasn't encumbered by superfluous emotions since he said they got in the way of an assassin being able to carry out her missions. But perhaps instead of eradicating her emotions, he'd merely driven them down deep under the surface simply waiting for the right time and stimulus to resurface.

Standing up shakily and stumbling across the room, her head pounding, she decided that if this was what it felt like to experience fear, grief and guilt that perhaps Aba had done her a favour after all. As a sudden bout of coughing overcame her and left her gasping for breath and dizzy, the Mossad Officer felt her legs give way and her head collided with the cheap set of wooden drawers on her way down.

The Israeli slipped into unconsciousness just as her cell phone started ringing, as one of her contacts returned her earlier call, which when she failed to answer went to voicemail.

~Betrayals~

Fornell burst into Jethro's hospital room to find Haswari slumped to the floor beside the IV pump on the right-hand side of his hospital bed. Tony stood on the other side of the bed with his Sig resting loosely in his right hand held beside his thigh. Gibbs' monitors showed that while still unconscious, the steady beep of his heart rate and blood pressure indicated that he was unscathed by the assassination attempt. Tobias heaved a relieved sigh because as much as Jethro was a butt head, he was one of the FBI agent's best friends and he would miss him if he wasn't around to annoy the carp out of him.
Although the attempt had failed, it had not been without cost. Tony's left hand was elevated, and the FBI agent could see a lethal looking knife buried up to the haft, with the blade penetrating through the middle of his palm - the serrated blade protruding sickeningly out the back of his hand.

The Fibbie stared at the weapon, recognising it as a knife that was favoured by Ari for up close up wet work. Mentally reconstructing the scene based on his observation, plus what he'd heard over his cell phone, he had trouble figuring out how Tony had end up with that particular injury. It was what Ducky would call a defensive wound and he had shot to kill after all. He cocked an eyebrow before quizzing the NCIS agent.

"Decided to audition for a knife catching job, DiNotzo?"

"Never neglect an opportunity to add to the old skill set, Tobias. Since I developed proficiency at Summer Camp as a kid in throwing them, I thought I might work up a circus act, if my gig as a super special agent doesn't work out, "Tony deadpanned back at him.

"Don't you know you're supposed to catch the handle not the blade?" Fornell bantered right back, the tension bleeding off them both with the comfortable yet by now, familiar snarking.

"Damn it, why didn't someone explain that to me?" he teased.

Suddenly grave, the Fibbie frowned. "Seriously, all jokes aside, how the hell did you get a defensive wound?" He paused as he suddenly started putting together the scenario in his mind. "Ari wasn't aiming to kill you, was he? He was trying to kill Jethro? But he must have known that you would shoot to kill and that at point-blank range, Blind Freddy couldn't miss, let alone Gibbs protégé!"

"Yeah, death by cop but he was determined that Gibbs was going down with him. Did you hear his confession? His father must be a real bastard, I almost felt sorry for him...until he tried to take Gibbs with him. Nothing more damn cowardly than killing a comatose victim, is there?"

He looked down at the body of Gibbs' Great White Whale that his mentor had been so obsessed with and wondered what had drawn the two individuals together with the gravitational pull of a black hole.

Feeling the pain in his hand, Tony realised that the adrenaline high was subsiding, and his hand was starting to hurt. He knew from his undergrad studies that there were several vital tendons in the vicinity of his wound and knew that he was looking at delicate surgery to try to repair any damage, not to mention to remove the damned thing. Just as well it wasn't his shooting hand although he could shoot left-handed if he needed to…well that was before he tried to stop a knife with it. Still at least being his non-dominant hand would make it easier to cope with being one-handed while it healed.

Tobias pulled a face as he revealed, "Yeah, heard everything. His old man is Deputy Director of Mossad and his daughter is a Kidon trained assassin too. Ari was right about one thing at least… the guy is a cold-blooded bastard, alright. Can't image ever doing that to Emily, making her over into an assassin; word is he started Ziva’s training when she was still a child. She was Ari's handler, you know?" he looked at Tony who shook his head.

As agents started pouring into the room, Tony said to Fornell, "There's a syringe somewhere down there near Ari that you might want to secure. I'm assuming that it has something pretty lethal in there, so you may want to be careful how you handle it."

They looked up as Cassie and Derek burst through the door along with the Chief Neurologist Dr Gelfand who insisted on gaining admittance despite being told the room was a crime scene. Taking
in the scene, the Doctor pushed Tony into the visitor chair, seeing that he was showing obvious signs of shock and he reached for the pulse in his neck and found it galloping rather alarmingly.

"We need to get this hand seen to immediately and we need to get Special Agent Gibbs out of here and into a new room. I take it that this was the man who you've been searching for and that he is beyond my skills?" the doctor quizzed Fornell.

"Yeah this was the terrorist and he's dead alright. DiNotzo had no choice since he was going kill Gibbs. We need to process the site but you're right, we need to get Gibbs outta here, Doc. Need to do it with as little disturbance as possible though. Anyone found Special Agent Tomkins?"

Derek looked sombre. "They found him trussed up like a turkey in a supply cupboard, Fornell and barely alive, not clear if he's going make it either."

"Damn, I told him to take care; I hope Haswari's burning in Hell right now!" He took the bagged syringe and handed it off to another agent with an admonishment to be careful til they found out what was in it. "Gotta talk to the powers-that-be, I guess. Tony?" he asked, suddenly aware that Tony was speaking but not making eye contact with anyone in particular.

"We got him just like I promised. I told you he wasn't gonna get away this time," the NCIs agent said softly, staring at thin air.

Exchanging worried glances with Yates and Morgan, Fornell approach Tony and laid a gentle hand on his right shoulder. "You okay there, Tony?"

"Yeah, I'm fine!"

"Who were you talking to?" Derek wanted to know.

Tony smiled at no one in particular before shaking his head. "Gibbs," he said but Derek wasn't sure he believed him. Standing up shakily, Derek took his good arm ready to take his weight if he collapsed as they made their way out of the room and to a waiting wheelchair. Realising the lack of protest was testament to the degree of discomfort he was experiencing, Cassie and Derek escorted him to the emergency department where Dr Gelfand had arranged for their foremost hand surgeon to assess the knife wound.

~ Betrayals~

Two days later:

Tobias Fornell knocked on the hospital door of the NCIS medical examiner and hearing the dulcet English accent call, "Come in," entered Ducky's room. He still found it hard to reconcile that the man was actually Scottish by birth since he didn't have the gentle Gallic burr nor did his dotty mother Victoria, for that matter. To his uneducated ear both sounded more like upper class members of the aristocracy and spoke the Queen's English, in his humble opinion.

"Tobias, what can I do for you, my friend? You're looking rather strained."

The agent smiled mirthlessly. The ME had a genius for understatement. "It's DiNotzo, Ducky. He's disappeared from his room again. I swear, the man is worse than Emily was when she was a toddler. Have you seen him at all today?"

Ducky who was still looking rather the worse for wear and being careful not to gesticulate with his head because of the concussion, smiled wanly. "Yes, he's..."
"Here." Tony finished Ducky's sentence as he wandered out of the bathroom. "What sup?"

"Tony, you're supposed to rest not roam around the hospital, visiting people. I need to talk to you. Something's happened."

He nodded, "Yeah I know, Tobias. Ducky and I were just discussing it and what to do about it."

The fibbie looked surprised. "How did you find out about it? It's totally on the QT at the moment."

"He's obsessively private, but I didn't think it was a state secret," Tony commented, puzzled and Fornell frowned.

"What are YOU talking about DiNotzo? I thought it was your hand that needed medical attention, not your head."

Tony sighed and looked at Ducky who looked equally mystified but because of his concussion was less voluble than usual and shrugged. The agent countered, "We're talking about the fact that when Gibbs deigned to wake up from his coma today, he'd apparently decided to forget the last fourteen years. According to the Doc, he's convinced that he's just lost his family and he doesn't recognise Ducky or me.

"Madame Director's miffed because he apparently doesn't remember her, despite their "close" relationship. Looks like you might be right about them getting hot and heavy because she's acting more like a woman scorned that a concerned boss," he smirked exchanging amused looks with Fornell while Ducky tried to look innocent.

Fornell nodded. "Ah... the dissociative retrograde amnesia; not what I was referring to. So, what conclusions did you reach?"

"That we need to find someone who knew Gibbs in his Marine days. His CO is still being stabilised on his anti-psychotic meds, but Ducky says that there's a congressman that served with him that might be willing to help track down other leads. What the hell are you talking about?" Tony questioned hoping that nothing else had gone wrong.

"Tony, what do you know about Ari's half-sister, Ziva David?"

"Nothing Tobias, until yesterday I wasn't aware of her existence. You told me about her, remember? Why?" he probed.

"Because there's been a biohazard attack and you seem to be involved, somehow."

"Me? What do you mean?" Tony demanded while Ducky piped up with, "What was the biological Agent, Tobias?"

"It was a genetically modified version of the Y-Pestis. According to the lunatic that sent it, it was modified with a suicide chain, so it was rendered harmless after 36 hours, but it was also made resistant to antibiotics," he revealed focusing on Ducky's enquiries.

"What the devil is Y-Pestis, Ducky?"

"It is one of three strains of what is commonly called the plague, my boy. Or sometimes also known as pneumonic plague," the medical examiner explained worriedly.

"What do I have to do with the freakin plague and how the hell is Ari's sister involved? Is this payback for me killing her brother that has gone wrong?"
The FBI agent looked at Tony and was glad that he had an alibi for the last few days. Since returning from Denver, he hadn't ever been alone long enough to have had anything to do with this latest fiasco but that still left open the possibility that this was just a tragic coincidence that Ziva David had opened that damned letter. If that was so, then did that mean that Tony was the intended victim and if so, what was the motive? Was that letter genuine or was it a merely a ploy to disguise further homophobic hate crimes, although that seemed extremely unlikely.

"Because Ziva David opened a letter that contained the bio-agent and the letter was found in a low-budget motel along with various items that have your fingerprints on them and about thirty cards and notes all addressed to you. Plus, some photos of you and Gibbs' team.

You can see why all this is raising red flags with the FBI and the CDC. Luckily, your every move has been alibied since you went to Denver or they might suspect you of being complicit in the attack," Fornell explained, gently.

Ducky looked equally shocked and began to ask typical medical questions about contamination issues and causalities. Fornell responded that so far there was only the Mossad officer who had been confirmed as having contracted the bacteria. The CDC had quarantined the motel, its workers and guests and were decontaminating the building and pumping out their closed septic system since there was evidence that Officer David had used the shower although they couldn't be sure if that was before or after the contamination occurred.

Tony was relieved that the biohazard attack was so far, contained to just one victim but still it was early days and there was no way to know if David had managed to infect anyone else or not. Time would undoubtedly answer that question. But was the attack part of Haswari's sociopathic plans or were there more than one set of terrorists running around loose and intent on hurting innocent Americans?

"Any leads, on who is behind the bio-hazard attack?" he asked Fornell.

"Well if the letter that delivered the Y-Pestis can be believed and it is being investigated, a parent intent on revenge for her daughter's alleged rape by Navy personnel was the motivation. Special Agent Yates says she remembers the case from her probie days with Special Agent Pacci." Fornell revealed sombrely.

"How did my stuff come to be in Ziva David's motel room since to the best of my knowledge I wouldn't recognise her from Eve if I saw her? Since when does Mossad engage in petty larceny? Has anyone asked her why she had my personal effects and how she got them, damn it because I certainly didn't give them to her?" Tony challenged heatedly.

"Or how she came to have a biohazard letter addressed to an NCIS Special Agent; but the consensus is that it was taken from your desk in the bull pen. Suggesting that the letter was meant to infect either you or perhaps Special Agent Yates who has been using your desk and apparently worked the case in question."

Ducky frowned, "That can't be right, surely Tobias? NCIS in line with other Federal organisations have mail screening and irradiation protocols in place to kill bio-hazard agents such as anthrax and Yersinia Pestis. How could it have possibly gotten through those firewalls? There must be some other explanation," the ME argued.

"Oh this 'crazy' was still damned clever, Ducky. The bacteria apparently had been kept alive by encasing it in a moisture strip and the irradiation process was by-passed by having a SWAK on either side of the envelope where the moisture strip was situated. The SWAK was lead-lined lipstick, if you can believe that?" the veteran Fibbie shook his head, incredulously.
Ducky looked at Tony who was looking conflicted. Disgust battled awe and Ducky felt confused. "Anthony, it is clear you know what Tobias is referring to so perhaps you will enlighten me as to exactly what is a SWAK?"

Tony smiled but it was a tight cynical smile, a far cry from his usual offerings. "Um it's an acronym for sealed with a kiss Ducky," he explained.

"Ah I see; thank-you my boy. I must say that a SWAK certainly doesn't have the same romantic connotation by any stretch of the imagination but in this particular case I suppose that it is fitting. You know, I have been the recipient of more than a few missives over the years that were sealed with a kiss but luckily none of them contained a bio-hazardous agent, I'm pleased to say. Although I remember one time in…"

Fornell, sensing one of Ducky's rather convoluted parables decided to interrupt even if it made him feel like a pale imitation of Jethro. "Yes, well I'd love to hear about it some other time Ducky, but as it stands right now, the theory is that the SWAK must have been with your other mail since it was discovered with the other items belonging to you. And until we get to the bottom of this Tony, I'm afraid that you are going to have to accept a protection detail."

Seeing that he was about to object strenuously the Fibbie interrupted him. "It's already been decided by the higher ups, DiNozzo. Yours and mine and you can bitch and moan all you like but it won't change their minds. Apart from this crazed bioterror attack, even if it is just a genuine, loony tune, garden variety wingnut, my Director is still concerned that with your involvement with both of these FUBARs with his children that Eli David will want your head on a platter. He's one mean SOB."

Ducky, who had followed their discussion closely, interspersed a question, following up on one of Tony's earlier ones that had gone unanswered. "Surely Miss David will be able to reassure her father that Anthony is entirely blameless when it comes to the Y-Pestis situation, Tobias? Unless she is refusing to talk, since I presume she is now being questioned as to her role in this mess? I understand that Mossad trains its operatives to resist interrogations? Although surely as allies, we can persuade her to reveal how she came to be in possession of the letter that you feel was clearly meant to infect the good folk at NCIS."

Fornell shook his head soberly. "Officer David won't be talking I'm afraid, Ducky. She was found this morning by a maid at the motel where the contamination occurred, collapsed on the floor near the door and barely alive. By the time the EMTs had transported her to the closest emergency department; she was DOA. The medical examiner says that she had a subdural hematoma although we're not sure yet if that's what killed her; he's thinking that it was respiratory failure. He does think that the head injury resulted in unconsciousness and he has conjectured; based on the lack of victims so far, that it prevented her spreading the disease, thank heavens."

They were all silent as they contemplated just how badly the attack could have ended and while it would be a while before the CDC would give the all clear, it did seem like they'd dodged a bullet. More likely a bazooka!

"So, Tony, you see the need for you to have a protection detail, at least until the dust settles." Fornell stated trying hard not to sound like he was pleading with the stubborn NCIS agent to see sense. Before Tony had a chance to protest that he didn't need a babysitter, a familiar voice filled the silence.

"Yeah and that's why he's going stay with me, so I can watch his back, Fornell." All three men jumped as Derek Morgan entered the room and smiled at them. Before Tony had a chance to protest he explained, sending his temporary partner a meaningful look.
"We still have a few loose ends to tie up anyway on the Patchwork case and Baby Girl is going to come around tonight and give us a hand on that other project we talked about," he looked at Tony's heavily bandaged appendage that was currently in a sling to reduce post-op swelling and smirked. "No pun intended, man!"
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Morgan and Garcia uncover Jonathan Gold’s interest in Tony which comes as an unwelcome surprise.

Tony hauled himself out of the guest bathroom in Derek Morgan's apartment, feeling like something that the cat dragged in. When Tony had been discharged from Bethesda Naval Hospital yesterday and ended up with Morgan watching his six, they'd come back to his place. Morgan's techie friend, FBI technical Analyst Penelope Garcia had come over last night and they'd started looking at Pennington Grammar and the faceless men that had been behind his banishment all those years before.

Derek had been hell bent on finding someone that they could make pay for putting their precious school and its traditions before the welfare of a child sexual assault victim. Tony had assumed that the faceless men that made up the school trustees were probably all either in their graves or picking out their preferred funeral music in anticipation. They’d all seemed ancient to the young Tony when he’d been a student so many years before. Therefore, it had come as a terrible shock to discover that Jonathon Gold, the Secretary of Defence and his ultimate boss, had been part of the legal team for the school at the time.

That little bombshell had totally rocked his world and lead to an embarrassing meltdown for Tony and then the technical analyst who Derek called 'Baby Girl' had insisted on pulling an all-nighter. Derek had asked him if he would be willing to share the bare bones of the assault with Penelope, since he had a gut feeling that Secretary Gold could be a threat to the NCIS agent and wanted his gal pal to dig the dirt on the scum bag. While Tony wasn't ready to share his sordid secret with the techie, since he'd only ever told Morgan what had happened to him, Derek had been persuasive.

"Look, man, you don't need to tell her anything more than the fact that you were assaulted by a staff member. Garcia is cool, I swear. She may seem ditzy, but if you forgive the cliché, she has a heart of gold. More to the point, she knows how to be discreet.”

Tony looked at him, wondering if he should trust Derek's judgment. He didn't even trust himself or his own opinions anymore, but he had taken a chance on the former cop, and if anyone knew what he was going through it would have to be Derek. Surely, if the profiler trusted Penelope, that should be good enough for him, too, shouldn't it? Yet, the truth was that there was time not so long ago that he would have sworn on his life that Abby would never betray him, that they were the best of friends, and look how that turned out.

Still, the fact remained that Jonathon Gold, knew about his past, and even if he hadn't known that he was working at NCIS before, then he certainly would have found out after this whole fake photo scandal. If he knew about Tony's past, then who else knew? Did SecNav know? What about Morrow, did he know, or the new director?

Maybe it would be a smarter move to not be working for the guy who knew what had happened to him back at that damned school, who’d engaged in the cover-up. Although he already had enough reasons to jump ship, a part of him was screaming that he would be damned if that bastard would chase him away from a job that up until recently, he had considered to be a dream job. So really, was
it such a big deal if Derek's minion-in-mayhem was let in on the secret; which wasn't anywhere near as secret as he'd thought?

Talking a deep breath along with a leap of faith in the guy who had been his partner for the last few months, he acquiesced. "Okay, Derek, if you trust Garcia, I guess that's good enough for me. Have at it, but just the bare bones, none of the pathetic victim stuff, comprenhende?" Tony warned.

"Okay, man, I read you, but in case you forgot, you're not a victim, you're a survivor, and Pen will see you as such," Morgan promised seriously.

After they filled her in on why they were investigating Pennington and the men who had been in charge during the time that she'd already searched, Garcia started getting down and dirty investigating Gold, even though she was pinching herself and wondering how he had slipped through the vetting process. While her fingers flew across the keyboard at warped speeds, she had Morgan and Tony puttering around on their lap-tops performing some basic searches, and while they were her loyal Aide-de-camps, she was most definitely the General. Somewhere around 2100 hours, Tony found his appetite and enlisted his fellow agent as his kitchen hand since he only had one hand to chop and stir, as he threw together a scratch Italian meal out of ingredients in Derek's pantry.

It wasn't until about 0320 hours this morning that Garcia found something extremely disturbing, yet it must have been what Morgan had been intuiting in a feat that Tony decided rivalled some of Gibbs' most spectacular gut-leaps. The FBI analyst called them over, her face stony as she read what was on Jonathon Gold's personal computer.

"Hey, Antonio, Derek; you both need to see this. This is bad! I can't believe Sec. Def. would be so stupid to keep it on his hard drive, even if he has encrypted it. It's not exactly unbreakable, though if you actually go looking like I did, and you have some rudimentary skills," Garcia ground out, disdainfully.

~ Betrayals ~

When the two of them came over and stood behind her to read over her shoulder, Morgan uttered a soft curse while Tony seemed to be struck dumb and lost all colour in his face. The two friends studiously avoided staring at Tony as they perused the file and when the cursor reached the bottom of the last page they all stood, silently not knowing what to say.

Tony groaned and without looking at either of his companions, he coughed, "I think I need a stiff drink if you have something, Derek."

"I've got gin, rum or vodka, take your pick?"

Tony thought about it for half a second, "Give me the vodka, thanks."

The buxom blonde analyst pulled a face and chimed in, "Make mine a double, my handsome prince. In fact, is there any chance of some grapefruit or cranberry juice with that?" she asked the tall profiler hopefully.

"Sorry, Baby Doll, but I do have some orange juice, will that do?" he offered, and she nodded.

As they sat around sipping their drinks and avoiding the elephant in the room, Penelope finally bit the bullet, even if she just nibbled daintily on the pachyderm's proboscis. "We are going to do something about this, aren't we, boys? Gold is one major douche bag and he can't get away with this. Tell me we are going take him down, gentlemen?" she pleaded, and Tony couldn't help but make the comparison to Abby. They were so alike and yet as different as night and day,
Morgan looked at Tony and said, "Gold was an officer of the court back then and he knowingly engaged in concealing a felony and has been stalking Tony ever since, so, yeah Princess, you betcha! He's going down, but we need to be smart about how we hide the body so he doesn't hurt anyone else on his way down. And we don't want him to have any warning that we know either. Have you covered your tracks, Pen, 'cause we don't want any trace of our snooping?"

"No problemo, Handsome. I've got it all on a flash drive and I made sure to wipe all trace of my meddling…ah my presence. For such a high-profile politician, he is incredibly casual about his computer security protocols. I'm figuring he's like a lot of powerful men. Thinks he's bullet proof and that no one would dream of looking into his personal business, so he got arrogant and made a digital copy of this filth." She reached out and put a tentative hand on Tony's shoulder.

"Are you going to be okay, Tony? I'm creeped-out by this sicko and I haven't been the one he's been stalking for two decades. He's almost as bad as that animal, in my book." Penelope could tell how tense he was, but he relaxed minutely under her touch and she backed off, willing to build trust with him slowly.

She knew Derek was pushing hard to have him join the team, and Gideon and Hotch had expressed their interest in having him come on board after his work on the Patchwork Killer case. After she'd checked out his pedigree she could see why all the alphabets had been fighting over him. She was already feeling maternal, but she had the feeling Tony wasn't used to having people fuss over him, so she didn't want to spook him.

Garcia hated to bring it up, and no doubt these two very experienced investigators would have thought about it already, but still it needed to be said. "So, then my Adonis I and II, you also need to find the primary source of this crap and get rid of it, right? He must have had a P.I. on speed dial, which should be pretty easy to locate. I'll get on it tonight, and let you know and you can 'persuade him' to hand over all the crap he's being collecting." Derek nodded, and Tony thanked her awkwardly for her help and she smiled.

"I'll settle for another Italian dinner, one with cannolis," and they shook hands to seal the deal.

~ Betrayals ~

Penelope finally left Derek's apartment at 0450 to head home and grab an hour or two of sleep before heading into work and after she left, Tony and Derek had collapsed, too. Now, several hours later and after two hot and bracing showers, the two agents stood drinking coffee in the kitchen, trying to kick start their brains. Derek studied Tony carefully, noting the signs of strain around his eyes and mouth.

Probably in pain, he decided, although I wouldn't be surprised if he had more nightmares after seeing that crap. What does he call this mess… a fable, a fubar? Whatever it is, I'm glad that we found out about Gold sooner rather than later. What a bastard!

"You sleep at all, Tony?" he asked gently.

Tony looked at him and evidently decided not to prevaricate since he shrugged. "Sure, in between the nightmares and freaking out about having the last twenty years of my life documented in glorious technicolour. I feel much rested," he quipped sardonically.

He hesitated slightly before admitting, "I wasn't sure about letting Penelope in on my 'little secret', but you were right about this. I hate knowing but I'm still glad we did it…"

A text message interrupted their conversation and Derek wondered at the strange expression that
crossed the NCIS agent's face as he read the message. It was an odd mixture of guilt, regret and sorrow and he assumed it was probably to do with his team.

"Is something wrong?" he asked knowing that it was a ridiculous question under the circumstances, since what wasn't wrong.

Tony shook his head, "Nah, just a victim of a crime that was asking if I wanted to go with her to a Survivors' Support group tomorrow night. She's been at me for a while, but I had to keep cancelling on her because of the case," he looked at Morgan who looked puzzled. "Ducky told her I'd been attacked, and now she's mother-henning me," he revealed.

Morgan still felt confused by his odd reaction. Did he get too close to the witness; have an affair with her, perhaps? It was an easy trap to fall into because witnesses were often at their most vulnerable and helpless at a crime scene and cops and agents all had an innate sense of protectiveness that caused them to serve in the first place.

Looking at the profiler's confused expression, Tony sighed. "It was an attempted rape, but the victim's husband was a Marine who taught his wife to shoot, and she shot the perp."

Succinctly, he explained how he'd started out treating Laura as a victim of crime before the team had been hoodwinked by the perp and his sicko girlfriend accomplice posing as his sister. How the victim had quickly become the chief suspect and subject of a bruising interrogation and investigation that had left her traumatised, and not just by the would-be rapist.

"I let her down."

"Hey, man, there's no 'I' in team. Your team let her down."

"But I'm the one with experience with dozens of rape cases, Derek. I let the fake emails distract me and I dropped the ball. I know that rapists are no good lying scum and I let them essentially rape her by framing her for murder and attempted murder. She came home to find two disembodied eyes on her kitchen bench and waiting to arrest her. How the devil is that not my fault, God damnit?"

Derek concluded that the team dynamics were what had let the victim down, but he could see that Tony wasn't ready to let go of his guilt. The profiler considered how the undercurrents of competition had created a chasm that had let the perps take advantage of the team's weakness and inexperience. At the BAU, they were all experienced, but had their own areas where they shone, and there was a sense of mutual respect and acceptance that meant that they were one hell of a strong team.

There were no prima donnas on the team and they listened to each other and treated each other with mutual respect. Such a rookie error of identifying with the perps would never have happened since they trusted each other to make sure that no one went off half-cocked. Derek figured if Tony's team had been less focused on competition and one-upmanship, they would have been able to acknowledge and exploit the experience that Tony could contribute as a cop and agent. If they'd followed the fundamental rule of rape cases that perps lie and never assumed that everything was as it appeared on the surface, then the Vic wouldn't have had her life turned upside down by the scum that had tried to rape her.

Once again, he was filled with a sense of resolve to draw Tony into his team where they could gain from his particular experience, but also where they could nurture him and help him to heal. This guy had enough personal demons without having to carry the failures of his damned team on his shoulders, too. He knew that Tony was a little uncomfortable around Gideon and Spencer, but he decided to drag him into the office and meet the whole team, so he could see them in their natural
Maybe, while he was keeping an eye on Tony's six, Gideon and Hotch would let Tony hang out with them. He figured that the delightful Elle and J.J. would, along with Garcia, change his mind about the team being an intimidating place to work.

He looked at Tony who was staring at him with a half-smile. "Looks painful, Morgan. Stop thinking so hard."

Morgan shrugged, "I was thinking that it wasn't your fault if your team didn't function effectively. The whole purpose of having a team is so that you have each other's backs, not to try to outdo each other. I was also thinking that only idiots would discount the experience you have, but competition impedes teamwork. Factor in the usually arrogant crap about the superiority of agents and their training over us poor lowly cops, and you have a recipe for disaster. It wasn't your fault, or at least it wasn't JUST your screw-up; there were three other members of the team and you weren't the leader."

He glanced at the set expression on the stubborn agent's face and smirked.

"But I was also thinking that I'm not going to cure you of your guilt with a few well chosen, if highly intelligent phrases, no matter how right I am. So, I'll settle on showing you the difference between a dysfunctional team and one that supports and nurtures each other. But first, I need to take you down to H.Q to take care of the paperwork for the taskforce... that's if you're up to it? Then later we can take a drive out to Quantico and see the whole team."

Tony nodded. "Sure, that's a good idea. I need to get that report done and I want to talk to Tobias and find out where they stand on this biohazard threat. Not that I don't enjoy your company, but I really want to go home, y'know?"

"Yeah, I hear you, man, but what about coming out to Quantico?" Derek pushed. "Ya already know Gideon and Spencer," he ignored Tony's grimace, "and Baby Girl, too, but you haven't met Hotch, J.J. and Elle yet, and they want to meet you. You're quite the celebrity right now. Might ask for your autograph," he joshed good-naturedly.

"After all, you singlehandedly took out Haswari and closed the Patchwork Killer case in partnership with your charismatic and talented profiling partner, who is also extremely good looking," he teased affectionately.

Tony rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Yeah, okay, but not today, Derek. Will you drive me to Ducky's place after we finish up the paperwork? I need to talk to him about Gibbs and this mess with Gold. If we are going after him, then Gibbs needs to be somewhere safe, since he's decided to forget the last decade and a half, give or take.

~ Betrayals ~

They were on the last leg of the trip to Reston House, Ducky's domicile as he was wont to call it, when Tony decided he'd better warn Morgan about the dotty Mrs. Mallard. While he was sure that Derek encountered racism and prejudice on a daily basis as a cop and FBI agent, he still wanted to give him the heads up in case she decided that Morgan was a rapist or a servant.

Since he was labelled as an Italian Gigolo, he didn't want to take any chances with the man who'd become a good supportive friend. He couldn't help wondering how she knew he had Italian heritage, since he didn't look typically Italian with his mother's Anglo-Saxon genes, but he figured that his surname had been the kicker, and realised that while Victoria was loopy, in some ways she was still sharp as a tack. Regardless, he felt compelled to warn Derek that she was in the early stages of dementia and that she claimed to carry a knife in her brassiere. He wondered idly if Gibbs had
adopted Rule #9 after meeting the formidable female.

After warning him about Victoria's archaic views on 'the help', he proceeded to share her demands for Cate to show Victoria her knickers and her insistence that Cate was a hussy and after Ducky's money. Or how she'd chased Gibbs around trying to seduce him when Tony had been staying over after coming out of hospital, convinced he was some long-lost lover, and Ducky had been forced to get his mother more than slightly tipsy to get her to back off. Even though his current partner hadn't ever met Gibbs, Derek had been pretty amused to hear about his molestation by a randy nonagenarian nonetheless, and Tony had to admit that it had been pretty funny.

Part of him questioned yet again, if Victoria had more marbles than people gave her credit for and used the dementia as an excuse to behave outrageously. There was often a maniacal gleam in her eye when she did or said something particularly provocative.

As they pulled into Ducky's street, Morgan abruptly changed the subject. "Are you thinking about going to the Survivors' Support group tomorrow night with Laura?"

Tony gave him the evil eye and nodded. "I guess so. She won't stop nagging, and I owe her anyway. I went with her the first time to get her started and now she wants to pay it forward, and in a way, that's great, cuz it means she's feeling better. More 'empowered' as the shrinks like to say, I guess, but Ducky says that she even managed to make it to NCIS when she didn't hear from me when I was being harassed and changed my cell phone number. He says she had a panic attack when she ended up in the bull pen."

Sighing, he continued, "Still, she faced her demons, I suppose, but the fact remains that she did it 'cause she was worried about me. How screwed up is that? I mess up and traumatise her, and she's concerned about me?" He sounded both outraged and mortified.

"It sounds as if she is grateful for your help." Morgan answered.

"Yeah, I know, and how wrong is that? She should be slapping me around or sticking pins in a Tony doll, man. Not going to NCIS to find out why I'm not answering my cell phone." Tony countered as they stepped out of the car and walked up the stairs to the front door.

The FBI profiler shook his head in exasperation as Tony knocked on the front door. It was immediately flung open by Mrs. Mallard with her nurse turning up a few steps behind her. For such an elderly woman, she sure could move fast, like a whippet, he concluded wryly.

Today appeared to be a good day for Victoria. She had decided that Derek was the Abyssinian Emperor and she graciously invited them into the parlour to partake in High Tea. Morgan exchanged a dazed glance at Tony before entering the house, no doubt deciding that Mrs. Mallard eccentricities went a fair way to explaining her son's somewhat odd behaviour, too. Showing just how lucid she was today, Victoria embraced Tony before asking Derek had he met her grandson, Anthony and demanding to know what he had done to his hand.

"You've only just recovered from that dreadful beating you suffered when fighting those dreadful fascists, my dearest laddie. You aren't looking after yourself," she lectured sternly. "Even Donald has been attacked by hooligans."

As they were escorted into the sitting-room after greeting Mrs. Mallard's nurse, Tony explained he'd cut his hand, but it was getting better now. As she fussed around him, Ducky, who was still looking the worse for wear, rolled his eyes, reminding Tony of how he'd done that, too, on to many occasions with Gibbs when he was being annoying, although Tony could understand Ducky's point. They needed to talk, and he didn't want to do it with an audience, either.
"Mother, I believe that you mentioned something about Anthony and Derek staying for High Tea? Anthony was only saying the other day how much he misses your Chelsea buns, and I for one would love some scones with rosehip preserves." He winked at Tony and he quickly got with the program.

"Yes, Mrs. Mallard, your Chelsea buns are to die for, and the Colonials simply don't know how to make them like you do," he played along with Ducky obediently, surprised when Victoria scowled at him.

"Since when does my Grandson call his seanmhair, Mrs. Mallard? You know it's Grandmamma or Seanmhair, silly boy."

Tony looked at Ducky and mouthed seanmhair and Ducky spoke sotto voce, "It's the Scottish form of grandmother."

Looking suitable chagrined, he crossed to Victoria, took her hand in his and bowed his head. "My apologies, Seanmhair, could you please, please bake Chelsea buns for me…please?" he wheedled, before giving her his best puppy dog eyes and a shy smile that melted way too many females' hearts in the past.

Ducky's mother was no exception and she bustled off to the kitchen, before pausing and fixing Derek with an imperious stare. "And what would the Emperor like for tea?" she enquired cordially.

Derek looked like a deer caught in the headlight, but he obviously drew on every reference he could think of about English High Teas and offered, "I'd love to try some cucumber sandwiches, Mrs. Mallard," relieved when she beamed at him approvingly.

"Excellent, and so you shall, Your Eminence, and we can eat crumpets with lemon curd, too," she promised, delighted. Calling to her nurse like a lady-in waiting, she swept out of the living room, and the three men all heaved a relieved sigh.

Tony looked at Ducky critically. "How are you really doing, Ducky?"

The medical examiner grimaced. "Actually, my boy, I really don't know how you cope with all the concussions that you have. I'm feeling positively peaky, I'm afraid, and that's IF I don't move my head imprudently. Truth be told, I feel rather like something that Prince Albert has dragged through a ditch or three."

Morgan mouthed 'Prince Albert?' in confusion.

Tony grinned briefly. "Ducky's mother's corgi; he's the alpha male of the pack. Ducky, did you talk to Gibbs before they discharged you yesterday?"

Ducky nodded carefully. "That I did, my boy. I mentioned Senator Patrick Kiley, but Jethro was keen on tracking down his former mentor, Michael Franks, who was a Special Agent at NIS. I said that I would endeavour to locate the man, Anthony."

Tony and Derek exchanged panicked looks, and Tony exclaimed, "No! Tell him you can't find him, Ducky. We need to find somewhere else for Gibbs to go and lick his wounds. Do not look for Franks."

"May I ask why you do not want Jethro to reunite with his mentor?" he asked, confused.

"Ducky, it's complicated. I found out today that I have a stalker who has been watching me for the last twenty years and he has also figured out that my Dad and I… well, we don't have a relationship, but he's figured out that he can blackmail me through Gibbs. He's dug up some pretty bad shit on
Gibbs that would send him to jail, and that bastard Franks is to blame, so for that reason alone, there is motive enough to keep him away from Franks, wherever the hell that bastard's hiding out."

"My dear Anthony, what did Jethro do that would make him ripe for blackmail? He is one of the finest, upstanding agents that NCIS has."

Tony frowned. "He was corrupted by Franks before he ever joined NIS, Ducky. Franks leaked information to him, Marine to Marine, about the man that was 'alleged' to be behind Gibbs' wife and daughter's death, along with an agent that was part of their protection detail. Franks wanted retribution for his dead agent and couldn't arrest him when the suspect fled to Mexico, and he knew that the grieving widower and father would leap at the chance to mete out his own type of justice.

"He would know as a Black Ops sniper, Gibbs wouldn't have a problem travelling down to Mexico to take out a drug lord. There was an investigation by a Marine MP, a Lieutenant Lara Macy, who coincidently is an NCIS agent, too, now, and it looks as if she had enough to nail him, but at the last minute she took pity on him and dropped the investigation."

He cut off Ducky's exclamation and continued, "Not long after Gibbs killed him and returned, Franks recruited the Boss, no doubt knowing that Gibbs owed him big time. From what I've seen, Franks was a cowboy, a dinosaur and an anachronism. God knows, I've seen his type enough in Peoria, Philly and Baltimore," he said scornfully.

“They think that the rules don't apply to them, they see nothing wrong in beating a confession out of a suspect or shooting a dirt bag 'resisting arrest' and justify it as saving the good tax-payers the cost of a trial. The file we found from my stalker details all the times Franks bent or broke the law and all the times that his Probie agent looked the other way or was an accessory." He turned anguished eyes towards Ducky, who looked stunned. “Sometimes before and sometimes after the fact, but still an accessory.”

"Oh, my boy, I am so sorry. What a mess. Why are you being blackmailed, Anthony?" he watched dismayed as Tony nodded at Derek.

"Show him the file, Derek. I can't do it again. I'm going to see Seanmhair," he flung over his shoulder and he raced out of the room, wondering if he could bully Derek into going for a bruising run, as he knew the profiler would never agree to him going alone. Even though he was glad they had found out about Gold and his filthy file, it was dredging up a whole lotta crap and he was hanging in there, barely.

After watching Victoria up to her elbows in flour and happy as a pig in mud for several minutes, he slipped out the side door into the garden and sank down trying not to let the latest revelations overwhelm him. He wasn't sure how long he sat there thinking about what he had discovered about Gibbs in the last few days.

Losing his wife and daughter must have broken Gibbs, since he never mentioned them, but to go out and stalk and kill the guy that Franks said killed his family? Tony tried not to be judgemental, but how the hell could Gibbs reconcile putting killers away who were bent on avenging their loved ones with the fact that he had acted the same way, damn it?

How could Franks do it? He must have known that the boss was vulnerable and suggestible.

Tony tried to imagine any situation where he could conceive of giving a grieving loved one the sort of information that Franks had imparted to Gibbs. It didn't matter that he'd been a willing participant; he'd had to have been mad with grief and should never have been exploited like that by the NIS agent. Cops and agents should hold themselves to a higher code of conduct, not break the law. That
made them no better than the dirtbags.

Talk about double standards! Much as he respected Gibbs as an investigator, he suddenly felt like his idol had feet of clay, and Tony wondered if Gibbs was so very different to his father, after all? Still a part of him had to figure that Gibbs couldn't possibly be fine with what he'd done, otherwise he would have been able to talk about his family instead of pretending they'd never existed.

Suddenly, Tony felt himself being dragged up off the ground as Ducky and Derek both hauled him to his feet after coming to find him, and Ducky, despite being at least four inches shy of his 6 foot 2, grabbed him in a fierce and protective embrace and hugged him tight.

"Oh, Anthony," he gasped and the man-child who had been searching for something indefinable ever since his world fell apart when his mother died, finally felt something warm and safe settle over him. Even though he couldn't put a name to the emotion he felt on a deeper intrinsic level, he knew that he had found acceptance and love without conditions.

Ducky knew his darkest, foulest secret, and had not found him repellent or repulsive, and that had always been his greatest fear.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Abby and Cate learn their fates.

Chapter Notes

My thanks go to Arress for beta-ing the final three chapters of Betrayals.

Dr. Mallard led what was left of the MCRT contingent down the steps of the auditorium at the end of the memorial service for Special Agent Timothy McGee. Gibbs had decided not to attend since he didn't remember any of his team and was already plunged into a fresh round of grief for his dead family. Also, apart from not remember young Timothy, the team or the actual incident which resulted in his death, the Marine in Gibbs had left him feeling guilty for not preventing the young agent from being blown up. A situation that Ducky conceded was probably inevitable whether he had his memories or not.

The only thing that surprised the medical examiner was that Anthony did not seem to find some way to blame himself, too. Of course, no sane individual would have expected to have been able to save young Timothy, not even Anthony, unfortunately.

Meanwhile, Cate was unable to attend the service, still in hospital, gravely injured from the same bomb-blast that had taken Timothy's life, although today the doctors were going to move her to a step-down ward from ICU, which Ducky found encouraging. Anthony had attended the service and sat beside Abigail, Jimmy and himself, but the medical examiner could tell that he was still quite uncomfortable around his former best friend and his NCIS colleagues in general. On his other side, Cassie Yates had flanked him as a TAD working on the Major Case Response Team, and Special Agents Fornell and Morgan had insisted upon coming and staying close to Tony, sitting directly behind, to offer silent support.

It had fallen to Ducky to do what should have been Jethro's role as Timothy's supervisor and deliver a eulogy. The next most logical choice for the task would be the Director of the Agency, since the special agent had been killed on the line of fire, but Thomas Morrow was on the nose with 'The Powers that Be', and Director Shepard had never even met Timothy, and hadn't felt that it was appropriate. The new Director asked both Anthony and Cassandra to speak, but both had declined. Cassandra felt that it wasn't appropriate since she had only been his immediate superior for a few weeks, and it had been temporary at that, and Anthony said that there was too much ill-will surrounding him amongst his colleagues and he didn't want to cause McGee's family any more heartache than they had already endured. Ducky had been given the task by default.

Looking at Timothy's young sister and mother, Ducky could understand why Tony was reluctant to cause them any further grief, as they looked completely shattered, and while Admiral McGee was stony-faced, he must be devastated, too. So, Ducky had agreed that he needed to step up and he delivered the eulogy, calling upon all his oratory skills and affection for the young agent and doing
an admirable job under the circumstances, if he did say so, but he did hope that Anthony had managed to make his peace with Timothy. He had seen first-hand see how grief, resentment, anger and hatred could eat away at an individual, and although he didn't think that Anthony had refused to deliver the eulogy because of hard feelings, he knew that the agent was feeling very conflicted right now.

And he now knew why the attacks on him earlier this year in the NCIS showers had stirred up the PTSD, and he wished that his suspicions, well his, Tobias and Jethro's suspicions really; hadn't been right, even if they had been wrong about the perpetrator. This was one situation where he'd have welcomed being wrong, since it meant that in being right meant that Anthony had suffered terribly as a young boy. He was surprised that his temporary FBI partner had already been in the know since getting Anthony to talk about anything personal, let alone something of such enormous magnitude was terribly out of character for the young agent, and he couldn't help but wonder if NCIS had lost their rising star.

He'd been fairly certain before that Anthony had been seriously considering a return to Gibbs' team, especially after he heard about Cassie and her contribution and Gibbs' support. Now though, since Tony has uncovered the circumstances of Gibbs' compromise, he knew that something had broken in the man; that he felt conflicted over his loyalty to his mentor, a man he respected as a father figure, and the oath he had taken as a law enforcement officer. Ducky feared that it might be impossible for him to work with Gibbs again. That was even supposing that Gibbs regained his memory or wanted to return to work.

Ducky had to admit that initially he had been caught off balance by Anthony's reaction to Jethro's little journey into retribution, expecting him to excuse Gibbs' actions as Ducky felt inclined to do. However, while he had one giant case of hero worship when it came to his mentor, Ducky realised Tony was still so very young and idealistic, plus he was very much a cop in his outlook, too. Ducky knew he had seen more than his fair share of corrupt and dirty cops, and so the medical examiner could see why finding out that Jethro had forsaken his principles might have destroyed the trust he had in the former Marine.

Then, of course, there was the highly significant use of the word 'alleged' when Anthony had described the man who Jethro had executed which was another enlightening tell. It had been instilled into him that justice worked because the people that investigated and arrested the lawbreakers didn't act as judge and jury and mete out justice, since infallibility could never be guaranteed. And for that reason, it needed to have two branches of the law to oversee its implementation. And Ducky couldn't disagree with the young man, especially since he believed in the system enough to dedicate his life to law enforcement.

Of course, since Anthony had suffered at the hands of a bunch of rednecks, who felt that the law didn't apply to them because of his supposed sexual orientation, he could see why Gibbs acting outside of the law to gain revenge would be hard for him to come to terms with. Coming within an inch of dying at the hands of a mob who were carried away by testosterone and mindless blood lust tended to make one reassess one's life and values, after all. Anthony, despite his various masks and guises as a frivolous prankster had always been something of the team's moral compass anyway. How could anyone come through the experiences he had over the last few months and not end up a different person.

Ducky only hoped that the obvious conflicting emotions he was experiencing could be reconciled in a way that didn't end up destroying his young friend.

~ Betrayals ~
Cate was listening to her sister Rachel and her Mom argue about who was going to look after her after she was finally discharged from Bethesda. They were all hoping that she would be able to go home some time in the next week, although her surviving kidney was still cause for concern. At the moment she had several dialysis treatments to help take the strain off it while it continued to heal. All her siblings, along with her parents, God love them, had offered to donate a kidney if she needed a transplant, but the doctors were hopeful that her remaining kidney should be fully functional, given time.

She still felt like she’d been run over by a tank, since the concussive blast had been massive, but she knew she had been incredibly fortunate to survive it. Tim hadn't, and she couldn't help feeling guilty that it had been her that had ordered him to open the trunk, which had triggered the bomb. She should have been standing right beside the car, too, except she'd spied a highly patterned snake under the convertible and she had shrieked like a little girl instead of a badass federal agent and taken off at a run, since she had a pathological fear of snakes. Rachel had been offering to fix her phobia with systematic desensitisation for a while now, but Cate reckoned her pathological fear had saved her life.

Looking at the pile of information that her big sister had brought for her to read on postgraduate clinical psychology training programs and law degrees, she sighed mentally. The winds of change were blowing a gale and her future was uncertain. Director Shepard had been by yesterday to see how she was recovering and to let her know her fate.

She informed her that Director Morrow had been moved sideways and according to one of her Secret Service girlfriends, the word was that it was a tacit punishment for his role in the fake photo fiasco. Jennifer Shepard had told her that with only one kidney, particularly one that was dodgy, she wouldn't be able to qualify for field status and would be pensioned out on disability. When she brought up the possibility of an analyst position with the agency, the new director studied her candidly.

"Special Agent Todd, I was hoping that I, that we, might be spared having to have this conversation, but apparently that is not to be. Even if you hadn't been severely injured, even if you had been declared fit to resume your field agent status, the internal investigations into your conduct have recommended that you be terminated. The SecNav and the Secretary of Defence already decided prior to the attack that we couldn't condone your behaviour, nor will we.

“Considering the serious nature of the injuries that you have incurred while working for the agency, we will support you with your recovery and rehabilitation, and you will obviously qualify for a disability pension. The Powers That Be have also decided that you be permitted to retire instead of having it recording on your personnel file that you were terminated.”

The red-haired director smiled politely. "Feel free to call me if I can be of assistance with your rehabilitation program or benefits. Get well, Ms. Todd. I regret that you were injured while working for NCIS. You probably already know that Ari Haswari has been apprehended and will no longer be a threat to you or anyone else. I hope you get out of here soon,” and with the empty smile of a practised politician, the first female director of NCIS strode out of her hospital room and left Cate dazed as she contemplated the future.

Rachel and her parents had rallied round her when she told them she was being retired on disability, although she did confess the truth to her sister. She had already told her big sis about the mess over the photo and Tony's attacks. She couldn't bear her parents to know the truth about why she was really parting company with the agency though, since they would be so disappointed in her. She hadn't told them why she had resigned from the Secret Service, either.
Thankfully, Rachel had pointed out that she could go back to school and complete her clinical training to become a therapist. She teased her that they could open a joint practice, or if Cate still wanted to work in law enforcement in some capacity, she could go back and complete her studies in law and become an attorney. Plus, she could always teach college kids. Her sister kept reminding Cate that she had plenty of options once she regained her health.

Cate was feeling battered by all that had occurred, but her sister was her rock, and refused to let her brood on how much of a mess she'd made of everything, and she realised just how lucky she was to have Rachel in her life. Exchanging an amused look at her father with her uninjured eye as his wife and daughter continued arguing about who would be best to look after Cate when she went home, he mouthed, "Can I get you anything," and she shook her head, cautiously.

Announcing that he was going to go and get himself a coffee, he smirked when his wife and eldest daughter failed to even hear him, they were so caught up in their argument. He smiled again at his baby girl and turned to leave. He was heading out the door when a tall, athletic man paused in the doorway.

"Catey-bear, you have visitor," Her father informed her.

Cate was about to tear strips off her dad for the hated childish name when she paled as she realised that her visitor was none other than Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo.

"Come to gloat, DiNozzo?" she lashed out and noticed the confused expression round his eyes and the shocked expressions on her parents' faces before her mom rallied and attempted to smooth things over by asking her, "So Honey, aren't you going to introduce us to your friend?"

Cate shot a look at her sister, who certainly knew who DiNozzo was, even if she hadn't met him, before she made the introductions. "Mom, Dad, Rachel; this is NCIS Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. Tony, meet my Mom and Dad and this is my big sister, Dr. Rachel Cranston."

Tony smiled equally politely at Cate's family. "It's nice to meet you all. Cate has spoken of you often. Please, call me Tony."

Cate's father extended his hand, "It's nice to meet you, Tony. Do you work with Caitlyn?"

"Not currently, Sir. I have been working with the FBI for several months now."

Cate frowned, and her mother piped up, "Wait, I thought Cate was your partner? Isn't that what you told us, honey?"

Tony stepped in smoothly and explained, "We were partners Ma'am, but I have been on leave from NCIS and seconded to a FBI Task Force for a serial killing."

Cate's mom crowed in recognition. "Oh gosh, I though you looked familiar, you're one of those agents who caught the Patchwork Killer. I saw you on the television in Denver."

Tony shook his head embarrassed, "No, Mrs. Todd, it was a team effort; my partner and I just arrested the alleged killer at the end of a long investigation and then got our faces plastered all over the news. And I'm sorry to interrupt your visit with Cate. I'll come back some other time. It was nice to meet you all."

Rachel glared at her sister. "No, that's okay, Tony. I know that you and Cate need to talk. Dad was off to grab a coffee and we can go, too, and give you some time to chat." She gave her parents a pointed look and although they looked a little puzzled, her mom gathered her things and agreed that a coffee sounded like a good idea.
Rachel reached for her own handbag, but Cate grabbed her hand and sent her a silent message, pleading with her to stay. "Of course, I could hang out and keep you both company," she smiled, and Cate heaved a sigh of relief.

She had been desperate to talk to DiNozzo for so long now, to be given the opportunity to apologise for what she'd done, but when finally faced with the opportunity, she suddenly found that she didn't have anything to say. The guilt and the anger was palpable, but before she could lash out and throw out the baby with the bathwater because she was angry about losing her job, Tony stepped in with an olive branch of sorts.

"Are you feeling better? I was told that your eyesight should return. Are you still on dialysis?" he quizzed in his typically nosy fashion.

Thankful of a safe topic to kick start this awkward conversation, she smiled slightly. "Yes, getting better, Tony. They still have me on dialysis, but they're hopeful that it's temporary, even though my parents and sibs have all offered to give me a kidney if I need one at a later stage, and the ophthalmologist is removing the bandage from the eye later this week."

Tony nodded, "That's good news, Cate. I'm glad you made it. The last time I saw you in ICU, I wasn't sure you would."

~ Betrayals ~

Abby Sciuto shifted nervously in her seat as the Director's personal assistant, Cynthia, nodded into the phone before hanging up and smiling at her. "You can go in now, Dr. Sciuto."

Standing, as she found her centre of balance with her platform boots, Abby contemplated if she was about to be terminated for her part in the fake photo fiasco. She had gone to visit Cate last night after work and found her shocked and upset. Director Shepard had delivered the news that she was going to be pensioned out of NCIS on disability, and when Cate had asked about a desk job, she'd told her that the decision had already been taken to terminate her.

Abby had sort of thought that with the whole Ari Haswari episode that everything would just fade away, since the agency had already been decimated, especially the Major Case Response Team. Tom Morrow had intimated that it would all blow over and they'd probably only receive a rap over the knuckles.

Well, instead of blowing over Cate was gone, Director Morrow had moved over to Homeland Security, and now she was expecting that she would probably get the sack, too. Entering the director's office and taking the seat that the new director motioned her to, she sank down and waited anxiously. Looking at the petite woman, Abby could see her stern demeanour and wished that Ducky or Gibbs was beside her, offering support.

"Ms. Sciuto…ah, I mean, Dr. Sciuto, I had been intending to meet with you sooner to discuss several issues with you, but I'm afraid that more pressing events have had to take precedent. I wish to discuss your future at NCIS because, as you are no doubt aware, the findings of the internal investigations have been complete for some time now. The Secretary of Defence and the SecNav have come to a decision regarding what action will be taken in relation to your behaviour and authorised me to carry out those recommendations." She paused dramatically and stared at Abby until she was desperate to know what those sanctions were, and the Goth was positive that they were going to be punitive.

The new director stared at her intently. "Before we discuss them, I just need to make it very clear, Dr. Sciuto, that your behaviour was completely outrageous and inappropriate, not to say unprofessional in the extreme. I simply will not tolerate you misappropriating government equipment
and resources for this type of appalling behaviour, do I make myself clear?"

Abby much chastened, nodded. "Yes, Madam Director."

Jenny Shepard scowled. "It's Director Shepard. Dr. Sciuto you should be aware that you came close
to being terminated, however, you will be placed on probation for a period of one year and your
work may be subject to auditing without prior notice if for whatever reason, I may deem it necessary.
Furthermore, should there be any further professional misconduct you will be dismissed immediately
and with no redress to any appeals processes.

"In addition, until further notice, you will not be permitted to use any software that can manipulate
digital images unless you are under the direct observation and supervision of another NCIS employee
at all times. A probationary agent will be assigned to monitor you when it is necessary for you to use
the pertinent computer software. And finally, from now on, you will be required, as per all NCIS
employees, to observe the office dress code and clothe yourself in a manner that is appropriate for a
forensic professional.

"I understand that in the past you have been permitted a certain laxity in the way you conduct
yourself, but I think perhaps that may have played a part in causing the problem. As it is, the actions
of yourself and Todd have probably cost me the most valuable undercover agent this agency has.
And while Director Morrow and Special Agent Gibbs were incredibly indulgent with you, neither of
them is here any longer. I run this agency and will not tolerate conduct that is not professional.

Abby was reeling from the censure that she encountered from the new director and shocked at the
stringency of her new conditions of employment, but the final blow was delivered when she heard
that Gibbs was no longer a part of NCIS.

"What do you mean that the Bossman isn't here anymore? Where would he go? He is family!" She
exclaimed tearfully.

The director looked at the forensic scientist cautiously, knowing that while she needed to exert her
dominance, she also had to be careful she didn't lose Abigail Sciuto, too.

"Gibbs has no memory of his time here and has taken leave from NCIS. I don't know if he will
resume his duties as the lead agent of the MCRT or not. We can only hope that he will decide to
come back when his memory returns, whenever that may be."
Inside her private room at Bethesda Naval Hospital, former special Agent Cate Todd looked up at Tony out of her one good eye. She was surprised to find herself feeling unbelievably awkward with the man who had been her partner for almost two years, which prompted her to think once again about their probie Timothy McGee and her guilt about his death. "I can't believe Ari killed Tim," she mumbled.

Tony nodded, "Yeah, I know what you mean. I keep seeing him all the time. I'm not sorry Haswari is dead, he was a rabid monster, but I think the truly evil one is still well and truly alive and flourishing. His own father sounds like a brute and an abomination, if what Ari and Fornell said about him is true. He turned his son into a tyrant. Ari was angry at his ass wipe of a sperm donor and everyone else was just collateral damage to him and a way to piss off his old man." He spoke in harsh staccato fashion as the hatred he felt for Ari had come bubbling up to the surface. In the end, Tony decided that Ari hadn't been all that different from your garden variety serial killer with his rage issues with his father.

No doubt the shrinks would claim that the rage at his father was a result of an Electra Complex and he really had simply wanted to kill his father and sleep with his mother, but then again, Tony thought Ari was just really pissed off that his father had slept with his Palestinian mother simply to sire a child that could gain entree to Israel's bitterest enemy, Hamas. But Hell, what did he know anyway? At least Eli David didn't seem all that cut up about Tony double tapping his son to stop him from killing Gibbs. The only thing that irked him apparently was that it had been 'Agent Meatball' that had removed a trained Kidon operative.

According to Fornell, Ziva David had prepared exhaustive intelligence dossiers on all the members of the MCRT, and Tony's had been far from flattering, earning him the racially derogatory epithet. Now the Deputy Director of Mossad was apparently suffering from a severe loss-of-face because his daughter had so badly underestimated his abilities.

On a positive note though, Cassie and Fornell had proved that Officer David had ended up being the sole casualty of the SWAK because she had stolen that letter out of his desk drawer at NCIS, and he had no intent to kill Eli David's super-soldier-spy-assassin daughter. Which was good since he didn’t relish having some sort of Israeli version of a blood feud with the Deputy Director to worry about.

Finally, he was free to return home to his apartment, and he was so glad to have his sanctuary back again. Of course, the $64,000 question was why the Mossad officer had stolen his possessions and the letters in the first place, but nobody seemed to know, or if they did, they weren’t telling him.

Cate evidently had decided to fill the uncomfortable silence when Tony zoned out as he heard her ask, "How are you doing, Tony?"
He surprised her by hesitating. "If I said I was fine, I'd be lying, Cate. Not really sure how I am. So many things have happened that I had no control over." He stared at her, considering his words. "What did you mean before about me coming to gloat?"

She winced, "Director Shepard informed me yesterday that I'll be pensioned out of the agency on disability, but when I questioned the possibility of an analyst job she told me I was going to be dismissed anyway. Then the next day, you show up after refusing to talk to me for weeks. It seems like a reasonable enough assumption that you'd come to gloat. There's no such thing as a coincidence after all," she snarked at him, irritably.

Cate noticed that DiNozzo's eyes had gone all hard and flinty. "Actually, Agent Todd, there really is. I didn't talk to you for weeks because I couldn't cope with everything that happened to ME, and for once I decided to put what I needed before making sure that other people who should be watching my six were okay at my expense. I came here today to see if you were okay and maybe talk about Tim, but of course you would interpret my actions as a childish attempt to rub your nose in it for losing your job. Just 'for the record,' no one bothered to inform me that you were going to be retired," he said using air quotes.

"That's always been a problem you know, since you think I am nothing more than a jerk and a dumb jock, but I'm not the cause of you losing your job, Cate. No one forced you and Abby to commit fraud, or to do it on the government dime."

She winced and stared at her sister, looking for support, and wondering just how she'd managed to turn this into a confrontation rather than reconciliation, and her sister shrugged and shook her head. It seemed that while she was lost for words, Tony had found his second wind though. "I'm sorry you lost your job, Cate, but I almost lost my life," he reminded her. "I think my boo-boo kinda trumps you losing your job. Let's face it; it could be worse; you could be facing criminal charges."

Rachel moved to her sister's bedside and placed a restraining hand on her sister's arm. "C'mon, Cate, breathe and focus on what you wanted to say to Tony when he first got hurt."

Cate heard her, but she couldn't shrug off the pain of her dismissal. She wasn't used to rejection and had always wanted to be in control, and she so wasn't right now. So that was why she lashed out at a convenient target, and since she'd always used DiNozzo as her punching bag in the past, as the team's whipping boy, it was habit.

"So, it was coincidence that you turned up the day after I got fired. Surely you aren't going to try to convince me that now that Tim and I aren't on the team anymore, you won't go running back to being Gibbs' faithful lapdog again? After all, he'll need YOU!"

Her sister gasped, and Tony laughed, a bitterly cynical chuckle, even as her good angel was yelling at her 'Just shut your mouth, Cate, before you end up sounding like a total bitch.'

"Gosh, Catey, you do have tickets on yourself. I took leave because I wasn't safe at NCIS because of all the homophobic idiots that were threatening me. You know, after being assaulted at work by colleagues and nearly being gang raped. Oh, and let's not forget, beaten almost to death outside my own apartment. I needed to work someplace where I could feel safe and where I could be sure that the people I worked with would have my back."

He glared at Cate, so angry at her that he forgot about his reason for coming. "Yeah, I was avoiding you because I was pissed at you, at pretty much the whole team. Yes, I should have had this out with you a long time ago, but it was about so much more than just you and what you needed. You have no idea what I was going through, and I'm not going to share that with you because I'm entitled to
my privacy, but contrary to what you think, the universe doesn't revolve around Caitlin Todd. And not that it is any of your business, but I don't know if I can go back to NCIS since I still don't feel safe there anymore. I'm not sure I even want to go back."

He wasn't about to share his doubts about Gibbs with her. Or that the former Marine had resigned from NCIS, determined to crawl away and lick his wounds in private, even if Madam Director had refused to process his resignation and had put him on sick leave. She was adamant that when he *decided* to remember the last fourteen years, he would go crazy without his job and come back. While Tony tended to agree that if Gibbs regained his memory he would want to come back to NCIS, he knew that Gibbs was stubborn, and there were no guarantees that he would get his memories back again. Not unless he wanted to.

He sighed and looked at the two sisters. "This was a mistake. I'm going to go now. I hope you're out of here soon, Cate. It was nice meeting you, Dr Cranston.

Rachel put a hand out but didn't touch him, figuring that this might be an issue for him. "Please, Tony, wait a moment. Don't leave! Caitlin Samantha Todd, you're cutting off your nose to spite your face; you've been chewing my ear off for weeks about not being able to apologise to Tony and now that you have the chance, you want to throw it away by acting like a spoilt brat?" She asked her little sister with asperity.

Tony swallowed his amusement, but the NCIS agent felt more than a touch of envy for what Cate had with her sister. He would kill to have a family like she had. He wondered how he would have ended up if he had siblings, or even one parent who was sober and responsible. He knew it was no good thinking about what might have been, but he decided to give Cate one last chance before he walked out on her. He knew he had to forgive her, not for her sake, but so he could start to put this behind him, little by little.

He had too much other crap still to cope with and it was time to stop acting like a victim. After all, it wasn't as if crap hadn't happened to him before and no doubt it would again. He had to clear out the shit and make room for the new stuff. Trouble was, he couldn't think of anything to say to her and he chuckled silently. Imagine that, Tony DiNozzo not being able to fill the void with meaningless dribble. What was the world coming to?

Rachel clearly decided it was her turn to pick up the conversational slack and she smiled politely at Tony. "So, will you be staying at the FBI, Tony, if you don't return to NCIS?"

"Maybe, I haven't decided yet. I have had an offer to join Fornell on his team or work with the Behavioural Analysis Unit, but I'm not sure what I'll do." There were pros and cons with both job offers. He craved novelty and stimulation, and Fornell's team would give him that. With profiling he would be helping to get monsters off the streets, but he wasn't sure if he could deal with the constant barrage of depravity and pain.

Cate looked interested at the mention of the BAU. "I didn't know they also used investigators on the BAU team, DiNozzo?"

He smirked inwardly. I knew she was patronising me when I told her she wasn't the only one with profiling skills. "They don't! They come from a diverse range of backgrounds, but all of them are profilers." Chew on that, Cate!

"Cate never mentioned you were a profiler, Tony. It would be quite a challenge working at the BAU…"

"Why didn't you tell me you had profiler training, DiNozzo?" Cate demanded angrily.
Tony allowed himself a small smirk. "But I did, Cate, and you told me you knew."

She searched her memory and couldn't think of any time that Tony had said anything about profiling.

"The case where you and Gibbs went undercover in a Marine Recruitment Office," he prompted as he saw the penny drop and she flushed with embarrassment. "That time when I was playing the construction worker! It never occurred to you to check the educational requirements and field experience for a Senior Field Agent or you would have known that it calls for post graduate qualifications for all supervisory positions in federal agencies. You didn't think that Gibbs was an SSA without him fulfilling the degree requirements, either?

“We both chose not to discuss it, but even if I told you that I started a Master's degree when I was a rookie cop and finally graduated not long after joining Baltimore PD, it wouldn't have fit with your preconceived view of me. How did you think I managed to earn a detective's shield just a few years after graduating the academy? You had me pegged as a dumb jock and a chauvinist pig and you wouldn't have believed me.”

He regarded her for a long time before offering, "If you had taken the time to figure me out, you would have noticed that I only ever talked about crap that didn't matter, I never spoke about anything that was really personal or private. And if you ever managed to get too close for comfort, all I had to do was make a lewd comment or say something chauvinistic and you would get pissed off."

Tony decided to man up and then walk away. "I'm sorry about threatening to use that dumb photo of you, Cate. Not something I am proud of. I'm sorry that things have worked out the way they have. I learnt a lot working with you and like I said, I'm really glad that Ari didn't succeed in killing you, too. Tim never deserved to die like that.

“Just so you know, I lit a candle for the Probie for you at the funeral and sent both your condolences and your apologies to the McGee family for not being able to attend. Bye, Cate, and best of luck. Have a good life!"

He smiled at her sister and turned and walked out of the room, hearing the click of high heels coming after him and he heard his name being called. Turning he wasn't surprised to see Rachel running to keep up with his long legs as he made his way towards the elevator.

"Please, Tony, come back and let Cate apologise for what she did. You caught her at a bad time, because Director Shepard told her that she was being retired on disability and if she hadn't been injured that she would have been dismissed. Not making excuses, but she's hurting and ashamed and she's not thinking straight, but I know that she did want to talk to you, to tell you she's sorry ever since she heard about your attack. She knows that her behaviour was totally unacceptable."

"Look, Rachel, this was a mistake. When she was ready to talk I wasn't and now when I felt it was time to face her, Cate is dealing with her own shit. I get that, and I guess I should have called before I came by, but it is what it is. If I hadn't reacted so violently when she called me by a hated name that my frat brother should have never revealed to her, then this probably would never have happened. No doubt it looked like I overreacted, and I should have laughed it off, but there was a whole heap of baggage attached to that name.

“It was a trigger, but hindsight is a bitch. I can't go back and change the past any more than she can. I'm trying to forgive her and myself, and deal with a bunch of other stuff. It was nice to meet you finally and I think she is lucky to have you.” He smiled a genuine smile for a change and as the elevator doors opened he stepped inside and gave her a small wave as the doors closed.

Leaning against the wall he reviewed the visit dispassionately. Well, Tony, your timing sure sucks,
but at least you apologised to her and told her what you needed to say. Abby apologising didn't really change anything, so Cate not giving you one doesn't change anything either. It's not like she would ever truly understand what she did to you.

~ Betrayals ~

Fornell had volunteered to drive Tony to Bethesda as he was still not supposed to drive, and now when he pulled up at his apartment building he exchanged a look with Tony as he saw Ducky's vintage Morgan parked in the street. "You coming up, Tobias?" Tony asked.

"Only if you have a beer, DiNotzo," he responded gruffly.

Ducky was waiting for them in the living room, since he had been given a key for Tony's apartment and he'd apparently been there for a while and made himself at home with a cup of tea. Heading to the kitchen, Tony walked to the fridge and called out. "Want a beer, Ducky?"

Ducky shook his head, "No, I'm fine with my tea, thank you Anthony."

Grabbing the two bottles he walked in, handed a beer to Fornell, and sank into chair. Looking at the medical examiner he raised an eyebrow. "Did everything go off smoothly?"

"Yes. Indeed, it did, my boy. The Marines do really live and breathe Semper Fi, don't they, although of course while Semper Fidelis is Latin for always faithful to God, Country, Family and the Corps it has long been used in heraldic contexts in Medieval England, France and Ireland. Did you know that the City of Exeter in Devon has used the phrase since at least 1660 and that there is a Masonic lodge there that is called Lodge Semper Fidelis…?"

Fornell rolled his eyes and exchanged an amused grin with Tony as he interrupted. "Dr Mallard, as fascinating as this discourse is, I have to get back to the office this afternoon, so could we cut to the chase?"

Ducky looked rather shocked at the polite redirection. "Absolutely, Tobias… forgive me for digressing…now, where was I? Well, his former brothers-in-arms had organised for one of them to accompany him to Wyoming. He'll make sure that Jethro gets safely to his firearms instructor's ranch. Jethro looked very happy, well as happy as he could be under the circumstances. He was looking rather like a lost puppy, but he seemed comfortable with his Marine chums. I think it will be good for him to be around people he knows, and I always find working with nature to be a great healer."

Tony felt suspicion creeping in as he stared as Ducky's innocent expression. "Dr. Mallard, Gibbs does know what he's letting himself in for, doesn't he?"

"Of course he does, Anthony. He's going to spend lots of time in the great outdoors as a ranch hand. I understand he is an accomplished rider, and I think the physical activity will be good for him. It wouldn't be the first time that animals helped to heal a broken heart. That's why there are programs set up to for troubled youth based around animal therapy."

"But did you tell him that Master Sergeant Kennedy is married now?" Tony demanded quietly, but insistently.

Yes, of course, I told him about Maureen. He was fine with it," he declared, although something about his body posture seemed off to Tony.

Then it occurred to him that Gibbs wouldn't be fine with it, he'd expected him to run a mile in the other direction. "You didn't tell him, did you?"
"Tell him what?" Fornell asked curiously

"That Maureen Kennedy is a renowned therapist and I'll bet my DVD collection that she'll want to shrink him." Tony stated baldly. "Tell me he knows, Ducky."

At both of their pointed glares, he looked slightly abashed. "I may have had a temporary lapse of memory, lads. I believe it's called a senior moment."

Tobias looked at Tony, "He's gonna be so pissed when he finds out," Fornell predicted, shocked but Tony thought he was secretly amused.

Ducky frowned, "Maybe you're right, Tobias, but sometimes we need a little shove to help us find a path we wouldn't choose for ourselves. Just call me a meddlesome old man." He smiled not the slightest bit apologetically. "Rule # 18…"

"It's better to seek forgiveness than ask permission," they chorused as a trio.

Chapter End Notes

Just to be clear, is it fair that Cate was fired and Abby wasn't for the same crime? No most definitely not - but life isn't fair. Cate was a newbie investigator and an incredibly mediocre profiler, and that's being incredibly generous about her abilities, while Abby was a much respected forensic scientist. Plus she had a spotless record and Cate already had a black mark on her record for fraternization as a secret service agent. The truth is that Abby was still useful to NCIS and that was why they didn't terminate her too.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

What happened six weeks later...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who let comments and kudos. The good news is that my amazing friend and awesome beta reader Arress has volunteered to post my older stories on this site for me which is huge.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Tony, have you got a minute to discuss this report?" He looked up at his boss and grinned. "Sure." Standing and making his way into the office he took the offered chair and sank down and waited.

"This is great work, and the second cold case you closed in as many weeks. It almost seems a pity to let you go back out in the field, but you've been cleared for active duty once you've passed your firearm qualifications. Think you can book it for today?"

Tony nodded, "Sure, Fornell, it shouldn't be a problem."

He stared around the office and knew that he'd made the right decision. He'd been extremely tempted by the offer to belong to the tight knit team at Quantico and he was comfortable around Derek Morgan, who'd become a close friend. In the end though, he'd decided that the multiple hits he taken to his psyche over the last six months had left him barely holding it together. Notwithstanding that he'd managed to sail through the psychological evaluation that Fornell had just revealed had cleared him to take up full duties as a fully-fledged FBI agent. After lots of soul searching and sleepless nights, he decided that he didn't need to put himself under extra stress right now. Part of it was the doubt that he could handle the relentless onslaught of mass murderers and serial killers on a daily basis, especially since so many of them were sexual predators or sexually dysfunctional.

The second factor that had given him pause was a disquieting sense that one of the team leads of the BAU had some qualities that were disturbingly reminiscent of Gibbs in some ways. Jason Gideon seemed to be larger than life and had become something of a legendary figure for his colleagues and peers and seemed to inspire the same infallible air of mystique as Tony's mentor. He’d recognised all too well that with his pathetic need for approval, Gideon would probably evoke the same sort of blind obedience in him as Gibbs had, too. Then, of course, there was the young wunderkind, Dr. Spenser Reid, who with his adulation of Gideon was just a little too close to home because it reminded the former cop of how he used to be around Gibbs. It was painful to see the rather awkward young man so desperate to please his mentor and impossible for him to not face some uncomfortable personal truths. But Reid also reminded him just a little too much of poor McGee, and that death was just too fresh and raw for him to deal with right now.

With Fornell's team, he would still have a chance to do undercover work, and he had a variety of cases, so he was never bored. There was a massive backlog of cold cases to play with when there
were no active cases, and he enjoyed the challenge of solving puzzles, too. Then there was the issue that while Tobias had suspicions about what had triggered his PTSD symptoms, he didn't know for sure. Tony reckoned it was good to have a little mystery in any relationship with his team mates. Although, there was also such a thing as too much mystery, as he'd come to discover with Gibbs.

And Gibbs and Gideon, while both charismatic, brilliant investigators, who also seemed to inspire unswerving loyalty in subordinates, Gibbs definitely, and he had a suspicion that Gideon was too, too, would be bastards if you didn't dance to their tune. Fornell was no Gibbs or Gideon, but he was a good solid investigator, an experienced agent and a loyal team leader you could trust to back you up when the going got tough, even if he didn't make intuitive leaps in logic, but Tony was kind of relieved to have an average Joe as his boss.

Tobias was like a comfortable old ugg boot that you slipped on when you got home at night, but wasn't sexy enough to wear when you went out clubbing. And when all was said and done, he had been incredibly loyal and dependable ever since the bottom had dropped out of Tony's life. Tony trusted him, and in the end, that was all that really mattered. He was looking forward to donning the ugg boots.

The only real downside was Ron Sacks but if things got too difficult between them he could reassess. Perhaps transfer to another team.

Derek had been disappointed when he had broken the news that he'd decided to accept Fornell's offer, but he seemed to understand his motivations. He said that although his superiors were also disappointed, too, they told him to warn Tony that they wouldn't give up and would make him an offer again after he had found his feet at the agency, and Tony nodded. The timing just hadn't been right, but maybe later, who knew?

Even though he didn't end up working on the same team as Derek, they had continued to hang out together and their friendship was flourishing and was providing him with something important that had been missing from his life in DC. They had so much in common, had a cop mentality, enjoyed playing a game of basketball to let off steam, not to mention the fact Morgan knew his secret and didn't treat him like a freak or someone who needed kid gloves, either. In fact, he and Derek had signed up together to a program that matched a child or youth who had been a victim of abuse or sexual assault with a big brother or sister for mentoring. He'd made a rather surprising discovery that although he and Derek were there to support kids whose world had shattered, Tony was more than a little shocked to find that the kids had helped them both, too.

He'd also learnt another valuable lesson, even if it had been an incredibly difficult one, that accepting help from the survivors' group was healing not just for him, but also for the people that helped him, too. But it was a battle, not so much intellectually, but actually being emotionally vulnerable enough to open himself up to receive help. He was so used to thinking that accepting help was a sign of weakness, even though he was always quick to help everyone else. Still it was another matter entirely to accept assistance with anything approaching graciousness and then grow from it.

Although he had only ever shared his life-threatening experiences outside his apartment building with the support/survivors group, he was now a bit more open to the possibility that one day he might be able to talk about what had happened to him. As a kid, or perhaps more realistically, about the attacks and harassment that had occurred at work and all the hostility he'd encountered.

Ducky had been sad when he told him he couldn't return, but being Ducky, he also understood his need to leave NCIS. He didn't seem all that surprised, though. Tony had explained to him that he had been so very close to coming back again after he'd seen all the effort that Gibbs had been making to fix things and then when Ari had cut a swathe through the team throwing them into chaos, he felt
obligated to repay Gibbs for his help and support after initially acting like an ass. That had been until Tony had found out about Pedro Hernandez, and that knowledge shattered any hope that Tony had that they could still work together.

As much as he was trying not to be judgmental, since he had never faced Gibbs' loss or had been faced with his choices, his oath as a cop and later as an agent combined with Gibbs' insistence that Marines especially, but the armed forces in general, must be held to a higher standard than a civilian, was making it a monumental challenge. He remembered how insistent Gibbs would be when a Marine would claim to be innocent and Gibbs would defend their honour without question and how furious, how devastated he would be when he found that a Marine had disgraced the Corps and their oath.

Tony knew that Gibbs was courageous and had served his country with honour – his innumerable awards and medals were testament to that. He also knew that he had saved the lives of many of his fellow service men and women while serving his country, so he had to wonder just how he lived with what he had done. He wouldn't, no, he couldn't believe someone who took such pride in the honour code of the Corps would be able to brush off what he had done, and wondered how much of a cost it had extracted?

He wanted to find Franks and hurt him. He'd made it his business to discover what rock the louse had crawled under, so he could warn him off if he thought he could come back and call out any more 'favours' from his former Probie. If he tried to compromise Gibbs again, he would drop him in it so damned fast he would end up wearing prison orange for the rest of his miserable life. The only positive thing to have come from finding all that crap that Jonathon Gold had been collecting, was that he now had enough info to make sure that Franks would rue the day he let Gibbs have access to a confidential NIS case file.

So, Ducky had seemed to understand his reasons, but he had warned that Madam Director seems determined to poach him back for the agency. He'd been puzzled by Ducky's observations because he didn't know the woman at all and he couldn't understand why she was so determined for him to return. Fornell and Ducky, conjecturing over bourbon or single malt scotch in Ducky's case, decided that she was likely feeling the pressure of her recent appointment as director without her top investigators to make her look good, and losing a whole MCRT was a devastating loss for a new director.

Of course, what none of them knew was that Jenny Sheppard had been chosen as director because of her close relationship to the David family and Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and neither of those factors applied any more. She'd also been brought in to clean up the Agency, and since DiNozzo was the poster child for the Gay and Lesbian workplace restructuring (ironic, since he was neither), and losing him was a serious blow to her credibility in carrying out her mission, and hence to justify her appointment as director. Having read DiNozzo's personnel file and knowing that Gibbs had handpicked him as his senior field agent and protégé, she was certain that when Gibbs was done licking his emotional wounds, he would be back to claim what he saw as his.

Tony, meanwhile decided that Ducky and Fornell were probably right in their assessment, right about the time that Director Shepard's flirting and coquettish act escalated to accidental brushing up against him as she attempted to convince him he was making a mistake in resigning. No doubt she had heard the rumours of his skirt chasing and figured he'd be easy to seduce, but when he'd turned down her offer, she seemed shocked. Tony couldn't help smirking knowing that his rejection made it two from two for her, since she'd used the same technique with Gibbs before he took off to the wilds of Wyoming.

He'd had to wonder about her people skills in opting to put the moves on Gibbs when he was dealing
with such fresh grief in the loss his wife and daughter. Not to mention the feelings of failure he would be experiencing for losing a member of his team. Even if he didn't remember McGee, he would still blame himself; that was inevitable. Gibbs was the consummate professional after several decades as a Marine and federal agent, and he would still feel the loss of one of his team, Tony knew. But even when Tony had refused to withdraw his resignation, Shepard had smirked infuriatingly and shaken her head. She'd told him that when Gibbs came back to work, he'd make sure that Tony came back, too.

Curious as Hell to know what would give her that idea, he'd asked in spite of himself, "Why?"

She smiled confidently, smugly. "Because I know Gibbs; he was my mentor, too, you know, Tony. I was his Probie, and one thing I know about him is that he is possessive about what he sees as his property and let me assure you that I've seen your work evaluations. Your ass belongs to Gibbs and he'll come and collect what belongs to him, and he won't take no for an answer."

Tony didn't think much of Jenny Shepard's analysis. His annual work appraisals were hardly effusive, generally consisting of single words, chiefly adequate or competent, and likewise, Gibbs didn't usually toss out verbal praise at him, not like the 'good jobs' and 'attaboys' that he sometimes offered the juniors, and the Caff-Pows and kisses that he gave out regularly to Abby. Tony knew that if Gibbs had been dissatisfied with his work he would have gotten rid of him, just like he did with Vivian Blackadder, but Gibbs didn't see him as indispensable or, God forbid, as irreplaceable, despite what he said the night he got back from ending up in the sewers with a homicidal maniac after his butt. He'd only said it to yank his chain before telling McGee in front of him that he couldn't have Tony's job or his desk as he was still alive.

Then there was the completely inappropriateness of telling a survivor of workplace sexual assaults that his boss owned his ass. Just so wrong and Tony didn't want to even think about what disturbing images that evoked.

But even if in some alternate reality where there was a Gibbs who was touchy feely and believed in giving him the occasional piece of positive reinforcement cuz it wouldn't give him a big head, it was a moot point. Tony couldn't work with Gibbs knowing what he did, nor could he explain it to Shepard. He knew that Fornell, like Shepard, was half expecting him to go crawling back to working for Gibbs, too, and without explaining the reason why, Tony couldn't hope to convince him otherwise. It was interesting that Shepard and Tobias both believed that Gibbs would come back to work when he regained his memory. Tony had only been able to really talk to Ducky about it, since he didn't want to put Garcia or Morgan in anymore of an impossible situation than they were already in, since they also knew about Gibbs' actions, and were staying silent because of him.

So, Ducky was the only one that he could talk to, really, and he was still very aware that Gibbs and Ducky both went back a lot of years together, and Tony was careful that he didn't make Ducky feel like he had to choose between them. Ducky had speculated that Gibbs was seeking to atone for his sins, and also to try to prevent other fathers and husbands or family members from having to deal with what he went through. Thinking back to the way he was when kids or women involved, Tony reasoned that Ducky might be right about his remorse/regrets/guilt, take your pick, and if you carried it all through to its logical conclusion with Ari, maybe it explained why Gibbs had become so utterly obsessed with him to the exclusion of everything else around him. If he was feeling guilty about his wife and daughter and not being able to protect them, Ari getting into NCIS and Autopsy then shooting Gerald and threatening Ducky and Cate, was probably perceived as an attack on his turf and people. One that he would have been determined to stop occurring a second time.

Wondering if Gibbs would regain his memories and if he did, would he decide to reclaim his position as the pre-eminent NCIS investigator as everyone thought? If he came back, even if he had no desire
to entice Tony to re-join his team, he was still going to have to make some tough decisions. Could he still be friends with Gibbs? He wasn't sure. And if Shepard was right and Gibbs thought he owned Tony's ass since he'd recruited him, he was going to have one exceptionally difficult conversation with the man that might well shatter any vestiges of what he'd thought had been a great partnership.

Not that Tony wished him any harm or hoped that Gibbs didn't recover fully, he didn't, but it was still much less complicated with him gone.

~ Betrayals ~

One Week Later

Tony was pulling a late-nighter at the office, going over the case file because something about the current case they were working on was bugging him. It was the kidnapping case of a high court judge's 11-year-old son, and Tony knew that there was something that they, well he, was missing, and it was bothering him. Hoping to be able to spot it in the solitude of the squad room when everyone else had gone home, he heard his cell phone beep to alert him of an incoming text message.

Checking to see who it was from, and hoping it wasn't Steve Adler, his frat brother again, he sighed, wishing that Adler would take the hint and leave him the hell alone. He didn't know what Cate had told him, but he was constantly bombarding Tony with texts, emails and phone calls, all wanting to talk, to meet, to make excuses and it was getting old.

He'd made it perfectly clear that he wanted nothing further to do with the guy. He'd finally resorted to threatening to take out a restraining order on the bastard if he didn't leave him alone, and Tony decided if he still didn't get the message, he'd let the Brothers know that he'd betrayed his oath to Tony and his fraternity just to get laid. He didn't want to go all Crime and Retribution, but honestly, how stupid could he be to not get that Tony was not interested in having any contact with his former friend?

Looking at the message, he smiled in relief to see it was Derek Morgan. Reading the text which was suitably cryptic he moved to the television plasma and switched it on, his curiosity piqued.

R u watching ZNN? DM

Switching to the 24-hour all-news channel, he wondered what had caught Derek's eye.

Just repeating, in breaking news The Secretary of Defence has announced that he will be stepping down from his position due to family issues. My sources say that after many years in public office, Jonathon Gold has decided to spend more time with his wife. his five children and two grandchildren. His resignation will take effect at the end of this month. The President's office has praised the Secretary of Defence for his work in the administration and for his exemplary service to his country. No word yet on his replacement...

Tony switched the TV off, reeling. Well...wow, that wasn't...expected. Oh, Tony had had revenge fantasies where Gold would get his just desserts, and how juvenile was that honestly, but none of the co-conspirators thought that Gold would just go away like that. Sure, they wanted to disconcert him and convince him that they weren't going to back down, but they didn't expect him to resign. It was surreal and almost too easy. Not that it had been easy...really.

Garcia had come up with this nasty computer virus that had totally destroyed his personal computer and records and had been completely untraceable. Tony realised then that Penelope might not have gone to any fancy schools, but she was as much a genius in her own way as McGee had been, and lethally relentless as she had meticulously made Gold's cyber life miserable.
Frankly, Tony was still having trouble accepting that Secretary Gold wouldn't have a lot more security and backups than they suspected, but Derek had profiled him as someone who had extreme control issues, didn't trust anyone, not even his spouse, and was incredibly invested in his position and reputation. So not trusting Tony's file to the care and expertise of an aide or minion wasn't so out of character with so much, to his mind, riding on keeping their earlier connection under wraps. And as Garcia pointed out rather scornfully, he wasn't exactly the most cyber savvy individual, which altogether made him vulnerable.

Still, Tony couldn't reconcile the fact that while Jonathon Gold was a scumbag of the first order, he felt somewhat hypocritical going after him in the way they had. Hacking and cyber-attacks of his files was illegal, and didn't that make him just as bad in seeking retribution as Gibbs in taking out the drug lord that killed his family? And wasn't the death of his mentor's family a more noble cause than his petty reasons for having a grudge against Gold?

He was so conflicted, and when he tried to explain his thoughts and feelings to Duck, Derek and Garcia, it came out all garbled.

They'd argued with him that Gold in holding such a high office, had abused his office. That he had failed to act within the law when he had taken an oath to uphold the laws of the state and as an officer of the courts and had broken the law. That he was gathering information on Tony and his friends that could be used extort or control him, and that the statutes for pursuing him for his failure to protect Tony as a minor through legal channels had expired.

Ducky also pointed out that they weren't necessarily trying to extract vengeance, rather they were only trying to neutralise a threat. That Tony was defending himself, and also watching Gibbs' six, too. Ducky had talked to him about ethics, moral ambiguity, and acknowledged that perhaps they were walking a questionable path when it came to right and wrong, but there was a huge difference between infecting Gold's personal computer records and killing him or physically harming him.

Finally, Ducky pointed out that the murky cyber-world was not as simple or cut and dried as real life, and Garcia was most definitely an avenging angel and would probably ignore him if he told her not to proceed with their plan. Tony conceded ruefully that he was probably correct in his assessment of the FBI techie. There was a sort of non-conformist outlaw vibe about her coupled with a strong mother lioness maternal streak that was kinda scary. Finally, there was the fact he owed her and Morgan a huge debt for staying mum about Gibbs' execution of Hernandez. He really couldn't repay such a debt by being precious about a computer virus and unauthorised hacking, although it didn't quiet his conscience.

Once they had procured the back-up hard copy held by the investigator Gold had employed, they had felt ready to move against Jonathon Gold. Using some subtle persuasion to convince the PI guy that he might not want the IRS to look too closely into his business transactions had been ethically questionable, Tony had argued, but Garcia had argued right back. She'd said it was only unethical if they turned a blind eye to his tax evasion and they had done their duty and expressed their concerns to the IRS about the P.I. *after* they had got hold of the backup file. Tony had expressed his concern that Gold, as a lawyer, would have spare copies probably squirreled away in safety deposit boxes, since it's what he’d do if it was him They'd agreed it was a possibility, but one they couldn't do anything about. All they could do was to hope for the best.

Once they had Secretary Gold's attention, and the loss of the file and his computer being destroyed was pretty damned unsubtle way of getting his attention he’d have thought, Tony had made contact and warned him off. Told him that blackmail only worked if Gold was ready to use it, and that Tony had also been busy collecting evidence about his time as legal counsel for Pennington Grammar.
Gold had laughed at him after his initial shock. Denying that he would ever let anyone know about his molestation, and Tony had laughed right back at him, sardonically. He was in all his glory undercover as a man who had decided to reveal everything he had been ashamed to tell everyone for so long and was pretty convincing. He'd confessed that in the last few weeks he had already confided in three people and found it such a liberating experience, he was seriously thinking of writing a tell-all book.

He hinted pointedly that perhaps some of The Secretary's 'admirers' might be interested in his story, also pointed out that Gibbs was an amnesiac who had left NCIS and gone to ground so he was no longer a source of leverage anymore, and finished up by warning that he had left copies of all his research with several trusted sources inside and out of the country, just in case anything unexpected should happen to him. After which, Gold had seemed to deflate, just like the school-yard bully when you finally stand up to them.

Of course, it had always been risky calling him out, but they had shaken him up pretty badly beforehand, and with Gibbs safely out of the way, he'd felt like they'd taken all precautions and then gone for broke. Tony had to hand it to Ducky, though, in taking care of the Gibbs problem. Oh, sure, he's been downright sceptical when Ducky had sent Gibbs off to the wilds of Wyoming with his Marine buddy and the guy's wife, who was currently shrinking Gibbs' head right now. When Ducky had pulled his sneaky switcheroo, Tony thought that he was crazy, and Gibbs would come gunning for the medical examiner with his sniper's rifle.

Now, though, Tony was willing to concede that it was a brilliant master stroke and that Ducky was far more Machiavellian than he'd ever given him credit for, and that he had been watching Gibbs' six most effectively. If the worst came to pass and there was an investigation or charges laid, Gibbs was under the constant supervision of a well-respected therapist who was treating him for dissociative retrograde amnesia. Ducky hadn't betrayed any confidences, and Tony hadn't asked him to either, but he figured that the shrink would testify about unresolved grief issues and acting under emotional duress or not being of sound mind, or whatever psycho-babble psychotherapists used to communicate instead of speaking plain English.

While it was still a risk if Gold called his bluff, if he didn't stand up to him, Tony would be forever looking over his shoulder, wondering when his nemesis was going to disrupt his life.

So, despite the high-risk game they'd played, it had been worth the risk, it had been exhilarating and empowering to stand up for himself for a change. But tonight, the announcement that The Secretary of Defence had decided to resign, that was so much more than he'd ever expected, and he felt giddy and a little disorientated. It really was the ultimate win-win situation, and Tony thought about these past months. Such a lot of changes, he mused both BFP (before the fake photo) and AFP (after the fake photo.)

Change was an inevitable part of life, and you couldn't go back and change the past. No matter how much you might wish you could, or simply go back and do things differently, say or not say something, choose not to open Pandora's Box, or just respond with the benefit of hindsight. But that just isn't an option…ever.

Tony knew that for better or worse, he was now a different person to the one he was before. He reacted so viscerally to that stupid pledge name and everything changed, and yet the cause of his violent reaction began so very long ago, and finally now he was coming to terms with the concept that it wasn't his fault. Not only was he a different person to the one that he was before, but other people were so very different now as well…like Gibbs, or perhaps Gibbs wasn't different, just the way he saw his mentor was different. Tony didn't know.
He did know that what they once had was no more and that made him sad, but maybe if Gibbs came back to DC, they could try to forge a new relationship, not mentor and protégé or father figure and overgrown child seeking approval, but perhaps colleagues who held each other's skills and talents in high regard. Two flawed and imperfect law enforcement professionals who were human and made mistakes, picked themselves up and tried harder, but never forgot that they could and did stumble.

Tony knew he and those around him had lost much and paid a high price for all that had happened lately, but as the only option was moving on, he hoped that they would all take what life had shoved at them and grasp it with both hands. He hoped that Gibbs could try, like he was attempting, to move on from the past, and Tony had to believe that if Gibbs came home, they could forge a new friendship, letting go of the old one and finding new strengths to focus on.

Change was inevitable. Sometimes it was a good thing, and often it brought about unwanted or painful transformations. Maybe not things that you would seek out if you had a choice, yet while some change was difficult or even extremely unpalatable, it could sometimes propel you in ways that you might never have gone otherwise, even while bringing with it pain and loss. Experience had taught him that the best that you can do is to accept it and make lemonade out of the lemons.

If someone had told him six months ago that his world would be turned so completely upside down, that he would have come close to losing his life and he would lose the team that he thought of as his family, he wouldn't have believed it. More to the point, if someone told him that despite such an overwhelming loss, that something good would also come out of it, he would have called for the men in white coats.

Yet out of the heartache and loss, strangers had stepped up and been there for him, and he had been forced to grow and face things that he wouldn't have done otherwise. Just like his betrayal by his old partner Danny Price and his fiancée Wendy had been the catalyst that saw him leave Baltimore PD behind and become a federal agent; this current betrayal by his team had resulted in his new life at the FBI. There was no way he would have left the warm womb of Gibbs' MCRT otherwise, and Tony concluded that there were times that he felt a bit like a tumbleweed at the mercy of the winds of change that blew him where he otherwise wouldn't go.

He could only hope that he would be granted some stability, and perhaps this time, the Tony DiNozzo that was a FBI agent could settle down and find some peace and happiness. He was finally beginning to believe that he deserved it.

Turning his mind back to the plight of the 11-year-old boy who was far from his loving home, Tony smiled as he finally saw the 'something' that had been nagging him all day. Reaching for the phone, he punched in his boss's cell phone number.

"Hey, Fornell... I think I know who snatched Jason…"

The End

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope that I have managed to answer most of the questions that you have with one notable exception of course. I can hear you all screaming in frustration, "what happens to Gibbs?" First off, I should preface this by saying that I always start any new story
with a detailed outline which means that I have a definite idea how a story will conclude before I even begin writing. As someone who is a bit of a cynic, I don't necessarily subscribe to the philosophy that just because it is fan fiction that it must have a HEA ending, but for Betrayals, I did have a happily ever after planned with Tony returning to the MCRT with Gibbs, I swear :)

Towards the end of writing this I realised that the 'Tony' who found out about Pedro Hernadez in Betrayals would not react in the same way as he did when he learnt about Gibbs' retribution in canon, when Gibbs and his team/family were being threatened by Reynosa. Apart from being younger and more idealistic in this story because he was not as jaded, he had been attacked based upon fake evidence and that would make him question how reliable the evidence had been that Franks presented to Gibbs. (Actually I've always questioned how accurate his evidence was based upon his confession that his interrogations took place in a broom closet with a telephone book.) For those reasons, at the eleventh hour, I concluded that Tony wasn't going home to NCIS.

At some point if I ever run out of stories to write, I might write a follow up although at this point there are no plans for a sequel for betrayals.

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