I Shouldn't Have To

by SASundance

Summary

Out of adversity can come change and personal growth. Sometimes it's easier to settle for second best, sometimes we don't even realise we're doing it, perhaps we feel like we don't deserve better. When disaster strikes, it can be the wake-up call we need to reassess our life, to see that what we have is lacking. The courage to say, 'I'm not going to take it anymore!'

Notes

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to post it here too. Since this story was mostly unbeta'd and full of typos, I figured that I would clean it up and post it here at the same time. I have done some reworking of the original story so there are some new bits too.

This story falls into the genre of my Grumpy Old Men persona and has spoilers for Better Angels in season 11 and episodes preceding it. TBH, the whole episode made me furious and when I read a review of the episode by a TV critic, it was like they'd watched an entirely different show to the one that I had. Phrases like heart-warming, team bonding predominated, while I found it so very wrong on many different levels. When I read reviews on a fan website about how funny it was to see Tony and Tim arguing about who should be leading the investigation in Gibbs absence it made my blood boil. This isn’t a damned Sunday School tea party – NCIS is supposed to be a federal law enforcement agency with a well-established chain-of-command so junior agents such as McGee understand their place in the pecking order – not rewarded for blatant insubordination by an atrocious leader for usurping the CoC. Out of my indignation and disgust this story was born.

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Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs poured himself a mason jar full of Jack Daniels, scowling as he settled down in his basement. Opening the leather-bound journal which belonged to DiNozzo, he turned to the first entry, noting the elegant script which was a far cry from the former cop’s usual hurried scrawl. Since DiNozzo had taken off so suddenly, leaving no clues behind as to where he was headed, Gibbs figured that his journal was probably the best place to start.

Actually, it was the only lead they had to find out where in the hell he’d gone.

Over the years he’d become aware that DiNozzo kept a journal, but he expected that it would be full of his exploits – sexual conquest, pranks and movie reviews. Hopefully it catalogued the places he went and people he talked to, so he could find out where to go to kick his ass for running off without so much as a by-your leave.

Knocking back a good third of a glass of bourbon he clenched his jaw in anger. When he tracked down his senior field agent, and he would, Jethro was gonna kick DiNozzo’s ass so hard he wouldn’t be able to sit down for a year.

Of course, the thought that he had managed to get the better of that smug assed doctor friend of DiNozzo’s was a bit of salve to his fury and being left out of the loop. Jethro wondered how long it would take Pitt before he noticed that the journal was missing.

As he prepared to read the first entry he noticed that there were several loose sheets of paper tucked haphazardly about a third of the way through the pages of the journal. Removing the sheets that had been folded in half, he noted that they were rather dog-eared. Unfolding the pages, he noted that it had also been written by DiNozzo, so curious Gibbs started to read:
The Boy No One Wanted

Once upon a time there was a little boy who lived in a very grand home on Long Island, New York. It had many rooms, including a ballroom, a library and a music room with a beautiful baby grand piano. It now had pride of place in his apartment and he spent many hours playing it.

Growing up, his mother and father were always ill because they drank too much and made themselves sick every day, and because of their illness, they were often cruel to the little boy. Sometimes they would forget that they were parents and needed to look after the little boy, so he learnt that he needed to take care of himself. Sometimes the little boy needed to look after his mother and father too.

One thing which his parents were adamant about was that no one could ever know just how ill they were. That they couldn’t make it through the day without having a drink or pills to make them feel better.

The little boy became really good at covering up for his parents so that no one knew how sick they were. He became excellent at pretending that no matter how bad everything was, they were always fine. He was fine!

His father also taught him other lessons he would carry with him for the rest of his life – that his family never showed weakness. Never ever! His family never cried. His family never passed out. His family never asked anyone for help.

So, the little boy also became exceptionally talented at pretending that nothing was wrong. He became so good at pretending that no one ever had a clue that he was lying all the time – that everything was wrong.

When his mother occasionally took him to the theatre to see movies, it was like magic. He quickly lost himself in a world that let him escape from his life and at the same time, he also got to see how normal people lived in real life— or so he believed.

One day when the little boy was eight years old, his mother died and afterwards his father forgot about him. He was so sad to lose the love of his life that he abandoned the little boy like you would throw away an old pair of shoes that had holes in them as he drank ever more alcohol to get him through each day. The little boy was sad too because he missed his mother very much, but his father wouldn’t allow him to cry because DiNozzo men weren’t cry-babies.

After her death the little boy, who no one loved, grew even cleverer at looking after himself. He also learnt to stay out of his father’s way as much as possible, especially when his father was ‘sick.’ The little boy knew that his father wouldn’t lay a hand on him, but when he was ‘sick’ he would use his belt or a riding crop. Once when the little boy was bad and annoyed him he even used a poker from the fireplace to discipline his son.

Then when he was 12 years old his father formally disowned him. He told him that he wasn’t his son any more and that made the little boy very sad. But he didn’t cry...not even when his father sent him away from his home.
The boy was bullied at the boarding schools he attended, making him feel weak and vulnerable. One time the other boys stripped off his clothes and left him hanging up a flagpole in his underwear. Having no one he could trust, no one who cared about him, he coped with the bullying the only way he knew how. Rather than obliterating it from his memory – he flipped the facts all around. The little boy managed to convince himself that he was the bully and not the victim because victims were weak and weak was bad!

At least in this new reality, it gave him a little bit of apparent control over a life where he felt unloved and unwanted and never knew why. In his new reality he wasn’t a pathetic little loser – he was a big tough bully.

Plus in labelling himself a bully, it was a reason the boy could comprehend as to why he was unloved and unwanted. Why his father would abandon him like yesterday’s trash!

His years at boarding school taught him very little about the right way to treat others. His friend, Donald the Duck, who’d also attended a very famous boarding school when he was a boy, declare that boarding schools had more in common with the pecking order inside prisons than places that educated impressionable children. They were places where bullying was entrenched, even culturally endorsed – people thinking that being bullied made men out of boys. Where abuse of young boys by the older ones was as common as fireworks on the 4th of July.

The boy, who wasn’t so little any more, finally left the detested boarding schools and a military academy behind him and went off to college. It was there that the boy found a Fraternity that at long last welcomed him in and taught him how to be part of a real family.

He learnt all about hazing, about teasing, nicknames and pranking his family to show them how much he cared about them - how much he loved them. He learnt how to be loyal and to protect his family – his brothers - no matter what they did or the personal cost to himself.

The best thing about college was that for the first time in his life, he had family that cared about what happened to him and would do anything for him.

The boy drank alcohol at college like the rest of his frat brothers, although not as much as he pretended to his friends. Not just because he was an athlete and needed to be sober and fit to take the field, but because he didn’t want to be like his parents. Besides, the feeling he got from finally being a part of a family who wanted him was way better than any high from alcohol. It was a feeling he would do anything to experience for the rest of his life, to be like normal people.

When it was time to leave college, he was sad. He knew that he needed to find a new family - one that he could stay with for much longer than four years. When a football injury meant that he wouldn’t be able to find his family on a sporting team like he’d planned, the boy turned to the police force, knowing that it could give him the family he longed for, that he could belong to.

Plus - he could help others too. People like himself who needed help.

After failing to save a little girl from burning to death in a fire when he was in college, the boy who couldn’t be a professional athlete, really wanted to make amends for his screw-up. The little girl, Amber’s screams would haunt his dreams for a very long time and he knew he had to try harder, be better, braver.
It was a while before he found a new family, and he missed his frat brothers so much he thought his heart would shatter. There were false starts along the way but after six long years, he finally found what he hoped might be his forever family in DC.

Unfortunately, one day he come to realised that his new family that he loved unconditionally didn’t love him. They didn’t even like him all that much and believed they were better than him. Sadly, it took him many years and a lot of pain before he stopped fooling himself how they actually felt about him.

How they thought he was a joke...a clown. How he wasn’t worthy of respect.

Of course, it was his fault – he wasn’t sure how exactly, but it must be him. After all, they’d all grown up with pretty normal families and had proper childhoods, but they didn’t seem to understand him, although the little boy who was now a man had thought they did for the longest time. On balance, when the boy hazed and teased his new family like he had with his frat brothers at college, his teammates always retaliated, and that made the boy feel like he belonged.

But deep down, the boy who was now a man was confused, because it wasn’t the good natured getting back at him that he’d experienced at college. Instead of feeling loved, they made him feel stupid – made him feel that he wasn’t as important or smart as they were. Since he’d been told as a child he was a failure and without value, that he would end up in the gutter, he accepted that they must right about him – he wasn’t special even if he joked that he was Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo.

Oh, he never complained when they made him feel worthless and unwanted, like his dad had made him feel when he was a little boy. After all, they were his family, so he forgave them because that's what you did for family. He might be stupid, but his frat brothers had taught him about being in a family. Families squabbled and made up, but you always sided with them and protected them when others attacked them... because that was what family was.

The boy who was now a man tried his best to protect his family and support them, because they were important – to him personally, to the agency, to their real families. The boy who'd become an agent, frequently put his life on the line to save theirs, even though he never received a word of thanks from them when he saved them, he understood. It was his job to save his team because he wasn’t important like they were or smart. HE wouldn’t be missed if anything did happen to him, unlike his teammates.

However, when one of his family pulled him back from plummeting to certain death or grievous injury in a parking garage, the boy who was an agent thanked his team mate profusely because it was his job to save them, not the other way around. Although his teammate hadn’t endangered himself to save the boy who no one wanted, he did have a bad fear of heights and was very scared. So, the boy who had become an agent was grateful that a team member would overcome his fear to save someone unimportant like him.

The agent who no one wanted was so lucky to have found this team and he knew it. Thus, the boy who had become a lonely sad agent lived unhappily ever after.

But at least he wasn’t alone ...even if he wasn't wanted, he could live with that.

The little boy who no one wanted was used to that.
The man who was now an agent was used to it.

Gibbs picked up the sheets of paper, shoved them back inside the journal and slammed the book shut; he felt as if someone had violently thrust a dagger deep into his heart. The pain, the agony practically leapt of the page, grabbing him, strangling him with its desolation, it’s sadness, despair but worst of all was the lack of anger – the calm acceptance. He could scarcely bear to read what DiNozzo had written about his childhood.

Some of it he may have suspected once upon a time, but after meeting Senior Jethro had discounted much of it – thinking that DiNozzo had embellished his past like he did over a paper cut or a stubbed toe. Or a splinter off a packing crate when he and Ziva had been trapped in a shipping crate years ago.

But not now. Not after reading this entry in DiNozzo’s journal. If anything, his childhood at the hands of Senior was far worse that he’d ever imagined.

Shaking his head in frustration, because the Marine still had no idea where DiNozzo had disappeared to, he really didn’t want to read any more of the heart rendering journal. Gibbs already lived with his own crushing guilt and pain for so long – he had no wish to add to it but DiNozzo’s journal was the only clue he had to finding him. Abby, McGee and Ziva had all attempted to trace his steps unsuccessfully but it was as if he’d vanished into thin air.

*As if he didn’t exist!*

Much as Jethro would sooner rip out his own toenails and eat them, Jethro knew that the clue to why DiNozzo had taken off lay in that god-damned journal. And he knew that he couldn’t accept not knowing where he’d gone.

He had no choice but to keep reading. Reaching for the bourbon, Gibbs hoped to anesthetise himself against the pain that he knew lay within.

*Damn it DiNozzo, why didn’t you come and talked to me before going off half-cocked? Why did he have to take off like a pouty child?*
Alone Again...Naturally

Chapter Summary

Tony faces a health scare – what is going on with his lungs?

Chapter Notes

This is a Tony-centric story. It is NOT flattering in the portrayal of the team in general although it is canon compliant up to episode 11.07. So if you see them as one big happy family, you won’t like this story. You’ve been warned! Seriously – go find some other story, don’t complain about how mean I’ve been to your favourite characters because I don’t care. Typically, with my stories, it contains a lot of introspection and psychological analysis and content but unlike many of my stories this one does have a HEA and gratuitous shippiness.

This chapter is very short. In the first version it was actually the prologue.

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Tony looked at the information the doctor had given him to read about the procedure, telling him it was a simple needle guided biopsy that shouldn't even require an overnight stay in hospital. No big deal at all!

*Yeah right! Piece of cake!*

Although, Dr Christiansen had also cautioned that it was possible that he would also need to have an endoscopic biopsy performed too and if so, then would need an overnight stay, since sedation was involved. He'd already had a chest X-ray and CT scan done since his internist was concerned about his persistent cough, problems breathing and intermittent chest pain.

Tony could have done with someone to talk with about his concerns but unfortunately Brad was overseas at some prestigious medical symposium, presenting a paper – coincidentally about him.

Ever since pulling him through the impossible double whammy of Y Pestis and double pneumonia, Brad Pitt had become the rock star of the pulmonary world. The superman of the medical podium - liable to leap tall nurses at a single bound and stop speeding enemas with his scary scowl. And now, just when the poor chump that had made him what he was today needed to see him, the Miracle Medico was overseas, dazzling the rest of the medical brethren with his brilliance.

Okay, so call him a bit of a Drama Queen but at least Brad took Tony’s not unexpected, very small aversion to injections… alright... his hearty dislike in a totally manful way…fine… his pathological fear of needles that left him sobbing like a scared child, in stride and never mentioned it afterwards. With Brad, what happened in Pittsville stayed in Pittsville – in fact the guy seemed to be blessed with a curious form of amnesia about it, for which Tony was eternally grateful.

So of course, he was always going to prefer to consult his friend if he had a medical problem. That hardly made him a wimp – *of course it didn't!*

Tony faced down crazed killers and terrorists practically every day, after all and he’d even faced hospital food stoically. No, he was not a coward. Nuh uh – no way.

However, he had been in contact with his friend and medical specialist (not to mention also the breaker of heroic Buckeye legs, destroyer of flourishing professional sporting careers and slayer of cherished hopes and dreams) about his persistent symptoms. Brad had been adamant that Tony needed to get checked out ASAP and not wait til he returned stateside and so he’d organised a consult with Brad’s colleague, internist Dr Eva Christiansen.

After the equivocal results of the X-ray and CT scan Tony emailed Brad to tell him about the proposed biopsy to get his opinion. Only because when he heard the word biopsy he may have freaked out… just a tad. His friend had emailed back immediately, urging Tony to go ahead with it and arranged a Skype call so they could talk.

And DiNozzo really appreciated Pitt's insight, both as a friend and doctor but he could really have done with his buddy Brad by his side to have a cold beer or two with him as they watched a game, to take his mind off the procedures. It wasn't the biopsy that was freaking him out per say – it was what they might find. Plus, the damned unbearable wait for results. Then even more waiting to find out his fate.

He wasn't great at waiting – okay he sucked big time at being patient. He was a lousy patient who had no patience with being patient.

Him and delayed gratification – not a fan. No way could he have been a Marine sniper like Gibbs, waiting for days until the conditions were right to take a single solitary shot. Of course, he wasn't
even a Marine, lacked the fortitude, the focus and discipline – Marines didn't need head slaps!

Later when he chatted to Brad via Skype the pulmonary specialist told Tony that he needed to try to stay calm, that it didn't have to be a tumour – that there were other things they needed to rule out too, like fungal infections. As weird as that sounded. Brad had pointed out, on Tony's recent trip to Israel and the time he'd spent in vineyards and olive groves, the risk factor when combined with his compromised lungs made contact with fungi a distinct possibility. One that needed eliminating as a matter of urgency.

Of course, while it was comforting on the one hand to know that the odds of him having lung cancer were low, when he Googled fungal lung infestations it scared the crap out of him, too. And even if there was a one in a hundred chance of his symptoms actually being cancer, well someone had to be the unlucky bastard who was the one person in a hundred, didn't they? Tony had always been damned unlucky!

Brad had smiled as they were winding up the conversation on his iPad. "I really wish I could be there for you, Buckeye but it really can't wait 'til I'm home. At least I feel better knowing that that wacky team slash family of yours, will be there to support you so you don't have to go through it alone."

Tony smirked. "Yeah, I'll be fine, Wolverine. Good luck with the paper and I'll let you know when I get the results."

"Actually Tony, I requested that Eva Ccs your result to my smart phone, so I'll be in touch when we know something definitive. Try not to worry and good luck with the biopsy. You'll be fine."

Sure, someone's going to come at me with a freakin huge needle and shove it into my chest to draw out a bunch of cells. No problemo, amigo!

However, never one to reveal his fears and weaknesses, even to those closest to him, he kept his personal insights to himself and instead said a swift goodbye.

He'd be fine, just like always!
 Facing Facts

Chapter Summary

Tony comes to terms with the fact that he could have a serious medical condition and that his future on Gibbs team may be coming to a close.

Chapter Notes

This story is dedicated to cancer survivors and those who have fallen while bravely fighting it. I have nothing but admiration for you all, having watched numerous family members deal with this disease. Sadly, in the last month I’ve attended two more funerals of family due to this terrible disease and just days ago learnt of yet another diagnosis.

This isn't a warm and fuzzy chapter so if you view the MCRT through Abby Scuito glasses (similar to rose coloured glasses only much, much pinker, think Barbie girl pink) or you channel Pollyanna Whittier, you might want to back the truck up and get out now. Personally, I think that what is the most confusing about the Better Angels episode was that Gibbs' crappy treatment of Tony and utter contempt for the chain-of-command came right out of the blue and was completely inexplicable, bearing in mind this was way before the abysmal season 13 disrespect. Maybe a portent of what was to come? It makes it difficult to find a rational canon explanation for what happened, especially when you consider the fact that that his team all resigned literally months before to save Gibbs' career. If anyone wants to argue that he was rewarding McGee for his loyalty, well even ignoring the CoC issue - which a real Marine never would, DiNozzo's resignation was actually far more of a sacrifice since Parson's wasn't gunning for him. Colin Parsons did however have the goods on Ziva for Bodnar's premeditated murder and McGee for his chronic hacking of the other alphabets, including the NSA and CIA - so their resignations were partially self-serving, unlike Tony whose only agenda was to save Gibbs. Some gratitude!
After Tony had shut down the call to Brad he decided he probably should head to bed He just wished the biopsy was happening tomorrow, instead of the day after. He wanted it over and done with. He was going to be climbing the walls not knowing.

It struck him suddenly that he’d never felt quite as alone as he did right at this moment, surrounded by people until a few days ago that he’d regarded as family – oh not by blood.

He’d learned that painful lesson years ago that when it came to his family, blood wasn’t thicker than water but up until now he thought the people at NCIS were family. The truth was though that they were just people he worked with, people that didn’t even really like nor respect him and as he did when he became depressed, maudlin or troubled Anthony DiNozzo turned to his one true friend who he knew wouldn’t betray him.

Wandering over to his desk, he sat down and picked up his favourite Monteverde fountain pen, relishing the beautiful balance of the writing implement before discarding it in favour of his second choice – a more prosaic but perfectly practical refillable cartridge fountain pen. Tony suspected that tonight his penmanship might need to take a back seat to his desire for self-expression. So, taking up the green and chrome trimmed Packer IM Premium pen he commenced filling the pristine white page of his leather-bound journal with all the minutiae, all the hurt, all the emotions that he would never dream of revealing to another soul...
After I got off the phone with Brad tonight I realised how very much alone I am. I have no one that I can turn to.

I could drop in for a chat at Casa Gibbs I suppose. He'd still be up. Back in the day he made the 'my door is always open to you, speech' after the bombing at BFF with that mad bomber Suzanne McNeil. But I don't feel like imposing, especially since the Boss has his father, Jackson staying over. There's no way I'd intrude on their father and son bonding.

Aw hell, who am I trying to kid, other than myself, obviously, since no one else is dumb enough to fall for my self-deluded crap.

Even if Gibbs wasn't spending quality time with his dad, Jackson Gibbs, who FYI is just about the sweetest damned guy on the planet, there's no way in the world that I would seek him out.

That dig Gibbs had made about me needing an excuse to drop by when I returned the boss' plunger and tried to talk to him about Ziva being out of control last year - well, it had more than a grain of truth to it.

Hadn't Gibbs ever noticed that I stopped coming by? Obviously not – he clearly didn't miss me.

Then again, if ever I needed an abject lesson that Gibbs and McGee were merely colleagues, not friends and definitely NOT 'my' family, then today would have been the day.

Seriously, I honestly don't know what died and crawled up McGee's ass recently, but he's been a total jerk. That comment about me needing sensitivity training when I'd made a derisive remark about the witness, Mr Spiffy, (just cuz he was making my skin crawl while questioning him) well it simply wasn't fair.

Of all the team, I'm the one who looks out for everyone else's emotions and well-being, including shielding them from Gibbs fury when it threatens to engulf them.

Yet I'm insensitive?

I'm the one who ignores every vicious, derogatory and passive aggressive comment intended to hurt me, demean me or embarrass me which Gibbs, Tim, Ziva and Cate have hurled at me over the years. And there have been a lot!

Yet I'm the insensitive one?

I've taken one for the team on more than one occasion and in general looked out for everyone's ass, regardless if they were colleague or perfect strangers, frequently at the expense of my own welfare or career.

Yet I'm the insensitive one?

It was me who'd called and warned Tim this summer that someone was trying to wipe out the team even when we'd resigned from NCIS, thereby preventing McGee from ending up six-foot under, pushing up daisies. Not Gibbs, who honestly hadn't given a shit about us, even though we resigned to save his ass from the DoD and their poisonous little gnome.

Being too harsh? Nuh... not really.
Let’s face it, Gibbs hadn’t exactly worked up a sweat letting us... his former team members know he was back home again. And if it comes to that, where was the legendary LJG’s gut in not giving us a heads up that someone was determined to arrange funerals for all four of us, huh?

Curiously silent...that’s where!

But then again, once we ceased to be on his team, we also ceased to be useful to him. Why should he be concerned that a few civilians would be in danger? C’mon Anthony, surely you know him better than that after all these years.

All we were to him were tools to help him solve cases and make him look good. Once we resigned we ceased to have any usefulness – we were obsolete. Unwanted, past our use- by- date and utterly irrelevant to his needs.

No seriously, it hadn’t been Gibbs who’d faithfully followed his precious Rule One, wasting weeks chasing after Ziva just to make sure she was safe too. After all, she was a former agent – her usefulness was minimal. Luckily, Tony had his own set of rules too.

DiNozzo’s rule 11 – just because a team member moves on, you don’t turn your back on them when they might be in danger. I would do the same for any of my former partners, even Danny Price if I’d known...despite the way our partnership ended.

Okay, DiNozzo... rant over...get that damned train back on the track.

Now, where was I?

Oh yeah...McGee accusing me of being insensitive about Mr Spiffy...

Tim apparently still doesn’t get it after all these years. Gallows humour is imperative in making sure that the depravity, the blood, the gore of a crime scene doesn’t take you on a one-way trip to eating your gun and a gurney ride to the morgue.

And let's face it, if you really wanted to talk about being insensitive when working a crime scene, well pot say HELLO to kettle. I wasn’t the one who was complaining bitterly about the crappy workmanship of a duffle bag Tim had recently bought when we discovered it had been used to hide a dead body and stuff it down the laundry chute at a fancy hotel on the Renny Grant case. McGee had been majorly pissed off, all because his bag didn’t live up to the buyers' reviews and was falling apart under the strain of the DB.

Yet somehow, I was the crass one! At least Mr Spiffy had still been alive...not stuffed in a duffle bag like an unwanted piece of trash.

And really, with the benefit of hindsight, if I’d been firing on all fronts instead of still playing catch up, I’d have realised that my gut was trying to tell me that there was something definitely hinky about the guy. My gut might not be celebrated like Gibbs’ but I’m the one that thinks outside the box...way outside the box at times.

I pull disparate facts together or take a quirky detail and turn it into a solid lead because on the team I’m the square peg in a round hole. I’m a creative thinker, and big part of that is cuz I’m highly intuitive too, so my reaction to Mr Spiffy should have tipped me off.
Of course, I wasn't performing up to my usual standards – I have a few other things on my mind atm.

Okay stop right there with the pity party, Anthony. No one cares about your lungs or fungal infections or biopsies!

Tony sighed, laying down his pen, cracking his knuckles before stretching and yawning. He briefly considered pouring himself a drink but decided it was not a good idea and took up his pen to resume his journaling once more.

And let’s face it, McBitchy had been all too ready to jump down my throat all week long, it wasn’t just Mr Spiffy and my so-called insensitive remark, that got his goat, either. Honestly, I don’t know what Tim’s problem is – he has a lovely girlfriend called Delilah and he’s getting laid - so he should be feeling sated and happy.

Plus...and this is a biggie, he has his job back again. Things certainly seem to be going well for someone who a few months before was being stalked by that bastard, Richard Parsons from the Inspector General's Office at the Department of Defence. Parsons had a serious hard on for the McSnooper, looking to lock him up for his years of illegal hacking at NCIS. Potentially, Tim could have ended up facing some very serious criminal charges, not to mention jail time, so you think McGee would be doing a happy dance.

Instead though, Tim was stomping around acting all stroppy, like he had the worst case of constipation plus a really bad case of haemorrhoids, all at the same time. All his barbs were of the distinctly below the belt, stab you in the gonads and then stand there and watch you bleed to death, while smugly patting himself on the back, variety. Not even the slightest attempt to pretend that he was joking - which was his usual I'm smarter than you passive aggressive modus operandi.

Then when I confronted him about stealing my yoghurt all week, he hadn't shown the slightest sign of remorse – had in fact become even more belligerent. And wasn’t that fun?

Tim had snarkily thrown down the gauntlet, telling me if I didn't want him to steal my yoghurt then I should put my name on it.

The implication being that it I was to blame for his thieving. And that was when I’d lost it with him.

"I shouldn't have to." I'd declared icily, because it was true.

Seriously, if I couldn't leave my food in the fridge of a law enforcement agency without having to worry that a team mate would steal it repeatedly, then what the hell was I doing here anyway?
After all, it wasn't like McYoghurt-Robber didn't know that the yoghurt didn’t belong to him, that it was mine. He watched me stow it in the fridge. Bottom line...he knew it wasn’t his.

It isn’t like he is stupid. _Hallo – look at me, Agent I've got a Masters in Computer Science from MIT, not to mention a degree from Johns Hopkins while you're the dumb as a box of rocks jock_ - so there was no way it was an honest slip-up.

If I’d been in the mood to get my own back, I’d have been mighty tempted to leave a few tubs of the Mexican brand yoghurt in the fridge that McGee had taken such a shine to on his trip south of the border when he’d been sent to guard Abby a few years ago. The yoghurt was organic and unpasteurized and according to all accounts, McGee had ended up in the head with a serious case of dysentery.

Of course, food poisoning was serious stuff, potentially life threatening so obviously I wouldn’t have done it, even supposing I could get hold of the Mexican brand. But still a good revenge fantasy might just help me to get through the long sleepless night ahead.

Honestly though, I ask you, who didn't know that you had to be careful of food that you ate in third world countries, especially non-bottled water and raw food? Some genius!

I really have to question why Tim would even want to eat yoghurt again after his Mexican experience. With his history of phobias – dogs, heights, domineering women - I'd expect him to have developed a pretty strong aversion to the dairy snack too, especially since food aversions after a bout of food poisoning were extremely common. Even with animals, it had a strong survival mechanism.

Which makes me suspect quite strongly that Tim was doing it with the express purpose of pissing me off. Guess what? It worked!

Going back to the revenge fantasy... I briefly entertained the thought of getting him back with a harmless prank like super gluing the sprinkles onto his morning donut but then I discounted it for several reasons. First off, I had more important things to figure out than McGee stealing my yoghurt and perhaps most importantly, pranks and jokes were things I only shared with friends.

I'd rather belatedly realised that I didn't qualify as McGee's.

But that realisation was better late than never, I guess.

As the troubled senior field agent sat at his desk facing his demons - professional and personal - he thought about the case of the dead Marine Sergeant, Michael Dawson, supposedly killed in an armed robbery.

Thought about how that simple phrase he’d uttered to McGee about him stealing his damned yoghurt, could also sum up in a nutshell the epiphany he’d had at the end of the case.
Tony took up his pen for a third time, determinedly trying to get rid of his negative thoughts...his
hurts by writing them down in his journal, safe in the knowledge it wouldn’t judge him or find him
weak of character. He needed to make sense of his life...the mess he’d made of it and he knew from
many past experiences that his friend wouldn’t let him down.

He’d first started keeping a journal of sorts, albeit a rather crude version when he was sent away to
boarding school not long after his mother died. But he’d only been a little kid back then. So
incredibly vulnerable and unable to protect himself from the world. Sadly, he’d learnt through bitter
experience that the world could be an extremely vindictive place and that even kids weren’t immured
from its cruelty – most especially kids.

The problem was that Senior didn’t know what the hell to do with a child who cried constantly for
his mother, except to impress upon him that DiNozzo’s don’t cry. His other ‘compassionate’ strategy
for dealing with his son had been to ship his only child, (and a child he had been) off to become
someone else’s problem.

Tony had been a sad, lonely little boy, missing his mother – who despite being under the influence of
alcohol the majority of the time, had at the very least acknowledged her son’s existence. Once a
week she took him to the cinema with her to watch old movies, many in black and white and while
that may seem like a pathetic sign of filial love to most people, the young Anthony had latched onto
it as a sign of maternal devotion and unconditional love.

As an affection starved kid, he’d taken any scrap of attention and attached great importance to it – far
greater than was probably warranted. Perhaps it was why the affection starved agent also chose to
see Gibbs head slaps as a sign of affection for a mentor to his protégé rather than abusive and
disrespectful. At least until he could no longer hide the truth - that he wasn’t Gibbs protégé anymore
and probably he never had been.

So, when Tony was shipped off to boarding school, he’d been a grieving, introverted child who
loved old movies and fifties TV shows about perfect families. Basically, he was a sitting duck for
bullying by the older kids. Tony quickly discovered that telling a teacher he was the victim of bullies
only landed him in more trouble. With the staff who told him firmly not to be a cry baby and to stop
telling tales on his classmates, and with the students who bullied him even more viciously for trying
to get them into trouble.

That was when he started writing down in an old blank exercise book what the other kids did to him
instead of telling the staff. Even back then he learnt that it helped to be able to tell someone what was
going on, even if there was nothing that could be done to fix it. Even if the someone was just an old
exercise book.

Later on, as Tony grew older, he found himself writing additional things down in his journal, like his
feelings.

By the time he was at college and he injured his leg or to be more accurate, Brad Pitt smashed his leg
along with his dream of a professional sporting career, Tony also began to record his thoughts,
impressions, his perceptions and his dreams. It was the only thing that helped him stay sane as he
tried to figure out what he should do with the rest of his life when he recovered from his life-
changing football injury.

It helped him to move on and begin to rebuild his life again. It helped him to not spend his days
blaming the guy who had wrecked his dream but focus on the future, on his recovery and on
planning what to do with the rest of his life. His journal also helped him figure out that he wanted to
go into law enforcement.
After failing to rescue Jason King’s little sister, Tony would forever hear her scream of terror and agony as the fire engulfed her. She haunted his dreams every night for years. Despite what he’d told Jason when they’d run into each other on an arson case several years before, Amber continued haunting him, awake and asleep. It wasn’t that he saved Jason that was the catalyst for him entering the police force, it was his sister and his failure to save her. It still drove him.

Keeping a journal had long ago become a habit, one he continued when he became a cop and six years later a federal agent. Tony knew that writing down stuff helped him to let go over the anger he felt when Gibbs and the junior agents on the team made hurtful, cutting remarks which happened way too frequently, or they betrayed his trust.

So, while what had happened on the Mr Spiffy case, in the scheme of things, was trivial in comparison to the fact he was facing a biopsy, Tony knew that if he journaled about what had happened on the case it would help him let go of the anger and the resentment he was experiencing. After all, he needed the slate wiped clean when they biopsied his lungs the day after tomorrow. His needed his mask to be perfect so he didn’t break down or reveal to anyone just how weak he really was.

Putting pen to paper he commenced writing again...

With Gibbs out of the office dealing with his father, I’d preceded to do my job as McGee’s direct superior... his supervisor... his SFA, directing him to search for leads from the files sent to us by Metro PD. At that point Tim had decided to throw a petty tantrum that would have done a toddler proud and frankly, it left me gobsmacked.

Tim pouted when I dumped the files on his desk for him to go through and demanded. ”You’re really going to insist on taking point? That's insane when it's just the two of us and Gibbs will be back in a couple of hours.”

And didn't that comment from their computer expert/junior agent sum up the whole fucking problem?

After more than twelve years on the MCRT it finally hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks. Call me slow on the uptake but hit me over the head long enough and even Anthony DiNozzo – the dumb jock, the class clown will finally get the message. And I did!

Yep, I might have been McGee’s senior field agent for the nine years Tim has been on the team, less the four months that I was his senior supervisory agent during Gibbs massive tantrum when he stalked off to Mexico to drink himself blind drunk. But while technically, I've always been Tim's direct superior (at least according to NCIS rules and regs) in McGee's mind and everybody else's on the team, including the boss, I was merely another junior agent.

Just one of a number of forgettable and ultimately replaceable remora dragged along in the unstoppable slipstream of the great white shark - Leroy Jethro Gibbs, the ultimate of predators. Now obviously, I'm also vastly inferior to the brilliant MIT graduate when it comes to skills such writing computer programs, hacking or developing algorms and I'll be the first to admit it.

But apparently when it comes to field work and directing investigations, I’m inferior to Tim too,
maybe because I’m just a cop. A cop and a big fat joke to the others on the team. To the rest of the agency???

Be that as it may, in McGee’s universe, the point is that on any other team at NCIS or the other alphabets... I shouldn't have to justify taking point if Gibbs is unavailable to lead the team.

I SHOULDN’T HAVE TO!

On any other team, my assuming charge of the case and the team would be a given, with no question or debate. Hell, I would have already been issuing orders and managing the team, even when the SSA was present - because that is part of my freakin job description as 2IC.

Furthermore, on any other team, those orders would have been followed unfailingly or else the junior agents would have been history.

Except on our-team Leroy Jethro Gibbs’ team! On Gibbs’ team Anthony DiNozzo is kept around like a spare tyre, to be taken out and used sparingly (no pun intended) when one of the regulars has a really bad puncture.

Aw hell Anthony, who am I trying to fool, apart from myself? I’m not even a spare tyre – I’m a eunuch Gibbs keeps around purely to make TPTB and HR happy.

I’m such a useless waste of space who is so pathetically eager to earn Gibbs’ approval, that I let Gibbs emasculate me a long time ago. I am the senior field agent of the major case response team - in name only!

Yet, even that particularly limited role of spare tyre/eunuch (did that make me a spare tyre without a valve or a tyre without a rim?) even that limited and frankly insulting patronising nominal role had been ripped off me on this last case.

McGee usurped the chain of command (again) this time with his juvenile petty sulking and complaints to Gibbs when the boss called for an update. Tim had bitched and whined about doing his damned job and surprise, surprise... he got rewarded for his insubordination and shitty attitude by Gibbs assigning him point in his absence. All over his stupid obsession, wanting to play with his asinine algorithm instead of doing the boring work of an investigator and... yeah, it pissed me off.

The truth is that Tim wants to have his cake and get to eat it too. He wants to be considered more than the computer expert on the team. He wants to be given undercover roles and plum assignments without earning them. Yet when faced with the mundane unsexy aspects of an investigation, he always opts to play the I’m-the-computer-expert and programming card rather than have to do the boring grunt work like a normal average agent. Basically, because he feels it’s beneath him.

After all Anthony, he has attended MIT and Johns Hopkins and he’s a certified genius. And don’t you ever forget it.

Huh...as if he’d ever let that happen!

Still after all these years he has a massive blind spot. McGee always assumes, naively, that the computer will spit out a lead because it and the person who is driving it (McGee) is smarter than
us. With his MIT degree and years of experience he should know by now, it just didn't work that way, as this case demonstrated!

It was mundane, unsexy detective work done by Dumb-As-A-Box-of-Rocks Agent, Yours Truly that secured the lead and cracked the case wide open.

Plus, even if aforesaid Dumb-As-A-Box-of-Rocks little old Anthony was as incompetent as Tim believes, he should respect the position - if not the man. No matter how many times I thought Gibbs was letting his obsessions take priority over best practise, I’d never undercut my superior by going to any of the three directors and complaining about my team leader.

When I’ve had a bone to pick with Gibbs or I disagreed with him I did it like a man, face to face. I also did it in private, so I didn’t undermine the Boss in front of the rest of the team and not always because I respected the man, but he was the team leader and I respect that.

I would never have tried to have Gibbs removed as the lead investigator. I have too much respect for Gibbs and for the rank he holds, even when he is wrong, (which even the mighty Gibbs is sometimes) to ever go behind his back, or was that over his head, to the director.

Unlike my colleagues, who obviously feel I’m undeserving of the same professional courtesy and positively delighted in me losing face. And that included my asshat jerkface boss who revelled in making me look foolish, frequently rewarding Ziva and McGee’s disloyalty and insubordination instead of kicking their asses over it.

Still it wasn’t even that particular truth of my eunuch status on the team … or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it wasn’t ONLY that realisation that finally rammed the message home LOUD AND CLEAR. No, there were two further events that had emphasized the painful truth that I’m not a valued member of Gibbs’ team.

Yep! He well and truly broadcast the memorandum in stereophonic surround sound and digital high definition for someone who is slow on the uptake like myself.

The first ‘EVENT’ took place when we were trying to track down the confidential details of what Sergeant Dawson had been doing for Defence Clandestine Service and Tim and I were getting stymied with the usual classified crap. Bottom line - we were at a standstill.

That's when Gibbs strolled into the diner where we were eating, to metaphorically piss up against the nearest tree in a classic alpha wolf reminder that he was in complete charge. In a typical Gibbs-esque manoeuvre he’d dropped a copy of the confidential DCS file on the diner counter, just to illustrate to both McGee and the Eunuch (in case there was ever a moments doubt) his utter superiority in being able to obtain crucial information for the investigation, despite not even being there.

Then when I attempted to access the information we’d been waiting on to move the investigation forward, he delighted in denying us access to it. Informing me that only he got to look at ‘HIS’ copy and that Tim and I would have to go to the DCS to access a copy of their file. Clearly this was the boss’ way of telling us, 'this is my damned deer carcass, you have to hunt down your own if you want some.'

All of which was designed to cement in our consciousness that he might not be actively running
point on the investigation, but he was still capable of running rings around either of us and don't you ever forget it...not for a second. Of course, the fact that we had to waste time going over to the DCS to access data Gibbs already had clutched in his bloodied yet triumphant maw, clearly was immaterial and unimportant in the scheme of things.

The fact that it was information that might hold the difference between a murderer getting away or being apprehended, was conveniently overlooked. Even though the murder of an upstanding Marine usually had Gibbs frothing at the mouth and on an obsessive quest to solve the case in the shortest possible amount of time. Usually so determined that the dirt bag was punished asap that he ran his team into the ground until the case was closed. Yet inevitably, that took a back seat to the importance of putting his subordinates in their place, today.

After all, what was an obsessive desire to seek vengeance for his fellow Marine when compared to him making sure that his team understood their place in the team hierarchy? Clearly nothing!

And the highly personal actions of Gibbs during the case...well it was the final nail in the coffin, as far as I was concerned. It convinced me unequivocally that I had no place on the team any more. Did I ever?

Although, Anthony, perhaps coffin nails aren’t a particularly appropriate analogy to be using at this point of your life, considering your own medical situation and the likelihood you’ll be requiring some sooner rather than later. Still... no one ever accused Anthony DiNozzo of being tactful or appropriate - quite the reverse according to Mr McSensitivity.

No, the final straw which had broken this camel’s back was knowing that Gibbs had deliberately gone to McGee, gone to Ducky and finally sought out Abby for help and advice over his problems with Jackson and had left me out of the loop. Although it is pitiful to be writing this, it hurt me more than any other slight or act of disrespect that occurred during the case, including Gibbs giving Tim point on the investigation.

I'm trying not to compare being left out of Ziva’s team dinner to Gibbs excluding me from his situation with his dad, but it isn’t easy.

Truth to tell, I genuinely love that sweet old guy, wish he belonged to me. BUT Gibbs has made it patently clear that he doesn’t want me having anything to do with his father. Obviously, he’s worried about me giving Jack DiNozzo cooties, since even when we had that first case in Stillwater, Pennsylvania some years ago when Gibbs first made peace with Jackson, the boss had gone to great lengths to prevent me even coming along for the case. Just to prevent me meeting his father.

I’d only been grudgingly allowed to come up to Stillwater when it couldn’t be avoided. After all, it was apparently imperative that Abby went to Stillwater to do her forensic magic and as she wasn’t a field agent she couldn’t be permitted to drive up unaccompanied. So, chauffeuring her was a suitable duty for a waste of space eunuch such as me.

On the other hand, clearly, the whole team, could cosy up to Senior aka Mr Wonderful but I’m such a bad person that Jackson has to be protected from my toxic influences.

Well I’m finally taking the hints they’d been dropping for so long. I won’t be troubling any of them anymore.
I’ve spent pretty much my whole life taking care of myself, I can do it again, no problem. If I am nothing else, Anthony DiNozzo is self-reliant and a survivor. I’ll be fine on my own, I always am.

Let it go Anthony. Let them GO!

~o0o~

I suppose it isn’t surprising that at this point in time my thoughts have turned to perhaps my toughest physical challenge up until now. After all, when I nearly died of the plague, I was fine. I’d been alone then too...well apart from Cate filling me full of guilt when she lied to me by telling me she had the plague too, convincing me I’d infected her. Then taunting me that I was weaker than she was for succumbing to the bacteria, even as I fought to survive...to breathe.

No doubt she thought she was helping me. Okay so I’d nearly gone to my grave consumed with guilt, believing I was taking her with me. But I’m sure that she had the best intentions, if not the best instincts. Poor Catie...she was the worst profiler ever... thought that the battle of the sexes was the way to make me hang on. But honestly, all it achieved was making me feel overwhelming guilt for opening up that damned stupid SWAK letter and infecting her.

It was further proof that Senior was right – that I would destroy everyone I ever cared about. He told me that right after my mother died, and yeah she’d died of cancer but since it was pancreatic cancer and probably due to her drinking, it was my fault since he told me she’d been sober ‘til I was born. Mind you...her death didn’t stop him from making love to his tonic and gin as the song goes, and his scotch on the rocks and his cognac and Port and...well anything that was expensive and alcoholic. He chosen to share that particular gem with me when he sent me to Military School at 12 right before he disowned me, rather like an unwanted puppy or kitten abandoned at the animal shelter.

So, my believing that I’d infected Caitlin, let’s say, it was not a well thought out plan. Luckily, Nurse Emma aka Lieutenant Emma Ingham had managed to figure out what was bothering me and convinced me that Cate had been pulling my leg about having the Y pestis too. Even showed me her pathology results in contravention to HIPAA regulations to prove it to me. She and Brad had seemed mighty pissed about it too.

I still sometimes have nightmare about her dying with the plague and me surviving it. If I don’t dream about her dying up on the roof where she died, her blood and brain matter splatter over my face.

Maybe that was why, even today I still felt guilty about her death, even when logically I knew that there was no way I could have saved her from a sniper’s bullet. After all, if the all-seeing all-knowing Leroy Jethro Gibbs couldn’t save Cate then what hope did DiNozzo the eunuch have?

Of course, to be fair, during my battle with the plague there’d been Gibbs' version of... what was that? He’d probably call it tough love I s’ppose – a head slap, handing me a phone and an order not to die, which was pretty lame, all things considered.

But then... perhaps it was no more lame than me giving a crap what the Boss thought of me, since Gibbs already knew I was weak. After all, in so many ways Gibbs told me so implicitly and explicitly, all the time.
No matter how many times I have the boss' six I will never have his admiration. Not like Gibbs regarded his fellow Marines, his brother's in arms, his brothers of the trenches. Hell – even Cpl Damon Werth, who was a fucking drug addict...who beat the crap out of us all when we tried to arrest him because he was psychotic due to the drugs he was on, had earned the genuine respect, admiration and sympathy of the crustily stoic Marine sniper.

Along with Little Miss Mossad who had fallen at Werth’s feet like an impressionable virgin or squealing fangirl.

Although point of order. Do impressionable virgins drool?

Gibbs wasn’t exactly subtle either. Even given Werth one of his own medals for Pete's sake.

Talk about making a great first impression.

But Anthony DiNozzo will never measure up because I'm not a Marine, I'm not a soldier, not an esteemed member of the armed forces. I'm was just a bumbling dumbass cop who tries to do the right thing and makes a mess of it most of the time.

Light bulb moment! Maybe that was where I'd gone wrong, and that was why Gibbs has no respect for me. Maybe if I'd beaten the snot out of Leroy Jethro Gibbs, like Werth had done or gone running to the director to whine about him, particularly when the boss had lost the plot on various occasions, just as Tim had done to me, maybe then I'd have earned his respect too.

Thinking back about the instances I could have gone over his head, I remembered all the times Gibbs allowed his former boss Mike Franks to break the law with impunity. Top of the list was when he gave me a concussion, so the SOB could execute a dirtbag he’d been gunning for since before his retirement – his Moby Dick but there was a heap of other instances. Plus, every time Jethro had turned a blind eye to cases that involved his Marine mates, perhaps I should have reported him in an attempt to have him removed from investigating cases. After all he was clearly compromised and in turn he compromised those cases. Senator Kiley’s aide’s horrific death hung heavy on my conscience even though it was Gibbs who withheld vital evidence in the case, resulting in his murder by Mrs Kiley who’d also killed the good Senator’s mistress.

Perhaps if I’d bulked up on steroids and growth hormones and had become obsessed with weight training so that I could kick the crap out of suspects like Gibbs and Ziva instead of outplaying them on Tetris, perhaps then I might have won some respect from my mentor. Come to think of it, I’d won a job offer from him after chasing him down, tackling him to the ground and hauling him off to the squad room.

Huh! I'd always thought that it was my ability to investigate and pull clues out of mid-air that had prompted the offer but still... clearly, I’m as dumb as dirt, obviously that was pure self-delusion on my part.

Poor gullible little Anthony, so desperate to see what you wanted to see. It only took you twelve years to figure out the truth. Some investigator you are – your really are a dumb jock!

Well you can’t change the past – all you can do is change the future and not be so credulous anymore.
Nope, Anthony DiNozzo, will be perfectly fine alone.

I can get through this health crisis on my own and if it is just a false alarm, I’ll work on my recovery and fitness and update my resume. I’ll find somewhere where I don’t have to settle for being a crappy spare tyre that was utilised once in a blue moon.

Even if I ended up having to take a demotion because let’s face it, I’ve turned down so many job offers over the years that they’ve begun to dry up. Oh well, I wasn’t really performing the practical duties of an SFA anyway.

At least if I feel like I am actually being useful, and my contribution is being acknowledged sometimes, then didn’t that have to be better than what I’ve been achieving on Gibbs team? Even with a demotion – at least I’ll have my self-respect!

And if the worst happened… shit happens after all and then you die. I always knew when I became a cop that I wouldn’t get to make old bones but still… I’d always thought I’d go out in a blaze of bullets – dying in order to save innocent lives. Maybe I could volunteer for a suicide mission – like Jenn did.

There are worse ways to go.

Laying down his pen, Tony sighed. He felt better for confiding in his tried and true friend.

A friend who’d never betray his secrets in the bull pen. Unlike when Gibbs told everyone all about his father dragging him to Civil War re-enactments and forcing him to carry around the bucket of crap, thus earning himself the hated moniker of ‘The Poo Boy.’ The Boss had thought it was a great joke to embarrass Tony because it was just so damned amusing making fun of Junior’s miserable abusive childhood.

A friend who never tired of listening to him talk, nor gave him a head slap to shut him up. Who’d never told him it was fine to die as long as he did it silently.

A friend who wouldn’t dream of turning off the microphone because his backup didn’t want to listen to his voice anymore when they’d worked a triple homicide/domestic terrorism case.

A friend who didn’t judge him or try to belittle and demean him. Someone who was simply there for him when he needed support whenever the going got too hard.

And honestly, Tony felt better, it was always good to share his troubles, thoughts and feelings with someone who wouldn’t let him down. He felt lighter, ready to move forward. Ready to put the past behind him so he could deal with the biopsy and whatever the fallout from it would be.

He supposed if anyone was to read his journal they would undoubtedly conclude that he was a whiny, needy, weak little snowflake, but Tony was sure that no one would read it. First off, he kept it under lock and key but most importantly, he wasn’t significant enough to warrant any one bothering to read his frivolous rambling. Finally, he’d left instructions that in the event of his death his journals were to be destroyed although to be honest, he couldn’t imagine anyone who’d care enough about him to read them.
He’d be fine... DiNozzo’s always were and if he wasn’t, his journal would be there for him.

Just like always.
Brad Pitt contemplates what the future holds for his most famous patient and his friend.

Dr Brad Pitt stared at the medical file on his laptop. Chiefly, the histopathology report from the endoscopic lung biopsy and he cursed loudly and long. How could one guy be so freakin damned unlucky?

Tony was a fit and healthy person, apart from his bad luck to have contracted the plague and double pneumonia that stuffed up his lungs that is. He exercised regularly, ate a reasonably healthy diet, except when he was working cases and lived at the office. He drank alcohol in moderation and didn't smoke. Yet his friend had ended up with a tumour in the lungs, not unlike the case of the celebrity Dana Reeves, heroic wife of Christopher ‘Superman’ Reeves, and boy didn't their luck stink, too.

Brad Skyped his buddy to discuss the results, having offered to discuss his options after conferring with his internist friend, Dr Eva Christiansen who he'd referred Tony to in his absence.

His friend had seemed almost fatalistic about the diagnosis and as they talked over his options, exhibited a flat affect – a dramatic change to his normal quicksilver demeanour. Pitt really wished he was back home, so he could give his friend his support in person, but the medical conference was still winding down.

Still, perhaps an ill wind and all that. One of his colleagues that he'd done some post grad work with back in his Harvard days, was doing some exciting experimental trials into new cancer drugs that held promise for the type of cancer Tony was facing. Once Tony had had the tumour resected of course, especially if they got clear margins, it might be viable option.

He'd know more after talking to his friend, Gia. Of course, Tony would need to have exhaustive full body scans and blood tests to make sure that this was the primary and there were no major secondaries that needed to be contended with as well.

On his way home to the States tomorrow, he was going to go call in to see his friend, Dr Giovanna Parisi at the European Institute of Oncology in Milan. She was going to give him a tour of the facilities and Brad would take Tony's medical file and biopsy report and he would charm, beg or blackmail Gia so Tony could be considered for a place in their clinical trial. The institute treated many patients from across Europe already and even language wouldn't be an issue, as Tony was fluent in Italian already as his great grand-parents had emigrated to the USA from Italy.

Plus, with his inheritance from his Uncle Clive carefully invested, Tony could also afford to pay the rather considerable cost of treatment on the Continent. At the time he’d wondered that Tony hadn’t splashed out, choosing to invest it instead; he didn’t even tell his team mates about the inheritance. Clearly Tony’s fiscal caution would pay off now – helping him to fight this terrible disease.

Concerned about Tony's emotional state though, he decided to call Donald to check up on him. Not that he thought that his friend would do anything hasty or anything, but he did have two parents with a history of substance abuse who’d done an exceptionally good job of damaging Tony in his formative years.
To others he was the life of the party, the extrovert, the un-squelchable guy that you couldn't offend, no matter how much you tried. Unfortunately, that was all very much an act to hide a highly sensitive self- questioning introverted side of his personality. A guy who never felt that he was good enough. Which was why Tony also shied away from meaningful relationships since he a) didn't feel that he deserved happiness or b) was good enough to make anyone else happy, either.

When it came to his personality the truth was that DiNozzo was a classic example of an ambivert (someone whose personality was a combination of extraversion and introversion) who for some reason Brad didn’t understand chose to hide his introverted side from the people he worked for. His music, his books, his apartment as his sanctuary where only a rare friend had visited were all carefully concealed behind the brashness and superficiality which people believed exemplified his sometimes-crass personality.

But lately, Tony had seemed to be trying way too hard to convince everyone that he was just fine. To convince himself, maybe?

So yeah, Brad was concerned about his friend. His choice of career, his solitary lifestyle, his proclivity to get injured, and his high-risk behaviours all spoke to an individual that wasn't completely anchored to remaining alive under any and all conditions. Having just been told you have lung cancer isn’t exactly the most optimal of situations and he was going to need as much support as they could provide to guide him through the rocky times ahead.

A call to the elderly ME was most definitely on the pulmonologist’s agenda tomorrow. Regrettably, it was too late for him to call Dr Mallard now, though.

~o0o~

Brad opened up his Skype account and selected Dr Mallard's drake avatar, clicking on the video call option and waited. If he had accurately calculated the time differential, then it was approximately 0830 back in DC and hopefully the good doctor was taking the time to indulge in his favourite tipple – a freshly brewed pot of Prince of Wales breakfast tea.

"Good morning Bradley, dear boy," the mellifluous tones of the medical examiner answered his Skype call promptly. "What can I do for you today?"

"Hi Donald, did Tony mention that I'm here at a medical symposium in Verona?"

"I don't believe so, lad but I do recall hearing someone at Bethesda mention it when I was out there last week. Everyone is very proud of your accomplishments, Bradley. Congratulations."

"Um thanks, Doctor. Are you busy?" Brad asked.

"No, my boy. In fact, if I wasn't worried about jonahing myself, I would make a flippant comment about it being blessedly quiet but that might invite the gods to send me a new case to remind me to remain humble." Ducky chuckled merrily.

Someone had obviously gotten up on the right side of bed, this morning.

"So instead I'll inquire obligingly if I can be of assistance, although clearly you have some reason for ringing." He observed good naturedly.

Okay, Brad was not getting a good feeling about this. If Tony had already told Ducky the results of the biopsy he wasn't picking up any verbal cues. Ducky seemed far too cheery.

"Well I was wondering if you could write up a couple of scripts for Tony, his emergency inhaler and
his usual antispasmodic, since I might be delayed here for a couple of days," he lied. A white lie he
told himself. "I just remembered this morning that I told Tony I'd be back sooner and could write up
the scripts for him. I'd appreciate if it's not too much trouble, Donald."

"Yes, I can most assuredly do that for Anthony. Easily fixed, Bradley."

"Thanks Donald, I'd appreciate it. How is he doing, the last time I spoke to him he seemed a bit
down or tired perhaps." Brad figured he wasn't breaking his Hippocratic Oath with such a general
inquiry and he did have genuine concerns for his friend's mental state.

"Ah yes indeed, dear boy. Affairs of the heart, I'm afraid. He has been depressed since he returned
from Israel. I'm afraid that Ziva has broken the poor boy's heart but even rejection can't keep our
resilient young man down for long. I'm sure he'll be back to annoying his team mates in no time. He
just needs a little time to crawl into a hole and lick his wounds in private."

Brad heard another voice in the background and decided to end the call before he spoke out of turn.
It wasn't a voice he recognised so he guessed another agent needed to speak to the ME.

"Okay Donald, thanks for doing that for me, I'll catch up with you later…Bye."

"Buon viaggio, Dr Pitt. Ciao," Ducky reciprocated before turning back to explain an anomaly in the
PM of PO Flores to Special Agent Hopkins.

~o0o~

Brad closed his laptop and thought about his call. It seemed clear that Donald Mallard didn't have a
clue about Tony's diagnosis. Not only that, unless he was an extremely gifted actor, he wasn't even
aware that he even had a biopsy to begin with. If he was, he would have given him some sort of
indication or been concerned about Tony, but he seemed in altogether too good a mood to not have
been informed that something was seriously awry.

Pitt wondered why Tony hadn't talked to Ducky – he knew how fond he was of the ME and how he
turned to him for help whenever he had medical concerns. He wondered who he'd turned to instead
but mostly the revelation that Ducky knew nothing increased his own gut feelings that Tony wasn't
coping well with the situation.

He tried to figure out who he could call to check up on Tony but do it without betraying any patient
confidentiality issues. He came to the conclusion that there wasn't anyone at NCIS apart from
Donald. Calling Jimmy Palmer would be highly suspect - even if he was now a doctor. Although he
would have been the most logical and least suspicious person for Brad to call or Tony to confide in,
if he mentioned the call to Ducky now, it would create suspicion.

Equally, him calling Abby was a little more plausible but certainly enough out of character for it to
trigger gossip and conjecture – that is if Tony hadn't confided in them. Which frankly didn't make
sense to Brad. He always declared the team, along with the extended members i.e. Donald, Jimmy
and Abby to be his family, so surely Tony had told at least one of them what he was going through.
Hadin't he?

Tony would assuredly have talked to Gibbs at the very least. After all he'd resigned the job he loved
more than anything else, to protect Jethro from being fired. Jethro should be highly honoured that
Tony's regard for him had achieved what crap treatment by team mates, betrayal by directors and Sec
Nav, less than suitable DC weather conditions for his lungs and promotions to Spain and a variety of
other plum job offers had failed to achieve, in all the years Brad had known Tony.
Tony gave up his beloved job, along with Ziva and Tim and took the blame for Gibbs playing too fast and loose with the rules, in order to save his boss’ – his mentor’s miserable (and in Brad’s humble opinion) totally unworthy six. Which considering the gunny’s surfeit of rules, written and otherwise, and his pig-headed insistence that everybody else but himself observes them – was pretty damned ironic, when you stopped to think about it.

Even more ironic had been that Tony, out of the four-person MCRT had been the ONLY ONE that hadn't been singled out as being culpable for the law breaking that Gibbs sanctioned. And yet, Tony had sacrificed his own job to save Gibbs anyway. That was pretty damned loyal by anyone's standards.

That being the case and having that much devotion to his mentor, surely, he'd have shared his medical condition with Jethro.

The former Wolverine snorted disdainfully at Donald's simplistic assessment of the situation with Ziva. He may be smart as a tack but how had he got it so damned wrong?

Even Brad could see that Tony experienced deep feelings of guilt over the ex-assassin. He still felt like he'd failed her by not preventing her from embarking on a path of retribution over her father's death. Tony had been firmly convinced that her conscience would plague her as she got older, when she was forced to confront what she'd done, although confidentially, Brad wasn't as sure.

Abusive, angry individuals with sociopathic tendencies were selected to train as assassins for a reason - which didn't usually include having the capacity to regret past actions. But Tony always chose to see the good in the people he loved.

Tony truly thought that with the passage of time, toss in emotional distance, it would become increasingly difficult for Ziva to live with her actions, particularly how her own actions or perhaps lack of action contributed to Jackie Vance's death. Brad thought that compulsion to see the good in people (other than himself of course) was at least partially why the Buckeye got caught up in his unstoppable urge to save a teammate when they got into trouble.

It certainly wasn't the first time she triggered his Sir Galahad persona into riding to the rescue, even if her damsel in distress façade was about as real as a black mambo snake feeling compassion for its prey. It simply wasn't in their nature, so even if the Buckeye managed to deceive himself that they might be able to be there for each other as a couple (at least for five minutes) Ziva didn't need or appreciate being saved.

So, Brad was super relieved when Ziva had refused to come back to the States and Tony had returned alone. Glad she had stayed in Israel, even knowing his friend felt he'd failed a member of his team, and that team to Tony was tantamount to family. Brad understood that there was no one more important in his friend’s world and nothing too important to sacrifice when it came to family.

Yes, coming back without her must have been a bitter pill to swallow after all DiNozzo had done for her but she would never be capable of any degree of reciprocity. Brad was once again reminded of the Aesop's fable – The Frog and the Scorpion.

Frankly, the very thought of Tony getting together with that particular female made him want to throw up. Tony might love her as a member of his family or maybe even romantically, but to Brad all he could see her as was a vicious killer. A manipulative hypocrite and a physically and emotionally abusive person who didn't ever hesitate to take out her anger and frustrations upon his friend.

She was both verbally and physically abusive. He'd been the one Tony had sought help from when she'd attacked him in Tel Aviv and come close to killing him with a loaded gun. Who the hell pulls a
Then again, who would violently sweep a man off his feet, landing him on his back on an asphalt surface when they had numerous injuries?

Brad had seen where she had jammed her weapon into DiNozzo’s chest and his thigh with enough force to leave bruising. He’d reset Tony’s broken arm which had been snapped by Ziva’s Kidon-trained lover just days before and he’d diagnosed and treated a number of broken ribs. Ribs which had been badly bruised from the previous life and death struggle with Rivkin but Ziva’s forceful takedown had been the straw that broke the camel’s back, and in the impact, they’d fractured.

Despite his innate desire to protect one of his own (even if she had remained behind) once the Buckeye become loose lipped after receiving analgesia, he’d admitted that Ziva had come far too close to pulling the trigger of her gun and shooting him. Typical Tony, he’d been quick to forgive, rationalising that she was grief-stricken, claiming it was his fault. Although Brad, as an unbiased bystander, was far less lenient since he knew that she was frequently emotionally abusive to his friend – dismissive, disparaging and spiteful.

Not to mention constantly threatening physical harm to those around her for even the most minor of perceived slights.

And then there was the death of a suspect in the NCIS lift which had occurred while in Ziva’s custody. Tony had let that one slip when he’d been under the influence of pain meds at some point following surgery. Sure the ‘conclusion had been that the guy had died of an aneurism which had been a ticking time bomb – and yeah he’d checked it out on the QT. The fact remained that she’d lashed out physically - lashed out with violent intent and THAT had been the precursor to the suspect dying whilst in custody. At the least, she was guilty of manslaughter!

If Tony had commenced a romantic relationship with the former Mossad officer Brad would have been highly concerned for his welfare and not just his physical wellbeing either. Someone as sensitive, emotionally damaged and with Tony DiNozzo’s compulsive need to forgive such a walking psychological time bomb as the spy/assassin, would be nothing short of an unmitigated disaster for his friend. In military parlance a FUBAR state of affairs!

So, when Tony had returned from Israel feeling an overwhelming sense of failure about not bringing home one of his team, Brad while being a good buddy and commiserating with her, assuring him he hadn’t failed her or the team, was inwardly doing the happy dance. At least now that she was back in Israel, Ziva couldn’t hurt him anymore and hopefully Gibbs would replace her with someone who was more psychologically stable.

Still, the personnel on the MCRT was kind of a moot point at this moment. Tony had far bigger issues to preoccupy himself with and work wasn’t one of them or least it was tangentially. Only as far as the team would be able to provide the support that his friend was going to need to get through the scans, surgery and chemotherapy. Realistically, it was going to be a damned tough road ahead.

Brad knew he needed to focus on what lay ahead too, yet he couldn’t help thinking about his prior conversation with Dr Mallard, who’d known Tony for so many years.

Of all the team, he honestly would have expected Donald with his psychological training to have a better handle on the situation. To assume (like everyone else) that Tony could keep taking hit after hit to his body or his psyche and have him bounce back with no ill effects was sheer idiocy. They both knew (or should know as doctors) that these effects were cumulative, no matter how good an act he played, or how many 'I'm fines' that he uttered.
Didn't they see the weariness in his eyes and his step? Why did they all persist in seeing him as that dumb blow-up clown, Bobo that they could use, abused, kick, spit and void various other bodily functions upon and still have him spring back as if nothing had happened.

Standing up to pace around and burn off some nervous energy, Brad wondered what was wrong with these damned people, anyway?

Maybe that was why his friend hadn't told anyone. Tony aka Bobo the Blow-up Clown had to keep bouncing back. He probably thought if he admitted to a puncture it would result in Bobo being discarded in the trash, replaced with a brand-new, fresh out of the bag, unblemished Bobo.

Granted, all this speculation wasn't addressing Brad's current concerns about Tony's welfare and he wracked his brain trying to think of a solution. After metaphorically beating his head against the wall for a while, he belatedly thought of Emma Ingham – his trusted nurse. She'd recently started working with Brad again after resigning five years ago to follow her musician boyfriend to London to work and live. When the romance of the century went belly up in an angst filled clichéd scene involving another woman, Emma had returned home to the States and begged Brad for a job again.

She'd always had a soft spot for Tony, having seen how hard he'd battled to overcome the plague and pneumonia when she nursed him through what was probably one of the most frightening times of his life. She'd been impressed at how Tony had kept his sense of humour, even while drowning as his lungs filled up with fluid.

Brad knew he could trust her discretion when it came to his friend's desire not to be pitied or seen as weak – damn his father to the Eternal Fires of Hell! And Gibbs too for doing a bang-up job of reinforcing that message.

Calling his nurse and trusted friend, he outlined his concerns briefly, not having to worry about discussing Tony’s medical condition with his nurse. "So, Em, I was wondering if you could contact him and make sure he's all right. I don't think he's told anyone about the biopsy or the result and… well he just sounded weird when I talked to him last night."

Emma Ingham nodded empathetically, knowing that Tony was a good friend of Brad's. "I'm sorry Brad - that sucks so much! You'd think he deserved a break from the Fates, wouldn't you? But Hon, you know how intensely private Tony is. I can't just rock up out of the blue. You have any suggestions that will give me an in with him?"

Brad chuckled, mainly at the notion that Emma had nursed him one time when he had the plague and had limited contact since then but still managed to accurately read the guy. Yet the people who worked closely with him underestimated him on a daily basis.

"Yeah, Em. I was thinking that you could schedule him in with his appointments with the surgeon and oncologist. Maybe meet up for a cup of coffee," he explained, hopefully.

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan. I take it you want me to get onto it ASAP?"

That's affirmative, Nurse Awesome." Brad thanked his nurse, knowing that their level of familiarity made a lot of people think they were more than colleagues – well everyone except his wife, of course.

The truth was that they were really good friends, their friendship forged by the crises they faced over the years. He also knew that Emma was the epitome of professionalism and sensitivity and would look after Tony for him til he got back.
Hanging up, he felt so much better. Buckeye was in the best of hands. Emma really was an awesome nurse, but she was also an awesome person. Kind, empathetic and well capable of handling Tony without humiliating him or spooking him into running.

Sighing in relief he crossed worrying about his friend’s mental state off his list and turned to more constructive matters. And that would be making a detour to Milan.

Grabbing Tony's medical file and his luggage he made his way down to the lobby to check out of the hotel and pay his bill. The concierge had organised for a hire car to be waiting so he could drive to the Institute at Milan. A very important discussion with Giovanna about her oncology trial awaited – and hopefully a long overdue change of luck for his friend.
Chapter Summary

Chapter summary: Gibbs finds out that DiNozzo has left his team and has an acrimonious run in with one of his friends.

Chapter Notes

Okay... I'm going to play it safe and issue a warning here about Gibbs. He may seem OOC in this chapter, although I personally don't think so. He is however placed in a situation that he doesn't usually find himself in, where people actually thwart his attempts to find out what he sees as information that he is entitled to have. Usually if he behaves badly enough on the show, people back down and give him what he demands. So, it's hard to say what his reaction will be if someone stands up to him. Given his anger management issues, I don't see how he reacts in this chapter to be implausible... well obviously, since I wrote it. :)

As to my rationale as to why he treats Tony like a pile of crap, I know people have lots of theories about why but to me, his shit eating grin after he does it speaks of someone that is cognizant of what he's doing and also gets satisfaction from seeing someone suffer. That and there is no incentive for him to change his behaviour. since everyone excuses him by saying he's a bastard or he’s still grieving the loss of his family which is a pathetic excuse.

Tony requested a one week leave of absence for personal reasons but refused to explain to him why he needed the time off. At which point Gibbs had denied his request, citing all the time that he'd used up chasing down Ziva and that they were one team member short already. Tony had simply nodded his acceptance and Gibbs had thought that would be the end to it. Frankly DiNozzo had been off his game recently, ever since the team got back together really, but he'd been particularly unfocused lately, taking extra-long lunch breaks or coming in late to work and he'd been sulking in the bull pen. Quiet and not full of his usual yabba-yabba, so definitely something was on his mind.

Either he was working undercover for Vance or SecNav again without informing him of the fact or he was still in a huff because Gibbs had told McGee to take point in the investigation of the dead Marine Sergeant Dawson.

Even though he'd been away from the office, he'd still heard the water cooler gossip about how pissed DiNozzo had been about it, which essentially was why he'd done it. He enjoyed getting under DiNozzo's skin because he was always trying so hard to maintain a mask and make it hard to read him. Somehow getting a reaction out of him just felt so damned good.

It always put Gibbs in a great mood afterwards and that had to be a win-win situation for the whole team. So, he wasn't about to feel bad about treating Tony like a proverbial piece of dog shit. Besides, he’d been under pressure because of Jackson’s stubborn-assed behaviour, his dad was driving him
crazy and giving DiNozzo shit always helped him feel better. So, everyone won!

If he didn't like it, he shouldn't make it so easy for everyone to treat him like crap. Gibbs rationalised that DiNozzo really had no one but himself to blame for how he was treated.

When it was 0830 and Tony hadn't shown up for work today, Gibbs was getting ready to order McGee to put a bug up DiNozzo's ass and tell him to get his worthless butt into work. That's when he received an email from HR informing him that Anthony DiNozzo was on personal leave for the rest of the week and it had been approved by Director Vance. Exploding and picking up his cell phone he tried calling his SFA who wasn’t answering, so he threw it across the bull pen, smashing the phone into pieces. Yelling at McGee and telling him to call his SFA and order him to get in here ASAP, he ran upstairs to the director's office to confront the betrayer face to face.

Gibbs suspicions about an undercover mission confirmed, he was going to rip several people a new one, starting with Leon Fucking Vance. Then he was going emphasise once and for all that he wasn't to be left out of the loop ever again.

Returning to the bullpen twenty minutes later he was frustrated and in a foul temper, but no further along in finding out where DiNozzo was and what he was doing. Leon had refused to confirm or deny that Tony was on an undercover mission. He cited need-to-know and haughtily informed Gibbs that he didn't need to know, before refusing to be drawn further. That was despite the mother of all tantrums that he'd unleashed in Vance’s office.

Finally realising that he was being toyed with, and he'd get nothing else from Director Vance he’d descended to the bullpen to strategize his next move. Essentially, his plan consisted of snatching McGee's phone (since his was in pieces) to call DiNozzo every five minutes, screaming threats down the phone to call him or else. He had Abby trace his phone - but it was switched off, so no help from that avenue to locate his UA agent, either.

He ordered McGee to get hold of DiNozzo's personnel file, knowing that it would have the paperwork for his leave in it. Although McGee initially looked as if he was going to refuse that directive, one look at his boss seemed to dispel any notion of refusing to hack, for reasons that seemed to Tim to be frivolous at best after his dodging of Parson's bullet. Sighing, he made short work of obtaining his team mate's records, but it looked as if someone had anticipated them because apart from the approval, there was nothing else filed. He suggested to Gibbs that they may not have scanned in the data but retained it as paper copy only, especially if it was need-to-know.

So of course, he'd threatened Delores What’s-her-name down in HR to tell him the reason for DiNozzo's leave of absence, but the officious busybody cited confidentiality regulations with a supercilious smile. It was clear that she took great pleasure in denying Jethro’s request but then again, he seriously doubted if she knew the reason for his leave either. She was probably just as much in the dark as he was.

Still, it annoyed the crap out of him to be thwarted at any time but since he’d been blocked at every turn, he longed to push her aside and rifle through her damned records to find out what was going on. Why couldn't she just tell him what he needed to know? It was easier all round when everyone just gave him what he wanted – what he needed to do his job!

Instead, he had to settle for interrogating the team and other people that DiNozzo worked with or was chummy with - which was pretty much the whole damned building, since privacy seemed a foreign concept to the former cop. Strangely though, with all the chatting he did at work, no one knew why he'd taken personal leave, although many people felt that something was bothering him.

Frankly he was sceptical about that since none of the team had picked up on anything troubling him
(apart from sulking over Ziva). Not even Ducky or Abby had a clue about anything bothering him and he wasn't at his apartment. If anyone would know if something was troubling him it would be his teammates – the people who know him best. Meanwhile, with nothing to go one, all Jethro could do was wait until he returned to work next week and rip him a new one for disobeying his direct order denying his request for leave.

In the interim, with just Tim in the bullpen they weren't exactly a productive team, especially when Elf Lord kept running off to the head constantly. Watching the other SFAs on the floor collapse into hysterical peals of laughter every time he had to bolt to the bathroom with a desperation that suggested a severe case of stomach flu, Gibbs figured out he'd been pranked. Some surreptitious investigation revealed several empty containers of chocolate yoghurt with DiNozzo's name on them in the trash near McGee's desk that he'd obviously consumed for breakfast.

Marco Mendez and Karen Whitman, two SFAs confessed to rather liberally lacing DiNozzo's chocolate yoghurt snacks with Ex-Lax. Claimed to be pissed at McGee's treatment of their colleague last week, citing his hurtful remarks – some crap made about the size of the former cop's head. They also mentioned McGee's failure to respect the chain of command, his constant insubordinate attitude to the other SFA and constantly stealing Tony's food last week. The fact he had taken food specifically labelled with DiNozzo’s name confirmed to them that he had been doing it on purpose.

Since they hadn't spiked Tim's food, only DiNozzo's and he'd knowingly consumed food labelled as someone else's, Mendez and Whitman's team leaders declined to discipline them, claiming that McGee had no one to blame but himself. Gibbs got the distinct impression that they also endorsed the intent behind the prank, although they stopped short of saying so, since Jethro took a dim view of interference in his team. But their huge grins when Tim took another trip to the head were pretty telling. Still, by knowingly eating food with someone else's name on it, McGee made it hard to argue that he hadn't been hoisted on his own petard.

Also, with all the SFAs offering to do Tony's paperwork during his week-long leave, it was difficult for Jethro to get too precious about it since they could easily tell him to go bite himself. Deciding as McGee bolted to the head yet again that McGee had made his bed, so now he'd just have to lie in it - even if it was a cubicle in the head and a raw asshole from the scalding diarrhoea, he dismissed it from his mind. Instead Gibbs focused on what he'd do to DiNozzo’s anatomy when his week of leave was up.

Unfortunately, Gibbs never got his chance to rearrange Tony's anatomy or demand answers to his many questions either. Awaiting him instead of a penitent Anthony DiNozzo next Monday was a request for extended medical leave signed by Dr Brad Pitt. Gibbs read the form with disbelief. Barging unannounced into the director’s office he demanded, "What the Hell is this, Leon? Some sort of damned façade to hide an undercover Op that you won't tell me about?"

Vance sighed long sufferingly. "No Gibbs, it's nothing more or less than what it seems. DiNozzo has requested an extended leave of absence due to medical reasons that have been verified by his doctor. Unless you're suggesting a Bethesda medical doctor, a lieutenant commander no less, is complicit in 'the undercover mission' as well?" He sneered.

"As DiNozzo's paperwork is all in order and he is entitled to take said medical leave, I have granted the request and also spoken to him briefly. He indicated he is seeking specialised medical treatment for his health condition and that his diagnosis is serious. He requested that I give this to you," and the director handed over a letter addressed to Gibbs.

Taking it from Leon he stared at DiNozzo’s distinctive scrawl that Jethro knew almost as well as his own. Ripping it open in fury he stared at the note – it would be wrong to call it a letter. After more
than 12 years working together he didn't warrant more than a one-page note? That was pretty damned insulting. Glaring at the words he read them disbelievingly.

Dear Boss,

By now you will have heard that I have left the country to receive treatment. I was diagnosed with a tumour and had surgery last week. I've been lucky to be offered a spot in a clinical trial for a new experimental chemotherapeutic drug to treat the type of cancer I have. I have decided to proceed to the clinic to continue recuperating from my surgery and also to undertake the myriad of medical evaluations that are necessary prior to my formal acceptance in the trial. I therefore am unable to make appropriate good-byes to everyone at NCIS and trust that you will pass them along for me, on my behalf.

Thank-you for the opportunity to join your team. My prognosis isn't great unfortunately, but this drug trial offers me at least some hope of remission or perhaps more realistically, some extra time. Should a miracle remission take place and the doctors clear me to return to work at some stage, I wish to inform you that I will be requesting a transfer to a different field office, maybe overseas although those details are vague right now.

I regret my inability to provide you with more notice, but I urge you to go ahead and appoint Tim as your senior field agent immediately and not hold open the position in the hope that I might return. Make sure he watches your six since I invested too many years for it to be shot up now. Take care.

My gratitude for all your assistance over the years

Anthony D. DiNozzo

He finished reading the letter, the resignation letter and flashed a disdainful glare at the director and spun on his heel. Gibbs raced out of the office and down the stairs to grab his wallet, creds, gun and car keys and took off without a word to McGee.

Truth to tell he was too angry to speak, let alone issue orders. This had to be some sort of bizarre practical joke, otherwise why wouldn’t his obsessively loyal senior field agent have told him this to his face. No, it stank to high heaven of some elaborate fantasy to explain an undercover mission. Who did they think they were dealing with? He was going to hunt him down and disabuse him of that notion by inserting his boot so far up DiNozzo's ass that he'd be tasting crap and leather for the foreseeable future.

Fuming as he drove across town, he ignored his cell phone which rang continuously, noting that McGee and Leon were both taking it in turn to pester him. Pulling up at DiNozzo's apartment he leapt out, racing up the stairs, not bothering to wait for the stupid elevator to arrive and didn't his knee thank him for that. Banging on the door of DiNozzo’s apartment without getting a response he extracted his lock picking implements from his pocket, preparing to let himself in.

Tony's next-door neighbour stuck his head out of his front door, with a scowl. "Chillax Dude – no one’s there. Tony left yesterday, said he was going away. Didn't know if or when he'd be back."

Gibbs punched the wall in fury. "Damn it! Did he leave you a forwarding address?"

"Sorry Man, he looked too bad. I didn't like to ask. He didn't look like he'd last too long, if you want my honest opinion. Had a nurse and a doctor there helping him.

"If you need to talk to him urgently, you could try NCIS where he works. His boss will know what’s happening. According to Tony the guy's a paragon. Personally, I think he sounds like someone
sewed his asshole shut. Ask for Leroy Jethro Gibbs."

Gibbs didn't respond to that oh so annoying advice, scowling at the busybody neighbour and stomping off in high dudgeon. What the hell was wrong with DiNozzo? And of more immediate relevance was what he going to do now to find out where DiNozzo had gone and why he'd behaved like such a jackass.

How dare he treat him like that. After more than twelve years together – where was DiNozzo’s loyalty?

Suddenly recalling that it had been Brad Pitt who'd sign the medical certificate verifying his medical leave, Jethro was off again, the bit between his teeth. He was going to be having a chat with the good doctor, since he obviously knew what the hell was going on. Jumping back in the car he headed off to Bethesda, ignoring the constant ringing of his cell phone – well technically McGee’s phone. He was too furious to talk!

Storming into Brad Pitt's office despite ineffectual bleats from his receptionist to say that Brad was busy, he looked around and saw his office in chaos but no patients in sight. Jethro heaved a sigh, not that it would have stopped him getting answers, had Pitt been seeing someone. It just made life less complicated. Certainly, Brad's usual friendly demeanour was missing but that was fine by him. He was in a shit of a mood, too.

Tossing DiNozzo's pathetic slap-in-the-face of a note on Brad's desk, he demanded. "What the fuck is this supposed to be? What does he expect me to do with this?" He ranted and paced before sweeping a bunch of files off the desk because he really wanted to hurt someone, and property damage was the lesser of two evils.

When Brad just glared at him and remained silent, he grabbed him by the lapels and got right up in his face. "Tell me where he went!"

Pitt curled his lip in contempt. "No!"

Unsurprisingly, that pushed him over the edge. Jethro saw red, his blood pressure spiked as his head began to pound alarmingly and he heard a whoosh, whoosh in his ears as he wound up and delivered a right hook to Pitt's jaw. "WHY DIDN'T HE TELL ME?" He roared.

Somewhere on the way over to Walter Reed – previously Bethesda Naval Hospital – Gibbs gut had started to accept the dreadful truth that DiNozzo was indeed sick. Perhaps the annoying neighbour’s words about his appearance and his companions being medical personnel was sinking in – the realisation that it was far too elaborate to be a ruse.

Brad had seen the contracted pupils, the flared nostrils, knew the punch was coming and tried not to flinch. He glared at Gibbs before finally responding. "He was following orders. Your orders - you bastard."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You told him once that you were fine with him dying but to go off and do it quietly. He took your advice to heart. He always damned good at following your orders."

Continuing to glare at the stricken man who started shaking him angrily, like a terrier shakes a rat, Brad growled. "Let me go, Gibbs or I swear, you'll regret it."

Reluctantly Gibbs allowed Brad to extricate himself from the former Marine’s grip.
"I didn't mean it... it was a joke... we were in the middle of a case... I was busy..." he spewed out in an uncharacteristic display of excuses.

"Oh please, Mr I-Never-Lie. You can delude yourself if you want but don't waste that crap with me. I know better. Your actions over the years have spoken louder than words. You’ve all treated him like crap for years, then tell him it’s just a joke and expect it to be water off a duck’s back to him but it's not. God only knows why, but Tony looked up to you, so he internalises every single blessed thing you say to him."

Picking up a box of files he placed the lid on, labelled and stacked it on top of another. "Now if you excuse me, I've been offered a sabbatical and since my friend and most important patient no longer requires my special services in DC, I'm taking an offer to work somewhere new and warm for a bit. Frankly I'm disgusted with you lot and can't wait to get jack of you." He finished disgustedly. "Now if you don't mind, I have a lot to organise while I'm gone."

When Gibbs stood there, still in the doctor's personal space, Brad planted his right palm on Gibbs sternum, pushing him back gently yet firmly. "Go!" He ordered the federal agent who finally departed when Emma Ingham entered the room to see what all the yelling was about. She'd heard them down the corridor, as had everyone else.

"Looks like you were right to have Tony's medical records filed under a fake name, Hon. What's the betting that he's going have someone hack into our records?" Emma observed drily.

Yeah, he'd like to be as sure of picking the right lottery numbers as he was that McGee would be directed to hack into Patient Records. Gibbs was nothing if not consistent and extremely predictable. Still he really doubted they'd connect Buck Iceson to Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo. McGee was many things but a think outside the box lateral thinker – no way.

Brad regarded his friend carefully. "I guess you heard, then?" At her nodded assent, he made a moue of regret. "Sorry Em, I was going to tell you that I'd decided to accept Giavonna's offer of a sabbatical at the Institute over the weekend. Lara and I talked about it and apart from it being a good move for my career professionally, we can be there to support Tony through the trial and the radiation treatment. He needs someone in his corner."

"I've spoken to the other docs in the department and several leapt at the chance of having you work with them until I get back." He looked at her speculatively before making his next suggestion. "Or if you fancied an extended working holiday for the next four to six months in Milan, the European Institute of Oncology has agreed that I can bring you along, too. Lara's really looking forward to the locations and the light for her painting, but she'd welcome your company, I know. Her Italian is not great."

Emma looked uncomfortable. "Thanks Brad, I appreciate you thinking of me like that, but I have to turn down your offer." She seemed to be debating internally before giving an embarrassed grin.

"I've already accepted a temporary new job, since I anticipated that you'd be heading over to Milan. Too many years together Hon," she said when she saw his surprised expression.

Choosing her next words carefully, she continued. "I don't really feel comfortable working at the Institute – it wouldn't be professional or ethical. I've lined up a job at the American International Medical Centre."

Seeing her blush Brad did a double take. "Do you mean ... you and Tony?"
Ingham giggled, "Not yet, no but I'm working on it. He thinks it's not fair to start something when he might not survive but I plan to change his mind. I can be pretty convincing."

_Having seen her powers of persuasion at work, Brad would have to agree with that assessment. Tony didn't have a ghost of a chance._

"I think there's no better time than the present and since I've already seen him at his most vulnerable, I figure that's one obstacle that we don't have to worry about."

Grinning, despite his split lip and throbbing jaw he grabbed Emma in a delighted hug, warning her sternly not to hurt the Buckeye, although he knew she wasn't likely to. Damn, she was a fast worker. No wonder Tony seemed more positive and had agreed to enter the trial. _Go Em!_

He decided that Tony's chances just improved dramatically, and he wondered if the four of them could share accommodation over there so that when Tony wasn't at the Institute they could help take care of him. He also wondered if Emma could leave immediately so Tony had her to support him ASAP.

Lara still needed a few more days to get things organised before they left, especially all her art gear, as did he. Packing up his practise for half a year took some organising. Although Giovanna had promised to take good care of DiNozzo, somehow, he thought Emma would do a much better job.

~o0o~

Meanwhile Gibbs was reeling as he made his way back to NCIS. He knew that Abby and McGee would start tracking DiNozzo's digital shoeprints and Ducky could call in his vast number of contacts at Bethesda to access his medical file and find out what was wrong and where he'd gone. Of course, there was no guarantee that he'd reveal what he knew since he'd probably quote that HIPPO crap and doctor patient confidentiality, or was that the Hippocratic Oath? Whatever… he wasn't without his own secret weapon.

Glancing at the leather-bound journal that he recognised as the one that DiNozzo used compulsively to record his thoughts about cases that were bothering him and his work, he thanked his good fortune for seeing it and secreting it inside his jacket when he swept that pile of crap off Pitt's desk. He was sure there would be information in it he could use that would lead him to where DiNozzo had disappeared to.

Of course, what Gibbs hadn't factored into the equation was that in order to find the information he wanted, he'd have to trawl through a lot of extremely unpleasant and painful home truths about himself and the other members of his team. Information that he hadn't a clue about.

Which was galling, in itself, since he prided himself that his all-seeing, all knowing gut missed nothing. Yeah right!
Loss forces Gibbs to examine his life, particularly in light of what he learnt after reading the stolen journal.

Warnings: It contains a scene at Jackson Gibbs’ funeral, discretion advised.

Just a quick explanation about why I’ve decided to moderate comments on a site where I’ve always felt readers were far less prone to entitled behaviour. I was wrong! Due to a number of factors including the loss of two family members, it had proved difficult if not impossible for me to write new works, so I decided to fulfill an undertaking to post this story on A03. Quite a few readers where it currently archived have asked me to also post it here on A03, as it is much more reader friendly, particularly for longer fics. Many of those requests came from individuals who have read the fic multiple times. Plus, as I stated previously, the story was full of typos, so I figured cleaning it up would be therapeutic - better than not writing at all since I ascribe to the maxim, 'use it or lose it.' IMHO you don’t fix writers block by not writing, you write your way out of it. So that is what I’m trying to do – but I made the mistake of mentioning that while I was doing a re-edit I also did some rewriting. I did NOT say it was a redux or a reboot because it isn’t and frankly it would defeat the purpose of posting the original story here.

That said, as an inveterate re-drafter, I’ve re-written passages e.g. the first chapter contains in part, new content, approx. 800 words. I moved the journal entry from further on in the story to create a new prologue, which then necessitated the extra 800 words to put it into context. In chapter three, I changed the POV from third person to first person for the majority of the chapter. Across the five chapters posted, there are other minor additions, and in coming chapters some additional content and restructuring, e.g. re-writing a fight scene based on advice I received from a law enforcement professional trainer. Overall I’ve added roughly four to five thousand extra words to the existing 172,000 words, but the plot remains unchanged. So, just to be clear – I’m reposting ‘I Shouldn’t Have To’ here and in substance, it's the same story I wrote and posted four years ago on another site. I’ve cleaned up the typos etc. and made some minor changes (less than 3% of the total words) that in no way affects the integrity of the existing story.

By now, you’re probably wondering what this has to do with me moderating comments when I’ve never felt the need before? Well perhaps I’m more fragile than usual, (stress and grief will do that ) but I take exception to someone who doesn’t like my writing style acting like they are doing me a favour re-reading the story which they’ve previously read and complained about. People read fanfic of their own free will. No one is forcing anyone to read what I write – let alone reread it. Don’t like my stories - I don’t care. You're welcome to your opinion - you've have stated it on more than one occasion. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but why would you want to ruin the enjoyment I derive from a hobby? I Shouldn’t Have To apologise for writing fics for my own pleasure, nor am I going to. I’m also not about to change my writing style because
someone doesn’t like it.

I sometimes feel like writers need to possess the hide of an armadillo. To all the readers here, who in my past experience are a much more appreciative, thoughtful and mature audience i.e. they know how to use the back button – apologies for having to activate a measure that I never thought would be necessary when I began posting here. I Shouldn’t Have To do that and it makes me sad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gibbs stood stoically at the graveside of his father as they laid his casket to rest, his heart raw and broken. His eyes locked on the wreath that DiNozzo had sent. The flowers were yellow roses, Jack's favourite flowers were yellow roses, he'd even had them growing in his front yard. He was in no doubt whatsoever that his former SFA had noticed them the one and only time when he was in Stillwater years ago. It was the sort of detailed observation that was typical of his former team member. But it was the heartfelt message that was the real killer.

_I'll miss you Jackson Gibbs. It was an honour to have made your acquaintance. You're a good man, Jack. Maybe you'd put in a good word for me with Saint Pete? I'll probably be needing it. Safe passage my friend._

_Tony DiNozzo._

Tony had also sent Jethro a condolence card, his first contact with him since he'd gone on medical leave to Italy for treatment some months before. Despite the pandemonium he'd caused trying to find out where his 2IC had gone, after reading his pilfered journal Jethro found he was unable to face DiNozzo.

Sometimes the cost of obtaining what you desire – what you think is rightfully yours - is simply too high a price to pay. Something that Gibbs had learnt the hard way. So surprising as it was, he avoided making contact with DiNozzo, even if that made him was a coward.

In the condolence card, Tony expressed his sorrow at Gibbs' loss and stated his admiration for Jethro’s father, calling him a good man and signing off as Anthony DiNozzo. It was polite and proper, and just like every other damned bland condolence message he received from colleagues. Bland was not a descriptor he would usually use for DiNozzo.

That's when he had his epiphany… no several. The first was that while Tony had only met his dad on a handful of times, he’d clearly liked and admired Jack, even regarded Jethro’s old man as a friend. He, on the only hand, had worked with DiNozzo for 12 years and reading between the lines of the message and the journal, he'd realised that he’d finally destroyed the special trust that they'd always shared. The comment that he made to Leon after Jack's death about not leaving him out of the loop on cases because he didn't have anything but his job – well never had a truer word been spoken.

The last time he saw his dad, Gibbs was too busy convincing himself that the old guy was senile. He was feeling exasperated with him for dragging him away from his precious job, when all Jack wanted was to spend some time with him. He told Duck that Jack had lied to him, all because he broke one of his own damned rules – rule 8 – never assume always check your facts. He assumed that Walter was in his father's squadron and when there was no one of his name, had immediately leapt to conclusion that Jack had lied to him for years about the pilot who’d saved his life. Yet he had been wrong. And didn't that burn him up to admit it!
He made his dad feel like he was doing him a huge favour, gracing him with his presence to help chase down Walter. And then there was his ham-fisted invitation to come and live with him, which was rejected. Undoubtedly, Jack had turned him down because his smart as a whip father had known it was made out of duty, not a genuine desire to spend time with him. He'd even prefaced it with the qualifier that he should come live with him since Jack didn't have a driver's license any longer – the subtext being that he needed to be looked after. Not that Jackson was family and Gibbs might, God Forbid, might actually want to spend some more time with his own father.

After meeting Walter, if Jethro had asked again for him to come live with him, Jack would rightly interpret it as guilt for not believing in him, so he didn't bother – that and it would also have been tantamount to admitting he was wrong. God, he hated being wrong!

While he'd told Duck that apologising to family wasn't weakness, in his heart he found saying sorry extremely unpalatable. So, because he was a stubborn jackass, he lost the opportunity to spend precious months with his only living family member. A mistake that he wished now he could go back and change - yet like with Shannon and Kelly, he had put his job first.

Although he'd made peace with his dad, it was a somewhat uneasy truce. One where a lot was left unsaid, had just been swept under the rug as being too uncomfortable to talk about and that left Jethro with regrets. A ton of them.

You'd think he'd have learnt by now that any extra time with family was priceless beyond measure, not an imposition on him and his precious job. Yet the harsh truth was that the job he placed before everything else, wouldn't last forever. The damned pencil pushers could come along any day and stick their oar in his business and, citing mandatory retirement as a field agent, take away the only thing of value he had left. He would never agree to take on a paper pushing job, so soon enough he would have nothing left.

Even Ducky and Abby who he considered friends, now viewed him with disappointment. He'd run DiNozzo off and instead of being furious with him as he expected – as he deserved - he was now viewed by them an object of pity in the aftermath of Jack’s passing. He was what his friends, back in the day had always warned him he would become if he didn't mourn the dead and let them go – a bitter, twisted and lonely old man.

Mandatory retirement as a field agent loomed like a huge bogeyman that was a depressing prospect. He'd made sure all his old friends, well the few that he had, were driven off too, with the exception of Fornell and he was back together with Diane and didn’t want to hang out and drink bourbon so much anymore. Now he had nothing left – no family, no real friends.

As he stared at his father's casket, the words that DiNozzo had unknowingly echoed to describe his father were mocking him with their irony. Jack WAS a good man – he was a good friend, a good father and husband, a good father-in-law and granddad, a good pilot. He'd even reached out to bring comfort to a former mortal enemy in that man's final hours on earth and how ironic was it that his dad had sought to do that by proudly parading his son, poignantly calling him a good man, the best one he knew.

Oh, if Jack only knew – he was so very far from being a good man that it wasn’t funny. He was an implacable killer who took the life of his wife and child's murderer and then had made others complicit in the crime. He'd treated Lara Macy like the scum of the earth for simply doing her job, indeed for doing the self-same job he did every day of the week as an NCIS agent – such a damned hypocritical piece of shit. A good man!

He’d turned a blind eye to killers and corrupt colleagues, but maybe his worst crime was his treatment of Tony since he was someone he was supposed to care about. It was his job as
Supervisory Special Agent to look out for him not abuse the shit out of him and use him as a punching bag. Especially after he snatched the job back off him years ago after giving it to him when it all got too painful for him to deal with.

Jethro knew from reading his stolen journal, how over the years, he had systematically broken down, piece by piece, the spirit of the finest agent he had ever worked with. He told Senior a few years ago his son was the best 'young agent' because for years he'd been fooling himself about his mentor Mike Franks being the best. But he had finally come to the realisation that as good as Franks was, his questionable ethics, dishonesty and willingness to break the law when the going got tough, meant that he couldn't ever be thought of as great. To be great, you had to do the right thing even when the personal cost was immense.

Even though he'd told DiNozzo's useless sperm donor, he'd never told Tony or anyone else either just how good the senior field agent was. One time he did tell him he was proud of him, but he never did it in public where it could have done so much good. He’d told McGee when he retired and went to Mexico that Tim (who only had a couple of years in the field at that point and was a god-damned rookie) that he was good without batting an eyelash or any angst-filled deliberation about doing so and yet he’d deliberately withheld the same communal validation from Tony.

As if he wasn't equally as deserving of appreciation, if not more so for his extra years of service and unswerving loyalty. Not to mention he was good – he was damned good.

No, he'd treated Tony like dirt – made him doubt himself even more than he already did when he picked him up in Baltimore after the joint case where DiNozo had learnt his partner was dirty. It wasn't as if he hadn't known about his deeply ingrained self-doubt which he attempted to mask as cockiness, so Jethro couldn't claim ignorance, either. But the steady progression of a man who with each year he spent on the team of Leroy Jethro Gibb, lost a bit more of his spark and his self-confidence – was easily discernible in his journal. His terse, acerbic, increasingly self-critical comments which towards the end of the journal entries, were bordering on self-hatred.

Oh yeah, such an awesome team leader - if Jack read DiNozzo's journal Jethro doubted that his father would be so proud of him now.

No, Jack would be downright pissed at him if he viewed the litany of examples where his son had played favourites on the team, lavishing praise, even when it wasn't warranted. Where it was misdirected onto his favoured ones, just to screw with them all but particularly to screw with DiNozzo. When he handed out blame for screw-ups onto the less favourite ones even when it wasn't their fault, like when Abby let her stalker into Tim's apartment and the Elf Lord copped the shit when Jethro should have got in her face for not following orders while under protective custody and endangering herself and the agent protecting her. Perhaps even worse, turning a blind eye to behaviours of his favourites that would have seen Tony kicked off the team for a similar offence if he’d committed them.

It wasn't even as if he could claim that he didn't know how handing out praise to his select few and withholding it from others created an atmosphere of competition and jealousy, either. He was an NCO trained in leadership by the US Marine Corps and he deliberately used it to keep the team motivated because truthfully, it worked, and you couldn't argue with his results.

Although reading how DiNozzo had gone from being part of a satisfying partnership with him before Cate, McGee and Ziva joined the major case response team; learning from Jethro and feeling appreciated, feeling like he contributed equally in their working relationship to what he'd become now was excruciating. Tony referred to himself contemptuously as 'Gibbs' poo-boy' - slavishly following along in the wake of his boss (partner no more) collecting all the shit dumped on him from
the rest of his team.

Seeing that the poo-boy had been a terrible childhood memory when Senior made a small boy tote around a poo bucket at Civil War re-enactments, so people could crap in it, it was a far from flattering description of how he saw his role on the team or of how he saw his boss. In a rare bout of honesty Gibbs had to admit though that DiNozzo’s observation was also a painfully accurate one.

While others wondered why he didn't find a new team, Gibbs understood that it was his misguided sense of loyalty, because he'd once expressed faith in DiNozzo, combined with a lifetime of emotional neglect and abuse. DiNozzo was like many a herding dog he'd known over the years. You could curse, cuff, hell even kick or beat the crap out of the luckless creature, pretty much without limits because for a good herding dog, it was in their DNA to work, almost as naturally as breathing. So even a gruff grunt of scant praise once in a blue moon or a hunk of over-ripe maggot-infested meat tossed their way (even if it made them queasy after they’d swallowed it down) was enough to keep them tied to the farm and their master. Even if they weren't happy, these creatures were so browbeaten they didn't expect anything more from their master.

Gibbs had known all that about Tony on an instinctive level and he’d gleefully taken advantage of that side of DiNozzo's flawed personality. Not being able to work when he was recovering from the plague was absolute torture to him – honestly who else would have come back a week early after nearly dying and literally being too weak to stand up?

As Gibbs stared at the wreath or yellow roses adorning his father's coffin, he regarded the message again, struck by DiNozzo’s joke about Heaven. He knew damned well it was no joke but a thinly veiled reflection of Tony’s fear that he wouldn't be deemed worthy when he turned up at the pearly gates. Like there was ever any doubt that Tony wouldn't be welcomed with open arms. Absurd, since DiNozzo was a good man, a far, far better man than Jethro was – would ever be.

Flawed yes, very flawed in light of what Jethro had learnt lately but he didn't make others miserable because of his crappy past. Unlike himself he thought if he couldn’t be happy then no one else deserved to be either!

Truthfully it was Franks and himself who stood far less of a chance of gaining an invitation from St Peter than Tony, but he'd gotten such petty satisfaction over the years in making DiNozzo lose faith in himself.

Oh yeah Jack, I'm such a good man! So good, I never even thanked my agents for the enormous debt I owed them by preventing me from losing my job… my oh-so important damned job that they resigned their own positions to save me.

Just like he'd never had the balls to thank Tony for saving his and Maddie Tyler's lives either, in what had been an awe-inspiring display of pig-headedness, skill, courage and sheer athleticism.

No, stubborn as always, Jethro had focused on the job, taking his frustration at owing him a life debt...actually two life debts when you counted Maddie out on DiNozzo. That didn’t include the debt he owed Tony for keeping his team together when Gibbs impetuously ran off to Mexico and then graciously stepping aside and letting him take his job back without complaint at his churlish behaviour when he changed his mind and came back.

In return, he’d stripped DiNozzo of his sense of purpose, his dignity, his right to do his job properly. He’d stood in the way of his using his considerable skills to lead his own team by dropping crumbs (in private of course, with no witnesses) about how much he depended upon him. Jethro knew damned well that it would keep him hanging around, hoping to get more validation and turning down job offers.
Jethro made sure Tony didn't get a chance to see Jack one last time, even though he knew they both liked each other and got on well. Not that he knew at the time it was going to be their last opportunity - his last opportunity to spend time with his father. That comment about DiNozzo cooties haunted him and prevented him sleeping, because it was true that he was uncomfortable whenever the two of them got together.

The prevailing wisdom at NCIS was that he tried to stop any friendship between the two men from developing because he didn’t want his SFA snooping into his childhood. Yet the truth was far simpler. Because once they fielded the case of Cpl Ethan La Combe, it was always going to come out about Jethro’s troubled youth when they returned to his and La Combe’s home town of Stillwater. About him being a problem teen, a belligerent loner, getting in fights with Chuck Winslow and his cronies and run in with the law. It would be impossible to stuff the genie back in the bottle since Sheriff Gantry and Chuck Winslow were about as discreet as a hooker at a bible study meeting.

No, the truth was that he hadn't wanted Jackson to meet DiNozzo because he just knew that the affection starved gregarious former cop would get on like a house on fire with his garrulous and extraverted father. He had still been pissed at Jack and blamed DiNozzo for Jenny’s death and wanted to punish them. Plus, despite being angry at Jackson, he feared that his dad would like his senior field agent more than himself, as pathetic and weak as that sounded. Yet Jethro’s fears were realised when Jack gifted one of his own jumpers to his 2IC (who he’d known for less than twenty-four hours) for no particular reason Gibbs could see as they returned to DC. So, he did everything possible to stop them developing a relationship.

Now because of his pettiness, Tony was facing cancer with no one from the team supporting him. Why couldn't he stop playing his childishly malicious fucking mind games - like a cat toying with a mouse until it died of fright or shock, rather than killing it swiftly and painlessly. He'd heard that the cat, despite appearances, didn't derive satisfaction from the game. Rather that it was a sign of an immature predator who hadn't been taught to dispatch its prey humanely and efficiently. They were caught up in the adrenaline fuelled 'stalk and pounce' component of hunting prey but didn't know where to go next.

The problem was that he couldn't claim incompetency due to inadequate training though. Unlike an immature hunter, he knew precisely how to catch and kill someone humanely and swiftly - he just enjoyed toying with his victims, metaphorically at least. He enjoyed it quite a lot. Particularly DiNozzo!

Apart from the intense satisfaction he derived from taunting DiNozzo and seeing him suffer embarrassment, he didn't know why he was such a bastard. Or why a terrified, stuttering, green-assed private or a probie pissing their pants in terror when he was on a tear, filled him full of adrenaline that had become unbelievably addictive over the years. But the truth was that it had.

He didn't know why it felt so good to drive his people into the ground, denying them food or sleep or keeping them in the dark about vital clues, even while threatening them to produce results. He couldn’t explain why there was nothing better than waiting until they were proudly about to reveal hours of painstaking research to him and then him pipping them to the post as he revelled in the reveal. He could only say that it filled him full of a sense of power that was utterly intoxicating.

He never stopped to consider how his behaviour impacted on his colleagues. Well apart from pissing them off, which had obviously made him feel good. He’d never thought further than making them fear and revere his awesomeness and his bastardness. Well not until NOW! Until he read DiNozzo's intensely private journal and had a chance to see his behaviour through someone else's eyes and feel how much harm he wrought.
Oh yeah, he wasn't stupid, on some level he'd always understood but only in an intellectual sense, from his own point of view where it was easy to rationalise his actions. Not from someone else's point of view. Not from someone that in his own twisted, sick, perverted fashion he cared about – as much as he was capable of caring for anyone after Shannon and Kelly died, that is.

As a written account, DiNozzo's journal was remarkably insightful, filled as it was with good humoured asides so evocative of his former SFA. If you were able to overlook the self-evaluations full of pathos and outright pain and the ever-escalating self-hate.

It was also clear that Tony despised himself for letting Gibbs fuck with his head. But probably the worst revelation of many he’d encountered in the journal he’d stolen and read without permission, was that Tony considered Jethro to be even worse than Senior.

That shocking pronouncement was based on the fact that Senior had never pretended to care about him, while Gibbs had professed to. He’d enticed him away from the police force with the promise that 'you don't waste good' and then he did precisely that. Senior had never promised that he'd always have his six and then let him down as Jethro had done on far too many occasions to mention. Not keeping his own Rule #1 - never screw over your partner.

That analogy of Tony as a spare tyre wasn't as ridiculous as it sounded. He did keep him mostly shut up in the trunk because Gibbs was such a control freak he wouldn't allow him to take charge as his SFA job description intended. Yet the truth was that DiNozzo was such a brilliant investigator, one who could literally turn a case around in the blink of an eye, Gibbs also couldn't let him go so he could lead his own team.

Nor did he trust anyone else but DiNozzo to watch his own back, either. The admission that his junior agents had left Tony's ass swinging in the breeze during that undercover Op to collect voice prints in the home-grown terrorist case was stunning, shocking! Or the revelation that Ziva attacked him in Israel when he was injured, not to mention unarmed, and therefore not a threat to the Kidon trained assassin/spy threatening him. Using a loaded gun to do so, was down-right deplorable. It also served to illustrate just why he had only trusted Tony to watch his six for all these years since neither Ziva or McGee were worthy of trust.

So, Jethro supposed that something positive had come out of him reading the damned journal, since he'd be damned if he'd reward McGee with the SFA slot for breaking such a fundamental procedure even if it happened more than four years ago. He needed to be able to depend on his 2IC to watch his six and clearly, he didn’t know how to do that, or Elf Lord would never have agreed to turn off the radio when DiNozzo was undercover.

And while McGee was furious when Gibbs didn't promote him to the senior field agent position, mainly due to the revelations in the journal, he had been forced to bring in someone new to try to fill DiNozzo's shoes, which were unfillable. When McGee had complained about all his years of experience on the team and being unfairly overlooked, he was able to demonstrate that he wasn't ready, (may never be ready since some people simply weren't suited to leadership roles no matter how much field experience they possessed) and to counter his complaints.

Jethro cited turning off the mic when Tony was under cover at Royal Woods and Tim nearly shit himself. Then he moved onto his running away and leaving his partner to face attack-trained Rottweilers without giving his partner adequate warning - which was not good. But even worse was locking him out of their agency car, taking away his means of escape and ignoring direct orders by his immediate superior to let him into the damned vehicle. (An incident that DiNozzo hadn’t reported, possibly because he felt bad about how he’d acquired his dog phobia.)

Gibbs had followed up with a laundry list of examples of his constant failure to follow DiNozzo's
orders and his outright insubordination. Then he’d moved on to several recent incidents to illustrate why he wasn’t ready for further responsibility including his failure to follow Gibbs’ most basic instructions in the field when he was supposed to be an experienced field agent. Not unexpectedly, McGee had denied it.

"So, when we were being tailed by foreign operatives who were potentially hostile, outside that Baltimore hotel last year and I told you not to look, you didn't disobey a simple order. You didn't turn around to look after being ordered not to, and as a direct consequence, tip them off that we knew that they were there, which then resulted in us losing a lead?"

"No Boss. That was a reflex action, not disobeying an order." McGee had protested self-righteously.

"No MuhGee, turning your head around… that would have been reflex, pretending to yawn really, really unconvincingly and turning around so you could look… that was premeditated. That was knowingly disobeying a direct order and I shoulda written ya up for it!"

Seeing the mulish expression and the deep breath as a sign of his intention to argue with Gibbs recollection of events, Gibbs got in first.

“You don't do anything without running multiple scenarios through you head like a god damned computer program. You just thought you knew better than me. In the field that can get you killed or me! I’ve no intention of letting you get me killed."

Gibbs decided to deliver the coup de grace even though he hadn't had a chance to deal with it officially yet. It would make his case ironclad. "A senior field agent is responsible for the safety of agents beneath them in the chain-of-command. You're not ready for that responsibility." Seeing McGee was about to interject he continued. "When you and Bishop were checking out hotel rooms for persons of interest in the Nick Bodeen case, when you entered Michael Elliot's room and found him dead in what was an obvious crime scene, what did you do?"

"We called you and Ducky, so we could process the scene for clues to the killer and the victim."

"And… what else did you do?"

"Uh nothing, Boss."

"Exactly, you stood around and made some lame ass joke about not wanting to clean up the mess."

McGee huffed, irritated. "DiNozzo used to make inappropriate comments at crime scenes all the time, Gibbs."

"True, McGee, he did often do that, but he didn't stand around doing it instead of his job. DiNozzo would have drawn his weapon and cleared the scene upon entering the hotel room as soon as he realised that a crime had occurred, to make sure that it was safe first, though." Gibbs drawled, dryly. "I wanna know why you didn’t?"

McGee opened and closed his mouth several times before managing to respond. "But there was no one there in the room, the killer had long departed." He justified.

"You weren't to know that when you entered the room – they could have been hiding in the bathroom. I expect rookie mistakes like that from Bishop since she's a probie. You, I expect to know better than that, especially since in your probationary year, your failure to properly clear a crime scene resulted in you getting injured and the killer getting away. Does the name Erin Kendall ring any bells for ya?"
McGee went white as a ghost at the mention of the MIT graduate who'd witnessed a murder and ended up being killed as a result. He scowled at Gibbs, obviously thinking that he was hitting him way below the belt, since Kendall, who built computer models for the DoD, was talking to a smitten McGee on the phone when her killer struck. In fact, he had heard the murder while he was still on the line.

It was a tough case for the probationary agent and Jethro would have bet the farm that it would have etched forever into his psyche the critical importance of clearing a crime scene. Especially when he had a probie agent to look out for. Yet. Obviously. Not!

So, not only had he placed their probie agent in danger by allowing Bishop onto a crime scene that hadn't been cleared as per procedure stipulated, not to mention endangering himself, but he'd also set her a shocking example.

"As an SFA, a big part of the role is training and keeping the probie, hell all the team safe and you've failed to demonstrate by your actions you're ready to assume that responsibility." Gibbs growled, furious Bishop had been placed in danger.

Add it to the turning off of DiNozzo’s mic when David and McGee were his backup, and his endangering DiNozzo when they were attacked by vicious dogs, it was bad...very bad. Then factor in his failure to watch out for Abby down in Mexico because he didn’t veto the field trip she’d insisted on. Plus, there’s his failure to watch Jimmy Palmer’s six on a crime scene (a partially completed hi-rise building site) because of his fear of heights, his leaving him alone resulting in Palmer being shot at by the killer. It all added up to someone who wasn’t ready to take responsibility for other agents.

So, disgruntled that his boss wouldn’t give him the promotion to field agent, Tim had gone over his head (really not smart with the Double B for Bastard) and complained to the director, saying he had seniority and deserved the promotion. Even justified why he should be SFA by pointing out that Gibbs had appointed him over DiNozzo to run point on the Sergeant Dawson case when he was out of the office dealing with his father a few months before.

McGee had argued that Gibbs actions proved that even he thought Tim was a better agent than Tony since he hadn’t trusted him to run the investigation in his absence. That Jethro had deliberately bypassed the chain of command so that the SFA didn’t do his job as he was supposed to do (talk about a dumb ass move coming back to bite Jethro on the ass). McGee told Vance he was more than qualified and ready to assume the role.

Vance had agreed with him, since he’d long been a fan of the Elf Lord and the director had attempted to overrule Gibbs decision, which forced Jethro's hand. He showed Leon selected excerpts of Tony's journal, including the Royal Woods entry and the Rottweilers' attack to explain why, among other incidents, he wasn't going to appoint McGee as his SFA. Not the least of which was going over DiNozzo’s head and ignoring the chain-of-command.

He'd also included entries on Ziva's attack on Tony in Israel in what he showed Leon since he was incredibly angry at her behaviour and because he felt that Leon and Jenn both bore responsibility for the whole miserable Mossad saga due to their parasitic relationship with the David family. He figured a bit of self-examination might do Vance a world of good, too. And well... just because misery loves company and Leon had fucked up too, not just himself when it came to the dynamics of the major case response team and should own it.

Of course, that led to awkward questions about why Leon hadn't been made aware of these incidents before now. Which forced Gibbs to reveal even more excerpts revealing Tony hadn't felt either of his superiors (Jethro or the director) would take action against Tim or Ziva and if they were to take any
action at all it would be to blame him. Either that or they’d simply write it off as a justifiable joke, as Tony's practical jokes were legendary around the office, though he never put anyone's life in danger with any of them. Therefore, he'd decided it was a waste of time reporting it; in fact, he'd expressed the view that he'd just lose even more face and make his position on the team even more untenable.

Justifying this opinion, he'd cited that both he and Leon had failed to have DiNozzo's back over his righteous shooting of Rivkin, dragging him to Israel to score brownie points with Eli David. Which shocked Vance with its insightfulness because he had to concede that it was probably a fairly accurate assessment of how he at least would have reacted, at least initially. In the end, he had no other choice but to support Gibbs' position on short-term plans for the team including not appointing McGee as senior field agent and bringing in someone new to take over as SFA. Long term plans though…well that was a whole other kettle of fish.

To defuse McGee's rabble rousing about discriminatory treatment based on unproven accusations, Gibbs grudgingly agreed to give him a trial on one condition. Tim could have the job if he could prove to Jethro's satisfaction that he was as capable of watching his six as DiNozzo. So, he set up a simulation of the feat that DiNozzo had pulled off in saving Maddie Tyler and himself. McGee had to run flat out and fire at two moving targets, delivering kill shots to both while under fire himself and then dive into freezing cold water fully clothed including his shoes to swim down, break a windscreen and drag an unconscious body (a dummy) up out of the bottom of the harbour. He had to get her onto the pier before returning and freeing a large six foot plus male victim (another dummy) who’d drowned and was dead weight and trapped by the car's steering wheel column, swim him to the surface and back onto the pier without assistance. Finally, he needed to successfully carry out resuscitation procedures on both dummies to save their lives.

Not unexpectedly, McGee failed to carry out the first part of the simulation, getting shot in the shoulder with the paintball gun, taking far too long to reach the car, by which time the victims would more than likely have perished. He complained that it wasn't a fair test as he was asthmatic and diving into cold water had brought on an attack. Gibbs didn't bother pointing out that DiNozzo also had scarred lungs.

He also didn't point out that he'd expected McGee to fail – that the number of individuals who could pull off such a feat were very limited. Probably only Navy SEALs could be guaranteed to accomplish the feat. But by making the claim that he was a better agent than DiNozzo – the junior field agent (who despite his decade of experience still lost his creds like a newbie and failed to clear a crime scene) had himself opened the door to comparison between the pair. So, no, Jethro didn't feel even slightly guilty about setting him up, knowing he'd fail. Second B and all that!

Then there was the other looming elephant in the room which was the issue of his own actions and the impact they'd had on others. It was one thing for him to mentally acknowledge the damage he'd caused, to even regret it but it was something else entirely to try to change who he was. Did he really have the courage to change? More importantly, did he really want to try?

Wasn't it easier to accept that he was a bastard, always was, always would be and deal with it? What was the point in trying to change who he was. He only had a limited time at best 'til he retired,' whether he wanted to or not.

As people filed past Jack's grave, paying their final respects and expressing their condolences, Jethro felt it was all too damned hard. After all, you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Since the failed simulation, relations between the Elf Lord and himself were frosty, practically Arctic, and Tim was taking out his disappointment on Bishop and Mendez – their SFA who’d replaced the irreplaceable DiNozzo. Abby was upset on McGee's behalf since neither Gibbs nor Tim had shared
the reasons why he hadn't been given the SFA job with her. Ducky was trying to play peacemaker unsuccessfully, so all in all, the dynamic on the team was tense.

Yes, his job was all he had left but what he had left – was it really worth saving?

Chapter End Notes

If we are taking Gibbs age as stated in Life Before His Eyes he was 54 according to his Mom in season 9. Yes, I know that in reality he is much older than that but go with me here please (or with the writers anyway). Mandatory retirement age of US government field agents is at age 55, so by my reckoning Gibbs should have been moved to a desk job some time ago. Do they really think we don't notice minor details like that?
Making Plans

Chapter Summary

Vance starts making plans to change things that he realises need addressing at the agency.

Chapter Notes

Just to clarify, this won't be an angst-filled Tony battling his way through chemo fic - I have lived through the real thing with several relatives and have no desire to do so again with Tony. It’s about what happens when someone experiences a life threatening illness and how it can change your point of view about the things that are important in your life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Director Leon Vance left the security meeting in Naples exhausted by the hours of endless meetings, strategizing and networking. He could hardly wait 'til he returned stateside. He missed the kids something fierce and was looking forward to sibling spats and rivalry. But first he had an errand to run. He was stopping off at the European Institute of Oncology in Milan to check in on DiNozzo. Thanks to SecNav's plane it was merely a short detour to Milan on the way home to DC.

He had wished Tony well of course when he'd been informed of his medical situation some months ago (only a monster wouldn’t have done so) but he hadn’t really considered how his departure from DC would impact on the agency. He definitely did not expect his DC Major Case Response Team woud fallen apart right in front of his eyes, plus they'd uncovered a lot of questionable work practises that had forced Vance to take a good hard look at the way they did things.

They were still appraising systems and procedures to find out how they'd fallen down so badly, and the bureaucrats were having multiple litters of kittens as they began to document all of the procedural inconsistencies that had been basically ignored up to this point. Chiefly it appeared because of the close out rate of their most successful MCRT ever, it was considered to be too important to mess around with and anything untoward had been firmly ignored by numerous directors.

Until it all began to fall apart, and the team wasn't so successful anymore. Then everyone who’d been tacitly complicit in maintaining the status quo started screaming for change.

The efficiency expert who was brought in to audit the DC office and specifically the MCRT over the last decade, Hubert Caldicott, tut-tutted disapprovingly during his extensive review of the team over the past decade. According to the leading expert on group dynamics, the team had become trapped in the second stage of Bruce Tuckman’s five stage model of group development - specifically STORMING. As Caldicott explained in his comprehensive report, the team had gone from FORMING where everyone was on their best party manners as they sized one another up, getting to know each other's strengths, weaknesses and figuring out where they fit into the team before moving on. The next stage was STORMING, meaning the team now had established just enough trust to
express their dissent about how the group proceeded.

Although it was a necessary part of all group evolutions, the competitive aspect of STORMING meant that it could quickly turn nasty as people jockeyed for positions at the cost of their colleagues. For some individuals, it was not a particularly pleasant environment to work in, especially those who preferred collaboration over competitiveness. For others, it was downright toxic. Fortunately, the vast majority of teams moved through this volatile phase relatively quickly and settled into the NORMING stage where they adopted a single goal for the team and mutually agreed to work together as a unit.

This stage was characterised as some stepping up while others stepped back to function as a cohesive whole rather than separate individuals with individual agendas. In other words, collaboration became more important than competing and scoring points off each other and the work environment became a whole lot more nurturing and supportive.

Of course – for a team which was part of a federal law enforcement agency with what should be a clear-cut change of command, any storming stage should hypothetically be moved through quickly. At least Leon had concluded that was the case. Which should in theory see minimal jostling for positions since the quasi-militaristic structure provided a structure that would be missing in many other work place situations. Yet apparently that hadn’t been the case when it had come to Leroy Jethro Gibbs team – the infighting to be Gibbs beta was vicious, bitter and destructive.

Even though the MCRT technically already had a second in charge. It was known as the senior field agent!

Leon had also learnt, thanks to Hubert, that in normal work place scenarios, few teams stepped it up to the fourth phase which was PERFORMING but most did evolve and grow even if they didn’t achieve the 4th stage. NORMING could still produce outstanding results and made for fulfilled, productive and happy team members. Leon had been shocked to find that his much revered MCRT had been stuck in the 2nd stage, the STORMING stage of development for years - unable to move on.

The mostly likely explanation for that, according to Caldicott, was due to the leadership style of the team leader. That meant that DiNozzo who was the one who tried to meld them into a collaborative team (essentially sacrificing his own career and peace of mind in the process) was destined to always come up short of his true potential.

Leon thought about how after years of performing that thankless task, downplaying his own potential to keep the egos of teammates in check so the team didn’t devolve into absolute anarchy, that it must have been soul destroying gig. To be relegated to class clown, having to throw himself on the minefields of Gibbs volatile emotional bombs and not pose a threat to Gibbs fragile ego or the rest of the team with his skills and experience because they were constantly jostling to get pole position was a craptastic job. And an ultimately impossible one as proved to be the case.

The team stuck at the STORMING level also helped explain why McGee thought he had the right to usurp DiNozzo's authority this year when Gibbs was dealing with his father's problem with law enforcement. After all, McGee’s father was a Navy Admiral, if anyone knew about the chain of command it should be a navy brat. Plus, when he’d sent him down to Cyber-crimes some years ago he’d ended up with everyone there calling him Boss of the unit purely on the basis of his field agent status and had carried a firearm. His promotion existed purely in his own mind (and the geeks) and he’d done nought to discourage their adulation.

Although Leon was genuinely surprised by the findings of his consultant, in many ways it also
explained a lot of things that had puzzled him, too. Typically, when you answered questions it raises a whole bunch more. Inevitably Caldicott's report had generated other pertinent questions for the director, too. Perhaps the most tantalising one regarded the amount of success that had been achieved by the MCRT despite being stuck in the STORMING phase of group development. You had to wonder what could they have achieved if they'd been coaxed into entering even the NORMING phase - the 'average' collaborative level where most teams tended to plateau? He suspected they would have been a force to be reckoned and ...well he didn't want to imagine what heights they could have reached had they attained the highly desirable PERFORMING level of operations.

They'd have been unstoppable, yet if Hubert was correct, it would have required a complete change of leadership style – a participative rather authoritarian approach or even an authoritative style. Frankly, Vance remained convinced that it was about as likely for Gibbs to do that as it had been for former Special Agent David to admit that she'd made a grievous error in judgement when she silenced a suspect she was escorting to interrogation who ended up dead in the elevator. In other words, about as likely as finding out that one eyed one horned flying purple people eaters really existed.

Everyone had given Gibbs carte blanche to form and run his team as he saw fit, blatantly ignoring his failure to observe accepted agency processes and procedures along the way. Somehow behaviours such as head slapping, denying his agents adequate rest and meals became acceptable for Gibbs while still being illegal for mere mortals. Insisting on them remaining contactable by him 24/7 and not allowing them to make private phone calls at work were also ignored. This despite the fact they didn't work normal office hours (so obviously needed to make personal calls at work) were viewed as one of many eccentricities of the legendary Leroy Jethro Gibbs and thus were ignored.

Everyone else merely thanked their lucky stars that they didn't have to conform to such unreasonable expectations and blatantly looked the other way. Even HR had grown tired of flogging a dead horse, always coming off as the bloodied loser any time they tried to enforce agency regulations.

While the MCRT's results were impressive, the toxic environment meant that there were always going to be a huge price to pay for the long-term effects of having to work in a team that wasn't truly cohesive. They were seeing those less than desirable effects now and Leon was kicking himself for being so damned short sighted. It could have been worse though - if Tony was litigious he would have an excellent case for suing Gibbs, NCIS and himself and probably walk away with huge damages.

As he arrived at the renowned Italian cancer treatment centre, Vance's thoughts turned to the journal that opened up a helluva Pandora's Box of trouble. He'd hazard a guess that Gibbs was heartily regretting stealing DiNozzo's private journal in his obsessive desire to locate him. Leon was no fool, he knew that Tony wouldn't have handed it over willingly to Gibbs and while he'd only read a small fraction of the journal, he guessed that the rest was just as explosive, if not more so than what he'd seen already. He figured that if Jethro had any idea that it was going to turn into a poison chalice, he would have thought twice about taking it.

Perhaps the most ironic thing about the whole 'Gibbs stealing the journal' saga was that it did actually achieve what he set out to achieve, since it revealed to him why his SFA had left and where he had gone. So, Vance had naturally expected Gibbs to be on the next transport plane out of the country and demanding time off to be there to support Tony as he went through treatment. Instead, he seemed too afraid to visit DiNozzo.

Based on his reluctance to have any contact with the gravely ill agent, Leon decided that the rest of the journal entries must have been pure dynamite to have Gibbs backing off like that. Part of him really wanted to know what else was in there but the wiler part of the director whispered that some
Leon, over these last months had called in several times when he was passing through, to see how his agent was getting along. Honestly, the guy looked like the grim reaper was a hairs breath away from Tony riding shotgun along with him one last time. However, Dr Pitt had assured him that was to be expected considering the treatment regimen. He stated that the NCIS agent was actually holding his own fairly well. This was his second cycle (or was that round) of chemo with the experimental drug, the course of radiation therapy sandwiched in between it and the first set of chemo. Pitt had declared that generally, Tony was doing much better than they'd dared to hope.

Which raised the question in Leon's mind of what the hell would he have looked like if things were going poorly- it didn't bear thinking about. Still the good news was that Brad was hopeful that it was the experimental drug he was responding too and that a remission was now a real possibility.

Leon had been pretty shocked to find Dr Pitt working at the Institute when he first dropped by. After expressing his surprise at him being there he commented, "I don't usually find myself agreeing with Gibbs famous rules but the unwritten one about coincidences… that is one I think has some merit. It's not a fluke that you happened to move here to work, is it?"

"Tony's a good friend, I got him into the trial since I knew one of the researchers. Went to Harvard Med School with her. My wife and I decided when she offered me a sabbatical here for six months that coming would mean that we could be here for Tony. He needed someone in his corner – not a bunch of strangers, no matter how top notch."

Leon nodded. “Agreed but what about your wife?"

“Lara is a painter and likes the locales – who wouldn’t, and my nurse decided to come over too.”

"That is rather extreme, isn't it?" Leon asked, taken back.

"Not really. I broke his leg in college and ruined his chances of a professional sports career. Then when we meet up again and Tony was dying of the pneumonic plague and contracted pneumonia, he made me a celebrity in infectious diseases and pulmonary medicine. I've travelled all over the world presenting medical papers because he was too damned stubborn to die. Maybe I'm just looking out for my meal ticket," He shrugged with casual air of indifference that failed to fool the NCIS director. Pitt was heavily invested in DiNozzo and not just as his physician.

"Do you think he's going to make it, Doctor?"

"I sure hope so, but it's too early to say, definitely. At the moment, we are looking at achieving remission. If he stays in remission for five years we can start to talk about a cure theoretically although every cancer is different. But off the record… as someone who has beaten the plague against the odds, I'm feeling optimistic. Any particular reason that you are asking?" Brad quizzed him.

"Well it's like they say, you don't appreciate what you've got until it's gone. I want to offer him a team lead position in the New York office. It's in a mess and I think that he can turn them around if he's well enough to be coming back."

Of course, that was just Vance’s short-term plan for DiNozzo, though. He really wanted Tony back in DC long term and heading up the DC Major Case Response Team if he was able to return to work. He'd transferred Balboa's SFA into the MCRT after being convinced that McGee wasn't ready for the role. Might never be because the truth is that no agent should ever turn their back on another agent out in the field, let alone while investigating domestic terrorism. Let’s face it, the terrorists had
committed in a triple homicide so it had been a highly dangerous situation.

That failure alone was serious enough for Vance to question his long-term suitability for field work. Just because someone wanted to be a field agent didn't mean that they were suitable for the role and for the first time he had begun questioning if McGee was up to it.

Truth to tell, McGee and Ziva couldn't have picked a worst sin than leaving a fellow agent without back-up in the field, in Leon's own personal hierarchy of offences committed by agents. Ever since his own betrayal on his first mission to Amsterdam (as a green as grass NIS agent) where he’d been left with his own ass swing in the breeze, thinking he had back-up when he didn't, Leon had been a stickler for ensuring his agents weren't ever put in that position.

Sure, he had to send agents into situations sometimes where back up just wasn't possible, like when he’d sent DiNozzo down to Mexico and it had turned nasty. That was not desirable but at least he'd known going in that no one was watching his back and so he could behave accordingly. Plus, he'd proved he had what it took to work without backup with La Grenouille fiasco. But still there was a huge difference in thinking that someone is watching your ass when they're not!

And it hadn't escaped Vance's notice either, the incredible irony that a lowly Mossad operative (which was what Eli was back then) had saved his ass in Amsterdam when NIS agents had set him up to die. Yet the very same operative's daughter had been instrumental in ignoring well established procedures and turning off the microphone that was DiNozzo's lifeline in an emergency while in a dangerous situation.

Yeah, if it had been any other breech of procedure, Leon knew damned well that he would have swept it under the rug because he considered McGee to be the future of the agency and Ziva was Eli’s daughter or much more likely, he’d have undoubtedly blamed Tony because he disapproved of him. However, it wasn’t just any other failure to follow regulations and knowing the feeling of betrayal that cuts deep when you discover that the people you trust to your back don't give a flying fuck about you or the job, made him empathise with DiNozzo. Something he never thought would ever happen. Leon liked to believe that he would have his back and acted appropriately.

Even thinking about the incident which had taken place a number of years ago made him long for a toothpick. The journal excerpt had brought all his anger over Amsterdam back to the surface and combined with the anger he felt toward McGee and the absent David, he’d felt like he would explode if he didn't let it out. Even after so many years, the deceit of that first (and almost his last mission) still had the power to render him impotent with rage.

So, he'd gone to visit Jackie and put fresh flowers on her grave. He used to tell her pretty much everything before her death and he continued to confide in her every time he went to visit. She was still his best friend. Although there was much less confiding this time and a whole lot of venting over the Royale Woods fiasco. That and the fact that a naïve black kid on his first mission was considered expendable by his handlers. Seriously, the treachery – it never went away.

His venting had been cathartic and some good had come out of his feelings of impotence. Leon realised that DiNozzo had also been put into this situation on more than one occasion where he must have felt let down by the treachery of people who should have been trustworthy. For example, the Domino, La Grenouille debacles and the Rivkin mess where Leon had left him out in the cold when he should have had his back.

Leon really couldn't fault Tony for assuming there’d be no point in reporting his team mates. He'd hardly been a perceptive or impartial leader and having no knowledge of Leon’s own undercover mission, Tony understandably assumed that Leon would give him short shrift. After all, he’d ignored a heap of crap that had occurred on the team over the years when he should have acted.
Stroking Jackie's headstone he traced his long mobile fingers along the etching of her epitaph:

Beloved Wife and Mother

Leon couldn’t help himself – he had to ask the ‘what if’ question that he'd been manfully avoiding ever since Gibbs had shared what had happened. What if he hadn't been a such a stupid jackass to the SFA and Tony had felt that reporting the breach when it occurred would have been responded to in the correct manner for such a serious failure to follow regulations? As he would he have done if it had occurred to someone on any other team.

Leon knew that he probably would have sacked McGee and Ziva, so then Eli wouldn't have come to the US to try to win back his daughter. He'd have most likely have lost himself in machinations in Middle East affairs and even if he decided to play the 'Peacemaker' he'd have more than likely done so closer to home.

Jackie would probably still be alive, and Kayla and Jarrod would still have their wonderful, compassionate, loving mother to guide them into adulthood and beyond. To be a doting grandmother to their own kids one day.

Resolving to focus on understanding what made Anthony DiNozzo tick and utilise his skills more intelligently, he whispered a wretched farewell. Hating that he had to leave her there, so alone, he apologised to his mate as he did on every visit that his work, his overweening ambition had cost their family what was most precious. Time together...

OH, GOD he missed her!

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who is wondering what the 5th stage of Bruce Tuckman's model of group development, it is Adjourning. The team achieves the goal it was formed for and is disbanded, the organisation undergoes organisational restructuring or personnel changes fundamentally effect the team’s dynamics. This can impact on team members who like routine, miss colleagues that they may have developed close ties with or have to deal with uncertain futures.
Moving On

Chapter Summary

Leon and Dr Pitt have a deep and meaningful conversation about Tony’s prognosis and his wants and needs.

Frankly it had been a revelation for the whole DC office that after such a long time at the top of the heap with his agents, Gibbs team only outwardly looked to be solid and the epitome of excellence - but that was an illusion. The reality was what they were was less a team than one agent's personal fiefdom. One agent who’d blatantly flouted rules and procedures over the years and everyone had turned a blind eye to it since the team got results.

Yet it was an undeniable truism that no one person should ever be above the rules or law and results were not enough to justify questionable methods, ever, and they'd all lost sight of that. Leon had decided it was definitely time to bring in fresh ideas and ways to do things and he thought that it was beyond time for younger individuals to be given a go. He admitted that until recently, he'd thought that the individual he would anoint to do just that would be Timothy McGee, but he knew now that wasn't going to happen – not with a field team.

He'd recently begun to look at some of the innovations Tony had introduced during his four months at the helm of their flagship team, more than half a decade ago. Despite his absolute loyalty to Gibbs, it hadn't prevented him from trying to introduce improvements that had a lot of merit when he was presented with the opportunity. Even if Gibbs had ditched those innovations immediately when he bulldozed his way back into the job, a job he'd foisted onto a shell-shocked DiNozzo with no warning four months prior.

Shepard made a huge mistake when she let Jethro come back the way he did without having to requalify or have medical/psychological clearances, since it reinforced his belief that normal rules didn't apply to him. And NCIS was continuing to pay for that lapse since it had done irreparable damage to DiNozzo's standing. But unfortunately, Jenny was totally compromised by her personal vendetta and her sexual attraction for Gibbs. A damned good example of why a director (or superior) should not have the hots for an agent under their purview, since it clearly biased their decisions and behaviour.

Be that as it may, that was the past and he couldn't change it but soon Gibbs would be forced to step down from the MCRT since he was too old for field work. He had pulled strings with some heavy hitters to prevent his retirement but eventually those influences would wear thin and meanwhile, Vance was busy putting in place an exit strategy.

Gibbs' new SFA, Mendez was Balboa's former 2IC and DiNozzo had been instrumental in his selection several years ago, recommending him and helping to train him. Rocky happened to have a great deal of respect for DiNozzo; he’d discovered belatedly that pretty much all the DC team leaders did, having been impressed by his time leading the MCRT. They felt his talents had been woefully underutilised and he should have been given his own team long ago. Balboa had pointed out that the close out rates for the team had risen when Tony had first been hired but hadn't shown a similar increase as other team members joined Gibbs team.

When Gibbs had retired to Mexico – albeit it briefly - instead of a decreased closure rate as one
would expect of an inexperienced SSA, their rates had held steady. Considering he'd had an untrained SFA with inadequate field experience for the job, a liaison Mossad officer with no background in investigative techniques or familiarity with US justice and legal requirements it was unbelievable. Shepard must have been out of her God damned mind and to add insult to injury, she'd given him a probie agent that hadn't been in the field and was a lawyer. Frankly it was a freakin miracle he managed to solve any cases.

Looking at the composition of the team, one would be forgiven for thinking that giving Tony such an obviously inexperienced team was a deliberate attempt by Jenn Shepard to sabotage his appointment to the top job. Yet he had done the impossible and maintained an impressive result while also working an unsanctioned undercover mission fulltime without any backup.

It had been an astonishing achievement and yet all he got for his efforts had been a heap of shit from them all. Perhaps none more so than Leon himself, who as someone totally removed from the situation, should have done a much better job of analysing his performance since Vance prided himself on his analytical abilities. So now Leon was hoping to redeem himself and utilise DiNozzo’s obvious talents to rectify some issues within the agency.

Rocky had agreed to step in as the next SSA for the MCRT after Gibbs’ retirement, but it was on the proviso that it was a short-term measure. His wife wanted them to transfer to the San Diego office as they had young grandchildren there who they wished to have a more hands-on role as grandparents. The new analyst, Ellie Bishop who Gibbs hired as a replacement for Ziva David would continue to grow and Leon was hopefully in time, Tony would take over from Balboa. For now, though, Leon wanted him to regain his confidence and be free to introduce innovations away from the spotlight of being a known entity.

First and foremost, he thought that Tony needed the challenge of a new office in order to rebuild his confidence (where he had a degree of anonymity) before taking over the team he'd been groomed for from his first hiring. Sending him to New York was also a win-win job in the short-term because the office was ripe for a major overhaul of just about everything - including personnel and processes - so they got to fix the trouble plagued office while Tony got back into the groove and in time back into the field.

Which was why Leon was here in Milan at a highly regarded cancer treatment centre confronting Dr Brad Pitt, searching for answers about Special Agent DiNozzo.

Earlier he'd asked the doc, "Is he going to make it, Doctor?"

"I sure hope so, but it's too early to say. At the moment we are looking at remission. If he stays in remission for five years we can start to talk about a cure. But off the record… as someone who has beaten the plague, I'm feeling optimistic. Any particular reason that you're asking?" Brad had enquired

"Well it's like they say, you don't appreciate what you've got until it's gone. I want to offer him a team lead position in the New York office. It's in a mess and I think that he can turn them around if he's well enough to be coming back."

That answer had not gone down as well as he'd expected, which had been a bit of a surprise.

ISHT

Brad Pitt stared at him, his hostility barely disguised as he confronted him about what he'd said. "You've hardly been Tony's biggest fan, Director. What's changed?"
"The truth, Doctor?" Leon winced with shame. "Agent DiNozzo's personal journal. I believe Gibbs obtained it by nefarious means and I have seen a few entries."

"You mean he stole it right out of my office, the asshole." Brad growled. "I had it in my office when he came storming in, demanding to know where Tony was and obviously he recognised it, so then the bastard nicked it. Tony had forgotten it in the aftermath of his surgery and departure and I fetched it from his apartment, so I could take it to him."

Leon nodded. "Ah, I wondered why you had it. I thought perhaps you had set Gibbs up but obviously there was no intent there."

"Of course not. It had highly personal, private thoughts in there. I know you’re totally clueless about him, but Tony is actually a highly complex guy who feels things deeply. Since he's been surrounded by males who have indoctrinated him to believe emotions are a sign of weakness, he conceals his feelings; what he views as his flaws."

Brad was still furious with Gibbs for taking Tony's precious journal. Tony had been devastated at the realisation that Gibbs had it, since it represented years of private thoughts and emotions and it was a huge betrayal of trust. Brad had felt enormous guilt that it was in his custody when it had been stolen.

Lara and Emma were adamant that he should have reported Gibbs, both for the theft of Tony’s journal and the assault on himself. Brad could understand their outrage – he shared it, but the problem was that he wanted to be over in Milan to support Tony ASAP. He didn’t want to hang around for hearings and IA inquiries or a court case.

That was supposing they chose to bring charges against Gibbs. It would be Brad’s word against Gibbs’ and the former Marine had a reputation around DC as someone who knew where everyone’s skeletons were buried. Brad wasn’t sanguine that he be held accountable and so he’d decided to let his moral outrage and his bruised jaw take a back seat to more pragmatic matters.

When you are engaged in a war you pick your battles and Tony was most definitely facing a war which had to be fought on several fronts. The psychological war was equally important - if he gave up without a fight, the chances weren’t good. Still just because Brad had chosen not to report the theft and assault didn’t mean that he wasn’t still furious about it and Vance had stirred up that anger just now.

Turning to another question that he’d worried about, he asked, "What I don't get was he was so damned gung-ho to know where Tony was, yet the diary would have led him right to the hospital in Milan. We were all trying to figure out how to protect Tony when he turned up...yet he never did. What gives?"

Leon chuckled ironically. "Jethro got a hell of a lot more than he bargained for when he read it, I think. I’m guessing that he had to confront a lot of painful home truths – he wasn't the only one. Although I only saw a few entries, but having said that, they were explosive so I’m surmising that the rest was equally so. I don't think after having to confront all that, he could face DiNozzo. Then the death of his father has shaken him further."

"Tony was very upset when he heard about Mr Gibbs. He was very fond of that old man. But he wasn't well enough to travel back for the funeral." Brad observed. "He'd just started the second round of chemo to make sure that we got any stray cells that survived the first lot of chemo and radiation."

"When will he finish this treatment?"
"Another month, all going well."

"And when will you clear him to return to work?"

"He won't be fit to go back into the field for quite a while. In fact, it isn't 100 percent certain that Tony's lungs will allow him to go back into the field."

Leon stared at the doctor. "You really believe that or are you ass covering, Pitt?"

Brad thought about it. The doctor hadn't thought he'd survive the plague, but he beat the odds. He didn't really think that he'd achieve remission, yet it looked as if he was going to go into remission. Since the remission was likely due to an experimental drug, there was no data to suggest if it was liable to be a short-term remission or if it would be longer term.

In a weird kind of way, Tony's scarred lungs had probably saved his life. Brad had him trained, after much tearing out of his hair (his, not Tony) to react immediately when the federal agent noticed changes in either his lungs or his respiratory function. Since the damage to Tony's lungs meant that even slight changes had much more impact on his health, he couldn't afford to ignore them, but the upside was he was more sensitive to those changes as well. That had resulted in the tumour being diagnosed when it was still relatively small.

That factor and the effects of the experimental drug combined, was the reason Tony was looking at such a positive outcome. And the fact that the resection was much less aggressive than if he'd let it go on longer before seeking treatment had played its part. It meant the surgery was far less traumatic than it might have been, under normal circumstances.

If Tony's lungs had been pre-plague with no scarring, it may have taken him a lot longer to actually notice any symptoms. So, while you could argue chicken and egg about if his scarred lungs might have been a contributing factor to rogue cells developing - which possibly led to cancer, or not, it also probably led to early detection in a bizarre way and saved his life.

Which ironically stood him in good stead if he attempted to get back in the field because he hadn't lost significant amounts of lung tissue. And Brad reckoned that if anyone was capable of making a comeback, it would be Tony. All they could do was wait and see!

He shrugged noncommittally. "If things continue as we hope, he 'may' have regained enough stamina in a few months' time to return to the office part time. But Director, may I recommend if you are hoping to entice him back, don't stick him behind a desk doing administrative duties. Even cold cases won't cut it for him after this experience. Unless he's challenged, he may decide on a complete change."

Brad seemed to consider his words carefully. "A life-threatening experience such as this, where the prognosis didn't have him surviving ...was always going to have a dramatic effect on him. And while remission is a wonderful outcome, its unexpectedness has caught him off guard. He didn't expect to survive, not really. Now he's going to need to reassess his life and goals. He might need new horizons or a complete change...time will tell."

"I was thinking about giving him a role creating solutions to the issues in the NY office – sort of trouble shooter role with some of the more challenging cold cases thrown in until he could assume the Supervisory Special Agent role. I was impressed with some of the innovations he brought in when he was team leader and would like for him to trial them on the teams in New York with a view to rolling them out agency wide, eventually.

"I'm sure that he has more ideas but frankly the environment he's been subject to isn't conducive to
developing them. Although some of his colleagues on other teams have been more open to exploring fresh ways of operating."

The director considered his words carefully. "I was wrong about DiNozzo. I judged him based not on his record or achievements but the box into which he'd been forced into on the MCRT. If I'd done my job better I would have ensured he was in an environment that supported his unique talents, not extinguished them."

Leon glanced at the implacable expression worn by the navy doctor, feeling his scepticism before ploughing on with his mission.

"Even when he tried to act more in keeping with his real personality his co-workers were threatened by him and badgered him to return to the role he'd been assigned as the class clown. We need more people like him who are talented, loyal and not in the job for the ambition or power."

Brad decided that a final warning that Tony wasn't the same desperate for validation agent who would meekly take one for the team any more was required. His priorities had altered drastically, as had his lifestyle. "Tony is in a committed relationship, Director. You'll have to convince not just Tony to return to the agency that treated him like shit but his partner. And fair warning - his partner won't be as easy to convince. She's damn scary!"

Okay, so Leon had not been expecting that development. Nope, nun uh. How the hell had that happened. "Um this is recent, someone he met in Italy?" He thought that given his history, it was unlikely to last.

"No, they've know each other a long time and she's in it for the long haul so prepare to woo them both." Brad advised him seriously.

~o0o~

Four weeks later:

Tony stared at Emma Ingham with a combination of awe, exasperation for her refusal to take no for an answer and what he was afraid to label as love, lest that was enough to destroy a rare and long desired gift. His whole life he had been searching for someone who loved him, who accepted him for who he was, his many flaws and all, who could look at him at his worst and see not his faults but what he could be.

He thought he had found that with someone a couple of times in the past, but he'd been wrong. Most children get to experience unconditional love in some form or another, but he'd never felt any love, if he did actually receive it, then it was with a string of conditions attached and as a child, he had never felt that he measured up to those expectations.

Even as an adult the sense that he was good enough were fleeting and unsatisfying. The feeling of racing down the basketball court or football field, flying through the air for a slam dunk, chasing down a dirt bag or discovering a clue at 0300 after an all-nighter in the bull pen or squad room that lead to another murderer being arrested were awesome but transient. And they were nothing compared with the feelings he experienced when he was with Emma. Or when they were apart and all he could think about was what she was doing and was she happy, was she safe.

It made him feel dizzy but not in the way that two torturous cycles of chemo did and left him wanting to puke his gut, intestines and lungs up. No, the way he felt about her was way worse. It scared the absolute crap out of him, yet at the same time he felt ten foot tall and able to do literally anything.
The only trouble was that he knew that Emma had made a terrible error in judgement, falling for him - but love was blind and all that crap. Tony thought it was just a matter of time ‘til she came to her senses and figured out what he had known from the get go – she was way too good for the likes of one Tony DiNozzo.

You just couldn't fight the inevitability of genetics bestowed on him by his asshole father or the fact both his parents were addicts. Oh, sure not in the meth head, crack house, selling your body to pay for the next fix sense, since they came from a privileged background. But his mother and father were still unable to function in the real world without chemical crutches to help them cope.

Plus, like Senior, he was lousy at relationships. Wendy was proof of that and Jeanne- who he'd loved like no one he'd ever met before- well he had been a complete bastard and hurt her so badly.

Tony was scared Emma would wake up one day and come to her well justified senses that he just wasn't partner material, not in any meaningful long-term sense. Or infinitely worse, he was terrified he would end up breaking her heart and that would be a thousand times worse – even if he didn't intend to. Since Emma swept into his life and heart at the bleakest time in his life, he had argued that starting a relationship with a guy who was dying was nuts and would only lead to him hurting her.

Now that he was in remission, it made it even scarier since they dared to dream of the future and if he were to fall ill a second time - the crash would be that much harder to deal with. So, it seemed to make sense to break up with her before that happened.

"You are totally not going to push me aside, Tony DiNozzo, so forget about it right now." Emma threatened him in a scary display of clairvoyance as they prepared to leave the hospital for the last time. "Either one of us could be hit by a bus or flatten by random space junk crashing back down to earth." She stopped to consider that scenario.

"Actually… for someone who managed to get infected by Y- Pestis by an avenging mother for a crime that was never committed, that isn't so outrageous, so perhaps we shouldn't go giving the Gods any idea." She giggled, hugging him to remove any perceived sting from her words since she knew that his team had regularly made hurtful comments intended to draw blood and understood why he was still so sensitive.

Tony had to admit that having been thrown out of a plane, drugged, beaten, chained inadvertently to a serial killer, taken hostage numerous times, nearly perishing in a burning building and being blown up on numerous occasions, it wasn't that far-fetched to get clobbered by an obsolete satellite hurtling through the atmosphere. "Okay but are you sure? You and me I mean… not the satellite! What if…"

Interrupting him firmly, she asked him. "What if I get sick? Will you dump me in case your heart gets broken?" Not even deigning to wait for his response, she continued. "Stop acting noble and take me for a cup of espresso instead. I'm going to miss being in Milan, well I'm going to miss Italy when we go home next month."

It was true, even with the reason for their sojourn, they had managed to find some precious memories along with the horrific ones. It was one thing that she had always admired about him, his unwavering ability to find positives in the worst of situations.

Seeing his smile, the one that said, 'I know something you don't, something good,' Emma congratulated herself that she'd derailed his most recent bout of doubts, feeling that he needed to save her from himself.

Turning on her pleading look that could persuade even the most uncooperative patient to eat or Tony to take pain meds, she knew that he would give in and his expression changed as he decided to
share. Basking in his smile and *Oh My Goodness* what a smile it was, a joyous, mischievous and wholly unguarded beam that lit up her heart and the whole room, she continued to pout, knowing he would spill.

Which he did. "Ms Ingham, would you do me the honour of accompanying me to Venice, Tuscany, Florence and Naples for a month, finishing up with a sun-filled week on Santori while I work on getting healthy?"

So, okay, who knew that calm-in-a-crisis Emma Ingham was capable of squealing like a fan girl as she flew into Tony's arms and hugged him ecstatically. Tony really wished with a reaction like that he'd waited 'til they were back at the apartment they were sharing with Brad and his wife Lara. He wasn't up to anything too passionate or strenuous, but hey, at the moment he'd settle for a cuddle and a nap.

Having made the love of his life happy, it was now time to say what he really hoped was a final goodbye to the amazing staff at the Istituto Europeo Di Oncologia. He'd already organised to have gourmet food hampers, chocolates and flowers delivered to the nurses for being there for him through the whole horrible ordeal of chemo treatments. He couldn't believe these amazing people did this day in and day out – they were so not paid enough to do what they did.

It took ages to make his way round the whole crew who were working today, saving his favourite nurse (not counting Emma of course) ‘til last to farewell. Blonde haired, green eyed Alessandra had sat with him on many a night when he'd been unable find sleep and they'd watched movies together. Brad had joked that if Emma hadn't come along when she did and sweep him off his feet, Tony might have been applying to the Naples field office instead of heading to New York.

He grinned, since who knew what might have happened if Emma hadn't come along and kicked his butt when he was so depressed. He smiled broadly, recalling her telling him that she expected him to kick the tumour's ass because she had season tickets to the 75th Anniversary season of the American Ballet Theatre in 2015. Seeing his befuddled expression about what one thing had to do with the other Emma explained.

"Well because you're going to take me to every performance at the Lincoln Centre in New York. I can't wait to dress up for you and see you looking suave in your Armani tux. So, start visualising that chemo annihilating your tumour cells," she instructed firmly as she handed him a bunch of nutritional supplements which he swallowed obediently.

Tony thought back to that stern lecture and wondered whether an ability for presentiment, was something Emma was keeping from him since at that point, he had no idea that Leon Vance would offer him a Supervisory Special Agent position in the NY field office. When he decided to go back to NCIS, pending his ability to regain his fitness levels and receive medical clearance, he decided to accept the offer. Mainly because a) it would allow him to keep his promise to Emma about the ballet and b) he really wasn't sure if he ever wanted to return to DC, even if they offered him team lead of the MCRT. The lure of being able to implement some of his ideas without the negativity of his old team sabotaging them before they got off the ground, was also just too tempting to refuse.

He thought that at least in the early stages of his and Emma’s nascent relationship, starting some place fresh, where his workmates were a blank slate would make it easier to focus on their relationship. Tony was convinced that it was Emma that made sure he didn't stop fighting the cancer and he counted himself as incredibly fortunate to have her.

He'd made a conscious choice to cut himself off from everyone in DC when he decided to come to Italy for treatment. He'd tried to stay 100 percent positive, but it was tough and having contact with anyone associated with DC just brought up too many issues he just couldn't deal with while fighting
for his life – their life. His and Emma's.

Brad had offered to keep anyone in the loop. Jimmy, Ducky, Balboa and Mendez had all agreed to the constraints that Brad laid down: regular updates from him but Tony needed space. He also asked them to respect his privacy which they'd agreed to. Abby he'd figured, was too close to McGee and Gibbs and wouldn't be able to adhere to the limited contact through Brad that Tony was prepared to give her. He was willing to renew personal contact with the four guys though, once he had set down roots in New York – just as long as they could accept that he wasn't the same person anymore.

It would be a different friendship to before and if they could handle that then he would maintain a relationship with them. Shrugging, he refocused on the here and now. That was one of the things he had taken away from his cancer experience. Time was precious and if you spent too much energy focusing on 'the what had been' or 'the what will be' then you wasted time that could never be regained. The past he couldn't change, and the future might never come to pass but he had right now. He wasn't about to fritter it away.

While he would never say that having cancer was a good thing – it had forced him to re-evaluate everything about his life and he had learned to live in the moment. And that hadn't been a bad thing – not at all. Smiling at his favourite Italian nurse, he approached her and drew her into his arms, grateful for leaving here in remission, for however long that may be. It was much more than others in his situation had.

Hugging Alessandra he smiled as he whispered in her ear, "You're coming to dinner tonight, right Ale?"

Brad and Lara were holding a small dinner party at the apartment tonight to say goodbye to his colleagues at the Institute. Tony had issued a personal invitation to Alessandra and Giovanna as well, and Emma had a couple of colleagues coming from the American International Medical Centre, where she'd been working. Brad, Lara and Emma were going to cook up a Creole feast and Tony's job was to go home to rest, so he would be able to make it through the dinner party without face planting into the main meal.

Although food still tasted bad – mostly metallic and he had to be careful to avoid spicy and acidic foods due to the pesky and persistent mouth ulcers from the chemo, he could still enjoy some great company, if not the food. He was looking forward to tonight.

The blonde Italian grinned. "I'll be there, Tesorino. We're going to miss you," she told him. "But, we don't want to see you back here, again. Milano is fine but not the Institute." She told him sternly before giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Smiling obediently, he nodded his agreement before telling her he'd see her tonight. Finally saying goodbye to the doctors who were on duty today, Emma and Tony exited the lobby for what both were hoping was the final time. They stopped off for coffee for Emma and a green tea for him before headed back to their apartment, feeling incredibly fortunate. Both of them knew that he was not out of the woods; wouldn't be for a long time yet but still it felt good to be alive.
Changing It Up

Chapter Summary

The winds of change swept into DC as innovations transform the office.

Chapter Notes

Just to clarify, no, this isn't a death fic...well as much as anyone in remission from cancer can ever be said to be safe. Two of my family were diagnosed within weeks of each other... one went into remission but not the other and we are painfully aware that even after five years remission, it is no a guarantee.

As to why Gibbs is avoiding confronting Tony - IMHO while he may be gung-ho at work about work related issues, when it comes to anything personal or to do with emotions he frequently adopts a head in the sand approach. He's spent 20 years avoiding working through his grief, continued to make the same mistakes resulting in a string of broken marriages and relationships and he hates admitting he was wrong, so I don't see him avoiding Tony as being all that out of character.

NCIS DC:

Probationary Special Agent Ellie Bishop stepped off the elevator at 0815 on Monday morning, ready to start a new week after a blissful weekend off, spent with her beloved husband Jake. Granted her in-laws had been visiting but no one's life was perfect – hers came damned close though. Sitting down at her desk she said hello to Gibbs, thinking the boss looked like he hadn't slept all weekend. Had he even taken the weekend off? She swore he never went home.

SFA Marc Mendez grinned at her as she greeted him. Tim grunted curtly, immersed in something on his computer but then again, he always seemed to be in a bad mood. She wasn't sure though, maybe it was just his natural disposition – like Gibbs.

Looking more closely she could see that the computer meme that had been driving him crazy for months was back again. It was a photo of a really hot looking bald guy with eyes and lips to die for. She might consider leaving Jake if he was available.

Just kidding, Jake honey!

But she didn't get the significance of the text which read: 'At least without hair his head's not too big, is it McBackstabber?

Hot guy's head looked just fine to her. Damned fine actually. Meanwhile, Tim seemed determined to banish it off his computer once and for all but every time he thought it was gone, it would turn up again. Obviously, someone at the office was playing a prank but no one was talking. Which was incredibly infuriating to the information analyst since she hated not being able to make sense of things and place them in neat little boxes, precisely labelled.
Shrugging, knowing that no one would clue her in, she fired up her computer. Ellie checked her emails before opening up the NCIS intranet to check out official announcements and requests for data or sharing of cases between the various field offices. Plus, there was always not so official announcements and notifications from Human Resources. As her speciality was information gathering and analysis, she immediately noticed the notification that the pilot program of information sharing being trialled out of the New York Office had now been evaluated by a consultant and credited with statistically significant improvement in staff morale and increased solve rates. Sec. Nav. had authorised the roll out of the model across all the field teams, agency wide.

Now Director Vance was calling for volunteers from each office to spend a week in New York, observing the program in situ and bring back their feedback and training to become peer coaches for their own individual field offices. Meanwhile HR would be working with training consultants to help implement the model gradually across the whole agency.

Ellie had been sharing this news with the rest of the team as she absorbed the content of the announcement. She looked at Gibbs and Mendez pleadingly.

"Can I volunteer to be the one to check it out in New York – it is kind of my bailiwick," she observed hopefully.

Gibbs grunted, he didn't care about that sort of crap and wasn't really paying attention. He would ignore it like he ignored most directives from TPTB. Marc nodded, a secretive smile giving nothing away.

"Sure, knock yourself out, Bish. As far as I know no one else has volunteered yet."

Squealing in excitement, Ellie sent off the request to be considered. "It sounds really interesting. They're calling it 'The Camp Fire Informational Model of Intelligence Sharing. This'll be right up your alley, Tim. It involves digital video recording of the data gathered to facilitate sharing with other teams and specialist consultants."

Ellie wondered why McGee who was taking a sip of coffee at the time, started choking, spitting his long black all over his computer keyboard. He was weird sometimes.

~o0o~

Marc Mendez swept into the bullpen, dropping information packs on everyone's desk, exchanging an amused glance over the partitions with his former SSA Balboa whose current senior field agent was performing a similar role for his old team.

"What the devil's this?" Gibbs growled.

"I thought we were on cold cases this week. I was going to create a new computer algorithm." McGee objected.

"Oh crap, Marc. If you'd told me about this yesterday, I wouldn't have applied my fake tan ‘til the weekend," Bishop groused before her natural good humour reasserted itself. "Paint ball manoeuvres? Are we going to go up against each other? Call shotgun on Gibbs’ team." She chuckled smugly, thinking she'd kick Tim and Marc's butts.

"Nope, us against Rocky's team," Mendez grinned, noticing that McGee looked less than thrilled, knowing the Elf Lord preferred the virtual type of conquests and duels to getting sweaty and out of breath.

"Why are we running around playing goodies and baddies, we already do it for real?" He demanded.
"It's called a Team Building exercise, Special Agent McGee. Get used to it!" Director Vance responded, coming up behind Tim. "The New York office instituted regular team activities and there has been a dramatic decrease in stress leave, less accidents and higher productivity. HR recommended it be adopted agency wise. I concurred."

~o0o~

Sec Nav Sarah Porter descended the stairs from the director's office and started making her way around the bullpen pausing at Special Agent Ellie Bishop's desk to hand her an individually addressed, ivory coloured invitation before stopping at Ned Dornaget's desk and giving him an ecru tinted personally addressed envelope. She proceeded to stop at various people's desks to distribute invitations to selected field agents. Agent Balboa watched her greeting everyone as she made her way round the room, working the crowd like the practised politician she indubitably was.

After Sec Nav's departure the team, sans Gibbs, who was curious as well but too cool to show it, crowded around to see what she had been invited to. Passing it over, she explained as she perused the additional information.

"The new Cassidy-Todd Foundation is holding an inaugural Spa Weekend for female agents to encourage mentoring between experienced female agents and new ones. They will have information sessions specially geared toward issues that are unique to female agents, like managing reproductive issues and career trajectories, potential discrimination during pregnancy and child care, dealing with generalised discrimination in the workplace and financial planning."

Carlton Barnes, a young, rather ambitious agent from financial crimes and also rather obnoxious, called out to Dornaget. "They started up a support group for spatially challenged agents, Dornie?" A cruel jibe referring to the fact that the young agent wasn't the most graceful of individuals on his feet.

Grinning, the slightly uncoordinated agent shook his head. "Nope Barnes, SecNav invited some of the up and comers in the agency to contribute to a think tank looking at innovative crime investigation practises."

Balboa swallowed down a guffaw at the just-swallowed-sour-milk expression on Agent Barnes face. Frankly, he found the little jerk far too smug and thoroughly enjoyed Ned's put down that had young Charlton worried about what he'd done or who he'd offended to miss out on an invite. Rocky already knew that it was an invite to a mentoring program for Gay, Lesbian and Transgender NCIS agents, primarily to support probie agents but also more established ones, too.

Not that he blamed Dornie for not sharing that info with the rest of the staff. He might be loud and proud about his sexual orientation but there were other agents who were more circumspect about their preferences and the young agent was respectful of their feelings. Balboa understood that those agents who were employed prior to the repealing of DADT had far different experiences of working in Law Enforcement to the younger ones like Dornie.

As he leant back in his seat, Balboa thought about Tony – he had to hand it to him. These two mentoring programs, plus the team building days – paintball, rock climbing, abseiling, ball room dancing, and sailing had all been brilliant. Aside from the Team Building aspects, it had been great for stress reduction too. And the Campfires were already paying dividends – other agencies, especially smaller ones like the Coast Guard were looking at the feasibility of implementing campfires to share and analyse data as well.

Just wait ‘til Gibbs found out the latest innovation that he'd gotten approval to implement. Tony was being a very busy boy. Jethro was going to go completely postal when Leon announced the Anger Management Program.
Rocky was already nicknaming it the L.J. Gibbs Program and it featured daily meditation, decaf tea and coffee and yoga along with mandatory counselling and anger management information sessions. He figured Tony's experience as he battled lung cancer had shaped his recommendations on techniques to deal with anger. That and 12 years dealing with Jethro’s volatility.

Leon had confided that even before he returned to field agent status, DiNozzo had completely turned morale around in the New York office after an incompetent assistant director cut a swathe of destruction through the office. He'd even lifted closure rates long before he took over as SSA of the top ranked team. Already he was having an amazing impact, with three high profile cases closed out and a score of cold cases with fresh leads that looked hopeful too.

Furthermore, he'd improved relations with the NYPD and organised for young probies from the force and NCIS to serve as liaisons on a rostered exchange basis to learn tolerance, improve communication and develop working relationships. Balboa thought that this was such a deceptively simple concept, but it had enormous potential to change attitudes. A hugely important outcome.

He was looking forward to catching up with Gibbs’ long suffering former senior field agent next weekend when he and his wife Jules were heading up to see a Broadway show. They were going to dinner before the show with him and his fiancée Emma and they were putting them up in their apartment spare room. It would be great to finally catch up with him – he really missed Tony a lot.

~o0o~

Gibbs was trying to make his ever-dwindling level of coffee last until the meeting ended. He decided that next time he would be bringing in a thermos, so he didn't have to ration himself, because he had a feeling he was going to need it before the meeting was over. He hated these stupid monthly talkfests with a passion but lately they have been even worse. Vance was a man on a mission, determined to bring all these damned stupid innovations in to make his existence a misery. There was nothing wrong with the way they had been doing things but typical bureaucrats – they were always tinkering with things that weren't broken, trying to justify their existence.

Vance had yet to announce the latest 'improvement' and the former Marine rolled his eyes. He ran his team the way that Mike Franks ran the MCRT – well he'd added a couple of extra rules – and there was nothing wrong with his team. All these efficiency geeks and PhDs – Mike used to call them pretenders - getting called doctor without spending time dissecting cadavers - just more big-headed and dumb. And didn't all this damned yabba yabba prove his theory was spot on.

And then there was Senior Supervisory Agent Grimes who’d earned his very own category of being an irritating waste of Jethro’s precious time. When would that idiot finished whatever the hell he was droning on about – demanding hypo-allergenic hand wash in the bathroom. Or was it doors on the head that were voice operated that he was on about earlier today in the lunchroom, just so you didn't have to re-contaminate your hands by touching the door handle when you were leaving the head? Basically, Jethro zoned out when Grimes started talking. The guy could seriously make watching paint drying seem like an enthralling activity.

"Thanks Grimes, I'll take those observations to the appropriate department heads," the Director finally shut him down mid-sentence and everyone sighed in relief.

"Before we finish up, I have an announcement about how supplies and equipment in our crime scene trucks are configured. Following much positive feedback about the innovations in the New York field office, we've studied them exhaustively and determined that the changes are much more effective way to organise the space. SecNav Porter has ordered that the changes be implemented agency wide."
He distributed a hard copy of the New York model as he spoke, knowing that some of the SSA were petrified old dinosaurs and preferred having a piece of paper in their hands. As they looked at it, Leon continued. "I'll be sending an electronic version to all field staff later today. Any comments or questions?"

Gibbs studied the changes, his irritation quickly morphing to feeling smug. The New York office had just adopted the MCRT’s crime scene truck’s organisation of supplies and equipment. Score one for Mike Franks! Bet the old rascal was looking on and pissing himself laughing.

Balboa grinned. "Yeah Director. My team already use this model. Works well, too. I think you'll find that since Special Agent DiNozzo came up with it in the mid noughties when he was in charge of the MCRT, all the SSA’s convinced us to try it. All the DC teams adopted it years ago and never looked back."

"This is Mike Franks’ method, Balboa." Gibbs objected.

"No Gibbs, this was one of the changes that Tony brought in. Actually, it is the only change that you didn't throw out when you returned from Mexico and tossed him out of the job. Guess you don't remember – your memory was definitely still crap then. You even called me Pacci a few times."

Jethro scowled. He did not remember that, but it gelled with what DiNozzo had written in his damned journal about him calling Ziva Cate and mixing up his name with McGee. He’d also alluded to having to step in and cover for his boss when his memory had failed him when on more than one occasion. The idea that people had been able to see how much he was struggling back then pissed him off since his power lay in appearing impenetrable.

Vance stepped in before things got heated. "So, all the DC field teams are already compliant with this change?" Getting nods from everyone he concluded the meeting. "Okay then, no action is required, and I don't need to bother sending this plan out to the DC staff. Thank-you everyone for your attendance. Same time next month."

Gibbs followed him out of the conference room back to his office, having finally put two and two together about DiNozzo being in New York. Vance had expected the campfires to tip him off, but he had ignored the whole program... in fact he’d ignored most of the innovations but that was nothing new.

"Why didn't ya tell me that DiNozzo was back working, Leon? And that he was in New York."

"I wasn't aware it was any of your business or that you cared, Gibbs."

"Of course, I care. He's my SFA and a friend."

Vance raised one eyebrow. "He was your SFA – he's Supervisory Special Agent of the MCRT in New York, now. As for being your friend – we have a different idea of what constitutes friendship, Jethro. So now you know – I take it you'll want time off, so you can go and see him? Mend some bridges, apologise for your behaviour?"

Leon smirked internally, knowing that Gibbs would back off like he had when he brought up the idea of confronting DiNozzo in the past. He prodded the stubborn agent with his suggestion.

“Perhaps explain why you never contacted him, since you knew where he was being treated after you stole his private journal? Might want to apologise for reading his private thoughts and feelings while you’re at it. He's pretty upset.”

"I'm too busy right now Leon. Got a cold case that's about to turn red hot." Jethro stalled, before
turning and leaving the director's office, speedily.

He by-passed the office and ended up in Autopsy where Jimmy and Ducky were engaged in a lively discussion about putrefaction. Although he really wanted to talk to Ducky privately, his mouth engaged before his brain. He was obviously spending too much time around Palmer – it was catching. Barging in he blurted out, "Duck, did you know that DiNozzo is assigned to the New York field office?"

Watching as the elderly ME glanced impassively at him, he switched, spearing his laser-like glare at Palmer who was so much easier to crack. Watching Jimmy's Sergeant Shultz - *I know nothing* façade start to crumble in under 20 seconds, he scowled at Ducky again.

“So, you did know? Why didn’t you say something? I had a right to know. Is he okay? Have you seen him?” He groused.

Ducky sighed, looking at Palmer sadly. "Mr Palmer, you really could do with some introductory lessons in subterfuge, dear boy."

Jimmy looked suitably embarrassed that he’d crumbled so easily.

“Yes, we knew, Jethro. Anthony wanted nothing to do with his old life here in DC, including us. I suspect when he thought that he might only have weeks or months to live, he wanted to focus on being positive and living in the present and even friends from his time here were associated with things he wanted to ignore."

Ignoring the pain, he saw on Jethro’s face he continued to speak as Palmer looked serious.

“No, we haven’t seen him since he returned. He asked for time to establish himself and put down some roots in his new home, although he does email us occasionally. He's hinted that he was going to issue an invitation soon. And as far as I know, he is currently in remission but like any other cancer survivor, that is no guarantee that the cancer won't return, today, tomorrow, next week or even next year."

Jimmy chimed in, "If he stays in remission for five years, it's generally considered to be a cure… although it can still come back."

"Mr Palmer is quite correct. I knew an orthodontist once who beat breast cancer – she swore by collecting and drinking her own urine, emulating the great Mahatma Ghandi who was a great advocate of drinking his early morning urine to help mediate. Aurora also observed a strict macrobiotic diet, meditated daily and brewed a variety of herbal teas. She remained cancer free for 17 years, but it did eventually return." He suddenly noticed Jimmy and Gibbs observing him incredulously.

"She drank her own urine?" Jimmy exclaimed.

"We were instructed in the Corps that since it is 95 percent water, as a survival strategy when there is no fresh water available that it could keep us alive but you’re saying she drank it willingly?" Gibbs demanded with revulsion.

"Uropathy is an ancient form of medicine, practised by many cultures." Ducky replied shrugging. "Young Timothy is slathering himself in urine with his many moisturisers every day, as recommended by his dermatologist and millions of women daily use urine on their faces too you know. Even down here with our hand creams, we are applying urine to our hands to keep them baby soft and smooth."
Seeing Jimmy's horrified expression, he chuckled. "You are a doctor Mr Palmer – shame on you. Where do you think urea comes from, which is a common ingredient in many moisturisers? Or the enzyme urokinase that is used to break up clots in medical treatment – it also is derived from urine. I suppose you also don't know that early morning urine is very high in Melatonin - a sleep hormone. Which is why it is used by meditation and yoga proponents. You must be more open minded, my boy." He scolded his assistant, jokingly.

Resolving to never use any moisturiser crap on his skin again, Gibbs refocused on the question that Ducky had so adeptly avoided. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought everyone knew that urea was urine Jethro or are you referring to the drinking urine because it had health benefits? I was sure that I shared a snippet of information with you. What about that time when I was in Zimbabwe, although it was still known as Rhodesia back then, anyway those tribesmen shared an aphrodisiac concoction with me of baboon urine and beer. How remiss of me to…"

"Duck, I meant about DiNozzo. I had a right to know."

Looking him in the eyes, he stopped prevaricating. "Because I didn't want you badgering the lad when he was trying to forge a fresh start or try to get him to come back to DC. And because you could have reached out to him while he was ill, and you didn't. Why didn't you?"

And Gibbs had no answer to that and it pissed him off.

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Gibbs led his team back to the bullpen, fuming. He'd been in a state ever since he found out about DiNozzo returning to work and that others knew about it too, including Balboa and Mendez. The fact they didn't tell him has sent him into a rage. Then on the case today, that Detective McCadden was wanting to know about DiNozzo… why he left, where was he. He kept on yammering on about it until Gibbs wanted to clean his clock just to shut his mouth.

McGee was pissy too, over some remark the annoying Metro cop made. Said now that he wasn't Tim's partner Tony wouldn't feel like he had to defend him anymore. Said that he and DiNozzo could be buddies again. Told McGee he hoped he realised how lucky he was to have DiNozzo for a partner and a friend.

He and Mendez went on and on about DiNozzo til finally Gibbs ordered him off his crime scene, rather forcefully. He snapped at their Probie, Ellie Bishop when she asked a probie question and later ripped her and his SFA a new one when she asked about what McCadden meant about defending McGee. He was short with Ducky and reduced the coffee barrister to tears before scaring the new security guard into pissing his pants and it wasn't even mid-day.

After a meeting with the Director he was ready to explode and had to head down to the gym, dragging his team with him so he could let off steam. Seems McCadden was going to be working a joint case with them since it looked as if they were dealing with a serial killer and the Metro bigwigs took exception to him manhandling their detective off the scene.

Vance had delivered an official caution which didn't bother him really. It wouldn't be the first and probably not his last either. Then Leon Vance dropped the bombshell. Jethro was going to be the first participant in the new NCIS Anger Management Program that was being instituted agency wide. That was like waving a red rag at a bull.

"Over my dead body, Leon."
The director shook his head. "Not a suggestion, not a request. That was an order. You don't have a choice if you want to work at NCIS. If you refuse… there's the door!" He stated, pointing at the exit.

Gibbs stomped off before he made things worse. Vance had him over a barrel and he knew it. He'd already told Leon after Jack died that his job was all he had to live for and Jethro was now hanging on to it by a gossamer thread. He was damned if he was going to let them kick him out.
Perspectives

Chapter Summary

Ellie finds that idols can have feet of clay and Ducky has a lunch time chat with the director.

Chapter Notes

Just in case you were confused about continuity in the last two chapters, I noticed they’d been posted out of order. Something similar happened in the previous posting but I caught that before it posted. Not sure why it is happening but I'll post this instalment differently and post one chapter and then another one a little later.

Warning: Fans of McGee will probably be offended by content herein, but the solution is simple. The back button is there for a reason so use it. Instead of complaining, remember that you’re perfectly free to write the perfect story yourself.

Ellie Bishop stepped off the elevator after a week away at the New York field office. It had been an extremely interesting visit, in more ways than one. Certainly, it answered some questions, but it raised others in that most annoying manner that mental problem solving was wont to do. And yet normally, Ellie enjoyed it when that happened, since she loved wrestling to make sense of information.

It was like doing jigsaw puzzles except they were inside her head and the feeling she experienced when she began to assemble the picture was always exhilarating… except for this one. While she already had begun to assemble and make some sense of the picture, the portrait wasn't pleasant to look at. Still, she hadn't collected all the data yet and as she kept reminding herself, there were two sides to every story, so perhaps the picture was different to what it appeared right now.

Everyone in the bull pen noticed that although Bishop was enthusiastic about the new campfire method of information sharing, she was also pensive and quiet. Marc Mendez soon found himself cornered, at the first opportunity in the break room.

"Can I talk to you, Marc?"

"What's up, Ellie?"

"I found out, is what's up. Why didn't you tell me that Tony used to be the SFA, aka 'hot bald guy' on the team?" Bishop enquired.

Marc shrugged.

"He said he didn't know anything about a meme or how it kept on showing up on Tim's computer. I believe him, he looked surprised when I mentioned it."
"All true. It was done after he left. He called after you spilled the beans and told me to call off the prank. He said he only plays jokes on friends and family."

“But isn’t Tim a friend? They were on the team together for at least a decade, weren’t they?” she probed for details. Annoyingly, Marc was singularly noncommittal on the subject of one Anthony DiNozzo.

One week later:

Marc had remained incredibly closed mouthed about their team before she had joined it and he also wouldn’t tell her who was behind the prank or why. But Ellie had known that someone would be prepared to gossip, especially if they thought she already knew about it. Once she had discovered the whole story behind the prank though, Bishop kind of wished she hadn't dug up the truth.

It made her feel pretty disappointed, cynical even. Frankly it was a hard lesson for an information analyst to learn. There were times when it was better not to know certain things.

Ellie had always looked up to Delilah Fielding, especially after Operation Pin Drop. The DoD cryptologist was legendary in the counter-terrorism community. While her professional respect for the analyst remained undiminished, she felt like the pedestal she’d had her on was definitely crumbling more than a bit. As was the friendship that had slowly flourished between them, ever since the attack by the explosives packed drone had left Delilah paralysed.

Ellie couldn't help wondering about all those weekly Skype calls to keep in touch with her were genuine attempts at a friendship. What did Tim, Delilah (and of course her girlfriends) really think or say about Ellie Bishop behind her back, after their calls had ended?

Were they laughing about her quirks with food associating or maybe her appearance? She had always paranoid over the size of her nose perhaps, or else they were all laughing at her behind her back because of her daddy-long-legs, spider-like appendages, just like the girls at high-school. After all, she'd only been on the team for less than a year and Anthony DiNozzo had been team mates with McGee for a decade and it hadn't stopped McGee dissing him. Her new reserve on their Skype calls finally attracted Delilah's attention and she demanded to know what she'd done to offend her.

Deciding not to beat around the bush, she answered honestly. "I heard something that disturbed me, Delilah, and made me wonder if I could trust you and Tim. He told Anthony DiNozzo that you and your BFFs thought his head was too big for his body, got a big old laugh over it. Did you really laugh about him with your buddies?"

"Well I have to say that's rich, him complaining about something that petty with all the torture he subjected Tim to," Delilah protested.

"So, it is true? And for the record he didn't say anything to me – it was one of the probies on another team who heard Tim taunting him about what you’d said. It didn't go down too well with the other agents, to tell you the truth. Tony is still very popular here."

"Well he's an obnoxious, juvenile jerk and he made Tim’s life a misery. He also sabotaged his promotion for no good reason except he was threatened by him. Tony never treated him with the respect he deserved."

"How do you know that? Did you ever see examples of it?" Ellie asked curiously.

"No... not exactly.” Delilah admitted grudgingly. “Although I did see DiNozzo teasing him and don’t forget all the nicknames he tortured him with. But Tim told me what he'd done, and my Tim
doesn't lie to me."

Bishop couldn’t help thinking about the first time she'd met Fielding in the elevator. How McGee had lied to Delilah about not being able to go to the Institute black-tie dinner (where she was to be awarded a fellowship for her work in counter-terrorism) in front of her and Marc. Tim had made a bunch of excuses and blamed Gibbs for not giving them time off.

It was so blatantly obvious to Ellie that he was lying through his teeth, as it should have been to Delilah since if the boss never gave them time off, then how did he find the time to go on dates with her?

Mind you, Gibbs had cut him off at the knees, announcing (in front of Delilah) that if McGee didn't want to go, he should man up and admit it, not use him as an excuse and lie about it.

Still Bishop held her tongue, knowing that Fielding believed Tim's version of reality without question, despite him being less than candid with her.

Ellie thought back to how she’d discovered the truth about McGee and Tony DiNozzo. After she’d tricked her informant into thinking she already knew. Special Agent Lisa Tran (the office gossip extraordinaire) let the cat out of the bag about 'hot bald guy meme' and why the meme was created and why they kept taunting him over it. That impelled Bishop into what was practically her default setting of digging into the biographical details of SSA Anthony DiNozzo.

As an Intel analyst, gathering data...and analysing it was as natural to her as breathing was to everyone else. When she started working on Gibbs' team, she'd automatically pulled together dossiers on them all to help her to figure them out, but never bothered with previous team members. Until now!

Looking over what she'd found, she was struck by quite a few things that let her draw inferences about the former SFA and it wasn't exactly a pretty picture. Who disowned a 12-year-old child for pity’s sake? She'd grown up with three doting brothers and kind loving parents, and she simply couldn't imagine what a little kid could possibly do to earn that kind of treatment.

Had he killed someone?

She dug into Juvenile Justice records but hadn’t discovered anything. She’d even hacked his personnel records that include a background check conducted by an Agent Christopher Pacci. He’d done a thorough investigation, and nothing had turned up, so she was guessing that no – he hadn’t been a twelve-year-old killer.

Besides, if DiNozzo had committed some heinous crime as a child, if he was some sort of psychopath, he’d never have been hired. He’d never made it past the exhaustive psych assessment. She decided not to read his psych evals, focusing on his physical bio.

The more she dug the worse it got. A string of traumas also emerged. Losing his mother in mysterious circumstances at the ripe old age of eight had Bishop’s tender heart wincing.

A spotless record at the military academy he’d been dumped in, before earning a full scholarship to OSU, where it looked as if things were starting to turn around for him. But no…a devastating injury ruined dreams of a professional sports career. There was the rescue of one child out of a burning building but being unable to save the boy's baby sister. All taking place before he left college and the picture that coalesced, pointed to an individual who had known great adversity in his short young life.
That Tony wanted to help other people and that he’d become a detective at an unheard-of age, was
impressive and suggested to the analyst a talented, ambitious yet caring individual. Ellie also found it
even more impressive that he seemed to have lived through great hardship without lugging around a
giant chip on his shoulder or turning into a serial killer.

Another thing she had to admire – he didn’t use his upbringing as an excuse either, since none of the
people she talked to, had any idea of his background. They all thought he’d lived a charmed life in a
Long Island Mansion as a boy, but he was still quite a popular figure, even despite the presumption
that he’d enjoyed a golden childhood.

The same people weren’t so complimentary about his colleagues, claiming that the junior agents,
Tim, an Israeli agent Ziva David (who Ellie replaced) and a former Secret Service agent Caitlin Todd
had been disrespectful and openly and chronically insubordinate. They’d also told her that Gibbs had
treated him like crap. The feeling in the bull pen was that if Tony had wanted to, he could have
reported the lot of them for various crimes and misdemeanours that would have ruined their careers –
with justification.

They’d complained that the team had ignored the chain-of-command, which didn't make any sense to
Bishop. She already knew from her background check that McGee’s father was an Admiral, so he'd
grown up as a Navy Brat. He’d have learnt about chain-of-command, virtually while on his mother’s
breast. The other junior agent, Former SA Ziva David had spent her obligatory two years in the
Israeli Defence Force and she knew that Mossad and the shadowy off-shoot – Kidon, simply
couldn’t exist without a strong chain-of-command.

Plus, there was the Secret Service, who operated on a hierarchical structure that included an
extremely rigid chain-of-command. Ellie was pretty certain that disobeying and questioning orders of
a superior there would be about as likely to occur as pink elephants dressed in tutus and doing ballet.
It didn’t make any sense that three agents from three different backgrounds would all have such a
serious disregard for following the change-of-command. Frankly, it beggared belief!

And then there was Gibbs, who as a former gunnery sergeant with the Marines. He was equally well
acquainted with the importance of the chain-of-command and why it existed. Ellie was pretty sure
the Corps didn't have only one Boss on a team and a bunch of privates blindly following orders
either. It made absolutely no sense for Gibbs to ignore the chain-of-command - so why did he do it?

Why encourage his agents to do it? Because even though she hadn’t served under him for very long,
one thing she knew, if he had wanted them to observe the CoC he would simply have to order them
to. If they ignored him he would have kicked their asses – therefore the subordination was done with
his tacit approval.

Ellie decided she was going to have a long chat with Marc about what she'd discovered. She wasn't
feeling so secure that the team would have her back in the field and since she didn’t have a lot of
experience in that sphere, the notion made her rather anxious.

Thinking about the lead agent she'd met in New York and her impressions of him, plus the Intel
she'd pieced together, a picture had begun to emerge. Then there was Jimmy and Ducky's input
regarding Tony DiNozzo’s teasing of McGee. She'd arrived at the conclusion that while Tony had
excellent people skills in many different social situations, he sucked big time at up close interpersonal
relationships, especially with people he thought of as family (like his team mates).

Ducky had confided that he'd used somewhat limited social skills to interact with the team, which
had been previously acquired courtesy of his time living with his college fraternity. Ellie figured that
any skills he picked up would have been pretty limited, since as she knew full well from her own
experiences, college aged males were hardly emotional Einsteins. DiNozzo’s skewed Fratboy take
on how to successfully relate to people he was close to, consisted of conveying feelings via teasing, pranks (and in lieu of more intimate behaviour, particularly with other guys) rough-housing and wrestling.

Bishop thought it was quite pathetic that his concept of how family relationships functioned was based almost exclusively on what he’d observed in the frat-house. It said a lot about his pathetic parents and their total and absolute neglect. But then, a father who disowned his only son was obviously not a good guy for a confused young boy to model himself on in how to conduct interpersonal relationships. At least his frat brothers had cared about him, despite their emotional immaturity - which was more than could be said about his father.

Ellie turned her mind to other matters namely those hated nicknames… although some judicious digging around shed a rather different light on those too. By her estimation they served a purpose and it wasn’t to do with putdowns or teasing.

Jimmy Palmer revealed that Tony had given him several nicknames too, unlike his predecessor (Gerald Jackson) who he apparently never managed to get terribly close to. Jimmy seemed as pleased as Punch to be given nicknames by Tony because he felt that it was a sign that he’d been accepted.

Unlike Tim, who was definitely less than ecstatic and Tony also gave nicknames to… a never-ending list of nicknames.

To Jimmy and most others, they’d taken it was a sign of his affection for them but not McGee. To him it was obviously an insult. Which just didn't add up. After all, Abby also gave people nicknames on a regular basis, including McGee and he didn't get shirty with her. In Bishop’s humble opinion, her ‘Timmy’ nickname was a pretty childish moniker – she would have thought it was pretty embarrassing for a grown man, not to mention a federal agent. Ellie couldn’t help but be reminded of Enid Blyton’s Famous Five books she’d devoured as a book hungry seven-year-old and the fifth member of the five - Timmy the dog.

Even Gibbs, according to scuttlebutt, had several nicknames for Tim, although based on their rather frosty relationship, she had difficulty envisaging it. But she had no reason to disbelieve Ducky. MuhGee...well she could kind of see where that one came from but what was ‘Elf Lord’ about and how embarrassing was that for a federal agent? And Delilah had a few for him too that were quite awkward like Snuggles and Pookums Pie and he didn’t get bent out of shape at her.

Yet it was DiNozzo who earned Tim's ire over nicknames – what was that about?

Adding credence to Jimmy’s theory that Tony’s nicknames were meant affectionately, she’d heard scuttlebutt that he saw Gibbs’ head slaps as a sign of his affection for them. (Bishop was not even going to venture there because it sounded too much like a victim of domestic abuse.) But the mindset was certainly not incompatible.

Perhaps it wasn’t about nicknames at all – perhaps it was about the person who gave him the nicknames.

Why did Tim resent DiNozzo so much?

Could he be jealous of Tony and if so, why the fuck would he?

Tim had a pretty normal kind of upbringing, not unlike her own one. Not perfect, he had father issues but still... there was no such thing as perfect parents or family, although some were a lot more perfect than others. Ellie found herself thinking about her own happy childhood, where not getting a
highly coveted computer game was a devastating catastrophe. How it resulted in her thinking her life sucked and her parents hated her and wanted to ruin her life.

Then she thought about a little boy in a huge house with no siblings and two parents who were drunk a lot of the time and when they did pay him any mind, they treated him like a mini adult. She’d read interviews from business associates of Tony’s father who described how he was dressed in sailor suits and made to perform on the piano to entertain and impress them.

Ellie realised that DiNozzo's clumsy attempts to relate on an emotional level to people he felt close to, were a good example of why it was so important that developmental milestones occurred at appropriate ages. Playing developmental catch-up at college had left him without an appropriate frame of reference for what was normal, and he’d probably taken everything he saw at face value. Still it was an understandable deficit – at least in her eyes. The former intelligence analyst reckoned they should have been more understanding.

Pretty much everyone Ellie talked to agreed he’d never set out to offend when he’d teased his team mates. Unlike Gibbs or to a lesser extent the other agents on the team who meant to draw blood and mostly achieved that objective. Yet there hadn't seemed to be any degree of empathy for his childhood from his team, no one prepared to cut him some slack because he was emotionally/socially clueless.

Ellie recalled her childhood friend, Jenny Thompkins who’d lived three doors down from the Bishop’s when she was growing up. When Jenny’s parents decided to adopt a rescue dog, they chose a Staffordshire Bull Terrier who’d been tied up and left in the yard without training, socialisation with other dogs or people. Lily was a sweet dog but had absolutely no idea about getting on with other dogs.

She way too boisterous and wasn’t able to read canine body language so she ended up getting attacked when she wouldn’t cease and desist in rough house games or even just saying hello. When it came to her interactions with humans, if you gave her a pat or even looked in her direction, Lily would get up in your face, literally slobbering all over you until you had to yell at her to get her to back off. But it wasn’t her fault – she was just so clueless and starving for attention.

The analyst felt quite irritated with his former team mates. If they'd really had such a serious problem with him being annoying, then why not explain that to him and then help him to develop new behaviours. After all, a basic tenet of behaviour modification that led to successful change was that you replace an unwanted behaviour with a more socially acceptable one. However, for that to work you had to ensure that the subject had another alternative to replace the behaviour you wanted them to change. Otherwise, how were they supposed to change?

You could bitch and moan as much as you like but unless the person knew what you wanted, complaining about it would get you squat. And, Ellie concluded, ganging up on him and belittling him wasn't exactly a mature approach to problem solving either. But she was getting a clue that the team had been quite childish, and not just Tony.

While Ellie was prepared to make allowances for someone who essentially reared themselves, she wasn't nearly as ready to cut Tim the same degree of slack. Mainly because from what she'd put together of Tim's bio, he had a loving sister, two parents and an eccentric, opinionated grandmother to guide him growing up. While the McGees obviously hadn't been the perfect family, just your average normal, dysfunctional nuclear one who’d divorced, they were a heck of a lot more functional than DiNozzo had growing.

Yes, Tim didn't get on with his dad, who was reportedly domineering and dismissive of his son, because he'd failed to follow in his footsteps. Still, his old man had bought him a fancy car when...
he’d turned sixteen and he’d also paid for his college education.

Not exactly the actions of a cruel unfeeling parent, so he must have loved his son even if he didn’t show it easily. Plenty of people had fathers who set impossible standards, who failed to accept their offspring for who they were instead of who they wanted them to be. Yet it was surely better than indifference, neglect, abusiveness, drunkenness and being disowned before hitting puberty. That was messed up in so many ways.

Ellie had noticed that Tim had seemed to have a pretty big chip on his shoulder about his father. Shame it hadn’t made him more empathetic about Tony’s background. It wasn’t as if he couldn’t have done the same bio searches as she’d done either. And yet, even without it, she wondered why he couldn’t see what had been so clear to others she’d talked to - that Tony had thought of Tim as his little brother. After all, Tim was supposed to be an investigator.

Sighing, she briefly thought about sharing what she’d uncovered about Tony with Delilah but figured she wouldn’t listen. Clearly, she saw Anthony DiNozzo as the evil one and wouldn’t pay any heed to Intel that Ellie supplied which painted him in a positive light. People always found excuses to justify their beliefs if you showed them to be false or at the very least, only one side of the coin. It would be a waste of time and Ellie’s granny Maude always said you could die of want of breath.

She did however, decide to share one small snippet with the cryptographer, though.

"Well I have to say, it makes me wonder what you, McGee and your girlfriends find to laugh about with me or Marc when our backs are turned. And for your information Delilah, I was talking to a ex Norfolk detective the other day that was a former buddy of DiNozzo’s. Him being a detective before joining NCIS, they both had a lot in common."

"Ellie could only imagine that he would have been treated with unaccustomed respect by Detective Philip McCadden, who spoke glowingly about Tony’s skills and accomplishments. When she’d gone out to coffee with him since they were working a case together, he kept going on about DiNozzo’s skills and brilliance. Which made Tony's sacrifice of his friendship with the cop all the more poignant since Phil seemed like a pretty straight up guy."

"When McCadden started making disparaging remarks about McGee and Ziva’s abilities and their characters’ Tony immediately broke off their friendship in support of his teammates. Pity Tim didn’t hold him in a similar regard. Turns out that McCadden was right – he deserved better than Tim as a friend."

Delilah had gone white, before protesting that she would never belittle Ellie, not responding to the info about McCadden. Ellie replied to that, saying that trust was a tenuous thread that could easily be broken.

To be honest, Bishop wasn’t sure that their friendship could survive. Although she respected the hell out of Delilah Fielding professionally and always would, she wasn’t even sure she wanted to be her friend. Some friendships just weren’t worth it.

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Ducky strolled along, the mid-day sun feeling pleasant on his exposed skin. A gentle zephyr-like breeze tousled his still vigorous head of hair as he made his way to the bench where he was meeting Leon for lunch. He wasn’t sure what it was that the director wanted to discuss, possibly the changes that had been occurring.

He’d been watching the innovations over the past months with a combination of wonder and
approval. The morale in the office, after several years of great turmoil, trauma and stress was at an all-time high. Stress leave was down, and productivity was up – making the director and the bureaucrats beam. There was definitely a much more cooperative atmosphere around the office.

It was a shame that Jethro had fallen back into his default setting of out-of-control, angry bastard again, though. After Tony's departure and Jackson Gibbs' demise, Gibbs had been unusually vulnerable and open, and he'd shared several heart-to-hearts with his oldest friend at NCIS. Ducky was surprised at the things that Gibbs had revealed about why Tony had gone. Surprised and outraged but also with a degree of optimism that Gibbs was finally ready to do the indubitably hard work on fixing some of his most serious of character flaws that made him so alone and isolated.

It was something all other mere mortals had to accept – that they were far from perfect paragons of virtue and therefore needed to work on minimising their faults. That they needed to build on their strong points and make it easier for other people who were important to them, to be around them. Something that Gibbs seemed to have no desire to address, seeming to feel that with his great loss, no one deserved to be happy, not him, not the women he married and not his team of agents.

Then the twin blows of losing Anthony's respect and presence and Gibbs father's passing had brought home to him his vulnerability. Ducky had strongly encouraged him to seek out Anthony and make peace with him. To apologise and return his journal – outraged when he'd learned that Jethro had stolen it and read it. Such a shocking breach of trust demanded a mea culpa, if anything did. Rule 6 be damned!

Unfortunately, he couldn't force the stubborn fool to go and speak to Anthony and his period of remorse, guilt and insight was sadly short lived. Ducky understood that change was difficult, especially for Jethro and apologies were utterly foreign to him but he was still bitterly disappointed at the lost opportunity. Jethro’s reluctance to confront Anthony resulted in him inevitably slipping back into old habits. Bad habits!

After so many years being angry at the whole world and being allowed to get away with the most outrageous behaviour (which wouldn't have been out of place in a bratty toddler) most people thought he quite enjoyed his acting out. Unfortunately, while Jethro had the attitude of a feral toddler, he had the body and mind of an adult. A very Machiavellian one at that - able to create a great deal of chaos.

The ME believed that after so many years, Jethro had created a neural loop that physiologically made anger his default setting, and where changing the status quo would be an uphill task. Quite possibly impossible unless Gibbs was truly motivated to want to change. Sadly, he seemed to decide that either he was too old to alter his behaviour or the fact that Tony and Jack were gone negated any need to even make the attempt.

Clearly, he didn't feel that his other colleagues deserved consideration and Ducky could see Gibbs’ removal from the field soon. He would end up even more embittered than he already was - his heart petrified as he ended up a dried-up old husk in his basement. It was such a sad irony that Jackson had been younger at heart than his own son, who seemed to almost revel in his own misery. And in sharing it around! Donald’s mother would have said that misery loves company.

Arriving at the wooden bench, the veteran ME observed that the director was waiting for him already, with two brown paper bag lunches for both of them, including 2 pieces of fruit and two bottles of water. No doubt his assistant had procured their lunch and Ducky made a mental note to thank her later. As he sat down and greeted the director, he busied himself unwrapping his sandwich. Observing it was turkey and salad, he nodded approvingly.

Sipping his water, he thanked his boss for the food before enquiring, "To what do I owe the
pleasure, Leon?" The elderly ME felt that the lunch break and their location was sufficiently informal to permit the familiarity.

"I thought you might appreciate the view, Ducky," Leon smirked, indicating the crowd steadily accumulating on the lower lawn to their right.

Ducky hadn't noticed the throng but once he did, then his keen powers of observation noted many senior special agents, including Balboa and a very grumpy looking Jethro, along with heads of departments and supervisors. Noting with wry amusement that they were all wearing loose white cotton trousers and shirts with high Mandarin collars and frog buttons, he shot a curious glance at Vance, wondering what the Dickens was going on.

Just then a rather wizen little figure crossed the lawn with a spryness belying her apparent chronological age, although her skin rather resembled a partly dried prune. Upon reaching the front of the group she proceeded to bow formally to the group.

"What is going on, Director?" He asked, although as the class (for it rapidly became apparent that was what it was) got under way, Ducky was struck speechless as it dawned on him what he was witnessing. Indeed, in one of his early trips to Peking (as Beijing was previously known) hundreds of thousands of the city's inhabitants would turn out every morning to practise the martial art of Tai Chi. He had taken some classes and heartily approved of both the health and psychological benefits. Watching the glum looks, he realised that most of the participants were there under sufferance.

"Another innovation to improve employee health and psychological welfare, courtesy of the New York office." Leon replied rather drolly, Ducky thought.

"Why do they all look so dour, Leon? Martin Evans from Financials looked happier when I sutured his hand last week, after he dropped a glass and cut himself picking it up."

The director smirked. "Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be macho enough...not like some other forms of martial arts. So, in an attempt to encourage all employees to benefit, I made it mandatory for supervisors to take a weekly class for 12 weeks. My name is Mudd," he explained, somewhat unnecessarily.

Ducky chuckled, looking at Gibbs face that looked like thunder. As they started going through the familiar movements, he found himself identifying movements. Pat the wild horse mane, White crane spreads its wings and Hand strums the lute brought back lots of memories of his trip to China. He suddenly realised that the director was using his smart phone to take oodles of photos of the group as they proceeded through the movements.

Exchanging a grin with the ME, Leon felt compelled to explain. "Sec Nav requested lots of photos, Ducky." He continued snapping as Ducky identified Grasp the bird's tail, Waves hands as clouds. Leon captured a perfect shot of Gibbs performing Needles at sea bottom, looking like he was about ready to explode.

"Two requests, Leon. First, would it be possible for myself and Mr Palmer to join the class if he is interested? I heartily approve of Tai Chi and would love to see it become a regular fixture."

"Absolutely, Doctor. And the second one?"

"Young Anthony is facing his six-monthly post remission scans again tomorrow and I'm sure is suitably apprehensive. May I get copies of those photos to send to him? I'm sure they'd cheer him up, especially the one of Gibbs performing Needles at sea bottom."
Ducky was still quite mortified that he'd misjudged the situation with Anthony so badly when he'd assumed that he was pining for Ms David. He was terribly ashamed that the poor fellow had been facing such a dreadful health scare and felt like he couldn't share it with his team mates. Ducky had no idea that things had gotten so bad for him and yet he knew that it was really a whole lot of cumulative 'bad' over the years.

As much as Tony had been the team's whipping boy and seemed to relish the challenge, in hindsight Ducky had to have rocks in his head to believe it for a moment. It would be like keeping a thoroughbred of impeccable racing credentials shut up in a stable constantly and never be allowed to run, much less stretch out his legs. And when he was permitted to leave the claustrophobic confines of his box, to be harnessed up to a plough, considered a draught horse and treated with derision. How could anyone ever be fine with that and really, why should they?

Seeing Anthony throw off the traces that had kept him trapped had obviously been pleasing, as was the news that Anthony had gone into remission. It was something that he hadn't honestly expected, given the diagnosis but he was truly delighted to be proved wrong. Just as he was thrilled to hear about his successes in New York. And when Anthony had tentatively extended the hand of friendship, Ducky had been determined not to blow it a second time and was careful not to take him for granted or just as importantly, overstep the mark.

Leon laughed heartily. "I had planned to CC them to Tony as well as SecNav but feel free by all means, Ducky. Tell me, do you know if the rumours about him getting married are true? I admit that it seems a bit fanciful, he's such a player."

Ducky looked sad. " He never used to be. On the contrary Director, it was being left at the altar by his hussy of a fiancée that made him afraid of relinquishing that much power to destroy him again to another individual. And then there was that horrendous debacle with the beautiful Dr Benoit that made him even more gun-shy as he fell hard and fast for her.

"It would seem he has finally found someone who he feels is worth taking a risk on. He is a gentle, loving soul and I wish him and his betrothed every happiness. If anyone deserves to be happy, it is our young friend."
Abby Scuito was not a happy Goth, in fact she was downright snarky. As she was fond of proclaiming often enough, she didn't do well with change and there was certainly change aplenty in Abbyland.

Just like in the days when a brand-new Director Shepard had swept in after the death of their own Caitlin Todd, bringing with her a wave of change. That had included an Israeli liaison officer replacing Cate and the director ordering Abby to observe the office dress code which resulted in the Goth lab rat developing a severe allergy to her clothes. Now, once again she found herself with an insatiable itch to all the change, one that unfortunately couldn't be scratched. Of course, the fact that her two favourite men – her Silver Fox and her Timmy were grumpy didn't help matters any, either.

It wasn't only that they'd been grumpy with each other since Tony left and Timmy hadn't been given the SFA job. It was that Gibbs seemed to be in a perpetually bad mood these days and that included being cranky with Abby, too, and hey – everyone knew she was supposed to be his favourite. She totally wasn't feeling the love anymore.

Meanwhile, the scuttlebutt was that they were trying to force her silver fox into to retiring – which was so unfair because bureaucratic rules shouldn't apply to Gibbs. He already had his Gibbs’ rules. They should leave him alone.

And the rumor mill was rife that that Marc Mendez was remaining as SFA and Balboa was going to take over as Supervisory Special Agent of the MCRT. That left her poor Timmy out in the cold with nowhere to go. She stomped her foot in frustration even if there was no audience to witness her tantrum. Needless to say, McGee was a very unhappy Elf Lord and he was biting her head off almost as much as Gibbs. Abby needed love and adulation like a flower needs the sun and rain and she just wasn't getting it from either her guys.

Abby couldn't understand why Timmy had been overlooked. He'd been on the MCRT for a decade and had even filled in as SFA for Tony a few times when he’d been injured or undercover. When Gibbs had bypassed him, and given the position to Mendez, Timmy had gone to the director to protest but it seems like Leon had withdrawn his support for Timmy for some unfathomable reason.
No one would tell her why that was, no matter how many times she stomped her leather boot clad foot, pouted her Goth lips or punched Timmy's bicep. It drove her crazy!

Life at NCIS was just plain hinky. In the space of eighteen months their little family had simply fallen apart. First Tony, Ziva and Timmy had resigned to stop that sucky Richard Parsons person trying to hurt her Silver Fox and then Parsa tried to kill them all. Although Tony and Timmy came home, Ziva didn't and that was when the team started to fall apart. If Ziva had come back to DC like she was supposed to, then everything would be hunky dory not hinky.

Maybe Gibbs would still be forced to retire from the field but maybe not. And Tony was supposed to take over the team from Gibbs, not Balboa – he wasn't a part of their family – Tony was. Then Timmy would have become the senior field agent and Ziva would move up to be the junior field agent and Timmy could have gotten a probie who would complete their little family, and everyone would have lived happily ever after.

Ziva had upset their symmetry and left a gaping hole that had affected their ju-ju. To restore the balance, it seemed obvious to Abby that if Ziva returned to NCIS and the team, the equilibrium would be restored. It was so simple that Abby was shocked that she didn't think of it sooner. The forensic scientist was excited to think that soon Ziva and Tony would be back where they belonged, and Gibbs would find a way to defy the bureaucrats.

Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, he would just tell those nasty bullies to 'kiss his ass' and everything would be perfect again. Now she was feeling angry with herself for not thinking of it sooner. Grabbing her phone, she started rehearsing what she should say.

She decided to text her immediately and then organise a Skype call later, since she didn't know whether Ziva's quest to find absolution for her sins would mean she'd be able to talk right now. Abby felt the Israeli's sack cloth and ashes routine was too little, too late but surely after eighteen months, she'd gotten it out of her system. Abby needed her family back again before she scratched off all her skin.

Quickly she fired off a text:

Ziva we need you. Come home.

Then for good measure she sent her a long rambling email explain how they needed Ziva to come back home.

Too excited to hang around in her lab, she decided to go and share her plan with Ducky, certain he would be ecstatic too. In fact, he could be present for the Skype call and help to persuade her to return. Ducky was pretty persuasive when he set his mind to it.

ISHT

"Who’s gonna call Emma and let her know about Tony?" Probationary agent Jodhi Crisp quipped, only half joking.

Dane Larson and Lisle Zabinski exchanged horrified glances. Zabinski pointed at Dane. "I vote for Mr Smooth here. Emma likes him, so it will be better coming from him."

"Oh no you don't. You're his Senior Field Agent. That's why you get paid the danger money, Little Boss." Dane protested strenuously.

"And as your superior in rank and smarts, I'm making an executive decision to protect the team's acting lead agent's cute butt. That would be me, Dane and I’m sacrificing yours for the greater good.
"Man up, Larson."

"Oh, thank you so very much Zabinski." The junior agent grimaced before turning his head to look over his shoulder at his ass. Smirking, he observed, "So Crispy, you heard Little Boss, she said I had a cute ass." He wiggled it provocatively.

"Give me the phone, I'll do it," Jodhi rolled her eyes at his antics, noting that his butt was pretty damned cute. It would be a shame if anything happened to it. "How did you guys manage to let him get a concussion anyway? You know that Emma had a romantic dinner and dancing planned tonight. We promised to get him there in one piece. She's going to kill us."

"Yeah, I know Probie," Lisle acknowledged sadly, not looking forward to facing Emma Ingham. "But in our defence, I have to say that I've never worked with an agent that shows greater affinity for getting injured in the field. I've started going grey since I got promoted to DiNozzo's SFA and I'm only 33." She revealed, indignantly.

Their junior agent grinned, his smooth shaved head and dark skin contrasting with his white straight teeth. The females in the office (and a certain group of males) spent their tea breaks debating if Dane Larson or Tony DiNozzo had the best smile and it was usually a tied decision – everyone agreeing they both could turn individuals to mush with their grins.

"Yeah, he needs his own body guard 24/7 but to be fair, none of us knew that a deaf kid was going to walk out into the confrontation like that. Not even Tony. We figured everyone would hear the gunfire and stay put."

Their probie, decided it would be prudent to have all the pertinent details before she rang Emma, plus she was procrastinating so she asked, "So how did our boss get a concussion?"

"He snatched the kid up and bundled him down the stairs doing a tuck and roll, whacking his head on the way down. He was too busy worrying about guarding the boy from harm to worry about himself." Lisle shook her head, half exasperatedly, half admiringly.

"Sounds about right. Tony is on a crusade to save as many people as humanly possible. Do you think he's a reincarnated Arthurian knight?" Jodhi enquired, not entirely joking as she took a deep breath before hitting the speed dial.

"Hallo, Emma?"

ISHT

"Duckman, I need your help to persuade Ziva to come home so we can be a family again. Everything is all wrong and I need your support to fix us. Once Ziva comes back, Tony will come back too, and my Silver Fox will be able to do his voodoo and banish the pencil pushers trying to cast him out of his kingdom and then everything will be fine again. And Timmy and Gibbs will stop grumping at each other.

Ducky shook his head, exasperated at the stubborn Goth. "Abigail, you need to accept that change is inevitable, and that people leave. Even if Ziva came back it wouldn't bring Anthony back to DC. He's happy where he is and has a new team in New York and a wonderful lassie who is doing marvellous things for his esteem. He's happy, finally."

Abby was shaking her head so violently her brain was in danger of becoming concussed. "No Ducky, it's not right, he can't be happy. He's supposed to be with Ziva, they're meant to be together."

"Abigail, if that was so, they would have gotten together – they had plenty of opportunities to do so.
You are not to meddle in their affairs. You must give me your solemn vow that you will not try to contact Ms David and convince her to return. She has chosen a path that doesn't include us or this world, and you must respect her desire to seek absolution in whatever fashion she sees fit."

When the Goth forensic scientist remained silent, her expression downcast, the ME crossed over, tipped her chin up so he could stare directly into her pale green orbs. "Abigail, I'm not joking. I want your word, immediately, Missy!"

"But Duckman, I already sent her a text." She didn’t mention the email.

"Well no more, my dear. You as a scientist know the need we humans have for change in order to grow and prosper. You need to embrace it, or you will never survive."

"But Ducky, I want my family back." Foot stomp.

"Why are they making Gibbs retire and why are Timmy and Gibbs so angry at each other. It's all hinky!" Crossed arms and double foot stomp.

"Why isn't Timmy the SFA?" Pouty face.

"And if Gibbs has to leave, why won't they give his job to Tony. He was supposed to take Gibbs place. It's not fair. Is it because he was sick? That's discrimination." Abby finished up with a scowl followed by tears of anger and a quadruple double stomp involve each foot separately. Her finale was picking up his forceps and flinging them at the freezer drawers.

"Really Abigail, how many off those ridiculously overly caffeinated concoctions have you consumed today? Don't you think that it's time you cut back, perhaps started acting your age?” He demanded but half-heartedly since they’d this conversation many times before. Seeing the stubborn set to her chin he sighed resignedly and gave up on the subject.

“But be that as it may, Gibbs is well past mandatory retirement age for field agents and he's chosen not to remain in a desk job. As for their disagreement, if Timothy or Jethro wanted you to know what their difficulties were, they would have informed you. And finally, Anthony was offered Jethro's job and I understand he refused it."

"But Ducky, that can't be right. Why would Tony knock it back – he wanted to take over when Gibbs retired – not that I think it's fair that my Silver Fox is being forced out."

Sighing long sufferingly, he decided brutally honesty might rob their energiser bunny of her steam. "Anthony doesn't want to take over the MCRT from Jethro because of the churlish way he was treated the last time he was the leader. Treated by people you wilfully insist were his family. Telling him that he was no Gibbs when he tried to maintain continuity and then throwing temper tantrums when he tried to change things. It convinced him he could never win no matter what he did, so he decided not to even try.

He chose instead to go where his skills were appreciated. Honestly, Abigail, his so-called family chased him away, so now you will do him the courtesy of letting him be happy where he is."

ISHT

When Ziva David woke she checked her phone and discovered the text from Abby. When she first left, she and the forensic scientist stayed in contact more frequently but as time passed their contact become more sporadic as the passage of time loosen their bond. There was an America idiom about that – absence makes the heart grow colder, and that's what had happen to her and Abby Sciuto.
Mind, most of earlier conversations were Abby trying to persuade her to come back. Determined to find redemption for the assassinations and deaths that she’d carried out over the years, she had no intention of returning to NCIS and tuned out much of what Abby had said. Discovering her brother had a secret life she’d known nothing about, had made her see him and her other victims as people and that had shaken her world. It was much more complex than Abby seemed to think.

Ever since she’d first known her, Ziva had adopted a strategy of ignoring much of what came out of the Goth’s mouth, so it wasn’t all that difficult. What she had always found hard to understand was why an intelligent female would feel the need to act like a little girl. Ziva understood wearing schoolgirl skirts, pigtails and knee highs to portray a Lolita persona in order to seduce someone for information. Yet this didn’t seem to be the intent behind Abby’s get down. She simply seemed to enjoy people fussing her and treating her like a child, although Ziva guessed it was really because it allowed her to behave outrageously.

Still this morning as she stared at her email, she admitted that Abby's idea had merit. She really didn't find redemption to be all it was crapped up to be. Perhaps it was time to let it go and move on. It wouldn’t bring Ari or her other victims back. Time to go home and take up her life at NCIS and Tony would help her to get her job back again. Gibbs might be poopy but DiNozzo would golly him around and maybe she should accept Tony’s invitation and begin an adult relationship with him. According to Abby he was desolate when she refused to return with him.

Feeling lighter than she had in months now she had made a decision, she sent Abby a text: we must talk - call me.

Now after a week of trying to contact Abby and getting no response, Ziva decided to take the cow by the horns and return to DC. She had much to do organising and packing up her meagre belongings. She had given away most of her worldly possessions in her bid for redemption. Looking back, all it had achieved was that she felt deprived and cranky. Time to head back to the materialistic, celebrity obsessed US and her old life. Abby was in for a pretty big surprise – still that would teach her to not answer her texts and calls.

ISHT

Emma sat in her fiancée’s hospital room, thankful that this time it was just a concussion he had been admitted for. She’d already spent far too much time in hospital rooms with Tony. It certainly could have been so much worse, since it was a minor miracle that he hadn't been shot as he scrambled to save the life of an eleven-year-old boy. As she waited for him to be returned from tests, Emma took a bite of the BLT that she’d grabbed from the cafeteria. It was a far cry from the date they had planned tonight but there was always next time.

One thing she was grateful for, was that Tony was quite a romantic. After coming to New York, she’d been wined and dined around all the premier spots in Manhattan. They’d take strolls hand-in-hand in Central Park, go to the opera, ballet, Broadway shows, and museums. They took long leisurely picnics together and went on weekends away. The Catskills Mountains were a favourite spot of theirs, they also stayed in cosy B & Bs in Vermont and sailed around Long Island Sound. Yet perhaps her most romantic memory so far was their engagement.

It was quintessential Tony, playful and romantic. And yet Emma despaired of ever getting him to propose to her. It was the same old same old. She’d inform him she wasn’t going anywhere and that *carpe diem* (seize the day) was their motto and Tony would settle down for a bit until he would talk himself into doubting that he should be in a committed relationship with her. He argued that they didn’t know how long his cancer would stay in remission and it wasn’t fair to her.

Finally, she reached the conclusion that the only way to stop Tony trying to act all noble and push
her away for her own good was to propose to the idiot and marry him, ASAP. So as much as she loved it when he organised romantic dates for her, she took the initiative, booking them in at their favourite Italian restaurant. Gone were the regular pizzas, carb heavy, creamy rich sauces in his new regime to eat as healthily as possible but the Mediterranean influences of fresh vegetables and seafood was something that they did eat regularly. Having spent so much time in Italy, Emma in particular had become addicted to the regional cooking style.

Poor Tony - he didn't get much chance to sample the wonderful foods, between nausea, an ulcerated mouth, oesophagus and intestinal tract from the chemotherapy. Getting him to eat anything had been extremely challenging - not to mention that the cancer treatment had made all food taste metallic.

So, they'd had a wonderful romantic meal before she'd dragged him to the top of the Empire State Building and proposed to him. Yeah, she cheerfully admitted that it was cheesy but hey, they were living in New York and prior to becoming a couple, her favourite romcom chick-flick was without doubt Sleepless in Seattle. Yet as romantic as it was, when she noticed a worry line on Tony's brow she got assertive and told him that she wasn't going to be chased off.

"Tony, if I had to choose, I'd rather be married to you for a day if that was all the time we had together than a lifetime with someone else. You make me laugh, you're kind and caring and all the nurses on my ward would steal you in a minute if I let my guard down. They are green with envy when they hear about our wonderful dates.

"So okay, we both know that you have to live for today and take nothing for granted but that isn't a bad philosophy to live by. I love that with all that has happened to you, you have remained positive. You make us laugh."

Seeing he was still hesitating, she sighed. Yes, she was assertive when she was "Nurse Emma" but somehow when she was in relationships she was the one to let the guy make the first move. But all along in her relationship with Tony, she'd had to pursue him, knowing that if she'd taken a backward step, they'd never have gotten together. And she knew enough about what made Tony tick to understand that without a support system, he might not have made it. He was a guy that craved affection yet had spent most of his life alone. It really shouldn't come as a surprise that she was going to have to give him a 'gentle' push.

"Tony, if you say no, I'm just going to have to drag you back here once a week til you give in because you are not getting rid of me. I love you… you idiot and that's all that matters. So, will you marry me?" Determined to seal the deal she leaned into him and gave him a searing kiss that made her wish that she'd opted for a less public venue.

Afterwards, Tony had kissed her back and somewhere along the way they lost a good thirty minutes making out before they found somewhere a bit sheltered and shadowy and just snuggled together for the longest time. That was one of Tony's guilty secrets, after a childhood mostly bereft of physical affection he craved hugs and displays of affection. It was something that he desperately needed but didn't know how to accept.

He'd sought it through sexual liaisons, especially after two disastrous relationships with Wendy and Jeanne but the cancer had changed all that. Treatment had put a serious kink in their bedroom activities, but he finally learnt how to accept being cuddled and hugged. It had been a serious adjunct to his therapy and Emma was firmly convinced that it contributed to his remission.

Now he was an expert snuggler and while he was no slouch in the bedroom, they both relished time just wrapped up in each other's arms, like tonight. She would cherish this memory even if he had needed a prod to get there.
As they cuddled together in the shadows, they discussed when to get married and where. She didn't want a huge ostentatious wedding and she knew that he wouldn't either. But she'd always dreamt of getting married in a picturesque chapel by the sea. Emma was hoping that they could find somewhere on Long Island or Rhode Island but knew that his childhood was tied to these places and might have painful associations. Ultimately, it didn't matter where it happened so long as it did.

Eventually, they were getting chilled and Tony suggested that they go somewhere and get coffee to warm up and then go dancing. Emma loved dancing and Tony was pretty good at it. It was yet another enigma that while his alcoholic parents neglected him horribly, they were big on making sure he learnt skills that would impress Senior's business partners or as Tony cynically referred to them, Senior's marks. So, it meant that Little Tony DiNozzo was privately tutored in ballroom dancing, golf, fencing, elocution, pionoforte and horse riding – specifically dressage and polo. Seriously some people didn't deserve to have kids.

Emma had years of dance classes as a child, not because her parents decided it would be good for her or for their business prospects but because she loved it. She'd dreamt of becoming a prima ballerina until she hit puberty and grew too tall and her torso was too long. Tony was the first guy she knew that didn't mind taking her dancing and for that reason alone, her friends reckoned he was a keeper.

So, they'd grabbed a cab and Tony had directed the driver to stop by their apartment, telling her he needed to collect something. Later as they warmed up over coffees, she found out why. With a shy nervous smile, he pulled something smallish out of his pocket.

Presenting her with a ring box, he crushed her in a hug that literally stole her breath away. "Em, I bought this a while ago, but I could never summon the courage to propose to you since I can't offer you a long and happy future. But you seem not to care about that, love of my life, so please accept this ring as a token of our love."

Opening the box Emma was stunned. Tony had impeccable taste…ordinarily. In fact, when it came to fashion, she was willing to concede he knew more than she did about designers and loved going with her to buy designer gowns. And the jewellery he'd given her as gifts had been beautiful, tasteful. But her engagement ring was anything but. It was yellow gold – which Emma didn't wear; the sapphire was large and clunky, and the setting was overly fussy, not to mention way too large for her small hand. Yet seeing the hopeful look on Tony's face, a look full of tenderness and love, how could she tell him the truth…that she absolutely hated the ring.

Why the hell hadn't she picked out the engagement and wedding rings for both of them before she proposed. *Idiot!* Now she was left with the terrible choice of breaking his heart and telling him his taste in engagement rings sucked or wearing the damned thing for eternity. Unless she could lose it, that is. Maybe she could accidentally drop it down the drain in the bathroom, except that it was so huge and chunky that she doubted if it would fit. Looking at his hopeful expression she just couldn't do it.

Smiling awkwardly, she responded. "Oh Tony, I don't know what to say. Thank-you."

"You really like it Em? You're not just saying that? Because you can always change it if you don't like it."

Knowing that he would be offended if she changed it, she assured him she loved it and his face was one giant beam. Dragging her off to dance the night away, she managed to focus on what was more important than a stupid piece of jewellery. Once they were married she hoped it would stop his regular attacks of guilt. Personally, she had a good feeling about him staying in remission long term, but she would gladly stay with him for however long or short that time may be. She actually thought
he was at greater risk in his job of getting shot or stabbed; yet cops and agents still got married anyway.

She could hardly believe it, but they danced until nearly dawn before going for a ride in a horse drawn carriage around the park.

She was so tired that all she could think of was falling into bed with her goofy fiancé who seemed to be on cloud nine. Finally, as the rose gold fingers of dawn crept across the sky, she found herself snuggling into Tony and using him as a pillow as she dozed. When the carriage stopped, she woke
up to Tony calling her.

Come on Em, we're here. Wake up, Sweetheart."

Stumbling with exhaustion she felt herself being lifted down by strong arms. Smelling the blissful aroma of freshly brewed coffee, she managed to force her eyes partly open to find that Tony was offering her not only coffee but a pastry.

"Sorry Ms Ingham, due to the short notice I had to forgo the cat, but for the rest, enjoy," He teased her happily.

Eventually, realising that they hadn't returned home to their apartment and registering where they were, she looked at him as he held her coffee and pastry out to her to take from his elegant musician's hands. She decided she must be dreaming or else it was the most romantic thing anyone had done for her.

"Tony DiNozzo, am I dreaming?" Seeing him shake his head, she grinned. Only Tony would recreate that iconic scene from Breakfast at Tiffany's after dancing the night away with her. Hugging him one-armed, she accepted the coffee and pastry, wondering how he had organised both without her knowing. Seeing one of his agent's, Dane Larson hovering nearby, Emma realised he must have called him last night from the apartment. Talk about sneaky!

"So, my darling fiancée, no dream. The question is, do you want to wait here till they open or go home to sleep and come back after brunch – a late brunch?"

"Come back? Wait here? What are you talking about, Tony?"

"I'm talking about choosing your engagement ring, so we can get it engraved, Em."

Seeing her confusion, he started laughing. "You're a wonderful person Emma Ingham but you are a terrible liar. You hate that ugly piece of metal I gave you. It was my mother's engagement ring and according to her maid she loathed it as well. Senior went for the most ostentation piece of crap he could find – keen to impress all his business contacts. I wanted to surprise you."

"You tricked me?" Emma demanded, unsure whether to be outraged or relieved. Since she wouldn't have to wear that ugly ring and was going to pick out one at Tiffany's and Co she decided to go with relieved and ecstatic. "How did you manage to pull it off? I thought you'd be devastated if I didn't wear it?"

Hearing her relief, Dane laughed as he strolled over and explained. "The boss is an undercover genius. He could sell potatoes to the Irish, honestly. Congratulations, Emma!" He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Well, you're forgiven, I guess but I still want a Burmese cat, DiNozzo - a lilac tortie," Emma joked.

Chuckling, Tony thanked Dane for his help in the scam, before asking her did she want to wait for the shop to open or come back later. Deciding that the shop would still be there later, and bed sounded good, she opted for the latter as Tony hailed a cab, offering to drop Dane off on their way home.

Smiling fondly at the memory, Emma looked down at her left hand as she waited for Tony to come back from his MRI. It was necessary due to his history of multiple concussions, not to mention over a decade of that lunatic whacking him across the back of the head. Her real engagement ring was a dainty white gold setting and the neat princess cut pink diamond was perfect. She loved her ring but what made it even more special was how she'd come to receive it.
Game Strategies

Chapter Summary

Team building and better inter-agency relations affect the DC agents. Meanwhile Tim is ecstatic about the revival of his literary career, others aren’t so thrilled by it. Go figure!

Chapter Notes

Hopefully I didn't create too many dental cavities with my Emma/Tony shippiness. If you are wondering why I’m reluctant to venture into the writing of ships, I have a terrible phobia about sounding like a cheap romance novel with heaving bosoms and throbbing manhoods lol. I hate cliches!

Trigger warning: Discussion of cults and specifically Jim Jones at Jonestown.

Timothy McGee, aka Thom E. Gemcity had been trying for some time to find his muse, without a lot of luck. There’d been one or two false starts where he thought he had his mojo back again, but the attempt to get back into writing had petered out. So, he was a bit surprised when his literary agent contacted him just before DiNozzo went off on sick leave.

Flashback August 20th 2013:

Tim McGee stared at the email from his literary agent informing him that the Hallmark channel was wanting to purchase the screen rights for his first book and although the fee wasn't exorbitant, it had still been a fair bit of money for a federal agent. More important than the money, he was trying to generate interest because after several years of writer's block and several unsuccessful forays into other genres, he'd decided to return to his Deep Six roots.

In a fortuitous twist, only days before he’d finally come up with a rough draft for a new book featuring Agent Tibbs, MacGregor and Co that he was happy with. Although in the past he never used a story outline, he'd decided to try something new in the hope that it would wake up his muse. So far it was working. So, the prospect of using the publicity generated by making of Deep Six into a telemovie really couldn't have come at a better time.

At first, he'd questioned Lynley Aimes, his agent, about the Hallmark Channel because as far as he knew he thought they made greeting cards not movies. His agent had been rather vague but suggested somewhat snarkily that since Gemcity’s alter ego was a professional investigator, maybe he should investigate.

So, after a quick foray into the Google search engine he discovered that they made sappy holiday movies and fluffy romance made-for-television movies based on Harlequin or Mills and Boon type novels which obviously wouldn’t suit his Deep Six novels. He really didn’t think what Officer Lisa and Agent Tommy got up to in the elevator banging like bunnies fit the ‘romance’ category, however further investigating revealed that they also had a mystery movie section that unsurprisingly, made mystery movies. He supposed that it fitted in with his procedural drama theme well enough –
certainly better than romance.

While they obviously didn't have huge budgets for special effects or big-name stars like Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise starring in their movies, he didn't think that would be a problem. Judging by the publicity shots and trailers on their website, they always had genetically blessed or cosmetically enhanced actors and actresses cast in their movies. So at least he didn't have to worry about Agent McGregor being played by anyone ugly even if they were B-grade actors.

Plus, he told himself, it wasn't as if a procedural crime drama required computer generated special effects to film it adequately. Deep Six was no Matrix or Avatar so that probably wasn't too much of a concern. And lastly, it wasn't as if other producers or indeed production companies were beating a path to his door, either.

No one else had ever expressed interest in securing the film-rights and as his grandmother Penny often said, never look a gift horse in the mouth. So, he’d signed the contract.

Looking at the email in his hand he decided that with a bit of luck, the release of his new book could be coordinated to take advantage of the airing of the telemovie. That way he could cross-promote both events and that would have to be a good thing for book sales. Tim knew that a full-time career as a successful writer and a federal agent, especially one that was in a leadership role was ultimately incompatible. He would need to decide sooner or later which fork in the road to take but for a while he would play the waiting game.

One path offered much greater pecuniary rewards and adulation. That undercover gig where he posed as Thom E. Gemcity and had fan girls hanging off his arms had been a pretty intoxicating experience (even if the fan girls were Michelle Lee, Ziva and Abby, all undercover.) It was definitely not a path to be dismissed out of hand, by any means. Plus, all the trappings that went along with being a celebrity had to be considered, too. The money, his Armani clothes and his Porsche, the premier events, parties, red carpets and opening nights were hard to refuse.

Yet his ambitious nature recognised that power could also be a heady and potent reinforcer, reminding him of a long-cherished goal of becoming Director of the agency he was working for. The incumbent in the chair had indicated that Tim had many of the characteristics that would stand him in good stead, not the least of which was Leon Vance's public support of his career. While the financial recompense of federal service would never match the level of money that a celebrity lifestyle would generate, a directorship or even deputy directorship would hardly leave him a pauper either.

His relationship with Delilah was another factor to be considered. She was a renowned cryptographer and while she would admire his success in gaining a directorship or deputy directorship, Tim really didn't think she was the sort to be impressed by a dinner party invitation by Kim Kardashian or Paris Hilton.

Still, even if he did decide to forgo a celebrity career, the success generated by his notoriety could still be used by a canny and ambitious individual to negotiate better working conditions and promotions than someone like DiNozzo with no other prospects. Nor did Tim want to end up with his career stalled like Tony’s who had zero ambitions, content to be Gibbs loyal St Bernard. More than a decade on Gibbs team as second in command – it was the Commander Riker phenomenon in real life.

It was with all this in mind that he’d decided to sign the contract giving the Hallmark Channel the screen rights to Deep Six, his first book in the series. Having resolved that particular dilemma, he then got to work on his next book, finding it was much harder to fit in his writing around his work and his relationship with Delilah.
Having a long-distance relationship was proving difficult and exhausting enough, and he found that he had to abandon his beloved typewriter in favour of his tablet or even his smart phone to jot down scenes, often while he was on hold in phone queues or stuck in traffic. He even became adept at jotting down passages while he was putting meals together. It was astonishing what could be achieved by multi-tasking, although he really missed the long all-nighters, just Gemcity, his pipe and trusty antique typewriter.

24th February 2015

Now, as he stared at the email from the producer, informing him of the screen date, he immediately forwarded it to his agent, so she could coordinate it with the release of his new Deep Six book which was ready to go, just waiting for a coordinated release. Sighing deeply as he thought about how much had changed in the intervening months between signing away the screen rights and now, he realised just how much was riding on successfully coordinating and taking advantage of the cross publicity. Thanks to his former team mate dropping him in the head, he’d managed to lose the support of Director Vance.

What a backstabbing coward DiNozzo had turned out to be, scuttling Tim’s well-deserved promotion to SFA by telling Gibbs that he and Ziva hadn’t been observing protocol during the undercover operation at Royal Woods. First off, it had happened years ago and second, nothing had even happened while their comms had been turned off.

The voice prints still got recorded, hadn’t they? The case was solved and the only thing bad that happened was that the idiot lost his voice although Tim felt it was highly debatable that it was a bad thing. Yes, DiNozzo had been forced to stop talking for a few days although, that was a damned good thing in McGee’s book. But if they’d had to listen to his voice for the whole time he’d been collecting voice prints, their ears would have been bleeding – the man was so infuriating.

And it wasn’t as if he and Ziva weren't in the car watching his back. They were there if any trouble had occurred, but they’d been in a gated community for Pete’s sake. Nothing bad would happen in such an anodyne enclave...seriously.

Yet for this very minor breach of protocol, Gibbs and Vance had overlooked his promotion to senior field agent? He deserved the job and was eminently qualified. More importantly, he needed the promotion to progress to supervisory special Agent of the MCRT. Without it, he would never make it to the top job as director.

He'd turned down an excellent job in Japan a couple of years ago, mostly because he figured that the chances of him reaching the directorship via a cyber/technical pathway was pretty slim. The last two directors were both former agents that had extensive field experience before climbing up the ladder. Now, Vance had expressed doubts about his career prospects and withdrawn his support – a really serious blow to Tim’s strategic plans.

Now more than ever, he needed to maximise the positive publicity for his book and movie to be successful.

~o0o~

Supervisory Special Agent Balboa saw Gibbs heading off to the break room, nodding to several other team leaders who were at a loose end to follow him and bail him up before he could slip away. As he poured a cup of black sludge from the coffee maker into his mug, glaring at it, Jethro took a sip as he turned to see his fellow SSA’s crowding into the room with him.

"What the Hell's going on?" He growled, scowling.
Balboa rolled his eyes. *Could you be any more damned predicable, Jethro?* "Just wanted a quick word about the next team building activity. Thought we could have an impromptu meeting," he explained, since he was in charge of organising the monthly activities.

After conferring with the director, they'd both decided to change it up a bit and follow the lead of New York once again. Balboa was expecting opposition to the plan – none more so than from Gibbs over this innovation. Taking a deep breath, he plunged in.

"We're organising the next team building activity to be a baseball round-robin tournament between NCIS and the other alphabet agencies, plus the Metro and State PDs – two innings per team. The two top teams from each group will play each other to find the overall winner."

Gibbs shrugged. "Not the first time we've played against the Feebs, Balboa. Used to have an annual match back when Di… years ago. At least it's better than that ballroom dancing crap. I didn't even do that for my exes."

The former Marine was silent as he contemplated the idea further, grinning predatorily. "I can't wait to whoop Fornell's ass." On that note, he pushed his way out of the break room and headed back to his desk.

Trish Sheringham frowned at Rocky. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"He kinda didn't give me a chance, Trish. Why didn't you stop him?" He countered, glaring at the others.

"You're kidding?" Alex Paxton demanded. I aint stopping Leroy Jethro Gibbs' ass when he wants to go somewhere. FYI Rocky, I don't think the anger management stuff is helping.

Rory O'Leary snickered. "Well not unless it's supposed to be helping him to manage getting angry more often than he used to." He quipped flippanantly as the others scowled at him. Gibbs increasing anger (and how was that even possible) was no laughing matter.

Balboa pondered the problem. "Maybe it's better that he doesn't know in advance."

He threw the suggestion out into the ether and saw a mixture of responses from wry amusement to genuine horror. The truth that they hadn’t been able to inform Gibbs (due to his premature departure) that unlike the old adversarial round-robin baseball and basketball games where NCIS played against the Metro PD and FBI, DiNozzo had come up with a novel twist. The difference would be mixed teams of law enforcement professionals playing each other to foster better understanding between the PDs and various agencies.

The aim was to hopefully smash the ridiculously outdated competitiveness between the various agencies and their childish desire to one up each other. After 9/11 that sort of 'my dick is bigger/better than yours' crap should have no place in their profession, yet jurisdiction was still fiercely contested by some of the old dinosaurs who should probably have been pensioned off long before now.

Perhaps none were more vehemently about his turf than a certain Senior Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, whose contempt for other agencies and police departments was the stuff of legend. Being forced to share jurisdiction or God forbid turn over a case over to someone else, resulted in him morphing into a 'bear whose butt had been blasted with a boatload of buckshot belligerence that was unbearable for everyone around him.' And anyone with a lick of common sense stayed out of his way 'til he calmed down. It generally only took... oh say a few weeks, minimum!
To say Jethro had a poor opinion of his colleagues from other agencies or PDs was definitely not an understatement. Truth to tell, Gibbs had only a slightly more flattering view of his own NCIS colleagues; he hated sharing a case with other teams almost as much as other alphabets. He made wolves look like cuddly Labradors puppies when being territorial.

In fact, Balboa wasn't sure why Jethro had placed as much faith in his MCRT as he did. After all, none of them were recruited from the agency, with the exception of Tim McGee. All the rest had been external transfers, Vivian Blackadder, Stan Burley aka 'Steve,' Tony DiNozzo, Caitlyn Todd, Ziva David, Brett Langer and now the NSA whizz-kid analyst, Ellie Bishop. McGee certainly hadn't attracted Gibbs attention because of his impressive abilities to solve crimes – he'd earned a shot because of his computer skills in identifying Ari Haswari, since he had no prior field agent skills.

And with the exception of Blackadder and Langer who were former FBI (and neither agent had lasted long) Tony was the only one with the background to truly justify getting a gig on the flagship team of the agency. He had a law enforcement background, experience in interviewing suspects and witnesses, knowledge of the law and experience in investigating major crimes including murder, with an impressive closure rate rivalling Gibbs own. And the icing on the cake in justifying his place on the team had been his phenomenal ability to go undercover.

The rest might have potential, Balboa conceded but they were babes in the wood when it came to them earning a place on the major case response team. They'd needed extensive training to get them up to speed to be able to investigate crimes, let alone major ones that Gibbs team specialised in. Training which ironically Tony, not Jethro used to provide back in the day because Gibbs was too damned impatient to train people. The trouble was because of their experience in their own fields, they generally weren't well disposed to being ‘the probies’ on the team.

So, they didn't use the opportunity wisely to learn from Tony like they should have; most of them believing they deserved their position ahead of many far better qualified and far more experienced NCIS agents, although Bishop wasn’t too bad. Balboa was firmly convinced that if Tony had still been around to train her that she would have taken advantage of his vast experience and skills instead of disrespecting him as the other non-investigators had done.

In fact, about the only things that he could see that the disparate individuals who Gibbs had wanted on the team had, excluding DiNozzo, was little to no investigative experience. Even Gibbs who was off on Black Ops with Shepard and then CIA agent G. Callen. That and all of them, including Tony and Gibbs too, had a bunch of... well to put it bluntly, ‘daddy issues' with the possible exception of Caitlin Todd.

She’d owed Jethro a huge favour when he offered her a job after she was forced to resign her previous job. Her career in the Secret Service had been destroyed by a foolish sexual indiscretion before Gibbs had thrown her a lifeline, earning her absolute loyalty. Well that all added up to a whole lot of people with dubious credentials for being on the premier investigative team, as far as Balboa was concerned.

And while Gibbs had a rule about always working as a team, when push came to shove that rule went out the window faster than spare ribs at a barbeque full of ravenous carnivores. When things went wrong, he clearly had little faith in his team since he always went off on his own; leaving his team feeling impotent while he went all lone wolf and kept all his cards close to his vest. In the experienced team leader’s opinion, that type of behaviour bore little resemblance to working as a team, especially when it came from the person in command, but then Jethro had always been a 'do as I say, not as I do' kinda guy.

Truth be told, since the mass resignation by the MCRT to save Gibbs’ job (even if he was past
mandatory retirement age and Balboa was pretty sure that he was) Rocky had been having a great many uncomfortable thoughts about Gibbs' team. His internal musing today had just helped crystallise that inner voice that had been murmuring a phrase over and over inside his head – Jim Jones, Jonestown and Kool-aid.

Years ago, he worked a case where Marine and Naval personal had returned from deployment to find their families had joined a religious cult. In working the case Balboa had learned that cult leaders or gurus were usually highly skilled at seeking out alienated or isolated, lonely individuals who were craving social connectedness. The victims were desperate to find meaning and purpose in their lives, and frequently were estranged from parental figures, either by distance or emotional issues.

The cult leader in the case – the self-named Lord Lucifer had made them feel special, unique, wanted and safe. He welcomed the military families including many Marine and naval dependants into the fold with open arms. Once he had earned their trust and loyalty he worked swiftly at cutting them off at the knees, ruthlessly withdrawing his approval until they were desperate to get it back. He kept the families isolated and prevented them reaching out for help or letting them join in with other military community or family who weren't cult members.

He created envy and competition between his flock so that they were all competing for his limited attention and favours. Balboa realised in hindsight that while they were all so busy competing with each other for Lord Lucifer’s attention, the cult leader knew that they were too distracted to plot a coup against him. The cult leader was paranoid that someone would want to usurp his position in all probability because that is what Lord Lucifer aka Cyril Holt would do if he was in their shoes.

His so called 'treat 'em mean to keep 'em keen, philosophy had highly intelligent people prepared to act completely out of character. Demanding that they hand over their children had been the ultimate control and manipulation. Balboa agreed he was a master manipulator and these people were willing to do anything to make him happy, especially if they gained his undivided attention. They say that power corrupts, and ultimate power corrupts absolutely, and Balboa felt that Holt had certainly become falling down drunk on the absolute power he’d gained.

Luckily, the scumbag didn't have a military or militia background and his reluctance to appoint trusted lieutenants with actual tactical and weapons experience, capable of planning and implementation of a proper defence played right into the Feds hands in the end. They managed to arrest Lord Lucifer and his Soldiers of the Light with a minimum of casualties, unlike some other famous cults and sieges.

Still... the much younger Balboa had nightmares for months about what they found when they processed the scene – containers upon containers of cyanide. The scary thing was, that the federal agent truly believed a lot of those brainwashed Marine and Navy dependants would have been persuaded to take the poison if they hadn't raided the cult in the nick of time. The degree of control Holt had managed to gain over the cult members was totally terrifying.

Given himself a mental shake, not liking the direction his thoughts had been drifting, he refocused on the baseball tournament. Deciding not to give Gibbs advance notice of the mixed teams, since he'd quite likely try to sabotage the activity, he figured it would be a good test of how that anger management program was really working. Perhaps he’d chat to Fornell and organise for Jethro to play on Tobias' Maryland Maulers team, along with state cops and DHS guys. He’d heard that FBI agent Lina Reyes was captaining the Maulers, which seemed rather appropriate since her rather unflattering nickname was The Pit Bull.

~o0o~
Ellie Bishop walked into the break room to grab her food out of the fridge. Grabbing the bottle of iced white tea, she'd brought from home, she glanced over at Special Agent Lisa Tran – a young Eurasian woman that, like Ellie, was the rookie on her team of three seasoned male agents. They'd kind of twin-souled since Ellie joined Gibbs team.

While they supported each other, Ellie found that Lisa was best handled in small doses as she was also the office gossip. And while Bishop craved data (even gossip) gossip which was delivered in an excited fan-girl squeal could often be too much of a good thing – even to an information analyst. When Lisa laid off the 'who was sleeping with who' and 'who was lusting after who' or 'who had broken up with who data,' they'd actually had some pretty cool conversations and she was an excellent listener.

*Duh Ellie, she's a gossip – of course that entails being able to listen as well as impart data!*

Smiling at the raven-haired beauty who was reading while taking bites of her egg salad sandwich and sips of black tar aka coffee that would do Gibbs proud, Bishop sat beside her. The weather outside was pretty foul so she decided to join her and eat lunch in the break room. Smiling back at the newest recruit to join the MCRT, Lisa moved her stuff to make room for her and returned her attention to the book she was reading. When she started snorting and pulling weird facial contortions that Ellie – as a lover of arcane words and knowledge – knew was called gurning in Cumbria in the UK, she got curious.

"Good book?" She enquired, glancing at the tittle inquisitively. *Deep Six* by Thom E. Gemcity – not an author she was familiar with.

Lisa started choking and after banging her on the back and getting Tran a glass of water, the young woman managed to catch her breath.

When Lisa didn't answer her, she prompted. "What's it about?"

Staring at her archly, Lisa said slyly, "You honestly don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That it's about the MCRT."

Ellie was surprised. "Why would I know that, Lisa?"

"Well you're being an Intel analyst and all, I just assumed. You mentioned you do bio checks on your team mates. I just figured you knew about McGee's nom de plume or is that pseudonym? I always get those two confused." She exclaimed, somewhat inconsequently.

Absently, Ellie explained the distinction, even as she was piecing together what Lisa had revealed.

"Simple – nom de plume literally means pen name and is used for writing and pseudonym is a more general term and refers to any name other than your own. It means false name and may refer to a stage name, a professional name, a stripper name – so an undercover name is a pseudonym and a nom de plume is also a pseudonym."

"Okay, thanks. So, you really had no idea that you have a novelist in your midst?"

Embarrassed that she had missed that piece of data in her Intel search on Tim, she shook her head. "Fraid not. What's it like?"

Let's just say that it's pretty passive aggressive – like Mommy Dearest, or Postcards from the Edge. For example, he writes that the team leader, one L.J. Tibbs drinks to alleviate his messianic complex.
He would never dare to say that to Gibbs’ face and he describes Agent Tommy as swashbuckling, socially repugnant, a dogged pursuer of dirtbags and any skirt over the age of 18. In the book Tommy's engaged in a steamy affair with Mossad Officer Lisa, who is an Israeli assassin. Do you want me to go on?"

Bishop shook her head. "How did it get published and how'd he keep his job?"

Tran shrugged. "Search me."

"Why are you reading it?"

"Well I'm dating a guy in the accounting department of The Hallmark Television Channel and Dirk told me that they've made a telemovie out of Deep Six that will be airing soon. He knew that I worked at NCIS and thought I'd get a kick out of it. When I asked around, I discovered it was based on Gibbs' team.

"Then Christa in the Financial Fraud Team said McGee started writing a new Deep Six book last year. Her family is in the publishing business and it's pretty common knowledge that he's tying the airing of the telemovie to the release of the new Deep Six book."

Ellie felt giddy with all the connections that Lisa had assembled, making a mental note to swear her to secrecy if she wanted to keep something quiet since with her impressive spy network, she was bound to found out. Although the analyst had no doubt that the Intel was probably accurate, she was feeling ambivalent – especially when Tran gave her a speculative look before asking, "How do you think Jake will take it when he turns up in the next Deep Six book?"

Bishop winced at the thought, figuring he probably wouldn't be thrilled, especially since he hadn't given permission. Her husband was a pretty private person.

"Well I don't think he'll be doing a happy dance about it, Lisa but Tim hasn't anything to get passive aggressive about with Jake, or me either for that matter. So, how bad could it be?" She said, trying to look on the bright side of appearing in a book as a character without being asked.

Lisa gave her a pitying look, remaining mute. Being silent was an unheard-of state of affairs for the office gossip, which made Ellie even more concerned.

"What?"

"Well Jimmy Palmer seems pretty innocuous too – right? Not exactly offensive, but Pimmy Jalmer in the book got a little too friendly with some of Ducky's or I suppose that should be Goosey's friends, if you catch my drift."

"Okay, Jimmy getting hot and heavy with elderly people is a bit disgusting, I'll admit but it could be worse."

Lisa shook her head. "No, Ellie, he wasn't having sex with geriatrics. I agree that is gross but bearable – just! No Pimmy the autopsy assistant was into necrophilia with the bodies in the morgue."

Ellie felt like her lunch was in danger of coming straight back up. Now she understood Tan's facial contortions. That really was sordid, and Jimmy was a nice guy who didn’t deserve to be portrayed as a sicko freak.

So, what would he have written about her in his new book? That she had food fetishes, or she was… no not going to go there.!
Resolving she'd better discover the worst, she went back to her desk and downloaded Deep Six from Amazon. She knew she wouldn't sleep tonight until she knew the worst.

Jake was likely to kill him if they were in the book doing what she'd just visualized with food and she had no intention of making conjugal visits to her darling husband. She wondered, could she hack into the publisher and download the latest book manuscript too? After all, it just might prevent a homicide!
Ziva David, pulled her trench coat around her more fully to ward off the chill of the predawn DC air. Since she was wearing very little underneath, it was chillier than the Middle East. Leaning forward she gave the address for Tony's apartment to the cab driver, figuring that unless she was very unlucky, she would find him home alone and asleep since it was a 'school night.' Besides, she knew with his king single bed, Tony did not take any of his croquettes to his apartment.

After much strategizing, she decided that rather than her calling first it would be a much better plan to just turn up unannounced and catch everyone unawares. That way they wouldn't have time to come up with reasons not to give her old job again. Not that Gibbs would refuse her anything – he considered her his daughter after she killed Ari for him. Still as they say, it was better to be sure than apologetic.

Ziva wasn't going to leave anything to chance. In her experience, a spot of seduction was never a bad idea and in this case, it would cement her plan quite nicely. Of course, she wouldn't mention wanting her job back again until after the deed was done because DiNozzo had always let Gibbs' ridiculous rule 12 prevent him sleeping with her. Even when he temporarily resigned so many years ago and they were forced to give his job to Tony, his trusty canine still refused to break Gibbs precious rule with her.

The former Mossad officer had been highly offended at the time, especially since Mossad and her own father had assumed she was screwing Tony, but she'd definitely learned her lesson. This time she would let him think she had come to be with him, then she would seduce him and only after that milestone was reached would she approach the topic of getting her place on the team back again.

She'd tossed up whether to come straight from the airport to Tony's apartment since she had no doubt that she would be staying at his place – at least initially til she had somewhere of her own to stay. He was too much of a gentleman not to offer her a place to stay. But there was still a small chance that
they were at the office working on a case, so she didn't want to be burdened with the dead weight of her luggage if he wasn't there.

Therefore, she'd checked into a hotel, had a scented bubble bath, donned extremely flimsy, extremely expensive lingerie, French perfume, stilettos – and her trench coat. Ah it felt good to be back in the fleshpans of the US.

The cab pulled up outside of Tony's apartment and she stared up at the windows which were in darkness. Perhaps he wasn't home yet. Ziva glanced at the car park and couldn't see his car, but then again it had been wrecked when they were lamb-chopped returning from Dulles airport on their way back from Berlin. He'd wanted to buy her mini when she decided to sell it, but she refused, calling him a car killer. She didn't actually know what type of car he had now, so he could very well be home and asleep, she supposed.

Getting out of the cab, she paid the driver who had been giving her leering looks on the way over from the hotel, almost as if he had X-ray vision. She decided to go on up anyway and let herself in. If Tony was home and asleep, that would just make her task that much simpler since she would slip into bed beside him. Since she knew full well that his preference was to sleep nude, he wouldn't know what smacked him. If he wasn't home, then she would still climb into his bed and wait for him to get home. She would be a surprise that he couldn't resist.

And frankly, if she was going to let herself into his apartment, it was wise to do this now when the chances of anyone else being out and about in the early hours of the morning were negligible. Americans were so damned fussy about illegal entry. She'd been constantly badgered about using her lock picks to gain entry to premises when she'd been an agent. Frankly, most of the time, she'd just tuned them all out and went ahead and did it the Mossad way anyway.

Still, she didn't want some paranoid neighbour calling the cops on her. That would most definitely put a limp in her plans.

L.J. Tibbs exited the crime scene investigation truck and looked around at the murder scene. He hated all murders, but the young midshipman was barely out of high school. It was such a waste. Sipping his camomile tea, he gave his team, his family a tender glance before handing out the team assignments.

"Lisa, you take photos, please. McGregor why don't you bag and tag today and Tommy you can sketch. When you're done, come and join me and we'll talk to the witness together. You're much better than me with getting civilians to talk, Tommy. Okay Tibblettes, let's get to work."

Everyone threw themselves into their work, hoping to find out who would do such a horrible thing to Sharon Tweed, the young sailor lying in Rock Creek Park clad in exercise gear. Everyone worked diligently, Goosey carrying out an initial examination and he and Pimmy Jalmer efficiently readied the corpse to be transported back to NCIS morgue. As his team completed their assignments and made their way back to the truck, Tibbs tossed the keys to Tommy.

"You drive back, Son. You did good work today with the witnesses." He praised him, affectionately ruffling the hair of his trusty senior field agent and heading towards the passenger seat.

McGregor raced to the truck. "Shotgun!"

Lisa looked at L.J. He frowned at Agent McGregor. "Now McGregor, what have I told you about sharing?"
"That everyone has to share the front seat, Sir. Sorry Lisa!"

Tibbs grinned, patting McGregor gently on the cheek. "Good boy! Now get in the back."

"Sir, when can I drive the truck?"

"When I think you are ready for the responsibility, Son and before you ask too Lisa, when you can observe all the road rules of the USA and not cause our McGregor here to lose his lunch. Then I might just consider it. Remember rule one: always work as a team. That means we are only as strong as our weakest link and Tim has a very sensitive stomach."

Lisa nodded. "Yes Tibbs."

When they got back to headquarters they got out of the truck and gathered for a group hug.

Sarah MaGee, hit the pause button on the blu-ray player and exchanged an incredulous look with her brother. Sipping her glass of red wine, she raised a well-coiffed eyebrow. "What was that?"

"Avoiding her gaze, he shrugged. "I told you Sarah, it's the telemovie that they made from the Deep Six screen play that I sold them. They sent me the director's cut to watch before it airs next week. It's bad, isn't it?"

His sister bit her lip. "No Tim… it's fine. Let's just watch the rest of the movie. It probably just takes a bit to get into." Picking up the remote she started the disc again, reaching for the packet of pistachio nuts to keep her occupied. Oh yeah this was bad! Pizza, she needed pizza.

~o0o~

Breena Palmer was getting ready to go to bed after a long day and a lonely night. She really missed her husband when he had to work nights and tonight was one of those nights. They had multiple cases the past few days and then there had been a multiple fatality this evening and Jimmy had called and told her that he probably wouldn't get in at all tonight. He said he'd crash out for an hour or two at work.

"I can come home for an hour if you want, Honey." He offered.

"Thanks Babe, but I don't want you driving exhausted. Stay put and get some extra sleep, if you can. Besides you need to keep an eye on Ducky." Ever since his heart attack when they got married, she and Jimmy tried to watch out for the elderly ME and she knew that all-nighters were much harder on him than they used to be. Her husband had to make sure he didn't push himself too hard and take regular breaks to rest.

"Okay Bree, I love you."

"Love you too, Sweet Cheeks." He chuckled as Breena did, both knowing it wasn't his facial features she was referring to. She loved his butt – it was great to tweak and looked mighty fine in jeans, too. Of course, it looked even better out of them.

"You are such a little minx! Gotta go. Take care, okay?" He admonished her seriously before hanging up.

Breena smiled, remembering sweet, silly memories of when they'd first started seeing each other and had long phone calls last thing before they went to sleep at night. The juvenile mushy ones where neither person wanted to be the first to hang up – the 'you hang up first, no you hang up first ones' – so reminiscent of ten-year-old girls. But with all the hormones raging through them, neither had
much cared how silly they sounded. That attraction and lust has deepened into respect and love, their
behaviour had matured as well.

Now that they were married, Jimmy had no difficulty ending phone conversations either. In a way, it
made her a tad sad. Hoping it wasn't a sign that they would ultimately grow apart, she mentally
shook herself for being so foolish. It was just that now they slept together in the same bed every night
and didn't need to be parted. Well usually anyway… except for nights when either of them had to
work.

Of course, the incidence of her needing to work through the night were rare but Jimmy's job meant
that there were occasions when he didn't make it home. Breena knew her husband worried about her
when she had to spend the night alone. Sitting down at the piano before heading off to bed she
decided to take advantage of her solitude to get in the extra practise. Although she'd taken lessons as
a child, as she hit her early adulthood, music lessons had made way for clubbing and more
adventurous pastimes. But since her husband played and was pretty competent, she decided to take it
up again, so they could play duets together.

She thought it would bring them even closer, but she needed to get back up to speed, so was
practising every chance she got. Unlike the forced practising that she'd done growing up which
became increasingly despised as she matured, she found the practising she did as an adult was
actually relaxing and even rather enjoyable. Who knew scales and arpeggios could be so meditative?
Of course, it probably had something to do with the fact that it was her decision and not her mother's,
to start playing again.

One good thing about her practising when Jimmy wasn't home was that it kept her mind off being
alone in the apartment. She found it was a much better distraction than watching TV, DVDs or
reading. She could lose herself in her music and it also was a proven stress reliever, reducing blood
pressure and anxiety. It was an unfortunate fact that Breena didn't cope well with being alone,
especially at night. Before her marriage to Jimmy, she'd always gone to extraordinary lengths to
never be alone, living in share houses with multiple room-mates so she would always have someone
close by.

It had happened when she was at college. She'd been out with her girlfriends, Jada and Roslyn who
she shared an apartment with when this guy came up to talk to them and bought them all a drink.
Somehow Breena had a funny feeling about him – something just didn't seem quite right, but she
couldn't figure out what. Initially Corey Wainwright seemed to be interested in Jada, which didn't
surprise the trio over-much. Her friend was stunning. In fact, the 5-foot 11 brunette with cornflower
blue eyes was already paying for her college tuition thanks to modelling jobs. The girl had legs
practically up to her armpits and a haughtiness that Naomi Campbell would kill for, so it made sense
that Corey would be attracted to her. And since he had nice clothes and drove a Porsche and was
quite attractive, Jada agreed to go out with him a few times.

Corey started coming around to the apartment the girls shared, sometimes when Jada wasn't home
and Breena, although still uncomfortable around him, couldn't exactly refuse him entry to the
apartment to wait. It happened one night. Corey stopped by to see Jada, who had a modelling job
and wasn't going to be home for an hour or so. When Roslyn headed off to a late class tutorial
Wainwright made his move. Although his attempt to rape her was ultimately unsuccessful, since
Roslyn returned home to pick up some notes she'd forgotten and whacked him on the head with her
chemistry book, knocking him out.

Breena although she escaped being raped, was still injured trying to fight him off and Wainwright
was charged with sexual assault and attempted rape. However even though he was convicted, he
ended up with little more than a rap over the knuckles because of his family money and connections,
combined with a perennially overcrowded prison system. That and Wainwright’s good behaviour inside.

Basically, his ability to get off lightly did little to make a young Breena feel safe and she suffered from crippling nightmares and anxiety. She had difficulty in being alone and ended up moving into a sorority house to finish college so that she would never be left on her own. She underwent therapy for her PTSD and over the course of several years, she managed to move back in to a share house to live when she left college but was always nervous whenever she was forced to spend time alone.

She'd taken self-defence courses, but the bottom line was that she still was uncomfortable being alone, especially at night but she was better than she used to be. Having said that, on the nights when Jimmy didn't make it home, she was still a bundle of nerves in the apartment. One of her rituals to reduce her anxiety was ensuring that she had items in each room that could be used to defend herself if she ever needed to. Knowing that they were on hand made her feel safer, even if she didn't rightly know if push came to shove, if she would be able to use them. It was one thing to have done the defence courses, but another thing entirely should she ever be attacked again.

Some of her friends, even her father had advised her to get a gun but Breena was adamant that she could never fire a gun at an animal, let alone a human being. As an embalmer, she saw far too many deaths from accidental shooting or violent crimes which would probably not have resulted in death if not for the presence of a firearm in the commission of the crime. Jimmy, working in at a federal agency, had offered to arrange for her to get expert tuition on how to use a gun safely to defend herself but the idea of firing a gun made her even more anxious. So, she'd politely declined her husband's offer.

Now, after hanging up on Jimmy's phone call, she got the baseball bat out of the hall closet and kept it beside her. Even later, when she took a quick shower before bed she kept it close. As a girl, she was a bit of a tomboy and was a pretty mean pinch hitter, so her bat calmed her down when she was alone in the apartment. She also hid on her person a scalpel, since as an embalmer she was a dab hand with a surgical blade, her movements deft and skilful.

Although sleeping was a particular challenge, what with the empty side of the bed, feeling vulnerable and letting her guard down while she slept, she had a few other tricks up her sleeve to help her feel safe, should she ever need the assistance.

Still the truth was, she admitted to herself as she slipped into their bed and settled down to read for a while, that with Jimmy gone she would probably not sleep really soundly tonight.

ISHT

Science Officer Amy Sutton came flying across the bullpen, her pixyish wings and pink ballet pumps making her fairy like appearance even more pronounced as she leapt gracefully upon L.J.

"Tibbs, Tibbs, Tibbs, I found out Midshipman Sharon had a secret half-sister who was adopted out at birth and who swore to get even with her family." She exclaimed excitedly to the bullpen in general, her ethereal blonde curls flying as she spoke.

"Great job, Amy. What do you say, Tibblettes?" L.J. asked eyeing his team a little sternly.

Leaving off what they'd been doing, everyone got up from their desks and came over to congratulate Amy and Tommy, as senior field agent gave her a healthy sugar free cookie from the cookie tin. Munching her reward greedily, Amy smiled angelically at her team and through the cookie crumbs told L.J. and Tommy that Goosey had been looking for them to tell them about a case this one reminded him of, back in Glasgow.
Smiling, L.J. clapped Tommy on the shoulder. "C'mon Son, let's not keep him waiting. He might not tell us if we're tardy and I love listening his stories."

Agent McGregor smiled at Amy who was licking the crumbs off her fingers daintily. "Amy, you want to go and see a movie with me on Saturday night? We could grab a bite to eat first if you want to?"

Amy threw her arms around him and gave him a big hug. "Oh Tyler, I don't think that it would be right to go on dates with you anymore. Ever since you joined Team Tibblette I don't think of you like that anymore. It would be like dating my brother – you know we're all like L.J.'s kids. Of course, I'm still his favourite." She observed, smugly while McGregor and Officer Lisa pouted.

"Now don't be naughty, Amy. You know I love all my Tibblettes equally, Sweet pea. Apologise to your brothers and sister, Missy." L.J. directed, swatting her gently on the rump.

"Sorry."

"And you, Mister," he frowned at McGregor. "What have I told you about Rule 12?" Tibbs demanded, before everyone parrotted.

"Never date your family."

"And who is your family?" L.J. interrogated fiercely.

"We are, Sir," They all echoed obediently, although McGregor looked upset.

"But Amy, you know I got a tattoo, so you'd go out with me."

"Oh, you silly, McGregor. As if I'd have tatts, you big dunderhead!" Amy scolded kindly. "They were fake ones cuz I was going to a fancy-dress party. Have you ever seen a fairy with tattoos?"

"And let that be a lesson to you, Tyler McGregor. "Goosey scolded, entering the bullpen and the discussion. "Trying to impress someone by being something you're not is never a good idea. What will your future wife have to say about you having another young lady's name on your buttocks, I'm sure I don't know."

Tibbs shook his head. "You disappoint me, McGreggor. What have I told ya about being yourself?"

McGregor hung his head. "Sorry Sir, sorry Amy, Sorry Goosey."

L.J patted him on the back. "Good boy! Remember Rule 6: Don't be afraid to admit your mistakes. It's not a weakness because everyone makes mistakes.

"Why don't we all have a family movie night?" Amy suggested to change the subject, while Lisa and Tommy nodded agreement.

L.J kissed her cheek. "Great idea, Aims. We can watch the Wizard of Oz after Sunday Dinner at my house. Now it's near 5.30 so finish up for the week and we'll make a fresh start on the case on Monday. Come here for a group hug. I'm proud of you all, Tibblettes. Now go and have a great weekend and don't forget to be at my place at 5.00pm on Sunday." Tibbs reminded them, kissing his girls’ cheeks fondly and ruffling Tommy and McGregor's hair.

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Dr Embden aka 'Goosey' descended the stairs to the basement where L.J. was standing in front of his trusty easel painting a sunset scene over Jerusalem, putting the finishing touches to the painting.
he was doing for Lisa's birthday. Usually he painted huge portraits of his former wives and then when they were done he took a paintball gun and attacked their portrait violently, but he had stopped marrying lately so he had to find something new to paint. He'd started painting boats in vibrant watercolours and when asked why he chose to paint sailing boats in such stunning and minute detail, Tibbs simply shrugged.

"What, ya think it would make more sense if I built a real boat in the basement? How would I get it out of there? And it beats building miniature models and sticking them in bottles."

And really, no one could argue with that.

As Goosey, their kindly medical examiner, greeted Tibbs he could see by his paint stained fingers that he'd been down here for a while.

"L.J. my good man, I have some bad news. I think you should have a wee dram of scotch to fortify yourself before I break it." He hugged his friend gently as he daubed at his eyes with a large white starched handkerchief.

Tibbs grasped his friend. "Goosey, you know I don't drink, it is a crutch of the weak-minded. C'mon and I'll make us a nice cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows and sprinkles. You can tell me the bad news while I fix it."

"That's right dear fellow, I momentarily forgot you were a lifelong, avowed teetotaller. That sounds simply splendid."

"So, what's up Doc?"

"Oh, that sounds like something our dear Tommy would say. Unfortunately, someone sent our young Agent Thomas a letter containing white powder when he was at the orphanage playing with the youngsters, or the battered women's shelter or perhaps it happened when he was tutoring the homeless youths in computer programming, so they could graduate high school. It's hard to keep up with the philanthropic exploits of the dear boy but I'm afraid it is anthrax and he's very, very sick. The doctors don't think he'll make it. I am sorry, my friend – I know he is like a son to you."

Tibbs gave an agonised bellow that would do a wounded elephant proud, before collapsing on the floor in his kitchen, sobbing. "I can't lose him Goose. He's more than just a son to me – he's my universe. I just can't go on without him. What am I to do?"

Suddenly, an apparition appeared and embraced the sobbing lump. "Oh, my poor son," a matronly woman crooned, as she rocked him. "You have to have faith. Tell him you love him and tell him to fight."

Sarah MaGee flinched as her brother hit the pause button and leapt up to pace agitatedly. "OMG. OMG they have totally screwed it up. What part of L.J. Tibbs drinks to alleviate his messianic complex didn't they get? Or Amy, they've turned her into freakin fairy, for Merlin's sake!" Tim ranted turning a frightening shade of puce. Before Sarah could think of anything to say to appease her big brother he continued to rant.

"Or Agent Tommy – how did a swashbuckling, socially repugnant, dogged pursuer of dirtbags and any skirt over the age of 18 end up as pure as the driven snow. They’ve freakin turned him into Mother Teresa!"

His sister, knowing that Tim was very het up, chose her words cautiously. "Who did you sell the screen right to again, big bro?" She wasn't sure that he'd ever actually told her but now wasn't the
time to point out that he wasn't good at seeking opinions before acting.

"I told you Sarah. The Hallmark Channel bought it and now they've... butchered it."

"Yeah Tim, I watched it too. They've turned you all into a reboot of The Waltons with guns and badges but really, what did you expect? It's the Hallmark Channel! What were you thinking? They should come with their own dentist they are so saccharine sweet. Everyone knows they're Fluff Central."

"But I checked. They had a Hallmark Mystery category," He protested, defensively.

"Did you watch any of them?" Sarah retorted, already knowing he hadn't, since he wouldn't have signed the contract if he had.

"Come on Sare. You know I prefer to spend my time online gaming to watching television. Surely you remember the only television I watch is on the ScFi Channel." He stared at his sibling as she suddenly collapsed into uncontrollable giggles.

He glared at her. Nothing about this situation was funny in the slightest.

"I just remembered who that actress is that played Tibbs dead mother. She played the mom, Olivia in The Waltons – Michelle…no Michael Learned." She explained through peals of laughter.

"OMG you're a Tibblette! A very Waltons Tibblette, Timmy, so I guess that makes you John Boy seeing he was a writer too. Oh, damn it, I think I just wet myself." She revealed as she jumped up and headed for the bathroom.

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Some hours later:

The cab driver, Ralph Gates watched the exotic looking and sounding woman exited his cab and he smirked knowingly. He knew a high-priced hooker when he saw one. Oh yeah, she probably described herself as an escort or a courtesan except that she'd soaked herself in a cloying perfume that had given him a headache. He'd like to be as sure of winning the lottery as he was about the fact that a) she had little on underneath her coat and b) she wasn't going home but to a client's. Although she could have come from servicing a client at the hotel where he picked her up, he doubted it. This time of the night average people would be shocked at the amount of hookers servicing society's movers and shakers in the nation’s capital – many of them so-called family values types too.

There was something indefinable about the woman that set him on edge. She was very attractive – he guessed some would call her beautiful but there was a dangerous quality, a feeling that reminded him of his trip to Kenya and the safari parks he'd visited where the magnificent predators roamed free. It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time to be amongst them and he wondered if the exotic woman was offering some highly specialised and expensive sexual services.

He could imagine her fulfilling certain dangerous sexual fantasies for some johns with more money than good sense. He had a sudden mental image of a black widow spider who after completing the sex act has been known to eat her mate if he couldn't escape her clutches in time. Although Ralph wasn't into all that kinky shit, he had to admit if people got off in rutting in public places, then not knowing if you would survive copulating would probably amp things up - especially for guys that need a bit of extra help in that direction.

Judging by the shop talk of some of the professional girls he sometimes drove around town, there were plenty of johns out there with a hellava lot of kinks that couldn't get it up otherwise. Some even
liked to dress up as babies and wear diapers and suck on pacifiers, which was freakin weird in Ralph’s opinion.

Live and let live he supposed, as long as they didn't hurt anyone else, but Ralph did draw the line at the exhibitionists who needed to get off by doing it in public and thought his cab was an ideal location. Like he was stupid or something.

Watching as the young woman ghosted her way to the entrance of the apartment building, again he was struck by her resemblance to a predator – a lioness or panther following a scent. The cabbie shuddered, feeling like someone had walked over his grave as his dear old granny used to say. Shrugging as the woman disappeared from sight, he dismissed her from his thoughts as he called in to base to let them know he was available.

Grimacing as he noted that the heavy musky perfume remained in the cab, he hoped it didn't cause any future clients to have a migraine. Damn it, it smelt like a cheap bordello in the back seat.

~o0o~

Breena was tossing and turning. She wasn't exactly asleep, but not quite awake either – dozing was probably the closest she could come to sleep, given the state she was in. It was one where although exhausted, all the thoughts of the day came crowding in making it impossible for her to find blissful oblivion, even if she hadn't felt too vulnerable to lapse into restful stage four deep sleep. Breena knew that it was probably an irrational fear that now that Corey Wainwright was released and out there free once more, that he would now inevitably come looking for her again.

For a start he didn't know where she lived or that she had gotten married and changed her name. At least she hoped not and during the day her rational side was able to poo-poo the notion that he was waiting 'out there' to attack her. Yet at night it was another matter, especially when she was alone.

It was ironic that most people found her embalming work creepy, morbid, scary, weird or just plain morose, but she had no issue working with the dead. In a way, she shared a sense of camaraderie with Duckie in that she didn't feel alone in their company. She actually felt safe and yet ironically, the thought of being on her own caused her so much mental angst.

Snickering at the thought, she contemplated the practicalities of bringing home her work so to speak on the nights she was forced to spend without the benefit of her husband's presence. Somehow the only person who she might share her whimsical Weekend at Bernie's solution to her problem with was Dr Mallard. She suspected that even Jimmy would be squicked out by that little 'scheme.'

Sighing, she acknowledged the other issue that was causing her to feel as if a miniature hamster had taken up residence inside her head and was giving the hamster wheel an almighty workout, which was Ellie Bishop. The ex- NSA analyst had discovered that Tim McGee was writing a third novel in his Deep Six series. Breena had always known in a general kind of way about the books, since Jimmy had mentioned them to her at some point when they were dating but she'd never bothered to read them. Until now.

The information analyst had found out that there was going to be a screen adaptation of the first book, which was due to air soon as a telemovie. Since it was based on the MCRT and included the support forensic staff which also comprised one James Palmer, she decided it behoved her to read the damned book and frankly she was glad she did.

To be honest, she was shocked and more than a little pissed off at how her husband, Jimmy had been portrayed. She wondered what Jimmy had ever done to Tim to warrant such treatment. Sure, he could be a tad awkward at times, put his foot in it without intending to and his sense of humour
might ruffle feathers and feelings, but he didn’t do it intentionally. He was just geeky but to tell everyone Dr James Palmer had necrophiliac fantasies was going beyond the pale.

Certainly, he'd had a tempestuous affair with a lawyer who worked as a field agent on the MCRT at one point, which Jimmy admitted had mostly been conducted surreptitiously in the morgue. But that was a far cry from wanting to have sex with dead people. He and Michelle in the autopsy suite… well it wasn't all that different to ducking into the supply closet as far as Breena was concerned. In fact, she may have had sex with a boyfriend or two in the embalming room of her father’s funeral palour when she was younger, minus any clients of course. It was private, and she didn’t ever have to worry about people just barging in on her.

Tim could protest all he liked that Pimmy Jalmer wasn't based on Jimmy but that just made him stupid or a liar, and someone who went to Johns Hopkins and MIT wasn't dumb. So, that left big fat liar.

She was worried sick about how all her friends and family, especially her hot-headed dad would handle the telemovie and the portrayal of her beloved husband as a sick, sexual pervert. And as if that wasn't enough to contend with, Ellie courtesy of the office gossip, discovered that a new Deep Six book was going to be released to coincide with the telemovie. Ellie was going to hack into someone's computer – she didn't say who and download a copy to read before it was released. So, she would at least be able to give her a heads up about what had been written about Jimmy and of course see if Breena was in this latest book too.

Frankly she was more than a little concerned that her dad might try and punch Tim's light out if she was in the book and portrayed as into any of that kinky sexual crap and embalm him while he was still alive. Then again, he might knock him out and seal him up in a coffin and shove it into the cremation furnace to get rid of any incriminating evidence. Her dad could be a real bad ass when it came to defending family.

To be honest, Breena was tired of being the butt of peoples’ outlandish superstitions and irrational fears because of being in the funeral business and unfortunately having married Jimmy had made it worse. If people thought an embalmer was creepy, cutting up dead people positively grossed most people out, which was why Jimmy had begun telling people he was a doctor when they asked what he did. After all, he WAS a doctor – he just didn’t mention that his speciality was forensic pathology (in other words dissecting dead bodies to determine their cause of death).

Breena knew she wasn’t the only one who was worried about the release of the book. Ellie had similar concerns re her hubby Jake getting physical too, should McGee’s portrayal of his wife or himself prove defamatory. As a lawyer, surely, he would just sue the pants of Thom E. Gemcity; take him to the cleaners but Ellie seemed to think Jake might throttle him. Personally, Breena couldn’t see too much wrong with that as long as he didn’t end up in prison – it would serve Tim right.

So, the hamster just kept on going around and around in the wheel, even as she was lightly dozing.

Suddenly her sense of smell was assaulted by a cloying, heavy scent as someone slipped into bed beside her and grabbed her butt roughly, which was something Jimmy would never do. She wasn’t comfortable playing those types of games as foreplay and he was very respectful of her needs.

Panicking and thinking only of her feared attacker, Corey Wainwright, she launched into survival mode, her brain not the only one to recognise an intruder. Breena’s body also instinctively understood that the person in the bed beside her was not James Palmer, her beloved husband and solicitous lover.
Even in the darken room, muscle memory and pheromones made it impossible for her to mistaken him for this uninvited interloper. Panicked though she was, a primitive survivalist portion of her brain, the same one that had fought off Wainwright the first time (which her therapist called her hindbrain) swung into action again to resist the reviled lowlife. But this time unlike the first attack, Breena was more than ready for Corey.

Reaching out to grab hold of the spray atomiser – similar to that used for perfume which she kept on her bedside table on any nights when Jimmy wasn't home, she sprayed it in the direction of her assailant's face who began struggling to get away. As an embalmer, Breena worked with some pretty toxic chemicals, including formaldehyde and she'd used a dilution of 5 parts per million which while known to cause eye irritation and difficulty breathing when the vapour was breathed in, wouldn't do permanent damage. It would however cause discomfort and disorientation.

Hearing the coughing and grunting, she knew that it was working, and she moved to her second tier of attack since she couldn't shoot anyone, even Corey. Her hand caressed the surgical steel scalpel which was secreted under her pillow, before deciding to opt for her trusty baseball bat instead.

Since her intention was only to subdue her attacker for her to make her escape and was not intended to cause permanent disability or death, Breena's swing lacked true venom. While she made contact with what sounded like a sinus cavity or mandible and she heard a crack, her intent had been purely to stun Corey, so she could flee. Mind, if he had to have his jaw wired shut because she broke it, she wasn't going to shed any tears over it.

As she scrambled out of bed and fled to the front door, she couldn't help but think of her father, who inclined to prudishness, had always told her that sleeping in the nude was an invitation to have your house burn down. Which would then lead to you having to escape from the burning building and parade past the neighbours in your birthday suit for everyone to see. Glad that her modesty was intact, even if the red satin teddy she was wearing wasn't as modest as her puritanical father would like for his little girl, she decided that at the very least, all her important bits were covered - barely.

Shaking her head at how in the midst of pure unadulterated panic and adrenaline fuelled fight or flight, she was still concerned about what her father had thought and said – would say about this mess. The human mind was pretty amazing!

A part of her was freaking out in a major way as she ran to her next-door neighbour's, pounding on their front door and screaming out for help, while another part was glad that she hadn't disappointed her father by sleeping in the duff. Of course, though she didn't acknowledge it in the melee, the disassociation was pure survival mechanism – helping her from losing the plot completely. Time enough for an emotional meltdown after she'd summoned assistance and the police arrived and dragged Corey Wainwright away.

Now that Corey knew where she lived, they were going to have to find a new apartment. It was a shame because she really liked living in Tony's place and he had nice neighbours too – apart from the neighbour across the way that was a cougar and not fussy about who she slept with. All that aside, she didn't like the way she was always mentally undressing her husband whenever they spoke. If Breena wasn't such a lady she'd call her a name that rhymed with glut but instead she'd settle on tramp!

Chapter End Notes
Double dipped chocolate Tim-Tams for anyone who gets the Dr Embden reference.
Rash Decisions

Chapter Summary

Tony catches up with Balboa, Sarah McGee commits crimes against pizza and The Elf Lord consults a real lawyer.

Chapter Notes

Thank-you to everyone who took time out to leave comments and kudos. In case anyone can’t place her, Special Agent Lena Reyes appeared in the 2.06 episode Terminal Leave and the question about Dr Embden it is a breed of goose.

Although it sees a bit redundant by chapter 13 here goes. This chapter contains passages that may offend McGee, Ziva, Abby and Gibbs fans. Oh, and pizza fans may be highly squicked but it is canon... so not my bad. The good news is that if you don't like my story anyone can write their own fanfic (as long as you’re prepared to put yourself out there for others to pick what you wrote to pieces). Writing your own means that everyone in the story will act exactly the way YOU want them to.

Tony placed a piece of sashimi into his mouth as he listened to Balboa fill him in on what had been happening in DC since the last time he and Jules had come to the Big Apple to see a Broadway show. Tonight though, they were off to the ballet and although Balboa hadn't ever been before, his better half was ecstatic. Having a long and happy marriage, he'd long ago learnt that little sacrifices made a huge difference to the longevity of their relationship. Happy wife, happy life was more than just a popular axiom in his experience.

While he and Tony talked shop, Emma and Jules were deeply immersed in talk of Tony and Emma's upcoming wedding. Finally, Tony eyed him sternly.

"Okay now we've talked our way around the grumpy, bourbon-soaked elephant in the room, what aren't you saying?"

"Things are getting pretty nasty, Tony. There was a ruckus at the last team building day; the baseball game." The NCIS agent grimaced.

Tony was almost too afraid to ask. Baseball, alphabet agencies, police departments, baseball bats. Oh yeah, he could see how it could get ugly really quickly. After all, Gibbs had been attacked by two of his ex-wives with sporting equipment. One had even been with a baseball bat. Hell, there'd been occasions when if he'd had a bat or a golf club handy, he'd have been tempted to clean Gibbs' clock himself. It was definitely a chancy proposition having blunt objects around Gibbs when he was being a bastard.

Taking a deep breath, he asked. "Okay Rocky, lay it on me. What happened?"
"Well I may have made a slight error of judgement in not telling him prior to the game that it was mixed agency teams." Balboa looked chagrined. "But I thought if I told him then he'd try to sabotage the day. As it happened, he kicked up a brouhaha, anyway."

Shaking his head, he observed heatedly, "There are times when he acts more like my five-year-old grandson Zac throwing a temper tantrum when someone tells him no. Trouble is that being an ex-Gunnery Sergeant with a gun, he's one very scary five-year-old."

"What did he do?" Tony enquired, prepared for the worst.

"Well…"

Flashback:

Gibbs arrived at the field, taking in the motley assortment of federal agents from a variety of agencies and cops, along with a bunch of people he didn't recognise. The only NCIS agents he recognised was the office gossip, Lisa Tran and klutzy Ned Dornaget and neither filled him full of confidence. He so wanted to kick butt against the Fibbies, but that pair weren't his idea of butt kicking types. He wondered where the rest of the team was, he'd rip them a new one for turning up late.

Seeing Fornell, Sacks and that vile Reyes woman, he really wanted to win and was unsurprised to see Tobias and Reyes aka The Pit Bull approach. No doubt planning on doing a bit of trash talking, hoping to psyche him out.

_Not gonna happen!

_Maybe they even wanted to have a side bet._

_Well bring it on, losers!_

"Gibbs," the Pit Bull greeted him. "Tobias says that you are a pretty fair pitcher so you're first up against the Virginia Vikings. Oh, and Gunny," She tossed a red baseball cap at him which he caught reflexively, scowling. "Put it on."

Reyes took off and Jethro fixed a lethal glare at Fornell. "What was that?"

Seeing his friend's confused look, he growled, "The Pit Bull. Why's she ordering me around?"

"Well she is our captain… that usually means she gets to boss us."

"Us?" Gibbs snarled, dangerously.

Tobias licked his lips, nervously. "Yeah, you, me, Reyes, Tran, Dornaget, the Homeland guys and Suzy and Gil from Annapolis PD. Making up the Maryland Maulers."

Gibbs snorted. "In your dreams. What makes you think I'd be on a team with a bunch of feds and cops? Get your head outta your ass, Tobias."

"But that's the point of the team building exercise, Jethro. To foster cooperation between the federal agencies and cops. Surely you read the memo?"

He gave himself a mock Gibbs' styled head slap. "What am I thinking? Of course, you didn't."

Gibbs noticed that Balboa and Mendez had pulled up and got out of the car and he tuned the FBI agent out as he made a bee-line for his fellow NCIS agents.
"What the Hell, Balboa? Fornell says we're playing on mixed teams. I thought we were playing against the other alphabets. That's the only reason I agreed to this crap, so I could kick their asses into the next state."

Balboa, who like Fornell was immune to Gibbs death ray glare, responded calmly. "Yes, Fornell is correct. No, we're not. If you'd bothered to read your emails, you would know that the aim was to build better interdepartmental relationships. And the reason you agreed was because these team building days are mandatory, which is why you took part in the ballroom dancing day.

“So, Gunny, you'll have to settle for kicking our asses – the Virginia Vikings. Borin and her 2IC, Winter and Grimes from the Secret Service, Slacks and Gomez from the FBI, and some Dees from Metro PD and Marc and yours truly. Suck it up Marine!"

As Gibbs scowled at him, Lina Reyes, yelled at Gibbs to get his butt over there and warm up. Unfortunate because he then got into Balboa's space. "Who died and made her God? I aint letting that damned woman give me orders. I demand to be team captain."

"Bad luck, Jethro. You wanted to lead the team, you should have volunteered."

"Never had to in the past. It was understood I'd lead. Makes sense."

"In case you haven't noticed, times they are a-changing, Gibbs. You can't just bulldoze your way over others anymore. We called for volunteers for the position of team captain and then people voted. You didn't put your name forward." Balboa responded, offhandedly.

Damn you, Rocky. You know I don't read petty emails, that's why you told me in person about the game. Why didn't you tell me all of it?" He snarled.

His longstanding colleague chuckled ironically. "Because you didn't give me a chance. You took off."

"Coulda come after me. Shoulda."

"Yeah I coulda… but I didn't. You shoulda read your email… but you didn't. Not my responsibility to go around wiping your ass for you. Grow up and take responsibility for yourself."

"Well I volunteer to be team captain."

"I'll keep that in mind for the next tournament, Jethro. Now I have to go and report in to my captain. Good luck."

End of flashback:

Tony glowered, poking his finger in Balboa's chest. "What happened? You can't stop there."

He chuckled. "We took to the field; the Vikings were batting and the Maulers defending. Jethro pitched all of five balls before all hell broke out when Reyes dared to suggest he pitch a slow ball and he blew up, yelling that he wasn't taking orders from a jumped up damned, stupid fibbie Pit Bull who didn't know her ass from her snout."

Tony snorted and Emma who'd stopped to listen to the story looked appalled. Balboa’s wife Jules just shook her head in disgust.

“Then he stormed off the field, snarling and snapping at the various alphabets as he went, got in his car like a chubby missionary with a tribe of hungary cannibals on his tail. He didn't even stop to
leave the ball and his glove – lucky we had spares."

Tony shook his head. While he couldn't really say he was surprised, he was sad nevertheless. "Bet Vance was impressed… not."

"You could say that. Ducky found him later, down in the basement, half tanked and fuming about what the world was coming to."

Both men were silent as they contemplated the inability of Gibbs to adapt to the changes that Vance was ramming through. The balance of power was subtly shifting away from him, he was no longer able to intimidate everyone through the sheer force of his personality. He wasn't coping with that reality.

Balboa seemed to be mentally debating whether to speak before making up his mind. "And as if that wasn't bad enough, Gibbs is flunking out of the Anger Management Program"

Tony, assuming his friend was pulling his leg, started laughing.

It's not funny, DiNozzo. At this rate, he won't be allowed to retire – they'll sack him, and they have cause. And he won't even be eligible for consultancy work or an instructing job in hand to hand."

Realising Balboa was serious, Tony stopped laughing, though he was still trying to figure out how you failed Anger Management. Once he got started though and aided by an extensive prior knowledge of one Leroy Jethro Gibbs, he started coming up with ridiculous scenarios:

1. Gibbs pulling out his Sig and shooting the counsellor
2. Gibbs setting fire to his anger triggers diary
3. Attacking the seminar trainer
4. Killing anyone trying to hand him decaffeinated coffee after 2200 hours
5. Shooting the janitor for calling him Sir
6. All of the above.

Oh yeah, the possibilities were endless.

"Okay, Rocky. What did he do?"

The veteran agent rolled his eyes in exasperation. "He's pretty much used up all his markers; he fast running out of high placed people ready to call in favours for him. The fact he’s acting like a shipment of unstable C4 isn't helping him. He's offering a deal, though. Says he'll go quietly but only if he gets to pick his replacement."

Tony shook his head. That sounded like Gibbs, he never did play by anyone else's rules but his own (or was that Mike Franks rules) since he'd become a fed. Always done what he wanted, regardless of the consequences and never thought about the effect of his behaviour on those people around him. Especially those people who cared about him. So typical for him to try to call the shots.

Although out of all the directors that Tony had worked under, Vance had given Gibbs the least amount of rope to run on, the last few years the adversarial relationship had tempered, especially after Jackie's death. Still, Leon already had an exit strategy in place for him and his replacement for the MCRT.

Tony really couldn't see this going down well - since both of them were stubborn as all get out and used to getting what they wanted. That meant it was going to turn nasty. He tried to figure out who the old Marine would want to replace him.
"So, who did the great Jethro Gibbs anoint instead of you? Stan Burley, G Callen, that guy in the Louisiana FO – Wayne Prude, Warren Proud?"

"You. Says he trained you, that you are a part of his and Mike's dynasty. You or no one."

~o0o~

Sarah McGee took a bite of her cheese-less pizza with peanut butter, pickle and tobasco sauce, trying to ignore the gross smell of pepperoni and mushroom pizza that Tim was ploughing through morosely.

Ah comfort food. This was bad, so bad. Tim needed to stop this airing because it was going to screw up the launch of his new book Deep Six: Agent L.J. Tibbs Rides Again.

The movie really was a shocker yet like a train wreck, you couldn't not look away. She really had to watch the rest, even knowing it would be more of the same saccharine sweet, cotton candy crap. Maybe there was something that they could use to get it pulled off air. It was bound to give everyone Type II Diabetes

"Tim, don’t you think we’d better see the rest of it?"

"What's the point, Sare? Not likely it is going to get better suddenly."

"Good point. But it's always better to know the worst so you can be prepared. Maybe you can take out an injunction or something, but you need to see the whole box and dice."

Tim grimaced. "You're right, but it's like watching someone carving up my child and not being able to stop it." He explained, as he flicked on the disc player and they settled in together to watch to the bitter end. And it was bad - Tibbs sharing his folksy past with the team, baking birthday cakes for the team and sharing his innermost thoughts and reasons for his actions during cases.

Most bizarre was seeing Tibbs sobbing when one of the team was in danger or injured. It was damn creepy, like Gibbs had been abducted by aliens. Finally, to both their relief, the final scene, bar the epilogue played out.

As Bodie Bryers descended the stairs from the Director's Office with his father Major Bryers and his Mom that the world had thought was dead, the team were enjoying the pizza pies and teas and coffees that L.J. Tibbs had gone out and bought for them as a reward for a job well done. Lisa and Amy were praising Agent McGregor for managing the slick subterfuge of looping the camera, so they could rescue the hostages safely and capture the dirtbag. Tommy was off to the side, pouting.

"Hey! It was my idea, guys"

"Oh Tommy," Lisa laughed at him. "You're not smart enough to come up with something that clever. It wasn't your idea. You stole it from that movie with Sandra Heifer."

"And it was McGregor that actually made it work with his brilliant computer skills and outstanding intellect, Tommy. You are just a Phys. Ed major after all, dear boy. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Someone on the team has to chase down those villains." Goosey observed, sagely.

"Yeah but we still love you, Tommy." Amy hugged him. "And you're cute with great hair," she comforted him as she ran her fingers through his hair. "Gibbs loves you too but just remember that he loves me the best."

L.J. snuck up behind her. "What did I say about that, Miss?" He scolded her, crossing his arms and
Jumping a foot off the ground the fairy looked huffy. "That we're all Tibblettes and you love us equally... But Tibbsy, I was here first!"

"And that just means you've had more of my love and attention, Aims, so I need to give them extra to be fair. Now McGregor, the Director was so impressed with your computer sleight of hand she's recommended you for a commendation. She thinks that it won't be too many years before you have her job."

The team leader looked at Lisa. "And before I forget Officer Lisa, what did you learn today?"

"That fifteen-year-old boys in the US aren't suicide bombers, Aba."

"Good girl, I'm so proud of you." Tibbs praised her, proudly.

"And Aims, if I find out that you have been hitting your brother again I'll ground you," he threatened as he saw her expression. "I mean it."

"You wouldn't confiscate my pixie wings, my platinum wolverine. You just wouldn't be so mean."

"You know I will – you know that it's wrong to hit McGregor. He's the hero, after all."

Beckoning them all into a group hug, he handed everyone a candy bar, despite Goosey's protests about tooth decay, insulin levels and obesity in the US reaching epidemic proportions.

"I'm real proud of ya all. You worked as a team and saved all the little kiddies and me too AND brought a family back together. Good Job! Go home Tibblettes, you can all finish up your reports tomorrow. Oh, and sleep in, you deserve it. Don't want to see any of you in here before 1030."

The epilogue of the movie was McGregor walking in the front door of his apartment and ringing his mom and telling her he loved her. Then as he chatted on the phone there was a cheesy McGregor voiceover a la Greys' Anatomy - complete with sickening homilies.

OOooooOO

Sara sighed as she stared at her big brother. He looked...well crestfallen. Thinking about his comments about feeling like he'd watched his child being carved up, she could see how upset he was. And it had been brutal – the most pitiless case of reworking of the characters imaginable. Knowing that it was probably hopeless to try and stop it being aired next week, she nevertheless suggested that he contact a lawyer she knew that specialised in entertainment contracts. When he didn't react to her suggestion she gave him a nudge with her toes.

"What's up, Timbo?" She asked, using one of her pet names for him from her childhood, before belatedly remembering his dislike of nicknames.

"That rubbish - that tooth rotting crap is going to ruin the launch of Deep Six: L.J. Tibbs Rides Again, Sis. It'll make me a laughing stock in the mystery writer's world and I'm wondering if I can delay the launch date of my book. I need to speak to my people ASAP," He decided as he pulled out his smartphone.

"Tim, it's almost 1 o'clock in the morning. You can't ring people now. You need to wait 'til the morning."

Grudgingly, he agreed she was right. Giving him a hug goodbye Sarah head off home, looking...
forward to getting reacquainted with her bed.

As she headed back to her own place she couldn't help thinking that if her big brother had just talked to her, she might have been able to prevent this mess. Of course, she conceded that him coming to her for advice was highly unlikely. Apart from the fact that he was older than her, she only had a degree in English Literature from Waverley College.

There were times when she felt like Timmy could be a bit of an intellectual snob, having attended elitist institutes. Knowing his disdain for agent Tommy's Phys. Ed degree at OSU also made her suspect that she was something of an academic disappointment to him, too.

Regardless, Sarah would have recommended caution about signing the screen rights over to the Hallmark Channel, knowing how sickly sweet their movies always were. Honestly, watching their movies would remove the need for people to take syrup of ipecac when they had to upchuck. It was just a shame that her opinion hadn't been sought but she was just the silly little baby sister – what did she know.

Driving home gave her time to think and although she loved her brother and was grateful to him looking after her when she got into trouble, she couldn't help some traitorous thoughts from invading her brain. That final scene where they saved the hostages from being blown up, Tim's bias towards Tommy's intellectual abilities were very evident – well at least to her.

Debatable that a stranger would pick it up and when she was a young college student she had accepted without question that Tommy was an idiot and a jerk However she was older and more experienced now. More independent in her thinking and able to apply what she'd learnt when she was a college student, especially now she had more life experience on board.

As a writer, she'd study philosophy for several years and knew that Aristotle and Plato saw analogy as a shared abstraction. They saw that an idea, pattern, image, attribute, relativity, metaphor or comparison could serve to argue a position and make an abstract thought, easier for people to grasp. It was also a highly desirable skill to be able to see patterns and similarities in disparate things. One that not a lot of people necessarily possessed.

It was a much more holistic and creative form of thinking than more linear processes such as inductive reasoning but certainly required no less intelligence. And it wasn't only ancient Greek philosophers interested in analogical thinking. Mathematics, artificial intelligence, engineering and cybernetics had renewed a strong interest in it too. Applying what she knew of analogical thought, Sarah reached some startling conclusions.

Certainly, coming up with the solution to the hostages' situation was more than simply stealing an idea from the Keanu Reeves movie Speed. She and Tim had watched it several times together and it appeared that Lisa and Amy had too so why didn't they make the leap of logic if it was just as simple as pinching the idea?

At the time when she'd encountered him as an impressionable college kid, she'd taken an immediate dislike to Agent Tommy, based mostly on the Deep Six books and Tim's less than flattering accounts of his team mate. Truthfully, during the very limited contact she'd had with him during the murder investigation of Seaman Jeff Petty, the sleazy Tommy hadn't tried to hit on her at all, behaving like a perfect gentleman. Sarah had actually been pretty pissed off with him frankly, since she was over 18 and a skirt wearer, obviously.

Until then, she'd thought she was fairly attractive but his lack of interest in hitting on her had dented her fragile sense of sexiness and she'd been both insulted and crushed. She'd really been looking forward to slapping him down – hard.
Now that she was older, wiser and worldlier, she realised that Tim might have been somewhat biased about Tommy. If you didn't know he was a real person, she supposed that he worked as a comic relief character in a book but in retrospect he had to be so much more than a clown. After all, you don't get promoted to be second in charge of the major case response team of a Federal law enforcement agency just by being able to tell jokes and play pranks.

Tibbs didn't strike her as someone who would put up with an agent doing crappy work, either. The other thing about him she'd noticed was that he didn't speak like a dumb jock. He corrected people's grammar automatically, mostly without realising he was doing it.

Pulling into the parking lot, she felt conflicted. She felt sorry for what had happened to Tim's book and she was proud of her brother and his success. But she really wished that he hadn't held ambitions in her chosen profession. She'd dreamt of being a writer since childhood, studied and prepared herself for it in college and had sent copies of her manuscript for her novel to countless publishers and was yet to get a nibble.

Meanwhile she paid the bills working as a freelance journalist, specialising in writing feature articles for magazines. Sarah also wrote speeches for politicians or aspiring politicians and had ghost-written a couple of biographies for two minor political figures, but she longed to have her work published in her own name. To have her novel published, yet she despaired of it ever occurring.

She loved her brother to death and was so grateful that he had helped her, particularly when she'd been accused of killing Jeff Petty; admired how he'd put his job on the line for her. Yet, as she unlocked her front door and went into her apartment she couldn't help a nasty, traitorous thought from pushing its way into her consciousness.

What if she'd always wanted to be a musician when she grew up instead of a writer, would Tim have managed to become a recording star in his spare time instead of a successful crime writer?

~o0o~

The entertainment lawyer frowned and closed the file before laying it down on the desk. Removing his half- moon glasses from his beak-like nose he made direct eye contact with his new client.

"I'm sorry Mr McGee... um Gemcity. Ah which do you prefer?" Sheldon Jones asked.

"Either is fine."

"Yes well, I'm afraid after reviewing the contract, Mr Gemcity that there is no way for you to stop the corporation from airing your movie. The fact that they have, in your opinion, butchered your characters is not cause enough for any court to order them to refrain from it being televised."

Tim looked around the ultra-modern office with photos of famous personalities from the entertainment realm beaming down and making him feel even angrier. He'd been in a crappy mood for days culminating in an email from the director of the telemovie. He'd complained bitterly about the butchering of his characters, particularly L.J. Tibbs. The email explained that after 'work shopping the story' it had been decided that the character of L.J. Tibbs was simply too unrealistic for the audience to embrace. No one would accept that he actually worked for a federal law enforcement agency.

His treatment of his colleagues was for a start, simply too appalling and his flouting of the rules and laws meant that in real life he would be sacked, forthwith. So, they had decided to rewrite him so that viewers would accept him as being a real person. His more caring inclusiveness had scored high on desirability and credibility for people taking part in the focus groups during the script development
stage.

Imbeciles – what the Hell would they know? Tibbs was real, as were his head slaps.

"What about delaying the release of my book, then?"

Sighing, Sheldon looked at the angry countenance of his client. "Honestly Mr Gemcity, it's not looking good. They're saying that it will cost far too much to delay the launch and frankly the contract doesn't give you a lot of wiggle room. If only you'd consulted me earlier. Like before signing this or the Hallmark Channel contracts." He looked up at the ceiling before continuing.

"To be honest I'd have advised you to negotiate several additional clauses to be added before agreeing to the terms. It is always wise to get sound legal advice before signing a contract. Nevertheless, I'll try to delay the book launch, but I don't hold out a whole lot of hope, I'm sorry."

Tim scowled. "I got legal advice. My room-mate from MIT looked over the contracts for me. He has an IQ of 155 and he successfully handled his two divorces, himself."

"With respect Mr Gemcity, if your house is burning down, you would call in trained, experienced firefighters, not someone who has read a book or two on the subject and has an impressive IQ." The attorney managed to avoid rolling his eyeballs, although it was a close thing. Spare him from stupid people regardless of their alleged IQ’s.

“Furthermore, even a real divorce lawyer would struggle to get the best outcome for clients in the entertainment industry, it's quite a specialised field of law, even if my intelligence quotient doesn't rival your friend's." Sheldon sniffed huffily.

Driving back home later following his less than satisfactory appointment with his lawyer, Tim yawned, feeling drained and tried to ignore comparisons of this fiasco to his disastrous investing of his book earnings in hedge funds. Maybe he should have sought out professional advice for his investments and the contracts instead of relying on a classmate.

Hack had insisted it wasn’t that hard – but the proof of the pudding was in the eating as Ducky would say. And now he was screwed!

Fighting off his exhaustion, he tried to refocus on the road as he drove, so he didn't crash the car. Ever since viewing the director's cut of the Deep Six: L.J. Tibbs Rides Again telemovie, he was barely sleeping.

Plus, the atmosphere at work was terrible. While it was always bad, these days with Gibbs in a constant bad mood, any past comparison of previous teams and bad temper just didn't cut it. Gibbs had lifted his game to a whole new level of Gibbsness. Tim would have said that it simply wasn't possible, having worked with him on the cases where kids and military wives were involved - but he was wrong.

All that aside though, Jimmy was furious with Abby for meddling and encouraging Ziva to come back to the States. Not to mention the mild-mannered medical examiner's anger was also directed at Tim when he heard that he'd bailed out Ziva after she'd been charged with break and enter and sexual assault. Considering that Breena had been alone when Ziva decided it was a good idea to break into DiNozzo's apartment and try to seduce him and instead ended up traumatising the gentle embalmer, he understood Palmer's anger. If it was Delilah, he'd be livid.

The problem was that Breena had shattered Ziva's jaw, requiring it to be wired shut and as the dual US/Israeli citizen had no permanent place of residence in the US, the court had been reluctant to
grant her bail. The prosecutor had argued that she would flee the country and with her history as a spy and former Mossad officer, he could understand the reluctance to grant her bail. The only way to get Ziva out of jail prior to her trial was to offer her a place to stay and agree to supervise her since she had no one else and she’d been his partner. How could he turn his back on her too?

To be honest, Tim expected Gibbs would go racing in and rescue her from the clutches of the cops. Although he did go to see her when she was first arrested, it had clearly not been an amicable father daughter reunion, although his former partner refused to discuss what had transpired with Tim.

It was also obvious that Gibbs had refused to post or go guarantor on her bail or even offer her a place to stay. Which frankly, would have made more sense seeing Gibbs had a house and spare bedroom, while he had a one-bedroom apartment where his electronics took up much of the living space.

Ziva was furious that she'd been arrested, demanding that Breena be charged with assaulting her and unamused when told by the cops that it wasn't going to happen. She seemed to think that her past history working at NCIS, plus her connections in Israel should get the criminal charges dropped but the cops and the Assistant District Attorney handling the case didn't see it that way.

To be honest, he lost count of the amount of times DiNozzo had nagged her about following the law and not using her lock picks to break into people’s homes. She wouldn’t listen. Ziva always thought she was above the law; that it was a waste of her precious time and vastly superior Mossad skills to get a warrant.

In a way, Tim could see it from her perspective. No one had ever held her accountable. Until now!

So Ziva was literally hopping mad and having to use Tim’s iPad to communicate because no one could understand what she was saying with her wired jaw. Which didn't exactly improve her attitude. He honestly didn't want to go home and have to spend time with her and listen er… read her whinging and moaning about how stupid the cops were the US.

The trouble with not going home to his apartment was that it was just as bad at work. Abby was upset and feeling guilty about the fiasco with Ziva; for pleading with her to come home and then ignoring her attempts to respond. And while that was wrong, who would have predicted that Ziva would be so deluded, arrogant and stupid to break in to Tony's old apartment instead of ringing the doorbell like anyone else.

Abs was also guilty because her meddling had resulted in Breena having the crap scared out of her and Jimmy wasn’t talking to the forensic scientist because he was furiously angry with her. She was especially distraught because Ducky and Gibbs had given her a bullocking about meddling in things that were none of her business.

And finally, Abby was pissed at him, blaming him for her going off half- cocked and begging Ziva to come home. In Abby's unique brand of logic, it was his fault because he had refused to tell her about why he'd missed out on getting the senior field agent job. Therefore, he'd forced her to try and fix their family the only way she knew how and now it was even more messed up.

Crazy Goth... and to think he used to think they were destined to be together forever.

So, home or work - life was a nightmare and that was even without his concerns over Deep Six.

Life sucked!

~o0o~
Tony stared at Balboa, dumbstruck! Talk about chutzpah—the guy was amazing. Thoughts of a quirky indie Australian movie called The Castle pooped into his head, along with the movie's catchphrase which seemed very apropos. *Tell him he's dreaming.*

He settled for an outraged humph knowing that Balboa wouldn't recognise the film quotation. "No thanks—I have no intention of accepting his sloppy seconds, again. Besides, not his loyal Saint Bernard anymore and definitely not Mike Frank's flunkey, either.

He chuckled but there was a distinctly bitter after-tone to it. Picking up his sparkling water he continued on in a more philosophical way. "Nor have I any intention of trying to live up the God-like Gibbs. Learnt my lesson the last time—I'm never going to measure up. Once was way more than enough to prove I'm nothing but a pale imitation. So, there's no point in even trying."

Balboa frowned. "I'm sorry that the other SSAs and I weren't more openly supportive when Gibbs took his little sabbatical. We should have written David and McGee up for their insubordination and arguing, and Abby and her damned in-training stickers. Pity someone didn't do that to her when she first started at NCIS."

Tony shrugged and made a waving it away motion with his hands. "Ancient history but I don't need to repeat it. My team here respects me, and they don't question my right to lead them. I don't have to yell at them or head slap them to get them to focus."

Balboa could feel Emma staring daggers at him, clearly not a fan of the infamous Gibbs head slap or was she pissed that he'd told Tony that Gibbs wanted him to return to DC? As a married man, he'd learnt not to cross a protective life partner.

Tony frowned, oblivious to the undercurrent playing out between Emma and Rocky. "I found that there are more effective ways to encourage agents to focus and I so regret that I didn't discover that while I was in DC. I should never have tried to emulate Gibbs and hand out head slaps, big mistake. So, I ask you Rocky, why on earth would I want to go back to take over Gibbs team where chain of command doesn't exist?"

Balboa leaned forward, choosing his words carefully. "Why indeed, but maybe you can do me a favour and tell him all that in person? He doesn't believe that you don't want to succeed him. He thinks that Vance is stopping you taking the job."

Tony shook his head in disbelief. "Why does it matter?"

"Because he's a colleague and I know he's a real bastard, but I can't help hoping that he'll turn his life around. There no reason for him to sit in his basement and drink himself to death just because he can't do field work. AND because we both know that he's not gonna come to you, the damn stubborn fool."

Tony sighed. He understood where Balboa was coming from. Despite the fact that Gibbs was an ass and treated people like shit, it was still hard not to be concerned about him. He knew that Gibbs never stopped to consider how his actions impacted on others, or if he did he didn’t care but Tony really wished he'd stop wallowing in grief. Twenty-three years of living in the past was way over the top, by anyone’s standards.

If Shannon and Kelly were even half as perfect as they sounded, then they'd surely kick his butt if they could, for Gibbs wasting so much time refusing to move forward. Tony wished he didn't give a damn, but he did, and he couldn't just stop caring. He could never forget but he also couldn't simply
turn off all those years of feeling responsible for watching the guy's back.

"Vance has been at me to come back and have a 'little chat' to Ziva," Tony revealed reluctantly. Emma said she'd be happy to come with." He flashed a smile at his fiancée who nodded and smiled back. Rocky thought it was about as friendly as a Great White Shark.

“I guess I could kill two birds with the one stone, although I really don't have anything to say to Ziva. Think she expects me to get her old job back again.

Balboa wisely said nothing, just snorted disparagingly.

“If we do visit, I wouldn't mind catching up with Ducky and Jimmy again and check up on how Breena is doing." Tony mused as he tried to reach a decision.

“Hey, it wasn’t your fault that David decided to break into your apartment and climb into what she thought was your bed,” his friend reminded him sharply.

Emma scowled. “I've already tried that argument. Didn’t work for me either. Can’t wait to give that...woman a piece of my mind.”

Although he wasn’t dumb enough to express it, Balboa was looking forward to that too. With a bit of luck, Ziva just might have met her match when it came to Emma Ingham.
Consequence

Chapter Summary

Leon gets his butt kicked for dropping the ball and Tony makes a long-awaited return to DC.

NSA Director Brenton Goulding welcomed NCIS Director Leon Vance into his office with an iron-fisted handshake and a steely-eyed glare. In the scheme of all things alphabet, Leon was low man in the pecking order of directors, so it was tacitly accepted that Leon should come to his office for their meeting. Brenton rang for coffee to be brought in as he offered the director a seat.

"Guess you're wondering why I requested an urgent meeting, Leon? So, let's dispense with the social niceties and get down to business, shall we."

Leon shrugged. "Fine by me. What's going on, Brent?"

"A situation has been brought to my attention that threatens national security. I'm hoping you'll take the lead on that situation, but time is most definitely of the essence, so if you are going to procrastinate then NSA will take point and do what needs to be done."

Goulding handed over a file and Leon opened it to find selected passages highlighted:

Agent McGregor stared at the glass shard piercing his torso after being caught in the aftermath of the bomb blast by the vengeful bomber Billy Sweeting. The mad bomber was determined to avenge his dead son who was killed in a naval accident caused by faulty wiring on the ship he was serving on, due to cost cutting measures.

Sweeting was not concerned about who he hurt in the process of gaining his retribution. The NCIS agent decided, having literally cheated death in his heroic attempt to retrieve the case file before the car bomb exploded, decimating their HQ, it was a wake-up call. He decided he was going to reassess his life and the way he lived it, if indeed he made it out of the twisted metal and concrete building alive.

As the EMTs loaded him onto a gurney and transported him to hospital, he stared aghast at the death and destruction that one deranged, callously grief-stricken parent had brought about with his car bomb. It was a sobering sight!

In hindsight, McGregor decided, the fact that their esteemed leader, Director Leonardo Chance had been abducted by Sweeting and then left unharmed, really should have set off some serious alarm bells. It should have been imperative for the agency to have ripped Chance's SUV apart to check it for bombs. As it was, the failure to do so meant it had become the smoking gun that allowed Billy Sweeting to wreak havoc and mayhem without having to be anywhere near NCIS headquarters.

It was a very costly mistake and one that should never have occurred!

L.J. Tibbs swore a vow to the dead and injured that Sweeting would pay for his despicable act and vowed to take him down like the feral dog he was. And soon enough Director Leonardo Chance gave him the word that 'the powers that be' had given approval for him to be dealt with. WITH
EXTREME PREJUDICE!

Tibbs rode off into the sunset, a romantic, yet solitary figure as he set off to take down a monster. Ordering his team to stand down lest anyone else be molested by one man's blind vendetta, he knew there was a good chance he might not make it back.

As long as he took down Sweeting, he was okay with that - he'd die happy.

Meanwhile as they'd attempted to flee the building via the elevator and become trapped as the bomb went off, Tommy and Lisa were bored and afraid. Since the elevator was used as their own personal make out room, it was no surprise that their thoughts turned carnal.

"It is just so hot in here, Tommy. Why don't we get up the duff to stay cool? We could even make up to take our mind of our imminent demise. At Mossad, we do not have the same prudish attitudes to having it off with our fellow team mates. We might die at any moment, so we might as well die having sex, no?"

"First off Lisa, it's 'let's get in the buff,' not up the duff. And you make out, not make up and FYI that will not make us cooler."

"Just shut up and lose your pants, Tommy. Remember I could kill you with a paperclip. Danger always makes me feel spikey." Officer Lisa ripped his clothes off and proceeded to have wild, tempestuous sex with the bemused Agent Tommy before he started to reciprocate, both uncaring that others around them lay dead or injured in the rubble as they gave in to their animalistic passions.

That was not good. No one liked having their monumental cock-ups to be broadcast to every man and his dog. Or suggesting that agents were humping like sex crazed rabbits during a tragedy.

Turning to another highlighted passage Vance scowled.

Director Leonardo Chance entered the interview room, his presence oozing barely contained menace as he approached the skinny young suspect. He was wielding a vicious looking axe that was almost identical to the murder weapon used to murder the young man's father. After 30 hours of being interrogated by the cops without getting a confession, he'd persuaded L.J. Tibbs to try to break the kid and get him to admit to killing his old man.

He told his agent that the victim was a former Marine and the Attorney General was a former JAG officer who he owed a favour to. Which was the truth, just not all of it since he first met the murder victim at naval college - making him an old friend. Leonardo was sure the kid was on the brink of breaking down and confessing his guilt and he'd been itching to get a shot at him after Tibbs had softened him up sufficiently. And now it was showtime, as Chance pounced mercilessly on his prey.

"Your father blamed you because your mother left you both. He said it was your fault and then he washed his hands of you."

"Who told you that? No one knew that."

"Your father told me. I knew him at the naval academy. I looked up to him because he was a real man, he had honour. Not like his contemptible drug addicted son. He threw your weak ass out of his house when you dropped out of a drug treatment program for the third time. You were a pathetic disappointment to him. You let him down."

Eighteen-year-old Mick reacted badly. "I was always a disappointment."

"Too right you were."
Chance picked up the axe and swung it down violently on the table into a photo of his father, inches away from Mick. "And that's why you picked up the axe and you hit him, didn't you? It must have felt good. You showed him you weren't nearly as weak and pitiful as he thought, didn't you?"

The teenager was ready to crack, tears streaming down his face. "Yes. Okay, I did it."

"And once you started you couldn't stop. You had to keep hitting him?"

"If you say so."

"I do. You realised in that moment that he'd never call you worthless again, never blame you for your mom leaving again, never throw you out of the house again. And it felt damned good, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"So be a man and say it. Say 'I killed my father.' Be a man."

"I killed my father and I'm not sorry the bastard is dead."

Leonardo Chance gave a triumphal grin. "Thank-you Mick, that's all I needed to hear." The director exited the interview room, casting a smug look at the two-way mirror, knowing that Tibbs had been observing.

When he caught up with him in the corridor, L.J. scowled, his lethal glare at Chance. "When were you going to tell me, you were a friend of his father's, Leonardo?"

"I wasn't going to tell you, L.J. Need to know."

Tibbs raised his eyebrows. "And ya don't think that the jury might have a problem with that?"

"What. He confessed. Call the DA and tell him we have his confession."

Tibbs shook his head. "You really don't think that you coerced him into a false confession?"

I did what I had to do to get him to admit to killing his father. What no one else could. I'm going to call the DA and tell him to come get him."

"There's just one problem, Director. He didn't do it."

"Are you deaf, Man? That was a confession in case you didn't realise it."

"Not deaf, but my gut says he didn't do it. You just scared the shit outta a kid with an axe, who's an addict, but he's also angry and confused. If ya pushed him a bit more he'd probably tell you he's Mary Poppins if you wanted him to."

And L.J proceeded to prove that Mick was innocent of the murder.

Leon finished reading the passages, his heart rate speeding up alarmingly and his blood pressure sky-rocketing. Glancing over at the NSA director, he scowled angrily.

"What the Hell is this trash, Brenton?"

"Those are a few selected passages from the latest book by Thom E. Gemcity that was due to be released this week. The book is the third one in the Deep Six series entitled L.J. Tibbs Rides Again."
"This is one of those books? I thought they were supposed to be works of fiction."

"Yes, the author does claim that, however as you can see there are far too many similarities to real
life situations for that claim to stand up to scrutiny. Cases, characters bearing striking similarities
including names, situations that could pose a threat to national security and… well certain multiple
decisions and outcomes that paint the US, the intelligence community and NCIS in a far from
favourable light." Seeing Leon's curious look, he explained.

"Well for example… an NCIS agent called Tommy DiNosey that refused to give up investigating the
death of an ICE agent. A death that was ruled as accidental and signed off rather precipitously may I
say, and how said agent's perspicacity ended up tracking down the killer. Turns out the killer was a
Mossad agent, operating without our approval on US soil who'd already been issued with an FISA
warrant by your agency to depart the country thrice after killing terrorists and getting in the middle of
an investigation. You know the public will want to know why he wasn't arrested and deported after
ignoring the first order to leave the country, before he killed a federal agent."

Leon winced at the truth of that observation.

Goulding continued to hammer the point. "The same killer who then resisted arrest and attacked and
injured Agent Tommy, who was then forced to kill Nivkin in self-defence. Then, due to an
outrageous temper tantrum by the Director of Mossad, Leonardo Chance drags Agent DiNosey (who
was injured by Nivkin resisting arrest) to Israel to be "interrogated" by Director Elijah Zavide in
Israel. At the same time, Chance swept the death of the ICE agent under the carpet, failing to demand
an explanation for Mossad killing him.

"As you can imagine, the press will have a field day with that, knowing that Chance as Elijah's
whore and apologist, also cared naught about a federal agent's death or protecting his own agent's
back. Everyone will know what an ambitious son of a bitch he is, prepared to sacrifice his own
countrymen to curry favours with Mossad."

Leon cursed colourfully. He'd be crucified, probably justifiably but worse, his kids would be vilified
too.

"And trust me, Jo or Jane Citizen won't care a hoot that you were relying on his cooperation to flush
out a mole, which was why you decided to crawl up his ass - that time."

Benton paused dramatically before asking sardonically. "What is it with NCIS? It would seem that
your little agency is quite a breeding ground for moles."

Vance scowled. The truth was that the alphabets might all be on the same side, nominally, but they
did all compete for the same funding pie from the government. So, there was the inevitable scramble
each year to get as much money as possible and that sometimes meant throwing a colleague or
agency under the bus – in much the same way Vance had done to his own agent after the Rivkin
debacle. Grinning smugly, Goulding continued, twisting the knife and watching Vance squirm.

"Nor will Gemcity's revelation that Officer Lisa was another mole, sending back classified data to
Mossad while she was a Liaison at NCIS for four years without Leo Chance's knowledge or
approval, go down well with the public. Or that she knew damned well that Rivkin… sorry my bad
Officer Nivkin had killed the ICE agent so she tried to cover up the crime by ordering an emergency
extraction.

That instead of prosecuting her, you made her a full-time federal agent after you and Gibbs
sponsored her to become a US citizen. Great thinking by the way. They'll probably demand your
head on a stick for that!"
"Damn it, we have to stop this being released. What was McGee thinking?" Leon yelled.

"Probably thought since no one took him to task for his first two books, that no one would have a problem with it." Brenton observed, wryly.

"Okay, so my predecessor dropped the ball."

"Gee, do you really think so?" Brenton retorted sarcastically. "Shepard was too busy trying to avenge Daddy's suicide. Seeing an unhealthy trend here, Leon?"

The NCIS director glared. He hated being wrong footed and he'd been stumbling all morning.

Goulding decided to toss him a crumb. "Luckily, the assassination of Elijah Zavide was kept out of the book. I suspect that if it had been included he would have detailed how Officer Lisa (with tacit but full support of Leonardo Chance) would have personally hunted him down and arranged a dirt nap for Officer Ben Lodnar. I suspect that the fact that Agent McGregor conspired with Lisa despite direct orders of the Department of Homeland Security not to track down Deputy Director Lodnar using unsanctioned government resources and had the full backing of Director Chance might have had something to do with it."

He noticed Vance looking relieved, so he delivered him more bad news. "However, you ignoring regulations and procedures when you used your position to interfere in a murder investigation involving your brother-in-law? That did make it into the book, I'm afraid. As was the fact that you ended up trying to shield a killer, since he was guilty. Then there were the other times that you covered up for killers. Seeing another trend, Leon?"

Vance swallowed and realised that he had been stupid covering up for Gibbs and Ziva. His kids could suffer if his involvement became known – what an idiot he was. Who'd take care of them if he was sent to prison.

Goulding looked at him dispassionately, deciding he deserved to suffer a bit longer. It beggared belief that these books had been allowed to be published without huge chunks of them being redacted.

"What I can't figure out is why his Team leader didn't flay him alive for what he wrote. 'L.J. Tibbs drinks to alleviate his messianic complex' is not exactly a description I'd relish being published about me."

Leon snorted. "Gibbs revels in his second B is for bastard reputation, Brent. As far as he is concerned, the more people that are scared shitless of him, the better he likes it."

"What about other people's reputation though? Jethro was supposed to be close to his trusty Saint Bernard for one," the NSA director wanted to know.

"What about them? He wouldn't see it as a big deal. Likes embarrassing his team, thinks it keeps them biddable."

"Maybe but after the fiasco with the two individuals Gemcity based his characters on getting killed by a disturbed individual and almost losing his colleague and former lover, you'd think he would have realised the danger of using real people’s lives. I understand that writers use their experiences to draw from, but they will amalgamate characters or create them from scratch, not just substitute a few letters in their name." Brenton was truly incredulous. Everyone said McGee was a genius.

“Surely after that case where the lunatic killed people and also got Dr Sciuto killed, anyone with a scrap of common sense would realise how dangerous it could be. At the very least, you’d get
people's permission to use their identities. It's one of the arguments we plan to use to make sure that the temporary injunction becomes permanent.

Vance shrugged, not really wanting to argue with Goulding's point of view. Particularly since he wasn't exactly on top of all the details, unlike Brent.

"But… what I don't get is how your godlike Gibbs could tell his agent that it wasn't his fault that a nut job took his manuscript too seriously and killed two innocent people and tried to make it three. How could he honestly believe that? What sort of advice was it? McGee was using people without their knowledge or consent as characters and he didn't even bother to disguise them enough to prevent someone off the street being able to track them down. How in hell was that not McGee’s fault?" he demanded vehemently.

"If Gemcity accepted the accolades, the fame and monetary rewards, then he had to be prepared to accept responsibility for painting a huge target on peoples' backs as well. And Gibbs is out of his tree if he thinks otherwise."

Goulding was momentarily silent before declaring dryly, "The legal eagles reckon the relatives of the two murder victims had a damn good civil case against him if they'd pursued it. And as far as I'm concerned, if any other people lost their lives or were harmed because they were used as character in future books, Leroy Jethro Gibbs is equally culpable because of that appalling piece of advice to his subordinate."

Sighing, Vance pulled out his phone. "Need to get the legal team working on an injunction," And the NSA director decided to put him out of his misery.

"Already done. It is only an emergency injunction at the moment, but the legal department is confident it will be upheld, and the book removed permanently. The movie on the other hand, we were not so successful. It looks as if nothing short of an act of God will stop it airing, I'm afraid."

"Why the Hell not?"

"According to the judge, it was the fact that the books were already published and out in the public domain for almost a decade, even if they contain information damaging to national security. He claimed that the cat was already out of the bag and couldn't be reasonably expected to be put back in again." He shrugged. "We can appeal but the lawyers feel that it will be difficult to argue this position."

"Crap!" They were both silent as they contemplated this gigantic screw up.

"Brenton, can I ask why NSA became involved in this situation?" Leon inquired.

In response, his colleague opened a file on his desk and extracted some pages then passed them across the desk to Leon.

"Pimmy Jalmer, the French Polynesian autopsy assistant having finished an autopsy was sitting down with a cup of coffee, planning on indulging in his favourite necrophilia fantasy with his old flame Rochelle Nee when the new probie came down for a chat. Trying to quell his irritation, not to mention his rampant libido, Pimmy tried to smile at the blond-haired Nellie Abbot.

"Hey Nellie, what brings you down here?"

"Hi Pimmy. I needed to talk to someone who gets me. McGregor thinks I'm weird for liking the smell of motor oil and well… other things." The blonde glanced at him slyly, referring to her well known food fetishes. "I needed to see a friendly face."
He nodded, knowing that he and the former NSA analyst both enjoyed an alternative lifestyle and had buddied up because they had much in common. Both were recently married and their spouses Briony Jalmer and Duke Mallory got on really well, too. The other members of the team were not so accepting of their sexual deviations, finding them quite confronting. Pimmy on the other hand never judged Nellie and her husband for it although he did find it rather messy...

Leon stopped reading because he was shocked. Palmer and Bishop were sexual perverts?

"Dear Lord, if the public thought that Palmer was into necrophilia…"

"Relax, according to my source those particular details are indeed the product of an overactive fantasy life. Perhaps it might even be projection on McGee’s part; I’d recommend that you check the security tapes to see if Agent McGregor has been dipping his nib into Dr Embden’s ‘guests’ inkwells.” Goulding suggested delicately.

“Must say that your embodiment of the new digital aged, superior NCIS agent has left you with rather a lot of egg on your face.” He smirked, happy to see a rival left red-faced before becoming serious again. Ignoring Vance’s glower, he continued.

“As for my former analyst, you may or may not know that Eleanor Bishop uses food association as a mnemonic device – similar to the person who recalls details by placing them in various rooms in a mansion as a memory aid.” Goulding explained briefly.

"Nevertheless, with so many other details that are identical, inflammatory insinuations of food fetishes will undoubted upset people…have already upset people. And like your good self did just now, they'll will assume it's fact."

"So, Bishop came to you?” The NSA director nodded affirmative. "Why you?” Leon pressed. "Why didn't she get a lawyer?"

"Multiple reasons. Apart from being pissed off over the food association/food play crap she was worried if she took legal action her husband Jake would find out and do something stupid that would land him in jail. I don't want one of my best people to end up charged because of this book, nor do I want attention drawn to him either. Just as I'm not keen to advertise that Bishop used to work for the NSA either, you can't be too careful when it comes to security issues.” He observed with a frown.

"But she was also concerned about the amount of classified and potentially damaging data that was loosely disguised as fiction.” He revealed candidly. "Having worked at the NSA, Ellie was well aware how much classified information is released under the guise of works of fiction in books. All our analysts are - and she felt that Deep Six One and Two had definitely crossed the line." Goulding paused, grimacing.

Most of the time nation security secrets loosely disguised as fiction was a deliberate ploy by disaffected elements, although this Gemcity character was definitely an enigma, the NSA director pondered. Supposedly he was a genius and yet the characters in the book were barely even disguised – a seventh grader had more subtlety and Agent McGee surely must realise the issues of confidentiality and National Security that he was breaking? He wasn't stupid, so how could he not? Yet he didn't seem to have a particular axe to grind, so what was his motivation?

"How did she get hold of the book? Did McGee give it to her? If Bishop had concerns, why not come and talk to me? I'm her boss."

"No, I don't believe he did give it to her and I didn't inquire how she came by it. Plausible deniability. As to why me and not you – well she is still a probationary agent – easily sacked and he's
been at the agency for a decade.” Brenton paused, choosing his words.

"And you have to look at things from her point of view – you didn't take any action about his first two books. So why should she expect you to do anything differently this time? She knew I would take her concerns seriously and she was right!"

Leon really couldn't argue with that logic – he should have done something about the books when he took over. Jen Shepard had dropped the ball; completely obsessed with Rene Benoit. What a FUBAR!

~o0o~

Emma Ingham glanced over to the passenger seat where Tony was grabbing a nap. He'd been tying up a case and hadn't made it home last night, although he'd managed to snatch a few hours’ sleep at the office. She knew that he tried hard to achieve a work life balance with his team and it was a rare situation that he kept them working without breaks. As he explained to her, the cumulative effects of working too many hours without breaks created negative stress and its effects made it counter-productive in terms of productivity. And, he pointed out slyly, people also needed a personal life.

He was convinced that happy agents made more productive workers. So whenever possible, when a case was big enough to need to be worked on 24/7 Tony would bring in extra agents from additional teams. Luckily, Tony recognised that it was equally important for him to have a life away from the job too. As he said, after being given a second chance at life, he wasn't about to take it for granted.

Em recalled a typical conversation that they'd had soon after he decided to return to NCIS.

"I used to think that the job was my life and the team was my family, Em but I know now I was wrong. I'm more than the job and if it ended tomorrow, I'd survive and thrive because you're my life and my family."

After a suitable interlude to express those sentiments that required non-verbal techniques, she asked, "So you don't mind having to ask for extra help, so you can come home at night?"

"For you Babe, nothing is too hard. I'd walk over hot coals to be able to spend time with you and anyway, it's a two-way street. Other teams help out when we have a hot one and then we'll bog in and help out when they need extra hands. We're all on the one team, really and this way we all get out of the office and get the down time we need."

At that point, by mutual consent, they’d decided to explore their nonverbal communication skills further. For such a verbose individual, Tony was exceptionally skilled, Emma decided as his lips sought out her nape, sending shivers through her body that had nothing to do with the cold.

As the sedan ate up the miles, she thought about the man asleep beside her. Emma understood that having had such a life changing experience with his lung cancer, Tony had found himself questioning everything about his life. Nothing was taken for granted or off limits.

She knew full well that perhaps the most difficult thing that Tony had faced pre-cancer was being thought of as weak. He would never ask for help when he was in trouble, having learnt as a child that he couldn't depend on others to look out for his welfare. Having to fight his way through cancer treatment had brought about a fundamental shift in perspective and he had re-evaluated pretty much everything in his life. Asking for help when he needed it was no longer seen as the terrible sin that he'd always considered it to be. Not after being so vulnerable and reliant on others to survive during his arduous treatment.
So, trying to avoid unnecessary stress, he normally tried not to work ridiculous hours but in the last case, Tony was trying to finish it up, so they could make this trip to DC. In the end, the case was not quite done and dusted but Tony had faith in his SFA, Lisle Zabinski to finish it up for him. Emma knew that Tony's management style was not a micro-manager. He trained his people and then trusted them to do the job to the best of their abilities. Plus, he never hesitated to give praise when it was due, with the consequence that his team strived to live up to his expectations.

As she watched the miles slide by, she contemplated their decision to drive down to DC instead of flying. They'd both figured it would be less stressful to drive than fighting their way through the Friday night commute at the airport, plus the traffic at both ends. Seeing his drawn features when he arrived home to collect her, Emma offered to drive down so he could nap. Tony had gratefully accepted her suggestion and she was pleased that he trusted her enough to fall asleep.

Lots of guys hated to be in the passenger seat but he'd never seemed to have a problem sharing the driving with her on trips. When she'd expressed surprise, he muttered that Emma was a good driver, unlike his former Israeli partner who drove like she was in a war zone dodging IEDs.

Tony's fiancée scowled at the thought of Ziva David since one of the reasons they were heading down to DC was to deal with her. She got the feeling that Tony would prefer to have his legs waxed than have to meet with her.

Emma on the other hand, was looking forward to having a cosy chat with the former assassin.
Triggers

Chapter Summary

Gibbs is confused about why people are treating him so strangely. Meanwhile Ziva is furious that she has been charged and confused as to why no one is coming to her rescue.

Gibbs was in the bullpen late Friday night, finishing up the report on their case – the murder of a gunnery sergeant. It had turned out to be a classic case of dishonour amongst thieves as Ducky would say, since the dirtbags had been misappropriating base funds and had gotten greedy and killed one of their own. Quite possibly, they’d decided that one less thief meant more money for the rest of them or maybe it was a more practical reason. For instance, seven was an awkward number to divvy up the spoils and six was a lot simpler for dumbasses to divide.

Whatever the reason, it brought them onto the radar screen of one Jethro Leroy Gibbs and the MCRT - to their detriment.

Now they’d closed the case, the rest of the gang was identified and in custody as well as the murderer and Jethro felt relief.

Gibbs hated dirty Marines with an abiding passion – they brought disgrace to the uniform but even worse was when a fellow Marine killed one of their own. They were bottom feeders, not even fit to clean a Marine's boots so as was customary in a case like this, he’d been particularly brutal when he interrogated the killer, Lieutenant Geller.

Jethro had been determined to wring a confession out of the dirtbag and he knew he could do it easily – one way or another. At first the interrogation was proceeding as planned, Kenneth Geller was antsy, nervous and Gibbs could sense the scent of blood in the air, invigorating him greatly. That always had the effect of the Marine stepping it up a notch, as he expected to make a breakthrough imminently.

Then something strange transpired, Abby would say it was hinky. Geller seemed to look at him, really look at him as if for the first time and then asked him what his name was, again. Figuring his fierce some reputation had proceeded him, Gibbs gave a feral grin and told him, waiting to see the terror in the killer's eyes after realising he was 'that Gibbs.' The second B in Gibbs being for bastard was an absurdly useful moniker, not just with his team or the agency but within the Armed Forces and other agencies. Even for dirtbags, if they'd been 'round the block more than once, it always struck terror in their hearts, knowing that Gibbs was their adversary.

A fellow Marine was sure to have heard of him and there was a definite light of recognition in his eye as Geller had put two and two together and figured out exactly who he was dealing with. Good! At this rate, there would be a confession in record time. Perhaps he could encourage the lieutenant to fill his pants; that really made his day.

It had the added bonus of pissing off the janitorial staff, too. When DiNozzo was still around he used to order him to clean up the mess as a joke, although maybe that was going a step too far.

Yet the killer's expression didn't seem to be one of fear as he’d expected – Gibbs wasn't sure what it
was. He was gobsmacked when the petty little ferret faced killer suddenly smirked, pulling out a snowy white handkerchief and offered it to him. Unsure if it was evidence Jethro looked at it, puzzled.

"Just thought you might need it when ya got all weepy, Tibbs." The suspect explained. In fact, he seemed to be highly amused about something, having difficulty containing himself.

"S'fine if you wanna step outside for a group hug with ya team... ya Tibblettes. Maybe make a soothing cup of cocoa for everyone; don't forget the marshmallows and sprinkles, now."

Gibbs decided Geller definitely had mental issues. Despite his fury, the man seemed unafraid of him, which was plain crazy. Anyone in their right mind would be soiling themselves right about now. Except Geller was clearly unaffected by his menace and reputation; in fact, the man was chuckling, looking at him as if he was a joke. Oh yeah, the pile of crap was obviously mad as a hatter.

What other possible explanation could there be for him tittering and muttering to himself about group hugs and hair ruffling of Gibbs’ Tibblettes, which frankly sounded a bit hinky. He hoped he wasn't being hit upon by the scum sucker and he’d better not try to make any moves towards Jethro’s Tibblettes or Geller would be singing soprano. He didn’t swing that way!

Now hours later, he was finishing up the case report and collating the rest of the team's contributions, including Abby and Ducky's reports. (No one was telling Ducky he was too old to do his job - talk about double standards.) Growling as he put the finishing touches to the report, he closed it and stood up to deliver it to the Director. To his eternal frustration, he'd been unable to break Lieutenant Geller and get his usual confession to round off the case and it pissed him off.

While they had enough solid evidence to charge him, and make the charges stick, according to the legal department advice, Gibbs felt like his competence was at stake. He always managed to get confessions, even when other agents couldn't. Vance had acknowledged him as one of the two best interrogators in the whole agency when he wanted him to get a confession out of the kid, Nick Whatsaname. He was supposed to have done a Lizzie Borden on his old man, who was a friend of the director's. Turned out the kid hadn't done it and Vance was not a happy camper to be proved wrong which just went to show, his Rule 10 was a sound one.

As he put the report to bed, feeling a disappointing sense of incompleteness, Jethro couldn't help thinking about how crazy the whole place had been acting this week. People kept behaving weirdly; asking him if his Tibblettes were okay. Was this a euphemistic reference to his balls and if so why the sudden interest? They also persisted in telling him they'd stocked up on tissues or offering him cups of chamomile tea. McGee was acting strange too, looking at him anxiously when he thought he wasn't watching. Although he put it down to the launch of his book being cancelled after Sec Nav and Leon decided that it was damaging to the Agency and National security, perhaps there was more to it than that.

Bishop was acting skittish around them as if she thought she was going to be disciplined (for what he didn’t know) and Marc seemed to be having trouble keeping a straight face, especially when someone made a crack about Jethro’s Tibblettes. Then there was Abby who was in a permanently bad mood and had taken to hitting McGee when he was around her and yelling like a banshee about him turning her into a fairy and ruining her street cred as a Goth.

There was such a thing as mass hysteria or mass insanity, he was sure. It seemed like it had infected the whole of the office. Which would explain Geller, who'd been raving like a lunatic about his Tibblettes and calling him a sobbing pile of goo which was as ridiculous as insisting that the sky was green.
Mendez seemed sane enough, but that air of amusement was damned annoying, especially when Geller was ranting at him. When he called him on it, asking what he'd been raving about, Marc told him to talk to McGee or watch the movie, which was a comment he expected to come outta DiNozzo's mouth. Sighing deeply, he wished Tony was here now – when push came to shove he would give it to him straight.

Then there was the midweek debacle of his first mandatory anger management counselling session. It had gone about as well as a bull in a china shop and he was still trying not to think about it because he was just so damned furious if he did. Vance had censured him for storming out before it was finished and threatened to sack him if he didn't pull his head out of his ass and comply, which infuriated him even more.

He was fighting to keep his job, cashing in favours left, right and centre he'd been accruing for years but if he failed to complete the damned stupid anger course, they would have just cause to terminate his contract. Damn DiNozzo, why couldn't he have just forgiven and forgotten like he'd done hundreds of times before. Things would never have gotten so far out of control if he'd just sucked it up.

Conveniently, Gibbs ignored the fact that a large part of him leaving was because he'd been diagnosed with cancer.

Fornell found him hours later still in the bull pen, sitting in the dark looking as grumpy as all get out to be disturbed. He was lost in melancholia about the good old days when people feared him and DiNozzo was his loyal Saint Bernard. Gibbs' frenemy physically had to drag him back to his own place for takeout Chinese, bourbon and to watch a truly god-awful movie.

Several hours later as he was lying practically paralytic on Tobias' couch, he now realised that the whole damned office had been taking the piss out of him and why Geller had managed to avoid confessing. He also understood Abby's fury and McGee's furtiveness (although he was also a laughingstock) as Jeethro's B for bastard cred all but trashed.

He was gonna kill his junior agent and he figured he'd better add that to his anger management Triggers Diary when his hangover lifted enough for him to pick up a pen and write. He drifted off as he imagined dire new ways to make McGee pay for trashing his reputation.

ISHT

The next day, cursing humanity for the world's worst hangover, Gibbs finally managed to stagger out of Tobias' home and get into his truck despite the pounding in his head. Sometimes when he had a bad hangover (usually when he got really maudlin) he questioned if the temporary respite of drinking to numb his emotions was worth the aftermath.

Rarely, he was prepared to admit that maybe, just maybe he had a slight problem with alcohol, but he could give it up if he really wanted to. He just chose not to.

Deciding to head into the office and finish up the reports he'd been working on last night before Tobias put him out of his misery about how he'd become a laughing stock, he set off, glad he'd driven to Tobias' last night. Last thing he wanted was to have to call a cab and listen to some idiot cabbie ramble on. Especially if he recognised him and started making cracks about his tibblettes.

At least the office should be quiet since it was Saturday morning and the team was off rotation since they'd closed the Geller investigation.

Remembering his anger over his carefully constructed professional persona (which also happened to
his off-the-job persona since his job was his life) that had been totally trashed – *thanks Elf Lord* - he felt a familiar surge of fury threatening to envelope him. Deciding to amend his list of anger triggers, he felt a juvenile sense of satisfaction in flaunting the rules of the anger management program. He hated being dictated to by cretins and fools. Five triggers indeed!

As he made amendments to the list yet again, his mind drifted back to the night he'd filled out the damned stupid diary last month. It had created quite a stir.

Flashback:

Gibbs sat at his desk in the bullpen at 2100 finishing off paperwork that HR had been nagging him about for days. The paper pushers had been trying to send him to the funny farm for years with the constant barrage of meaningless paper and so far, failing miserably; so, he soldiered on stoically. Finally, it was done, and he stuck it into the interoffice envelope and left it in his out-tray. Truth be told, he preferred the tried and true methods of completing the hated stuff.

Doing it online was just asking for it to be chewed up and be 'disappeared' into the murky world of cyberspace. The old interoffice envelope was good enough for him and if it got lost between the bullpen and its destination, it was much easier to track down who was responsible. And a lot simpler to tear them a new one than it was to shoot a computer. Less paperwork but less satisfying, though.

Now that his desk was clear, that presented Gibbs with another problem. The anger management exercises from the weekly seminar were due tomorrow. He had been putting it off all week, but he couldn't any longer. With a sigh, he decided to bite the bullet and finally get it over and done with. Staring at the first exercise in disbelief, he could feel his ire rising already.

**The goal of these exercises is to help you identify your anger triggers and to assess and modify your reactions to anger. Please complete the following:**

Think of five things that always make you angry or annoy you. These are your anger triggers or anger activators and they can range from small things that make you angry, to situations that provoke violent responses. For example, your co-worker humming under their breath or whistling, a noisy neighbour or someone who cuts in front of you in traffic or in the shopping queue may be a trigger.

Good Lord - these people were as dumb as dirt. Who didn't get angry at idiots doing this stuff? How the blazes could he narrow it down to just five triggers? Honestly!

No one could possibly be expected to do that. He started a mental list of triggers: lawyers, ex-wives, Jenn Shepard, Hollis Mann, directors in general, officers in the military, idiots, dirtbags, murdering drug lords slaughtering innocent women and children, stuttering probies, people calling him Sir when he worked for a living weak as water coffee, decaffeinated coffee, lousy coffee, cold coffee, people messing with his coffee.

Then there were: people not following his rules, idiots sanding against the grain, crappy bourbon, do-gooders, people who refuse to mind their own damned business, stickybeak counsellors, HR types running touchy-feely seminars – and he was just getting started. But they seriously expected him to pick just five?

What a load of intellectual clap trap. Putting off the first exercise he looked back at the blurb he'd been given at the first session

*Anger Out of Control: Introduction to Anger Management.*
Violent crimes, violence in the workplace, road rage, domestic abuse, queue rage, divorce and broken homes, and substance abuse and addictions are just some examples of the results of poor anger management. Anger also leads to physical health problems when not properly managed. Long-term anger has been conclusively linked to chronic headaches, sleep disorders, digestive issues such as heartburn, serious maladies including high blood pressure, and even heart attacks and strokes. Some people have even linked cancers to excessive anger.

Your anger needs to be expressed, not bottled up. Yet, aggressive displays of anger can result in violent eruptions that further hurt you socially, mentally, and physically. Anger management programs aim in the short term to equip you with healthy and socially appropriate means of expressing your anger and in the longer term, to find ways to resolve the problems that underlie and ignite it.

Your initial task in anger management is learning to define the problem and confront it!


Forty percent of referrals for our anger management program come from the corporate sector and 30% of referrals come from the criminal justice sector. A further 13% come from people recommending us who are satisfied customers of our program and the remainder are self-referred.

Gibbs snorted. Now he knew it was a crock! That they got more referrals from the corporate sector than from dirtbags just proved it was touchy-feely rubbish. His inner voice argued that the criminal dirtbags that got sent to anger management were for minor crimes like road rage or minor assaults. The serious dirtbags got sent to prison. But Gibbs was too pissed off to be reasonable. The stupid exercise had put him into a foul mood and the next two exercises were equally idiotic and pointless.

Now rate your five triggers from 1-5 with one being slightly angry to 5 feeling like you’re about to explode.

Seriously, who was writing this crap - six-year-olds? He didn't do slightly angry – that was like being slightly dead or slightly horny. IDIOTS!

3. Think about how you respond to each trigger? Some negative reactions are in the list below:
4. Do you get into physical altercations with others?
5. Do you punch walls, hit, or kick inanimate objects?
6. Do you ever take out your anger on family pets?
7. Do you frequently slam doors, sometimes to the point of damaging them or kick them in?
8. Do you frequently throw, break, or destroy objects as a way of relieving your anger?
9. Do you stomp your feet in anger?
10. Have you ever yelled at others until you’re hoarse?
11. Do you face confrontations with sarcasm or vitriol?
12. Do you often say things that you later regret?
13. Do you ever drink when angry or until you’re drunk?
14. Do you avoid confrontation? Do you keep your feelings to yourself?
15. Do you stew over how unfair your life or situation is; or how hopeless- thinking that you
16. Do you say, "We'll talk about it later" and never do?
17. Others ...

Good job! We'll be discussing your identified responses to your triggers at the next session and also have suggestions for alternative but more socially appropriate ways of reacting.

Feeling his heart rate speed up and the familiar surge of adrenaline wash over him, Gibbs looked around for someone or something to relieve it. Getting up and picking up his empty trash can, he threw it, feeling a modicum of anger bleed off. Deciding to go down to the gym and pummel the crap out the punching bag, Gibbs was hoping that would be enough release for him to be able to fill out the damned form, so he could head home to his basement, bourbon and boat. He just needed to take the edge off his irritation at these damn fools! And their asinine questions.

Later as he felt the anger bleed off as he pummelled the punching bag, he decided no touchy-feely jerk was going to tell him he could only list five anger triggers. He was quite looking forward to handing in his assignment at the next anger management session tomorrow.

Oh, the expression on the facilitator's face when he handed in his assignment was absolutely priceless. At the end of the session, she held him back to discuss his "anger activators" aka what pissed him off. He didn't know whether to be pissed off or elated.

Evelyn Ellis was a 27-year-old, earnest, rather plain looking young woman with what Gibbs regarded as an irritatingly, perky manner and mousy brown hair. She was, as she shared with the class, halfway through a PhD. in organisational psychology and so was working to pay for her tuition by conducting the educational component of the anger management program.

Sighing, she regarded Gibbs cautiously. Her students all had anger management issues after all. "Mr... ah um Special Agent Gibbs, can you count?"

Gibbs smirked. "Sure."

"And obviously you can read?"

He nodded.

"Then why have you listed not five anger activators as requested by the assignment but what looks like at least 60 plus triggers? You've filled almost three pages. That was not what you were asked to do."

"Couldn't narrow it down any more than that. I left off the triggers that were only fours, but the rest are all fives. How am I s'pposed to pick?"

"Special Agent... ah can I call you Leroy?"

"Nope."

"Gibbs then?"

"No."

"Um okay ...well then, other people managed to achieve the goal. I'm sure if you tried a bit harder..."

"Can I have my assignment back? I want to amend my answer."
"Good, that's excellent."

Gibbs wrote sparingly and handed it back to her, chuckled internally as she read through the changes he'd made. Rather than deleting activators he'd added three more:

Damned fool anger management programs [5]

Perky seminar facilitators [5]

Damned stupid rules [5]

Losing all colour in her face as she read it, Evelyn swallowed nervously. She looked around at the empty conference room before picking up his assignment and collecting her gear.

"Yes, well Special Agent, I have another appointment. I'll see you next time."

Clearly, she feared Jethro and that gave him a surged of adrenaline, as the apex predator realised that she thought he might physically attack and devour her. He still had it!

End of flashback.

Ah... good times! He was still in a good mood remembering it when Mark Mendez exited the elevator at 0930 hours, mostly because he was also ignoring what had happen with Geller’s interrogation and his counselling session. Since the team was off rotation this weekend, Gibbs had thought he would have privacy in the bull pen.

"Why ya here, Mendez?"

"Catching up on some paperwork Boss, plus Director Vance asked me if I could escort Ms David, since she is coming in today for a meeting."

Gibbs grunted and shut down his computer and grabbed his stuff and departed. No way was he ready to cope with a furious Ziva, especially with his Mother of All Hangovers.

ISHT

Tony found himself between a rock and a hard place. He awoke in the spare bedroom of Lara and Brad Pitt, to find himself unable to move. Emma had one leg thrown over his hip and was snuggled up behind him and he was perched on the edge of the bed. Em seemed to regard him as her personal hot water bottle and if he migrated in the bed at night then she followed as tenaciously as a bloodhound.

Normally it wasn't a problem since they had a king-sized bed, but the Pitt's guest room was on the small side and could only squeeze in a double bed. In an average night where he was restless, they would start on one side of the bed and slowly traverse the breadth of their bed but last night he had less space to work with. Hence waking to find himself teetering on the edge.

And his night had been a restive one. He was not looking forward to today. He was going to go up against Ziva and Gibbs and he doubted that either encounter was going to end well. Ziva was going to try to manipulate him into getting her old job back again plus help her out of the mess she'd got into because of her arrogance and refusal to play by the rules. Honestly, she was so used to doing whatever the hell she damn well pleased and when the shit hit the fan, expecting that others would clean up after her or take the rap for her actions.

A certain impetuous but deliberate ramming of a car to detain a suspect came to mind and her
assumption that Tony would carry the can for her with the insurance company. She was not pleased when he refused. But apart from it being fraud, he had issues of his own with other people destroying his cars and his insurance company was not benevolent. No doubt she got her father to order some stupid sap at the Israeli embassy to say it was his fault, though.

Still, the truth was that Ziva had never been held accountable for any of her transgressions that would have seen mere mortals fired, sent to prison, deported or sent to Guantanamo for espionage. No wonder she thought she could weasel out of a simple case of break and enter, not to mention sexual assault.

Though the tide had most definitely turned – Gibbs apparently had washed his hands of her. Truly a momentous occasion since he'd always treated her like a favourite daughter. According to the director it was because he found out about Royal Woods and Tel Aviv. Tony had to admit that had shocked him to the core – he didn’t think either incident would have made a bit of difference to Gibbs’ staunch defence of her.

Then there was Leon. When Eli was alive he would have more than likely made Ziva's faux pas disappear to keep the Mossad director on side but with him dead, the political landscape had changed dramatically. Plus, the very real threat posed by Richard Parsons to his career had no doubt given the NCIS director a really nasty wake up call.

Of course, the director was probably concerned that if he pissed her off, Ziva would quite possibly blackmail him over Ilan Bodnar's 'death' which was why he'd asked Tony to have a chat with her. Vance was hoping that he could convince her that he couldn't do anything about getting her own job back again, that no one could. Oh, the director had talked about the importance of him getting closure, but Tony knew the score. He was supposed to piss her off instead Leon.

The truth was that he was over Ziva David. Time away from her – from all of them, had given him much needed perspective and they hadn't been pleasant insights. The constant put downs were an insidious form of psychological abuse that had him second guessing himself constantly. Not that he didn't naturally lean towards doubting himself, it was just he was good at acting cocky, but the operative word was acting. His internal dialogue was always geared towards beating himself up after a lifetime of being told he was weak and stupid.

After the battle with the tumour, he'd worked hard to get the negative voices out of his head as he tried to become more positive. To stop forgiving everyone regardless of what was done to him. To work on believing that he didn't deserve to be treated with the crap which that other people close to him had done in the past. To insist on respect for the achievements he'd earned through hard work, skills, talent and dedication.

And although it was incredibly hard to put all those voices out of his head, it had been working. His life in New York was so different from what he'd thought was normal. His team all enjoyed a joke and they bantered back and forth but none of them tried to draw blood. It was all harmless and good-natured blowing off steam and he made sure that they never ganged up on just one team member, that everyone was fair game but weren’t left feeling demeaned. He also strived hard to make sure each of his team felt appreciated and that their unique skills were acknowledge by the rest of the team.

He never wanted them to feel that they had to compete against each other, but to understand that they needed to work as a team and that their skills complemented and enhanced one another. BUT the team understood that Lisle was their SFA - their superior and when she issued an order it was enforced, and he had her back. If he had a problem with her then it was hashed out in private and no one was ever the wiser. It felt good to work in a team where put downs and one-upmanship was rare
– where they all had each other's backs. And their closure rate was in the mid-nineties; life was sweet.

So, it was with a whole heap of trepidation that he approached having to face two of his former team mates, today. He was hoping that the negative interactions and bad habits of the past didn't drag him back into the black vortex that had kept him in such a toxic situation for at least a decade longer than he should have. Ziva, was a master of the abusive remark wrapped in a velvet glove that could set off his deep-seated self-doubts.

He catalogued a few of the worst of the worst she flung at him over the years – that he was dead weight, she needed a shower after she talked to him and what would any woman possibly see in him. Whatever the occasion, she was always ready. Having prepared dossiers on the team, she knew that he'd grown up with two alcoholics for parents and was disowned by the age of 12.

Of course, she knew that he had a whole heap of serious issues and she never stopped looking for his soft underbelly, so she could slip her knife in and then twist it round for good measure. He remembered her striking not that long after his disastrous relationship with Jeanne Benoit imploded and he'd run into a cop that had married a girlfriend he'd been getting serious about. Ziva asked him did he ever think about settling down and having a family.

Seriously? He'd been so dumbfounded by her cluelessness he'd escaped out of the car into the frigid night air, into the snow to get away from her. It was only lately that he finally realised she knew exactly what she was doing, and it hadn't been an unfortunate gaff.

Frankly, he was looking forward to seeing her again even less than he would having someone rip out all his finger and toe nails. And to be clear that wasn't something he was keen on, at all. It was painful as hell!

As Emma stirred, her leg roamed far too close to Tony's engorged bladder and he couldn't contain his groan. He'd been trying to put off going to the bathroom to empty it and have to wake her up. Grateful that she rolled over onto her back, he slipped from the bed and entered the bathroom to take care of business, sighing with relief.

Re-entering the guest room and recognising his fiancée's 'Baby, come back to bed' look, he slid back in beside her and wrapped her in a hug. Practically purring with desire, she started kissing him and although he responded enthusiastically, he never let it escalate. As Emma's hands strayed, Tony captured them.

"Love you but not here, Em."

"Tony, it's not like we're going to be disturbed and I missed waking up with you yesterday."

"Yeah, but this isn't our bed, Buns."

"No, it's our friends, our married friends and Brad's a doctor after all." Emma giggled, nibbling his neck.

"Perhaps but it just feels wrong,"

She continued to cajole as she rolled on top of him. "It's not like we are having sex in their bed, Babe. This is their spare room"

She saw the frozen expression on his face, felt him stiffen and knew she'd put her foot in it somehow. Rolling off him and snuggling into his side, Emma hugged him. "What's up Tony?"
"My father a few years ago at Christmas, invited himself to stay at my apartment. I told him that it was my sanctuary and I never brought women back there, hell I didn't even invite my team mates over, but I came home to find him going at it with one of my neighbours, in my bed. I just feel weird being a guest and making out in their bed, even if it isn't really their bed. Does that make sense?"

Emma nodded, understanding that Senior had damaged his son irrevocably over Tony's lifetime. "Yeah, it does in a totally, 'that is completely illogical' way. Parents have so much power over their kids to be able mess with them. Hope you don't mind me saying this but if Senior makes one more sleazy pass at me Hon, I'm going to knee him in the testicles."

Sitting up and glowering, he replied. "Nope, have at it but only if I don't get to him first, Em. He'd have been neutered already if I'd known what he was doing. You know, before he decided to marry my mother's best friend, I half expected Ziva to become my next step-mom."

Emma decided to change the subject to something more pleasant. "So, what's on the agenda today, Cheeks?"

"Meeting scheduled with Ziva at NCIS at 1100. Going to have lunch with Jimmy and Breena, then you and Lara are off for secret woman's business while I go and tell Gibbs I'm not going to be his replacement. Then tonight we are going out with the Pitts."

"You sure you don't want me to come with you when you talk to Gibbs?"

Tony gave a wry chuckle. "Not likely to be a whole lot of talking, Babe. More like yelling, screaming, grunts and laser-like glares, but to answer your question, thanks but I need to do it one on one. Things to be said that can't if a third person was there."

"And tomorrow?"

"Whatever you want to do or whoever you want to see, my Lady. I'm all yours."

"Yes, you are, Tony and don't you ever forget it."
A Long Time Coming

Chapter Summary

Tony and Ziva finally talk and Gibbs has his first counselling session. It does not go how he expects it too.

Chapter Notes

I’ve realised something about how I write scenes that involve Ziva David. First off, it shouldn’t be an earth-shattering revelation for anyone when I state that I don’t like Ziva David. On an intellectual level I know I’m supposed to feel sorry for her since she got a raw deal having Eli David as her father, and let’s face it, he was a contemptible person who had no problem manipulating his children. The trouble was that I never could feel empathy for her on an emotional level – especially for the abusive things she did to DiNozzo. But that aside, the whole premise that a foreign operative would be permitted to work on an investigative team of a US federal law enforcement agent was so ludicrous that I can’t take the character seriously. Perhaps that explains why I always find the scenes my muse comes up with with always contain a strong element of farce - because I never been able to take the character’s place on the team seriously.

Warnings: Ziva, Gibbs and Rachel Cranston fans beware. An iPad was harmed in the writing of this chapter! Colonel Flagg fans may take offence and just to be on the safe side, fans of Stu Travers may be offended. There, I think that about covers it.

Tony and Emma walked in, arm in arm through the DC headquarters and Emma could sense his tension as soon as they entered. Mind you, the vomitus inducing colour couldn’t be helping any, she concluded. (If a hospital picked this revolting carroyt colour as its décor, they’d probably face multiple malpractice suits. Maybe even a class action for inducing chronic and violent cases of nausea and vomiting.)

She also knew this was Tony's first time back here since he'd left DC and it was a Saturday so there weren't a lot of staff working, those that were here seemed to be genuinely excited to see him. Tony was perfectly polite to them, but to her experienced eye she thought that he seemed detached and she wasn't sure if it was being back or because he was preparing for the meeting. As they got onto the elevator alone she hugged him, and he smiled at her and hugged her back.

They entered the conference room on the third floor to find a man and a woman sitting beside each other somewhat tersely, although not speaking. Tony smiled at the darkly Hispanic guy who stood and gave him a warm man-hug. Emma thought he was rather dishy looking in a purely unbiased and harmless 'I may be taken but I can still notice hot guys other than my fiancé fashion.'

"Looking good, Tonio. We've missed you."

"Thanks Marc. Talk later?"
Emma figured this was his friend, Marc Mendez but taking her cue from Tony, simply smiled at him.

He gave Tony a thumbs up sign. "Sure thing. Sing out when you're done. I've set it up so Ms David's text from her tablet will be projected up onto the screen to make communication easier on everyone."

"Great, thanks for that."

Emma gawked at Ziva, still sitting at the table staring at them impassively, her hands held rather primly in her lap. Her iPad was in front of her and Emma wondered if she was going to use it as her sole form of communication. As a nurse she knew that it was possible to speak with your jaw wired shut, you just sounded perpetually angry.

She guessed that with an important meeting, and she was pretty sure that Ms David had much riding on today's outcome, perhaps the former agent wasn't prepared to leave anything to chance. She also noted professionally that her cheekbones were fairly pronounced and decided that like many people whose jaw was wired, maintaining a proper caloric intake was difficult. Emma winced at the thought of consuming blenderized meals – ewww.

Ziva David she conceded, was also darkly exotic and the nurse could see how men could be putty in her hands. She appeared to be aiming for a vulnerable waif-like look but Emma thought that she didn't quite pull it off, detecting a calculating, predator at odds with Little Miss Helpless. Still, women were much less naïve when it came to manipulation by their fellow females, especially when it came to men.

Of course, Em was biased she supposed, since she knew that the trollop had intended to seduce Tony in his bed when she broke into his old apartment. If a guy had done that, they would have ended up being labelled as a pervert or a rapist. So, she really wasn't predisposed to like this woman, even if she hadn't abused Tony's kindness time and again.

She also noticed that the conniving look was directed her way, assessing her before Ziva dismissed her as either irrelevant or a non-threat, and redirected her attention back to Tony. He sat down at the table, catty-corner to Ziva, first pulling out the seat next to his for Emma to sit on.

"Hallo Ziva."

"Tony." Ziva spoke through clenched teeth.

"This is Emma Ingham." He deliberately withheld further information as to her identity and affiliations.

The former NCIS agent again flicked a glance at her, nodding coolly before returning her attention to Tony, watching him like a cat observing a mouse, waiting for him to make the first move. He obliged.

"So, you wanted to see me, Ziva?"

"Yes, I need your help."

"How so, Ziva?"

She turned to her iPad to reply. **I need you to pull some threads and get these ridiculous charges dropped. I will need them to be swept under the mat then I can return to the MCRT. I know you have many contacts at Metro PD, yes?**
"I see. And why would I want to do that Ziva?"

‘Because I am your partner and you told me I was not alone. And I am coming back to put our family back together, so you owe it to me.’ The response flashed on the screen.

"We were a team Ziva, not a family and just because I told you that you weren't alone doesn't mean that I would be prepared to let you pervert the law or help you do it.

“How many times have I told you not to use those damned lock picks? Which of course you ignored. You broke into someone's apartment, terrified them…”

‘It was only Breena Palmer. Pressure could be brought to bear, I am sure she has some skeletons in her casket that could persuade her to drop the charges. Or Jimmy's job could be at risk or your friends at Metro could accidentally lose the evidence...it happens every day.’ Ziva replied coldheartedly, typing her response.

‘Anyway, it was your apartment, I thought I was waiting there for you to get home. It was an innocent mistake.’

Emma was genuinely shocked by her callousness. Her only concern was for herself and achieving her goal. Somehow seeing the words up there on the screen seemed to make them even crueller than if she'd spoken them.

"Yeah right, because all my guests break in to my apartment and climb into my bed naked to wait for me to come home." Tony scoffed, cynically.

Ruffling his hair in agitation, he took a deep breath. "It doesn't matter if it was someone you knew or a stranger and no, I can't and won't try to pressure anyone to drop the charges. Can't do the time, don't do the crime. Maybe you'll finally learn you are not above the law, Ziva.

“Even if I was still living in DC, I have no desire to have you break into my home and climb naked into bed with me. If that had been Emma alone in my bed that you assaulted and terrified, I'd have personally thrown you in jail and chucked away the key."

‘Do not pull my foot, Tony. There would be no chance of there being a woman in your bed unless it was of the blow-up variety.’ Ziva scoffed, with an haughty toss of her hair.

‘I broke your heart in Israel last year when I refused to come back here.’ She boasted, looking pleased with herself before a cruelly calculated expression, which Tony recognised, replace it. You don't have a girlfriend, maybe a cheap bambi for a quick roll in the straw but she wouldn't be in your bed, asleep.

Tony chuckled at Ziva's self-importance, but Emma was furious and interjected. "You are right about one thing you rabidus canis femina - Tony doesn't have a girlfriend, do you, Cheeks? He does have a fiancée, though. A very protective one and in just a few more weeks, I'll be his wife. So back off Tony – he’s mine. He might never have let YOU into his bed, but then that only goes to show he never loved you."

Knowing more than a dash of Latin, Ziva translated the insult effortless into 'crazy female dog' and snarled before typing furiously. ‘I see you have hired the bambi here to make me jealous and to
get back at me for Michael, Ray and Adam. But your stupid plan is doomed since no woman would want such a man-child as yourself, Tony.’

‘You forget that I know you too well.’ Emma observed the look she shot Tony – it was the look of a predator and it made the hair on the nape of her neck stand on end. This was one highly dangerous and deranged bitch. It was her professional opinion that the assassin needed to be dispatched like you would a rabid wolf before she was able to endanger anyone else.

‘You are a waste of space, even your own father could not bear to be related which is why he disowned you as a pathetic child. E.J. did not want you after being with you for a while and learning of your repugnant personality. She handed you onto me because no one else wants you.’

Emma was watching Tony's face as she delivered that cruel barb and saw how that rabidus canis femina's barbs struck home about his father abandoning him. She doubted that he would ever be able to shake off that traumatic event, much as he might try. Some pain left scars much too deep.

The rest of the crap Davis sprouted was just typical of the negative abused he'd tolerated for far too long from the she-dog and the others on the team. Even Caitlin Todd had taken delight in taking pot shots at him, when he was battling the plague. Em had taken great pleasure in taking her down a peg or two and that was before she'd even gotten to know Tony. Now that she understood how much those comments affected him, Ziva was treading on very dangerous ground by putting the knife into her fiancé.

Seeing red, the normally peaceable and empathetic nurse wished she could whack her one in the nose but with a fractured jaw decided it was too dangerous, so Emma did the next best thing. She kicked the sow's knee cap with her pointy-toed boot, not holding back although her intent was to cause pain not real injury.

Ziva fell to the floor, taking a theatrical dive off her chair that would have done a World Cup football hero proud, although she had been caught off guard by Emma’s attack. After all, no dumb bimbi had ever been stupid enough to attack her since she could kill people with a paperclip at least eighteen different ways. But while mortified at letting the unknown woman get the drop on her, Ziva was savvy enough to take any advantage she could get, telling herself she could make straw out of the situation. Although as she'd been sitting down at the time her dramatic dive was a bit OTT.

She scowled, as Emma also attacked her verbally.

"I think it's you that's jealous. Any one of my friends would steal him off me in a New York minute, if I turned my back. And that was before they heard about our marriage proposal too, just based on the romantic dinners and dancing dates and our weekends away. Now I can't let him out of my sight. Needless to say, Miss David, you WON'T be getting an invitation. To our wedding. You're a crazy whack job. Stay the Hell away from us both."

Ziva got back on her feet, limping and wincing unconvincingly and turned to Tony and spoke. "I demand you arrest her and charge her with assaulting me."

"Gee Ziva, sorry but I didn't see a thing. I guess it must have been while I was contemplating my repugnant personality and being a man-child,” Tony retorted.

“This assault that you claim occurred; can you describe what happened? Did Emma kick your legs out from under you, did she threaten you by holding a loaded gun against your chest or then press it
against your thigh and tell you that she wished you were dead?‘ Tony eyed her angrily. ‘That would be really bad but not as bad as if it was your own partner (who was supposed to have your back) who assaulted you."

Emma watched in shocked fatalism as the angry Israeli growled before putting her hand up under her thigh slit skirt and extracting a pair of pliers. Tony shook his head and made a gesture to the red blinking light that he later informed her meant, don't require assistance yet. Stand by.

They both watched on as Ziva cut and removed the wire holding her jaw together, which one-month post fracture was a stupendously idiotic act, since the bones where still healing. Then again, so was breaking into someone's apartment without even bothering to check if they'd moved because you arrogantly assumed they'd be pining away without you.

Sighing in satisfaction, Ziva turned her ire on Tony, scowling before grabbing her iPad and throwing it on the floor in anger and stamping on it to hear the satisfying crunch.

"Why did you have to be so childish and go prattle-telling to Gibbs and Leon about that? I apologised to you but because of you, they have rinsed their hands of my case."

Seeing two angry individuals giving her the hairy eyeball, Ziva seemingly reversed direction. Emma was creeped out at the speed at which she changed gears. As if she flicked a switch, she turned her now wet doe-eyes on Tony, slinking up close and personal and though her fiancé calmly stood his ground, she could sense his repulsion.

"But you can persuade them to defend me. I'm sorry that I broke your heart and rejected you in Israel when we parted, but you cannot be serious about this… this woman." She flicked a contemptuous glance in her direction.

"You must realise that this is love on the ricochet; that she is a pale copy of me. These relationships never work out well… always break up. I was coming to tell you I was done looking for myself in Israel and that I was ready to come back and begin a relationship with you. I did not mean to frighten anyone, but no one was hurt, except for myself so surely there is no harm done. I am prepared to forget about this." She gestured to her jaw.

Wow so magnanimous! Plus, Emma soon understood why Rabidus Canis Femina had gotten so close to her fiancé. She moved in like a cobra after her prey, groping his crotch aggressively (obviously David’s idea of subtle foreplay attacking her victim). Not surprisingly, he was reacting like a typically accosted male – freaking out and flinching, even as he valiantly defended his man bits. At which point, the bitch went in for the kill, smashing her lips against his, her tongue trying to force its way inside his mouth as he fought to get away her.

Emma figured rather analytically, that this must be David's idea of what amounted to a passionate kiss. Emma shuddered at the thought of kissing a month's worth of morning after breath, since it is impossible to effectively clean one's teeth with a wired jaw. Gross!

Just as Emma’s outrage finally began to stir, along with a homicidal urge to sucker punch her lunatic adversary in the mandible (damn the fracture) or at the very least, this time deliver a proper kneecapping, Tony reacted first. Pushing Ziva away, swiftly and forcibly, revulsion clear on his features.

'Come on Tony, you know you want me. How could you not,” She purred in her seductive Little Miss Mossad voice (straight out of The Art of Mossad Seduction, Emma suspected rather cynically). He had already told his fiancé that when they'd gone undercover as a husband and wife team of assassins when she was first on the team, Ziva tried to seduce him.
She’d calmly informed him Mossad trained its operatives to sleep with enemies and allies alike to gain every possible advantage. Even taught them seduction techniques so she’d argued, there was no reason not to enjoy themselves, but he’d refused, choosing to simulate intercourse instead which she had been incensed at. He’d flirted outrageously with the cute FBI agent instead.

Clearly, Emma concluded smugly, Little Miss Seducer had no clue how to entice Tony. Perhaps she wasn't paying enough attention in that particular class.

Finally seeing his stolid lack of response, the ex-agent swapped instead to a more derisive tenor. "Oh, for the sake of Peter, will you stop punishing us both for me rejecting your lumbering advances in Israel. I have apologised for breaking your delicate male heart."

"Ziva, you didn't break my heart. You did break my spirit, but you did that a long time ago - abusive comments, attempting to have me excluded from the MCRT. You made me doubt myself, made me feel guilty for your failure to control Rivkin which lead to his death.

“You never respected me or my position on the team. By the time we resigned and then you were in danger, like anyone in an abusive relationship I convinced myself that I loved you because I wanted - I needed to have someone, (anyone by that point) that cared about me.” Tony sounded firm but resolute before his expression hardened.

“BUT you aren't capable of caring about me – I doubt that you are capable of caring about anyone. And I don't love you Ziva – you were the ricochet, the rebound. I was trying to replace what I had or what I wanted to have with Jeanne Benoit and you can't give me that, you never could."

Emma watched as the Israeli's eyes narrowed and her lips tensed. She was angry but fighting hard for her professional life. She needed Tony, so she couldn't lash out at him like she wished, like her true nature demanded. Poor poppet!

"Tony, we can be the family that you wanted, we can also have our own if you wish but not if I am convicted of this absurd crime. You are the only one who will save me. Please, I need your help. Do it for Gibbs and Abby. Do it for us." This time Ziva opted for a softly, softly approach, favouring a wheedling tone and posture, her eyes pleading and wet as she forced tears into them.

_Probably by envisioning every single knife she owned being destroyed, Emma thought cynically_

Tony shook his head and Emma had to give her points for sheer dogged tenacity. Clearly giving up was not in her vocabulary.

_Rabidus canis femina pit bull, Emma mentally giggled._

"Ziva, clichéd it may well be but growing up in the DiNozzo family, I had a really screwed up concept of what constituted love. So, it took the love of this woman here to teach me that any potentially romantic liaison we might have had, indeed even a professional relationship was not now, and never could have been a healthy and loving one. It would be a toxic and abusive one.

“You don't try to tear down your partner, threaten or attack them when you are in a loving, healthy relationship. That’s domestic violence. So, thanks for the offer… but no thanks."

He stood up and got a glass of water and chugged it down. Emma took the opportunity to admire his profile once again, noticing that a few drops of water escaped and trickled down his lush labium inferius oris and she wanted to kiss it. She wondered naughtily, what Ziva would do if she licked the droplets off his face and giggled aloud – earning a glare from a fuming Ms David.

Tony ignored the by-play between the two women.
"Like I said before, I finally realised we were never a family, simply a team of agents and if this 'absurd crime' as you call it was a one off, I might consider trying to help you out by testifying to your character in court. But it's just the first time you've been caught and more to the point, made accountable, Ziva."

He glared at her. "You killed a suspect because he was annoying you and got away with it. You attacked me bodily, and then threatened me with a gun because you were angry with me for doing my job. That was after you betrayed us, I hasten to add - you lied about Rivkin. You covered up his crimes and all the time you were on the team you were passing classified Intel to Mossad which you didn’t have permission to give them. That’s espionage, yet Gibbs and Leon hired you instead of shipping you off to Gitmo as a spy.

“How many damned times have you broken into premises unlawfully, courtesy of your illegal pick locks and therein threatened the integrity of all our cases? You threaten people for the most minuscule slights imaginable, such as calling you Madam. What the heck is your problem?” He demanded but before she could respond, Tony forged on with the litany of transgressions and crimes.

"You don't follow procedures - like when you turned off my mic when you were supposed to be watching my six. Once again, because I annoy you. You repeatedly ignored orders given by superiors, but you really took that to a whole new level when you hunted down and killed Bodnar purely for your own personal revenge.

“So, tell me, where was your rage, your indignation when Eli killed an innocent US citizen when he was barely off the plane and then calmly sat down with the Vance's for dinner? Your father killed the journalist because he recognised him, and Eli didn’t want people to know he was in the country. How cold-blooded was that?” Tony demanded.

Although Emma knew it was a rhetorical question, Emma wanted to weigh in and tell Ziva it was vile and abhorrent.

“You knew what your father had done, you protected him, a murderer, just as you protected Rivkin. If you’d done your job and arrested him for murdering the journalist, Eli might still be alive, but you protected him and in doing so, he died and that is sad for you. What’s worse though, Jackie Vance, a damned good mother and person died as well.”

Emma frowned thinking about those poor sweet children, Kayla and Jared Vance. Such a tragedy!

"Some people would say it was karma that he was taken down, except that poor Jackie got caught in the crossfires. He never deserved your pitiless retribution, Ziva. Those that live by the sword should be prepared to die by it, too as should their family. Jackie was the blameless one and unlike your father, she was way too good a person to want revenge to be carried out in her name. I’m sorry for your loss, but that didn’t give you the right to avenge that man."

He stared at her and Emma could see the sorrow pouring off him. Tony had so much empathy, it oftentimes meant that he had no energy left to examine his own pain, much less address it.

She saw him take a deep breath and admired his resolve as he took a parting shot at his former partner, who Rafaela Gordani, his counsellor had felt most strongly he needed to confront. Privately, Emma had agreed with her but stayed out of the battle between them, merely offering to accompany him if he did decide to confront Ziva David.

"Ziva, there is still no getting away from the fact that you lied repeatedly about Michael - to me, to Gibbs and to the team collectively and you passed on unauthorised classified NCIS data to Mossad. You lied by commission. Then when you covered up for Rivkin and your father despite them taking
the lives of American citizens, you lied by omission.”

Walking over to get into her personal space he took a breath and looked her bleakly, “And aside from everything else, there is no way I would lift a finger to help you get your job back again. You don't care one whit about working as a team. You are a liability and a danger to those around you.”

Tony walked back over to Emma she could feel both his tension and his relief. Wrapping her up in a hug, he kissed her fervently and she responded with equal passion, attempting to suck his labia – superior and inferior – right off his face. Yes well… so since all traces of H20 had vanished, she focused on his lips instead. So, sue her for being passionate with her fiancé.

They remained that way for several minutes, although Emma realised that one part of her fiancé remained very much on alert and aware, like any sane individual would in the presence of a cobra. Said cobra, practically had steam coming out of her ears, she noticed maliciously.

Regretfully he finally pulled away. "And in case it escaped your notice, you could now be charged with sexual assaulting a federal agent for that stunt you just pulled. And with Emma as a witness to the assault, I think that it might make your life a good bit more complicated this time.” He observed cynically.

Not even bothering to look at her he said, “Goodbye, Ziva. I'll let Marc know that our meeting is over.”

Ziva's face darkened. "You'll regret this, DiNozzo, you're jealous of my superior…”

Tony dragged Emma out of the conference room and didn't seemed at all surprised to see Mendez hurrying along the corridor. The ‘hot’ looking agent smiled at Emma. He offered her his hand to shake and she noticed a wedding band. Excellent - she could admire him without guilt.

"Hi, I'm Marc Mendez.”

"Marc, this is my fiancée, Emma Ingham. Marc has my old job on the MCRT and volunteered as Ziva David's wrangler for the meeting.” Tony smirked at his friend. “Truth to tell, Leon probably didn't give you a whole lotta choice. Me either! Watch yourself when you go in there, amigo. She's not going to be a happy camper."

Marc exchanged an enigmatic look with him. "Understood, Tony. She'll be looking for a scapegoat. Been watching, although I unfortunately had to go to the head when her knee so carelessly connected with the toe of your boot, Emma. She really needs to be less clumsy, or perhaps she was trying to set you up."

The nurse stifled her surprise and tried not to giggle. "Perhaps.”

Looking at Tony he shook his head. "What was with the pliers? For a moment I thought she was going to start ripping your teeth out. She's one seriously psycho chick."

Tony shook his head, perplexed so Emma stepped in. "All patients with fractured jaws who have to have them wired, must carry pliers with them for emergencies, in case of choking or vomiting. But that wasn't an emergency - that was a temper tantrum! Did you notice she smashed her iPad?"

Mark scowled. "Not her iPad, McGee's." "Ouch, that's nasty. Well anyway, ripping out the wiring means the odds are her jaw is not going stand up to the strain she puts on it and it's gonna crumble. It's supposed to be wired for another 2-3 weeks.” Emma informed them wryly.
"Gotta admit guys, she caught me off guard when she did it, but then she's always seemed to get off on pain." Tony observed, gravely. "Reminds me of that crazy spook in MASH – Colonel Flagg that broke his own arm and had someone beat him up, so he'd have an excuse to hang round the base looking for non-existent spies."

Marc nodded, "Yeah, I remember him. He was really funny, scary but hysterical. Ziva is scary but not so much funny apart from her idioms. Gotta give her points for trying."

"Yeah, I guess, er actually no I don't. I'd like to give her a padded room and a strait jacket. 'Rabidus Canis Femina,' you got that in one Buns, definitely one very crazy female dog." Tony chuckled before becoming serious.

"Hey Marc, you might wanna give McGee a heads up to keep an eye on her if you break the bad news about his iPad. Can't understand how a judge gave her bail, I personally think she's a flight risk." Tony shook his head before asking, "And by the way, how is el Jefe?"

"Was in early this morning but when he realised Ziva was coming, he lit out. Not in the best of moods this week, let's just say. He went for his first mandatory anger management counselling session on Wednesday and went storming out 'bout half way through in a really foul mood. Disappeared for the rest of the day so I presume he went triple B.

Plus, a suspect refused to confess, laughed in his face after the Tibbs telemovie and people in the office have been dogging on him about it ever since but he seems clueless. Frustrated but in the dark."

Emma looked askance at Tony.

"Triple B?"

"Basement, bourbon and boat." He explained and looked at his friend. "He started another boat?"

"Dunno 'bout that… figure of speech. Why are you asking?"

"Oh joy! Balboa conned me into telling him I'm not coming back to DC in the immediate future, face to face. Rocky’s hoping he’ll pull his head out of his ass. I'm heading over there after lunch."

"Rather you than me." Gibbs’ new SFA grimaced in sympathy.

"Very funny, not! Just remember if I piss him off, you’ll have to deal with him on Monday.” Tony retaliated wickedly. “Better not keep Ms David waiting. I'm sure she's ready to leave. She's killed for less," he stated truthfully.

He grabbed his fiancée. "Let's blow this joint, kid. See if Dr Mallard is catching up on paperwork so we don't run into her as she's leaving."

ISHT

Gibbs gulped a healthy slug of his favourite poison down his throat. He really could stop if he wanted to. It was only that he was trying not to think about the jackass that had riled him up so bad in his counselling session earlier in the week. Now the case was done and dusted, it gave him way too much time to think. Even after spending half the morning sanding the set of shelves he was making for Ducky and knocking back over a third of the bottle of Jack.
He was still extremely pissed off about what had happened during the week but because of the case he’d been successful in pushed it aside, until now. Damn it, he couldn't stop thinking about that damned quack.

Grabbing the bottle, he poured a slug, just to take the edge off his anger. It wasn't as if they were on call or anything and not like his dad might need him in an emergency. He was perfectly free to do what he damn well pleased. There was absolutely nothing to stop him.

Flashback:

Gibbs shifted in his seat, feeling trapped. As part of the damned anger management crap he was supposed to go to counselling and needless to say, he was not happy. He hated counsellors and people trying to get inside his head, not that they ever succeeded of course. But it was a waste of his time.

Dr Stu Travers sat eyeballing him in silence, not the least bit intimidated by Gibbs' famous glare before firing the first salvo. "That's not going work with me. I don't intimidate easily."

Scowling at the counsellor who looked as if he had military training, Gibbs demanded. "Why can't Rachel Cranston be my counsellor? I requested her."

"Yes, you did, which is one reason why I'm your counsellor. You thought you'd be able to manipulate her. NOT GOING TO HAPPEN!" The shrink leaned forward confidingly.

Gibbs wasn't impressed. He used that manoeuvre during interviews.

"Dr Cranston is unable to maintain the clinical distance required when entering a therapeutic relationship with a client because of her sister and your shared relationship. Far be it for me to speak ill of a colleague but her prior contact with the team was definitely ill-advised – many counsellors would see her lack of disclosure as unethical and unprofessional." He pursed his lips, clearly disapprovingly.

"If TPTB had known her sister was the slain Special Agent Todd, they would never have allowed it. Fortunately, she realised she couldn't be your counsellor and referred you to me."

Smirking at Gibbs attempt to skewer him with his laser-like glare, he carried on. "Anyway – bottom lining it – I'm it. Cope!"

Gibbs felt like he'd been punched in the guts. This guy was unlike any other headshrinker he'd encountered. The jerk actually scared the crap out of him because his gut was telling him that this one wasn't going to be easily run off (and Gibbs didn't scare easily). He wasn't going to be able to turn on his charismatic flirt like he could with female counsellors in the past, although he wasn't anywhere near as skilled as DiNozzo at it. Practise – no doubt. Still his half smile and his blue eyes turned many a female to mush.

Travers also didn't seem the type to get bamboozled easily like he could do with the touchy-feely 'tell me how you feel' types. Yep they drove him to distraction but were also the easiest to deflect by tossing them a boo-hoo bone. Another trick DiNozzo had taught him.

His former SFA seemed to have a multitude of techniques for psych. evaluations but Gibbs felt that three main headshrinker techniques – intimidate, seduce and befuddle - were more than enough to finesse the situation. More than that was just grandstanding!

Gibbs philosophy was KISS whereas DiNozzo's had always been avoid, bother, bewilder, confound, deflect, manipulate, stonewall, daze, resist, seduce, frustrate and charm. Basically, the
same method he favoured in the boxing ring or in an interrogation, bouncing around like demented bumblebee – before delivering a stinger and then flitting out of the way. Effective Jethro supposed, but exhausting and complicated.

Jethro preferred to stick to basics even if their goals tended to be the same – to keep people the HELL outta their business. Both had their own reasons to not want people rooting around in their psyches.

But this Travers character – he was getting a real bad feeling about the guy. When he casually mentioned that he'd served in the Marines, seeing combat in Desert Storm before being sent home with life threatening wounds, Gibbs wanted out of there. He knew damned well what Travers was doing… well trying to do since he did the same thing himself when he interrogated dirtbags. He was trying to create a rapport with Gibbs.

At least if he was your garden variety headshrinker, that is what Jethro assumed he was doing but he couldn't shake his gut feeling that what Travers was really doing was warning him.

"So, I don't get a say?" Gibbs growled.

Stu chuckled. "Sure, you do Gibbs. You get to choose to turn up… or not. Any further choices were lost when you decided to circumvent the process every single time you had to attend mandatory counselling. Suck it up Marine. Not intimidated, are you?"

"Shit what was this guy doing? Was Travis deliberately trying to make him mad? He was doing a bang-up job, if so. Jethro felt he was ready to blow."

"Okay, let's skip the preliminaries, Gunny. You're well known for you impatience, so we'll cut straight to the chase? What the shit? Why are you so damned angry?"

"Not my problem if people can't handle a bit of bastard. It's who I am. People just need to suck it up. The second B is for bastard – been that way for years. Why everyone's getting their panties in a wad 'bout it suddenly, isn't my lookout."

"It's never been acceptable Gibbs. But because you're a bastard you've intimidated people for a long time. However, intimidation doesn't work indefinitely. You should already know that with assholes who intimidate their families. Eventually, people snap or decide that they have nothing left to lose." Travers countered.

"People work best when they're focused, motivated and stressed. I'm sure you're familiar with the Hawthorn Effect." Jethro tried to befuddle his opponent.

"Oh, damn you're good, Gibbs." Travers applauded somewhat ironically, sending a frisson of anger through the veteran agent.

"However, a somewhat questionable finding that subjects in an experiment increased productivity, which by the way was not due to manipulation of the variables but due to being under observation by the researchers, is not an excuse for you going around scaring the crap outta everyone.” He mocked the agent.

“First off, the experimenters didn't threaten the subjects or scare them silly and second thing, subsequent research found that the 'positive productivity' effects may have been exaggerated. And lastly, the real effects of increased performance when being observed didn't apply to everyone."

Gibbs shrugged, outwardly cool although his gut was churning. This guy was dangerous and knowledgeable. Gibbs wouldn’t be able to win an argument with this guy. New plan...he needed to
get out of here ASAP.

"People need to toughen up – get a life. Hard world out there and so is the job, I'm doing them a favor. They can't handle the heat… then get out of the damned kitchen! This ain't a Sunday school picnic."

Travers, ignored the response, instead he pulled out a copy of Gibbs’ trigger identification exercise and perused it dramatically for several minutes, remaining mute. Gibbs bit down on his rage – he pulled a similar move after all whenever he interrogated dirtbags, so he wasn't going to fall for that old trick. Although his anger was stirred, he wasn't going to give this jerk the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten under his skin.

"So, you really think that it's normal to have so many anger activators?" Travers asked suddenly, referring to Gibbs failure to pick only five and instead, creating a laundry list of triggers.

"Anger isn't the enemy. I embrace it – it's what makes me go further and harder to get the results that everybody else can't. I'm here for the victims."

"Cut the crap, Gibbs. What the hell are you so damn angry about? And I'm not talking about the Tai Chi classes or the stuttering probies calling you 'Sir' or the jerk cutting you off in traffic. That's all just a symptom of the real problem. Strip it all back and man up. What's the real problem?"

Where had this guy done his training? Where was the empathy, the caring touchy-feeliness? Where was the finesse?

Travers didn't play by any of the rules Gibbs knew and he was feeling cornered.

He didn't do cornered well.

"What's up? Can't face the truth. Man up, Marine." Stu prodded, knowing that they were close to the tipping point.

"You bastard. So, what if I'm pissed. I lost my family – I'm entitled." He roared, seeing red.

This was the admission the psychologist had been waiting for but knowing he had to press home the advantage, he hardened his heart and his expression.

"So, what?"

At first Gibbs thought he was hearing things.

"Excuse me? What did you say?" he demanded, dangerously.

"I said, 'so what?' Marine. Are you deaf or just dense?" Stu glanced at Gibbs noting he was looking like he could succumb to an apoplectic fit.

“What makes your loss so damned 'special' that you get to take that anger out on people who had nothing whatsoever to do with it for the last 23 freakin years?" He demanded harshly before pushing on, implacably.

“Why the fuck makes your grief so much worse that all the other people who lost families in Desert Storm? All the little kids that were orphaned and maimed. They didn't deserve it.

“What about people who've lost their families in crimes of passion or acts of God or car accidents? Is your pain any more devastating because you're a Marine?
“What makes you so damned important, Gunny that you can inflict your anger on people who have no choice but to come in contact with you, even when you treat them like shit? Tell me, cuz I can't see it!"

Gibbs stared at the former Marine, not believing that Travers dared to say what he just did. People always told him how sorry they were about his girls, gave him a free pass to behave like he had for the last twenty odd years. In fact, he really thought that people admired him for having the stones to do and say what plenty of others were thinking.

And yet here was this jumped up little prick, turning the tables on him. Part of him longed to pull out his Sig Saur and shoot the bastard but of course it was safely locked up in his desk, mores the pity. How… dare… he... question Jethro’s right to be angry over Kelly and Shannon's deaths?

Feeling the familiar wave of red fury wash over him, he briefly considered pummelling the shit out of Travers before recognising that wouldn't be smart. Mostly because he was pretty sure the guy could match him, hand to hand and he needed to obliterate someone or something. Deciding that the punching bag was the wisest option, he stood up, snarling. "Screw you, Stu!"

Although he heard the jerk say as he tore out of the room, "Well, that went well." Jethro could not have known that Stuart Travers Ph.D. was genuinely pleased with the outcome, as opposed to berating himself for blowing it. Had he possessed this information, the NCIS agent would have been even more troubled, especially about the prospect for next time.

End of flashback

Gibbs checked his watch. It was lunchtime – perhaps coffee would help. Typically, it didn't occur to him that eating anything that could be regarded as actual food might actually improve his situation, preferring to get by instead on several large mugs of coffee. He may have ultimately opted not to pull the trigger all those years ago, but that didn't mean that he had to be happy about it or live life to the full. He ate only enough to maintain existence, but that was all.

As he made his way up to the kitchen he tried to stop thinking about the fact that he was scheduled for another session with Travers next week. Vance had been pretty clear about the consequences of not showing up. Was it some sort of karmic joke for all those times he'd told his team, "Come in late again, don't bother coming in at all?"

Damn the man – he'd been there for him when Jackie was killed. Why was Leon giving him such a hard time now?
Tim is missing Delilah and Ziva decides DC is too tiresome and it's time to go home to Israel.

This story contains observations that will probably upset some people. If you are a Ziva or McGee fan, then you're going to be offended but by now you should know the score - I'm not a fan of either character so you should have stopped reading my stories a long time ago.

McGee heard the ping from his cell phone, indicating that a text message had arrived. Briefly checking his phone, he saw that it was from Mendez, the SFA for the team. Mendez was the jerk who took the job which by rights was supposed to be his. Feeling defiant, Tim decided he couldn’t be bothered reading the text since they weren't on call this weekend and if there'd been a terrorist threat or something big he'd have heard about it by now.

Honestly, how damned important could it be? He really didn't need to be focused on work right now. A few minutes later the phone rang, Mendez again and he peevishly decided to ignore it as it went to voicemail.

Mendez could just go to Hell. Today was his day off and he intended to make the most of it.

It might have been a different story if it had been Gibbs on the other end of the phone - but it wasn’t. It was only the senior field agent, so it was no big deal.

Tim was chilling out online, playing with his usual group of Saturday cyber buddies. Delilah was going to call later, and they planned on having cyber-sex. All in all, it was by far the best thing to happen to him all week.

First the telemovie went to air last Sunday night and the fallout from it at work had been ugly. Gibbs seemed surprisingly cool with it, didn't even mention it (which was quite surprising) but Abby had been positively brutal and the Goth scientist was looking for blood. Tim's blood!

What she seemed completely incapable of comprehending was that he'd been totally humiliated too. In the TV movie, Tibbs went around ruffling his hair and handing out group hugs and cocoa like McGregor was some fractious child instead of a tough, seasoned federal agent and the hero of the story. Some idiot scriptwriter (may he rot in Hell) had even fabricated an idiotic scene that had Tibbs spitting onto a handkerchief and using it to wash McGregor's filthy face after he'd been dumpster diving for the murder weapon. He...Timothy McGee was never going to hear the end of it and the only upside was that Tony wasn’t on the team anymore, thank heavens. He would have teased him without mercy.
The Admiral had been scathing after it aired. "You look like a pansy, Timothy. Not a son of mine to be admired and respected. What on earth possessed you?"

So yeah, his badass reputation was completely trashed (not to mention Agent McGregor if he ever managed to get another book published). Yet all Abby was focused on was how her uber cool Gothness had been morphed into a saccharine sweet mythical character. She couldn't spare even the tiniest thought for how he felt at having his creative work butchered. Nope... none at all.

No sympathy whatsoever for his heartbreak watching the callous demolition of meticulously written characters and situations by some overpaid imbecilic scribes without an ounce of creativity. They'd gone for clichés and stereotypes to appeal to the lowest common denominator of their audience – nothing cerebral amongst the lot of them.

And the rest of the office thought that it was simply hilarious. They hadn't stopped laughing all week, except when Gibbs was around, then they toned it down somewhat.

Thank goodness Gibbs was fine with it. Who'd have guessed that? No one apparently, since the office sweep that all of the SFAs in the DC office had run had no takers for ‘Gibbs not giving a shit about how he was portrayed. Serve them all right for mocking his ignominy.

Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, his lawyer informed Tim he couldn't delay the launch of his third book, useless fool. Then, in what looked to be a last-minute lifeline, the NCIS director called him up to his office and announced that the National Security Agency had sought and won a temporary injunction to stop the release of the book. For a few wondrous moments McGee thought his luck was turning.

That was until Vance informed then him that SecNav was looking to have the injunction made permanent because L.J. Tibbs Rides Again contained information that was highly classified or damaging to the reputation of the USA. Which was an absurd proposition because there was no way that people could think that it was anything but a work of fiction. None of the characters in the book had the same names as people in real life, *I mean hallo – L.J. Tibbs and Leroy Jethro Gibbs – what was wrong with people?*

Unfortunately, it seemed that all of a sudden, Vance was fuming because some of the scenarios bore a little bit of similarity to some things that might have occurred to HIM at work. And because of that he was threatening to make Tim's life extremely unpleasant; as if it wasn't already because of that blasted telemovie. If that wasn't enough to deal with, his publisher was talking about trying to recoup their launch cost for the book by suing him, arguing that he was in breach of contract for not delivering a work of fiction. Finally, they also wanted their book advance back in full.

Really? Had he walked under a ladder?

Stepped on a crack on the sidewalk, maybe broken a mirror and not noticed?

Had he offended a black cat, or a bunch of witches named Sanderson on Halloween?

What had he ever done to deserve such rotten luck?

So was it unreasonable that after a terrible week he'd really enjoyed letting his inner Elf Lord re-emerge and just hang out with his buddies. As an unexpected bonus, he even had his cramped apartment all to himself since Ziva had gone to NCIS for a meeting with the new Messiah, Tony DiNozzo aka I-walk-on-water.

That being the case, Tim was enjoying some much-needed time by himself to decompress from
what had been an unfortunate week for Thom E. Gemcity. He was just really glad it was over. Not that it looked as if his life would be improving in the near future.

Although, at least at NCIS things had to begin to get better. As Sarah had pointed out this morning, the telemovie would eventually fade from people’s consciousness and unlike Gibbs, Abby couldn’t hold a grudge indefinitely. No really, she couldn’t...could she?

So, McGee was expecting to have a blissful few hours of solitude knowing that Ziva was planning on seducing DiNozzo today to secure his help to a) get the criminal charges dropped and b) get her old job back. He couldn’t help wondering - did she just expect Bishop to disappear back to NSA in a puff of smoke or maybe she thought Mendez would leave and she could steep into his job?

And since DiNozzo was getting lucky, he figured that like father like son – Ziva and Tony would probably end up at the Adams House and he’d get to have sex with Delilah in private for a change. It was four weeks since he’d bailed Ziva out, four long weeks and he was starting to go stir crazy sharing with the Israeli ninja, not to mention horny as all get out.

Hearing the key in the front door caught him well and truly off-guard as his ex-teammate and now roomie stalked past him muttering ferociously, before entering the bedroom and slamming the door. He was really glad he was using his gaming joystick at the time and not his personal joystick with Delilah when Ziva made her dramatic entrance – that could have been pretty awkward.

Although, in the mood she was in, it was debatable that she would have even notice his Little Tim (which Delilah had christened his dick) not there was anything undersized about LT.

Honestly, Tim would never have thought that after finally being in a long-term relationship for the first time in... aw too damned long, his hand would get more of a workout than when he was single. Being in a long-distance relationship sucked. Cyber-sex sucked! And now he wouldn’t even have the apartment to himself. A pox on the witches!

Okay, so clearly things had not gone well for Ziva. As curious as he was to discover why the Sex Machine had turned down what Ziva drolly referred to as a roll in the straw with her when he’d kill his grandmother to get one, Tim’s overriding emotion was disappointment. Now he and Delilah would have to have cyber-sex with Ziva in the apartment and that wasn’t happening. Frankly, voyeurism left him cold or perhaps he should say, soft, so he needed to come up with a solution.

Maybe he could bribe her to go see a movie – maybe a Harry Potter marathon. Oh yeah, Ziva loved Harry Potter. He jumped on his non-gaming computer to see if there were any playing today.

No nothing... maybe she would consider a Star Wars movie marathon or wait, there was a Sound of Music screening. It was one of those screenings where everyone dressed up as their favourite characters from the movie and they stuck the lyrics of the songs up on the screen karaoke style, so the audience could sing along. Which seemed rather unnecessary because honestly, didn’t everyone know the words to the songs already?

It was only a few hours – not a marathon but still some gaming and then sex – it was doable. Even if he pared his Elf Lord session right back, as long as he was organised. Damn – he was always invincible after one of Delilah’s ‘special calls’ and he really deserved some quality down-time after the week he’d had.

Ziva appeared and he started to tell her about the Sound of Music screening when he noticed she had her suitcase in her hand and a duffel bag on her back. What was going on?

"Um ah Ziva, what are you doing?" Why after all this time why was he still sounding nervous
"I thought that would be obvious, McGee. I am returning to Israel."

Oh no no no! This wasn't good at all. "Um but you can't Ziva, you're still on bail…wait, did Tony get the charges dropped? Wow I know he has contacts but well…well, wow that was quick." Tim noticed the lethal glare and stopped.

"Do not mention that swine's name ever again if you wish to live, McGee. He is dead to me."

McGee realised that Ziva wasn't speaking through clenched teeth. "Ah Ziva, why are you able to talk now?"

"Because I decided my jaw was fine and I took the wires out."

"But it's only been a month. You're supposed to have it wired for 6-7 weeks. It won't have healed."

"Do not concern yourself, Tim. I have been injecting myself with stem cells harvested from human fat cells and engineered to becoming cartilage that helps in bone remodelling. Plus, for good measurement I've been taking a calcium supplement and also arnica."

"I don't understand."

"Mossad, especially Kidon trained operatives have long used special substances to speed up their rehabilitation. Our scientists have been providing us with this and other substances to speed our healing processes, so we can return to the field sooner." She smirked at him patronisingly. "How did you think I was able to recover from the car accident upon our return from Berlin so rapidly, so I could fulfil my duty and destiny as Eli David's daughter and take down Bodnar?"

Because I thought you were a crazy ninja who couldn't feel pain. "Okaaay, but Ziva, you aren't in Mossad anymore. Nor are you in Israel, so how the heck did you get hold of these special substances? They aren't illegal, are they?"

"Your scientists have finally begun to play catch up. They are using stem cells and turning them into cartilage."

"Yes, but how did YOU get hold of it?"

Ziva looked annoyed. "Let us simply say that I did and move out?"

"You mean you stole it, didn't you?" He accused.

She shrugged. "If the sandal fits. But it does not matter, and I am in a hurry."

He shook his head. Maybe he didn't want to know how she got it on account that she was already on bail for several felony crimes. Returning to the original topic which was the extremely pertinent one, he probed.

"So, Di… The Swine got the charges dropped even if he um pissed you off, right?"

She glided over in that predatory way of a panther stalking its prey, getting up into his personal space, giving Tim the evil eye and he shuddered. She knew damned well he hated that, even worse than people eating his Nutter Butters.

"Why did you not tell me about the vamp that he is engaged to, McGee?"
"DiNo… er The Swine is getting married to a vampire? Oh man."

"No, not a man, unless she is a transsexual. She is nothing but a cheap whore, I do not know if she is also a blood sucking undead. But yes, that is what they claim – that they are engaged. How could you not know this? You pride yourself on being a cracked-up investigator. You are a joke." Ziva took a step toward the door and Tim realised she hadn't addressed the elephant in the room.

"So even if he rejected your kind offer of a roll in the hay, he got the charges dropped? Didn't he?" Oh please, please, please say yes!

"He refused to cooperate after all I have done for the ungrateful… ageing… adolescent… jockstrap. All the time I have covered his hairy butt. I will have my revenge, mark my statements." Ziva's customary murdering of American idiom seemed to have become much worse since she left the US, he noted, silently deciding not correcting her was the prudent thing to do. Prudent for HIM!

Ignoring the obvious queries about what she had covered up (if anything) for DiNozzo because nothing leapt to mind, McGee focused on hammering the important information into her head. "But Ziva, you know that you can't return to Israel. You're still on bail."

"Bah! This is ridiculous, Tim. I refuse to go to jail for a crime I am innocent of. They are trunked up charges and I will not stand. I am going home, I will show that donkey's butt. Let me pass." She demanded as he barred the front door with his body.

"No Ziva, I can't let you do that. I stood surety for you, so they would release you until the trial. If you abscond I lose all the bond I put up for you." Something he could ill afford, especially now with the legal challenges he was facing from the book. Please, please Ziva be reasonable, don't make me use force.

"You cannot stop me, McGee. I regret the money, but it is not worth my freedom if I get convicted. Money isn't everything, this is my life. You surely must see this. I was merely helping you all out by returning and this is the thanks I get for doing a good deed."

"I can stop you, Ziva." He quavered slightly, seeing her expression. "I don't want to, but I'll arrest you, if I have to. I can't afford to lose that money."

Ziva smiled but there was nothing friendly in the baring of her pearly whites. "I think it will take a much manlier specimen of male than you to be able to arrest a trained former Mossad and Kidon agent, little Timmy." She eyed him up an down with an arrogant flick of her dark brown eyes, a slight upward curl of her lips suggesting disdain for his prowess.

"I can kill you with a paperclip, as you well know. I could snap your scrawny neck in the blink of an eye… the possibilities are endless." She grinned and watched him gulp nervously.

"I got you out of jail when no one else would have anything to do with you, not Director Vance or your precious Gibbs. Not Abby or Ducky. Me… I did, and this is how you repay my trust? I thought we were friends, Ziva." Tim tried not to sound like he was begging but even to his ears he detected a quavering note to his tone.

"Oh, honestly Tim, get a life. You would do the same thing in my boots. In this business you can't afford the luxury of friendships, only liaisons with people who prove useful to you. It is everyone for themselves and I need to look after number one. You are ambitious, you understand this, yes? After all, you never hesitated to put the shoe in when it could earn you praise at expense of others."

"No that's not true, Ziva."
"Oh please - do not assault my intelligence; of course, it is true. Besides, you owe that bail money to me anyway and probably a lot more since I could have very easily sued you for using my identity without my permission in your Deep Six books.

“In fact,” she frowned as if something just occurred to her. “It was your fault that Mossad decided I was sleeping with Donkey Butt which cost me status with my father. You do realise that you could so very easily have gotten that donkey butt killed.” Seeing his incredulity, she chuckled nastily. “Who else do you think tipped off Trent Kort and helped him place the bomb in his stupid car? Mossad did.”

"No… no that isn't true. You're making that up.” Tim babbled, turning a strange shade of green. The books were fiction and not based on real people. Beside you and Ton… er Donkey's Butt were so getting it off together, everyone knew that.”

"Cretin, that just proves you are a pathetic investigator, McGee. Donkey's Butt was too afraid of breaking his precious Gibbs' Rule 12 to risk jumping into the satchel, no matter how much he wanted me.”

"C'mon Ziva! Now I know you're lying. Tony broke Rule 12 with Paula Cassidy and E.J. Barrett. Not to mention dating at least half of the females at the DC office, so don't tell me that he wouldn't sleep with you because of Rule 12. I don't believe you.”

Looking at his former team mate's shattered expression, it occurred to him that perhaps he had made a gross miscalculation. He'd been positive that they had slept together in the early days, what with that assignment when they'd posed as married assassins. Ziva had gotten totally naked the moment they arrived at the hotel suite and he knew that the oversexed DiNozzo didn't have the self-discipline to resist that sort of temptation. Even the director had seen him au naturel via MTAC.

Everyone, not just him, assumed they were doing it, what with the way they flirted all the time in the bull pen.

Anyway, none of that changed the fact that Ziva was planning to flee, and his hopes of seeing his surety again go up in smoke. Or that she was now really angry with him – perhaps not the smartest thing to do to point out Tony's willingness to break Rule 12.

"Last warning McGee, stand aside. You do not have to get hurt here but if you force me to, I will hurt you.”

Tim quailed at the thought of the ninja assassin, having seen the results of her work, up close and personal, but could he afford to kiss goodbye to his $150,000 when he already facing legal bills for defending the injunction and his publisher threatening to sue him too. He’d already spent the advance – paying some of Ziva's bail.

Could a discharged bankrupt still be a federal agent, he wondered? He didn't want to get hurt or killed but on the other hand if he lost that money, he might as well be dead. He didn't know what to do.

As he was floundering, unable to make up his mind, Ziva decided to make it for him, impatient with his dithering. Like lightening she grabbed him in one of her stealth ninja moves and flipped him over onto his back, whipped out some cuffs and cuffed him to his computer desk. Glancing at him, she noted he was still breathing, although very dazed. No doubt winded but he'd live. Patting him affectionately on the cheek twice, she departed.

When he finally got his breath back again, he found she'd taken his cell phone and unplugged his
Okay this weekend officially sucked! And adding insult to injury, he was probably going to miss his call to the lovely Delilah.

ISHT

Marc Mendez sat at his desk, trying to decide if he was making a mountain out of a molehill or not. After he'd escorted a very angry Ziva David out of the building, trailed by three security guards, he'd placed her in a cab. The SFA decided that Tony had made a good call about giving McGee a sitrep on the meeting and Ziva's reactions. He felt sorry for the guy, having to deal with David when she returned, and she was mad enough to do something stupid. He wondered if he should quietly give Tony some backup while he was here in DC. He wouldn't put it past her to lash out at him or Emma or else the crazy assassin would probably try to skip the country.

Grabbing his phone, he sent McGee a text. **meeting over. iPad badly hurt. did not make it. ziva not happy. may skip country. call bckup requird – marc.**

Five minutes later he decided that sending McGee a text message warning him was rather lame. Sure, the guy resented him for taking the SFA position on the team that he felt should be his but that didn't negate Mendez' responsibility to his junior agent. Sighing, he picked up the phone and place a call to McGee that went straight to voicemail. Leaving a lengthier explanation of his text he finished up the edict, "Call me as soon as you get this message."

Now an hour later, he still hadn't heard back from Tim. He wanted to go home but was starting to get worried. Ziva would have gotten back to the Silver Springs apartment by now and McGee was permanently bonded to his smart phone, so why hadn't he heard from him? Of course, Tim could just be ignoring him and if, so he'd tear him a new one, big enough to insert said smart phone into. But what if he was in trouble?

Normally he'd call Abby and get her to try to contact him, but she had been on the warpath all week about the telemovie, so Marc figured McGee would be screening her calls too. Sighing, he called Ellie to ask her to try ringing McGee to see if he was okay. While he was waiting for her to call back, he called Tony to give him the heads up and the SSA gave him a contact at Dulles who worked security. Just in case Ziva had decided to run, they could keep an eye out without issuing a formal BOLO just yet.

When Bishop called to say that he wasn't answering her calls and texts either, he told her to head on over to the apartment and check on him and he'd join her soon. Grabbing his creds, keys and gun, he stopped to call Metro PD and request assistance. Not that he was hoping that anything had happened to his teammate but if he requested backup and McGee was just dodging their calls, he was dead meat!
Chapter Summary

Tony catches up with Jimmy and Breena and Fornell asks for his help.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is considerably longer than the last one was but that was just how it panned out, I'm afraid.
Warning: This chapter's content (the last third) contains discussion of alcoholism and its impact on children, in case you want to avoid it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Gotta say that Angel Amy looks like a whole lot more attractive alternative to Goth Abby right now. She is sure a Hell of a lot more mature." Jimmy Palmer commented angrily as he took a sip of his beer.

Tony nodded understandingly. Abby had really screwed up by convincing Ziva to return to the States again, and Jimmy was justifiably angry with both of them. Frankly, he was hard pressed to come up with a rationale for Abby's illogical insistence that Team Gibbs was just one big ol' happy family. She had had a relatively normal, happy childhood and home life even if her parents were deaf.

Sure, she was adopted but she only discovered that fact fairly recently and the upshot was she got an extra brother which seemed like a pretty good deal to Tony. As the only (and lonely) child who periodically got 'step siblings' only to have them torn away when Senior's newest wife discovered exactly who she'd married and dropped him like a hot potato, he'd love to find out about a long-lost brother.

"Yeah, I know, Jimmy. Not sure how or why but the Abby Scuito I knew when I first started working at NCIS was chalk and cheese from the caricature she’s become. She was smart and sassy, and she certainly didn't act like a spoilt little brat. Abby sure as hell was no angel, she went through guys like they were dirty underwear, but she wasn't pathologically needy and an emotional vampire like she is now."

"Maybe it's a parasitical relationship between her and members of Gibbs team, especially Gibbs since they seem to have a significant relationship." A female voice interjected causing both men to jump, not realising that Emma and Breena had returned from the Ladies.

Tony smirked at his fiancée. "Maybe Buns. That makes as much sense as anything else does."

As the ladies took their seats again, Jimmy returned to Amy/Abby debate. "You know Tony, now you come to mention it, I remember Abby was so much cooler and more mature too when I first started working with Dr Mallard in 2003. Even her voice was deeper and her speech much less babyish."
Breena who'd remained fairly quiet to this point, joined the conversation. "I wonder how much longer she's going to rock the Goth look. Not like she is really into the whole Goth lifestyle. But isn't she's getting a bit long in the tooth for the miniskirts and over the knee socks and platform boots."

Emma nodded in agreement. "Sounds like a pathetic bid for attention." She looked at Tony, aware that he was conflicted over Abby. She was someone he'd considered a good friend until she'd changed and become a Gibbs' groupie. Seeing him with a certain gleam in his eyes that augured some new idea or scheme in the offing, Emma wondered what was going on in his fertile brain.

She recognised the look by now – usually it preceded a new innovation and she was curious about what he'd come up with. Refusing to explain, he made her even more inquisitive with the comment that he needed to talk to Brad first to see if it was feasible. With his steadfast refusal to comment on his current mischief, talk turned to the meeting with Ziva, something which Jimmy and Breena were naturally keen to hear about.

"She sexually assaulted you and you have it on tape?" Jimmy fist pumped the air, jubilantly.

Tony didn't look quite as excited. "Technically, but since the tape also recorded Emma here landing a kick to Ms David's patella (sweet aim by the way, Buns) I'm not all that keen to use it. I'm thinking if we need to use the second charge, we'll go with sworn testimony plus Ducky collected DNA swabs of my lips and mouth that should back up our statements."

Emma had been thinking about how Tony didn't seem surprised by Ziva's attack and finally put the pieces together. "You were expecting her to do it, weren't you that's why you filmed it?"

He smiled at her. "Sort of. Not the sexual assault - I expected her to physically assault me like the last time. I didn't realise she would think after meeting you that seduction was a good idea. Guess I underestimated her…again."

Eyes narrowed in anger, Emma was about to probe her soon to be husband over the 'last time' comment but Jimmy pipped her to the post.

"What do you mean about assaulting you like the last time, Tony?" the Autopsy Gremlin demanded.

Looking guilty he sighed. "When we were in Tel Aviv after the Rivkin affair. She knocked me to the ground and held her loaded gun to my chest and threatened me and then threatened to shoot me point blank in the thigh."

"That was how you displaced your fractured humerus and came to have all that soft tissue bruising on your back? I assumed that was from Eli David."

"Nope Gremlin, he just caused the secondary bruising around my throat and my shoulder. Ziva did the rest. So, you see, I was expecting her to attack me, not try to steal my virtue."

At his announcement, his three lunch mates all began speaking simultaneously, furious at his casual revelations. Over the hubbub Tony detected his phone ringing and gestured for the trio to shut up so he could hear.

"DiNozzo."

"Hi Marc, what's up?"

"You're both heading over to his place to check on him now? Did you get any of his cyber buddies to try and call him in case he is screening your calls? No don't worry, I'll do that and just in case Ziva has decided to run and you don't want to put out a BOLO just yet, contact my friend Shelly Whately.
"She's 2IC of airport security at Dulles. Tell her I said to call her."

"Yeah, I'm with Jimmy and Breena. No, we'll take care. Hey Marc, keep me informed, please. Okay, go and I'll contact the cyber geeks."

After concluding the call, he held up a hand to forestall any questions. "In a minute, guys. Just let me make this call." He quickly dialled the NCIS main switchboard and asked to be connected with the cyber basement. Quickly chatting with whoever answered, he explained the potential concerns of Mendez about McGee and asked the recipient to see if he could get through. He then requested they put him through to MTAC and spoke to one of the techs that he knew was friendly with McGee. He briefly explained the situation a second time and asked Joss to try to contact him as well. Finishing up, he looked at his two friends and Emma who were waiting impatiently.

"It may be nothing, but McGee hasn't responded to Marc's attempts to contact him and since he wanted to warn him about Ziva's volatility, he's a little concerned. He and Bishop have gone to check out his apartment. Make sure he's okay."

Tony was glad that long ingrained habit had made him request a table where he could see anyone coming inside and also offering a quick getaway through the kitchen if necessary. He checked on his service weapon to make sure he had easy access to it and his knife. Getting to his backup gun would be a bit trickier but not impossible.

He was glad he decided to bring them, even though he thought the odds of Ziva coming after him or Breena were small. She was much more likely to try to flee the country and with her years of Mossad training and contacts she stood a good chance of succeeding. Damned idiot judge!

As their meals arrived, Tony steered the conversation into safer territory, discussing the wedding and the shopping expedition or as Tony termed it '-secret women's' business' that Emma and Lara were going on following lunch. Breena's enthusiasm soon earned her an invitation to join them and Tony decided that since he was doing a favour for Rocky, he'd hit him up for some protection for Emma and Breena just in case the whacko Ninja decided to come after them. Jimmy was evidently of the same mind, as he offered to tag along. Brave man!

They discussed the wedding venue and Emma admitted to not finding her dream chapel by the sea, so they were going to find a waterfront park and hope for fine weather. Emma and Breena were too caught up in the details to notice Tony's smirk although Jimmy did and wondered what he was up to. He knew him too well to not smell mischief or a prank of some sort.

Finally, as they all finished up their cooked to perfection salmon with chargrilled vegetables, Tony stared at Breena's empty wine glass and the sparkling water she was sipping. "Something you guys want to announce?"

Jimmy chuckled. "I told you he'd notice."

Breena sighed. "We hoped to keep it quiet since I'm only nine weeks along right now."

"Don't worry, I can keep a secret, but Emma here is the worry. Loose lips, hey Buns?"

"Well they sure as hell won't be kissing you any time soon, Cheeks." She retorted swiftly as Tony pouted.

"Um… guys…what's with the Buns and Cheeks thing?" Jimmy questioned them curiously after noticing it on several occasions.

Emma chuckled. "Well neither of us are the simpering, in your face lovey dovey types and most pet
names had us cracking up when we tried to use them. We finally settled on Buns for me and Cheeks for Tony."

"Short for Honey-buns and Sweet-cheeks." Tony admitted ruefully. And if you tell anyone at work, I'll tell Breena about what you used to get up to in autopsy before she met you." He threatened the Autopsy Gremlin, laughingly.

"You ass, Tony. She already knows." Jimmy taunted.

"What when you lost your iPod in the Petty Officer?"

"Well no…not that. But she does now. Thanks a bunch!"

Emma rolled her eyes at their antics. "Ignore those idiots. Congratulations Breena. And don't worry, we won't say anything."

"Yeah congratulations, Jimmy and Breena." Tony leaned over the table and bussed Jimmy's cheek and shook hands with Breena, which had them all laughing before he stood up and went around the table to give the expectant mother a hug and kiss.

"So how are things going at the apartment since I had Keith install the new security system?" Tony changed the subject, knowing most people were superstitious about discussing pregnancies before the three-month mark.

Breena smiled at him gratefully. "I feel heaps safer there now, thanks Tony."

"S'okay. I've been meaning to do it for ages, just never got around to it. Guess apart from my piano there wasn't anything worth protecting before."

Emma frowned, as did Jimmy; both picking up the subtext of Tony's remark. Both certain that he was clueless about what had made them both so mad.

Breena missing the byplay, smiled at Tony across the table. "While you mightn't have felt like using you police contacts to haul Ziva's ass out of the fire, I do appreciate you calling in some favours to have Wainwright warned off. And the local patrol officers have called round to let me know they have him unofficially on their watch list."

"Not to mention you enlisting our neighbours to be on the lookout, Tony." Jimmy observed gratefully.

"Yeah, even the nymphomaniac is keeping a weather eye open, when she's not ogling Jimmy's package, that is." His wife reported exasperatedly.

"Good, I'm glad. Not that you are being ogled Jimmy-boy, but you feel safer now, Breena. So, have you decided to stay or are you looking for a new apartment?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Eventually we'll need extra space, although the baby can sleep in with us at first but for now, we decided that this was our home. Neither Ziva or Cory Wainwright are going to chase us out of it."

Tony's cell phone rang, and he answered immediately. The conversation consisted mainly of grunts and monosyllabic responses, before he hung up and called Leon Vance to inform him that Ziva had assaulted McGee and taken off. Giving a brief sit rep he suggested to Leon that he bring in the FBI since their former team mate had now assaulted two federal agents today in himself and now McGee.
Once they apprehended her he was definitely going to press charges, even if McGee chose not to. It was time that Ziva learnt that her actions had consequences and the longer her sentence the better. He also insisted that until she was caught, Emma and Breena both required protection details, even if he thought she would be too busy trying to escape.

There was no way he was going to underestimate his former team mate, though. She'd shown just how determined she was to extract revenge with her vendetta against Bodnar.

Completing his call Tony suggested they ordered desert and coffee, which for him was fresh mixed berries and herbal tea while the girls ordered coffee and the house specialty rum chocolate gateaux. Jimmy picked a diabetic friendly desert with his coffee and seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly. At first, they were reluctant to eat in front of him, but he smiled and assured them it was fine. Emma usually followed his rather strict diet, but he encouraged her to indulge her sweet tooth, too. He knew how much she loved chocolate cake.

Jimmy looked across and smiled. "I'm impressed with your self-discipline, Tony. Most people in your shoes, once they're in remission return to their usual eating habits but you have maintained a really healthy diet."

"I got a second chance Jimmy. No one really expected it, but I'm here and I'm not about to take it for granted. Emma insisted we get married and although I worry that the risk of her being left a widow is too high, she's even more stubborn than me.

"So, I'm determined to do all that I can to stay with her for as long as I possibly can. If that means following a strict diet, it is a really small price to pay for our future together. Besides, after a while you get used to it and stop craving refined foods and sugars. After the chemo, all food tasted bad anyway, so it was kind of easy to give up the unhealthy stuff."

"Do you still meditate daily, Tony?" Breena asked, trying to envisage the hyperactive Tony that she knew in DC being able to remain still long enough.

"Yep, he does, as well as Tai Chi and yoga alternate days and working out." Emma answered.

"Gotta walk the talk. Our office has the lowest stress leave levels of any of the NCIS field offices since I started working there. HR love me," Tony boasted cheekily.

"Yeah, now tell them how many concussions you'd had since going back on active duty," his fiancée taunted him.

"Only three times, don't make a big deal out of it, oh future 'She Who Must Be Obeyed.' You know that deaf kid would have walked right into the midst of a shootout if I hadn't grabbed him and somersaulted down the stairs. And the probie was fighting a dirtbag with a knife when I tackled him. It was a small price to pay for getting slammed into the wall, since no one ended up being stabbed. Trust me it's no fun, Babe."

"That's two, what was the third?" Jimmy asked, frowning.

"He walked into a convenience store to buy doughnuts for the team in the middle of a holdup and took out two armed thugs!" Emma huffed.

"Well what was I supposed to do? Let them shoot everyone?" He asked, composedly.

"No… but why do you have to be such a trouble magnet? You don't even eat doughnuts anymore?" Emma demanded, heatedly.
He shrugged, looking at Jimmy and Breena who were trying to keep a straight face. "It was my turn to supply breakfast for the team, Em."

"So why bring doughnuts? You don't eat them? Why not bring stuff you eat? Since when did anyone get caught up in an armed robbery of a health food shop; it's always the convenience store?" She scolded him as the Palmers snickered.

Pouting and looking like a naughty child, Tony objected. "But Honeybuns, you know no one will eat my seeds and nuts crap or drink my veggie juice smoothies. All they do is whine and complain all day."

She just hugged him tight and whispered that he needed to be more careful. Before he could protest she kissed him with such passion that even the newly wedded Palmers were getting embarrassed, as well as more than a bit turned on watching.

Putty in her hands, he agreed to try to avoid convenience stores as much as he could.

After he left Emma with the Palmers to meet up with Lara Pitt, he found his thoughts distracted by her steamy PDA. His future wife sure knew how to kiss and wasn't shy about where she did it, either. She often swung by the office and marched into the bullpen to express her affections and the staff were pretty used to her demonstrative nature by now. Not that he minded of course, but that was the second time today in public, not to mention the heavy make out session before they got up this morning.

What with the lack of taking things beyond making out because of his 'Senior and the Nympho' neuroses, she was driving him crazy. He was finding it really hard to focus on the task ahead when all he wanted to do was take her somewhere good and private and make love for the rest of the afternoon.

Intruding on his carnal thoughts, his phone rang which was kind of a relief. It was Leon Vance calling to report that Fornell had agreed to handle the assault charges for them and that he wanted to see him ASAP. Sighing, Tony made his way over to the Hoover building. At this rate his weekend trip was turning into an all-out reunion. The only ones he hadn't met were Gibbs, Abby and McGee and he was going to encounter Gibbs later that day. Hopefully Ron 'Jack-ass' Slacks wouldn't be working today. It was bad enough that he had to meet Fornell.

"So glad to see that reports of your demise were premature, DiNutzo." Tobias quipped, sardonically.

"Well you know Fornell, if you keep predicting my demise long enough, eventually it is going to be correct." Tony countered. "Please tell me that Slacks is home with the gripe today."

"Nope. He's at a political correctness seminar," The Fibbie deadpanned.

"Oh, is that what you guys call it?" Tony chuckled.

"Not our wise and wonderful leaders… they call it Sensitivity and Cultural Awareness training… us plebs… oh yeah."

"So why did I have to see you, Tobias? I had the precinct fax over my and Emma's statements to you. What did you really want to see me for, other than to make sure I was still alive and kicking?"

"Gibbs says you're coming back to take over the team from him. That true?"
Tony sighed. "Which bit, that he's retiring or that I'm coming back to DC, Tobias?"

"Both. Either, neither?"

"Well I'm not coming back, I have my own team and plenty to keep me out of mischief in New York. As to Gibbs retiring, more likely that he'll get terminated I'd say, than he'll go out gracefully. Why the interest? Personal? Aren't you about due to retire as a field agent, too?"

"I'm interested cuz Jethro's a friend, not that he admits it and the stubborn fool is shitting in his nest with the way he's carrying on lately. Hoping you could talk sense into him. AND for your information DiNutzo, I have another 29 months til mandatory field retirement kicks in."

Seeing Tony's shocked expression, he scowled. "It's the hair, the god damned hair. Not fair! Being follicularly challenged makes me look years older than I really am, while that damned fool Jarhead has a full head of hair and shaves half of it off. I'm telling you, bald guys are at a severe disadvantage. It's so not reasonable."

Snickering, Tony decided to tease him as payback for Tobias expecting him to talk Gibbs into acting like a normal person, instead of a spoilt brat. "Oh, I don't know about that Fornelli, the guy working on the BAU, Derek Morgan doesn't look his age. Maybe you should rock the totally bald chrome dome look. Diane might dig it." Seeing his scowl, he chuckled. "Or maybe not. But seriously, why me?"

"You're his boy, DiNut… er Tony. You can get him to see sense." He stared as Tony collapsed, laughing.

"Think you're either delusional or blind. He doesn't listen to me… maybe Ducky or Abby." He didn't bother sharing that Balboa had convinced him to go and talk him round. No sense in raising false hope.

"Why'd you leave, Tony? No, not the official reason… why did you request a transfer when you recovered?"

"Team screwed the pooch one too many times. Gibbs made McGee point on a routine case when he was away from the office. Had enough of all of the insubordination, disrespect and ignoring the chain of command."

"So why didn't you accept my job offer? You could have stayed in DC?"

"Honestly, Tobias? Because working with Ron would have been as bad as staying on the MCRT. Plus, I got to lead my own team and the chance to put some long overdue changes in place. I needed challenges and needed to have some respect for a change. I was looking for a fresh start. And Emma loves the theatres and museums in New York."

Fornell looked confused. "Who's Emma?"

"My fiancée… actually in less than two months she'll be my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yep, that's partially what set Ziva off so badly. I introduced them, and Em told her to back off and then her foot might have accidentally found its way to the ninja's kneecap to help emphasize her point."

"She kicked Ziva David?"
“Close your mouth, Toby. I can see every filling and crown and it isn’t a pleasant view. Let’s just say that after nearly losing what she decided was hers, Emma isn’t about to let some crazy assassin get the wrong idea.”

“Damn, I wish I’d been a fly on the wall for that.”

ISHT

After Tony left the FBI building he stopped off a little coffee shop that he used to frequent and bought a chamomile tea. He breathed in the scent of freshly ground coffee beans and smiled. He rarely drank coffee anymore – while it was supposed to be full of antioxidants, he wasn’t a huge fan of the taste which was quite bitter. He always preferred it doctored with hazelnut flavouring and sugar but those were not things that were a part of his new healthy way of eating, so he preferred to skip coffee for the most part. But he still loved the smell of freshly ground beans and soaked up the aroma keenly, feeling a bit like a bloodhound.

After getting a sitrep from Marc – they were still looking for Ziva unfortunately – he took a few minutes to order some flowers for Raffy.

When asked what to put on the card he requested the following: ‘I bow before your brilliance, Ms Gordani. You’re right, I needed to get it off my chest, Antonio.’

He remembered how he’d ended up going to see Clinical Psychologist Rafaela Gordani in the first place.

Flashback:

His oncologist, Giovanna Parisi stopped by the night before his discharge after the second cycle of Chemo, to talk about his prognosis. They discussed his recuperation and future lifestyle considerations before she spoke about stress reduction. Sensing she wanted to ask something, Tony sighed and told her to spit it out. Coming so close to death he learnt not to get all bent out of shape over lots of things that used to get him worked up.

Still he was unprepared when she asked, "Did you ever get counselling as the child of alcoholic parents?"

Shocked, he stared at her wondering how she knew before realising the extensive medical and familial history that he’d had to fill out to take part in the clinical trial would have had enough info to draw conclusions.

"Um… no but I'm fine."

"Maybe but in case you decide it's something you need to address, I just thought I'd let you know a cousin of mine specialises in working with ACoAs." Seeing his blank expression at the use of the acronym she explained. "ACoAs is short for adult children of alcoholics and Raffy sent me her business card along with some literature to pass along, in case you decided to follow through. She has a practice in New York and I know you're planning on moving there if you go back to NCIS."

Tony took the info pack, deciding that Giovanna was just trying to help and with all he owed her, he’d accept the offer in the spirit it had been intended and not get all paranoid. After she left him alone, he went to put the info pack aside when the list of characteristics of so called ACoAs caught his eye. Being incurably nosy, he couldn't help himself, he had to read through the list that had been developed by a Janet Woititz. And that was most definitely a fatal mistake because once read, as a person with an eidetic memory, he couldn't just forget it.
Hell now he would have to suppress it. Like everything else that was too painful for him to deal with. But that would be easier said than done it seemed. He could picturee the information despite his best intentions:

**Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics – Janet Woititz**

They tend towards isolation, possessing a fear of people, and fear of authority figures.

Well he certainly isolated himself and lived with the fear that people would discover the real Tony DiNozzo.

But that didn’t mean anything, Tony protested as he looked at the next characteristic.

They’re inclined to have difficulties with their identity and this can manifest in them constantly seeking the approval of others.

Yep, he had chronic problems seeking approval and both Senior and Gibbs saw his vulnerability as a weakness and used it against him. He knew they despised his feebleness, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself looking for approbation.

Still...so did heaps of people. What else?

They tend to be frightened by angry people and personal criticism.

Well kinda – he always tried to play peacemaker if possible although he did often provoke Gibbs wrath just to get it done and dusted. He’d learnt a long time ago that anticipation was always worse than the punishment. Better to get the licking over and done with.

So that didn’t apply to him. Or was he so afraid of anger that provoking it was the lesser of two evils.

They've a strong tendency to become an alcoholic themselves, married to one, or both. A variation on such a scenario is that they tend to be attracted to another compulsive people, such as workaholics. The similarity is that neither is emotionally available to deal with overwhelming and unhealthy dependency needs.

Nope, not an alcoholic (although that time when he was agent afloat he did try to drown his guilt in a bottle more than was healthy) nor was he a drug addict or married to one.

Yeah but he’d become a workaholic and you worked closely with Gibbs who ticked a lot of boxes on the compulsion scale, his inner voice pointed out sanctimoniously.

Huh... he’d spent more hours with Gibbs than most people spent with a spouse in the average marriage - he figured that was significant.

Okay this wasn’t looking so good...

They have a predisposition to be a victim and see the world from the perspective of a victim.

He didn’t think that this one applied. Unlike other people who went around with a giant chip on their shoulder, he never tried to make people feel sorry for him for his crappy childhood. He had a genuine horror that people would see him as weak or pitiful.

But perhaps Emma might see him differently. He wasn’t sure if he would ask her though.
He forced himself to look at the next characteristic.

They often have an overly developed sense of responsibility for everything and everyone around them. It isn't uncommon for them to be excessively concerned about the needs of others, usually to the detriment of their own wants and needs. This behaviour while protective of others, also facilitates their need to avoid personal insight or identify and resolve personal difficulties.

Okay this was way too close to home for comfort. Jimmy was always nagging him about being too invested in taking care of everyone else's needs and ignoring his own.

A part of him wanted to stop this navel gazing immediately. Another part of him felt that would be cowardly and dishonest.

He had a lot of faults...ask anyone but he wasn’t a coward.

Was he focused on other people’s needs so he didn’t need to deal with his own pain?

He kept going. What was next.

Frequently may experience feelings of guilt associated with standing up for their own rights. They find it easier to give in to the demands of others.

Only because he wasn’t worth it. Victims of crime and ensuring they received justice was more important than petty considerations like him getting to eat or sleep. Even if it had bugged him at the time, in the scheme of things it was that big a deal.

Often have an addiction to excitement. Feeling a need to be on the edge and engage in risk-taking behaviours.

People accused him of risk taking behaviour - he countered that he was just protecting everybody's six.

Although he did seem to have the worst luck – he sure never asked to be pushed out of a plane at night by a bunch of angry Marines or hold a trigger to a car bomb so that his junior agents to flee the scene. And he certainly didn’t set out to have to shoot two perps and dive into a dirty river to haul a trapped Gibbs and his dead daughter’s best friend out of a submerged car and then have to resuscitate them both when they weren’t breathing.

A tendency to confuse feelings of love and pity. They also tend to be drawn or attract people they can rescue and look after.

Guilty!

Maybe that was why he tried pushing Emma away. She could take care of herself and she was only average screwed up...not like him.

Avoidance of feelings related to traumatic childhood experiences. Unable to feel or express feelings because it is frightening and/or painful and overwhelming. Denial of feelings.

Okay... so not going there now. DiNozzo men don’t cry! There was nothing wrong with not wanting to be weak.

They often experience low self-esteem. A tendency to judge themselves harshly, to be
perfectionist and extremely self-critical.

No… he rarely got positive feedback from Gibbs so how could he be a perfectionist? He was far from perfect, in fact he would never measure up to the standards of Gibbs. Or if it came to it, his father.

Avoiding the inner voice yelling - YOU ARE A SCREW-UP - he steeled himself to finish the damned list.

Strong dependency needs and a terror of being abandoned. Do almost anything to hold onto a relationship, even bad ones so they don't have to experience the pain and fear of abandonment.

Well his mother died when he was eight, father disowned him at twelve, not to mention forgetting him in Hawaii when he was still a kid. Losing every woman who he’d ever loved. Excuse me if I ended up with a fear of abandonment?

Who wouldn’t in his shoes, seriously?

Alcoholism is a family disease which often results in a family member taking on the characteristics of the disease even if they are not alcoholics (this is known as para-alcoholism). Dysfunctional relationships, denial, fearful, avoidance of feelings, poor coping, poor problem solving, afraid that others will find out what they’re really like, etc. This pattern of behaviour is even more likely for children who are reared in this environment.

Not an alcoholic... screwed up relationships – probably yeah. Definitely terrified that people will see him for what he really was behind all the masks - a really good faker.

So, did that fulfil the criteria for para-alcoholism? He wondered. feeling quite disconcerted.

What else?

Propensity to react to situations versus taking control and not becoming a victim to the behaviour of others or situations created by others.

Okay this one he didn't think applied to him...or did it? Belatedly, he wondered about Ziva in Tel Aviv and also the ‘terrible twosome’ during the undercover op. at Royal Woods. Did that qualify? Maybe…

It is not uncommon to be a chameleon. ACoAs can have an affinity to be what others want them to be instead of being themselves. Frequently they lack the ability to be honest with themselves and others.

Well yeah, he was a chameleon - he turned this attribute to his professional advantage to bring down a Mafia boss among other cases. He’d made it work for him – it was his only real talent that the others couldn’t replicated. He was good at it...maybe the best!

Looking at the list, he realised it had sounded pretty bad. Was his surplus of messed up faults really caused by growing up with two alcoholics and if so, what did it mean? Apart from making him extremely uncomfortable.

He didn't think that he ticked every box but there were enough items that rang true for him to find sleep a difficult commodity to come by that night. But where he would normally be expecting to be
bouncing with excitement to be leaving the European Institute of Oncology for the last time and in remission, he wasn't rating even a quiver of excitement. Instead he found himself mired in the realisation that his many flaws weren't simply because he was weak, not good enough or born that way.

According to Janet Woititz, it was actually the long-term result of having to grow up with two parents who were alcoholic. It was one thing to believe that he was a cock-up, a disappointment and... well a weakling. Hell, even after all this time he still felt the strongest of compulsions to apologise, constantly. No one else on Gibbs team needed to do that, but he couldn't seem to stop.

Now all of a sudden, this therapist was telling him that it wasn't weakness, it wasn't nature. It was nurture or rather, lack of it that explained why he was such a failure. He should be ecstatic that his faults were the result of his upbringing and not something inherently missing in him and yet, there had been a certainty, a sense of order... of control in believing that he was born inferior and weak. To accept he was destined to always make a mess of things, which also explained why he ended up alone.

Yet knowing now that there were others who like him too - offspring of alcoholics and addicts, shockingly it was threatening to everything that he had come to accept. So, the potential lack of control that this knowledge represented, well it absolutely scared the crap out of him.

Pretty much everything he'd come to accept and believed in would need to be reassessed and he wasn't sure if he was up to the task. No wonder he couldn't sleep!

The truth was that he felt physically gutted from surgery, two cycles of chemo and a round of radiation therapy. Honestly, he wasn't sure if he had the strength to deal with this revelation about adult children of alcoholics. Hell, he wasn't sure he could have even before he was diagnosed with cancer. So, he decided to put the information on the back-burner and focus on baby steps to regain his physical health right now.

Even when he returned stateside, it would be months before he was ready to even start thinking about going and talking to Giovanna's cousin.

What finally convinced him in the end to seek help was Emma's stubborn refusal to break up with him, no matter how hard he tried to convince her he was a time bomb waiting to go off both medically and emotionally. The woman simply didn't seem to understand the meaning of the word rejection. When he finally accepted that she wasn't going anywhere, he decided that he'd better start facing his demons.

Tony was already doing everything possible to stay healthy. He realised though that with all the baggage he'd been left lugging around from what everybody wrongly assumed was an idyllic childhood, it would mean diddly squat if he stuffed up the best thing to ever happen to him. Compared to Emma, Wendy and Jeanne were already pale imitations of what they had together. Wraith-like memories of what may have been, even knowing what they had together now might be fleeting.

He might not be able to prevent the cancer from returning, although he was doing everything in his power to make it as difficult as possible. Yet in the end it could return tomorrow, there were no guarantees. What he didn't want was to hurt Emma by letting his parents' alcoholism ruin their blossoming relationship and that meant he need to get his shit together. They had already taken too much from him. He refused to let down the one person who'd made him want to fight back from the tumour.

So, Tony began to see Raffy, even if it was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. After all, he'd
spent his entire professional life trying to avoid having to talk to a psychologist. Despite all the annual psych. evals, the mandatory counselling sessions following injuries acquired on the job, plus when he’d killed someone in the line of duty, he was good at talking around topics. He’d usually managed to avoid dealing with challenging topics he had no intention of visiting, by dint of his myriad of methods of distracting the agency shrinks from topics he had no intention of visiting.

Yet here he was, volunteering to open himself up to a lifetime of secrets and pain. All because of his fiancée, he was finally going to face up to his disastrous childhood instead of locking it all up in his mental lock-box. At least Giovanna’s cousin felt like she was a part of his team who were trying to help him stay cancer free, not a stranger who was messing with his emotions to earn a crust!

On a practical level, he also felt more comfortable seeing someone privately since he wasn't into the whole Al-Anon 12 Step group stuff or being into the whole higher power thing. In Rafaela’s practice, she worked one on one with survivors. He also felt that since she and Giovanna already knew about his childhood history he may as well keep it in the family. Plus, Rafaela was a clinical psychologist and scornful of the psychodynamic crap-trap that also made him nuts, so they hit it off as well as he could expect with someone uncovering all his dirty laundry.

Secrets that he'd spent a lifetime covering up. His parents had schooled him well!

Rafaela been working to convince him that he didn't have to feel guilty for surviving the only way he knew how. She encouraged him that it was going to be about taking small steps in order to change the habits of a lifetime. One day he might even want to join fellow ACoAs in a support group but for now, he just needed to remember that he wasn't responsible for his parents' alcoholism. He didn't cause it.

Tony had pointed out that unlike a lot of others, he at least had sufficient food and clothing – most of the time anyway. Raffy countered forcefully that the DiNozzo wealth was no substitute for adequate nurturing and providing a proper home for a child. She claimed that their money, in lots of ways made it even more difficult for others to see his suffering or his parents' illness for what it was.

That their wealth had enabled the DiNozzos to become invisible and unnoticed. He'd became invisible and slipped through the cracks. Was in fact, still slipping through the cracks but in deciding to seek help, he was finally declaring that he did matter. That what he wanted and needed was just as important as anyone else. That he was important too.

And so, Tony DiNozzo gradually came to accept that he was a work in progress. He stumbled, he fell, he pulled himself back up and he got discouraged but he had Emma and Raffy on his team. They convinced him it was okay if he didn't succeed all the time, as long as he didn't give up trying.

Raffy had also argued the case most strongly for him to face both Ziva and Gibbs, declaring he still had things that he needed to tell them, face to face. Role play, journaling and even counselling was no substitute for years of repressed anger and suppressing his real feelings.

Tony meanwhile was convinced he was fine and had put it all behind him, but he decided grudgingly that he owed Vance and Balboa favours and he'd finally acquiesced.

Now here he was, sitting in the coffee shop outside the Hoover building, after sending his 'I was wrong, and you were right' flowers to his counsellor. He couldn't help chuckling. Sure, it was a mess with Ziva deciding to jump bail and all, but he also did feel good after letting her have it with all the crap he’d been holding back for years.

Now, if he could only wipe his brain clean of her mauling his mouth, he'd be able to truthfully say he had no regrets.
As he paid his bill and left the shop, Tony wondered if he'd be equally sanguine after his visit to Alexandria.

Chapter End Notes

The characteristics of adult children of alcoholics is taken from the 1990 book Adult Children of Alcoholics by Janet G Woititz and is pretty much the basis for the hundreds of worldwide Al-Anon based groups of adults who grew up living with alcoholic parents.

On another note, I accept that people may hold opinions about Abby's mode of attire that differ radically to those stated earlier in the chapter, that it is judgemental and hypocritical because men aren’t subject to the same criticisms about how they dress at work. Just to clarify, what I write as dialogue is not always indicative of my personally held beliefs, but I try in pursuit of creating believable characters, to reflect traits and values of the world around us. For whatever reason, women often seem prone to more harshly judge their fellow females on the basis of appearance and grooming. For example, when Australia had its first female prime minister, shockingly it was other women who were her harshest critics about her appearance - her clothes and her pear-shaped figure, including an extremely well known Aussie feminist – Germaine Greer. Go figure!
Cue the Violins

Chapter Summary

Tony finally tells Gibbs everything he’s been holding back but the real question is, is Jethro ready to listen?

Chapter Notes

Well here it is folks. A confrontation this many years in the making between Tony and Gibbs is always going to fall short of some peoples' expectations - either by leaving things out or focusing on issues that might not seem important to people other than the author. Writing a scene like this is all about perspective and knowing what might come later :) which I know, and you don’t, obviously. But this smack down/ intervention/ confrontation is never going to meet with everyone's high expectations and I'm okay with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony pulled his car up outside the familiar façade of the two-storey Alexandria house, feeling a whole bunch of emotions. He'd thought long and hard about doing this after Balboa told him the score. He didn't owe it to the old coot. He'd paid any debts he might have owed to him in full a long time ago. Several times over in fact but he knew if he didn't try, he would have to live with the regrets and he didn’t need that extra emotional baggage.

He just couldn't turn off his feelings after so many years together; although he wished that he could.

His team mates may not have cared about him the same way, but for a long time he'd considered them all family and he couldn't just stop caring, as much as he would like to. Emotions weren't like a tap that he could simply turn off and on, unfortunately.

Wouldn't life be much simpler if you could though? He was left with all the remnants of a decade worth of working together closely – the good, the bad and yeah, the ugly.

So… according to Raffy he still needed to bury some bodies, close defunct accounts, settle old scores. It wasn’t only his psychologist who thought that - Emma had also encouraged him to come back to DC so she obviously thought he needed to get stuff off his chest, too. Ziva had been demanding to see him after her arrest and frankly he'd thought having his fingernails ripped out without any anaesthetic was vastly preferable to facing an outraged and bitter Ziva David. Emma had graciously offered to come with him and support him when he explained the score, an offer which he’d accepted most gratefully.

Sure... he faced down cancer and beaten it, but he had done it with his fiancée at his side, supporting him the whole way. He wasn't sure he'd have been able to do it without her. The truth was that he'd come to rely on her, which was a pleasant change because for most of his life he'd been the only one he counted on when he needed something.
Some people claimed he was stubborn about accepting help, and maybe he was but it was
doggedness borne out of necessity. He would never have survived if he hadn't learnt to be a self-
reliant, albeit a not very trusting child and it had become second nature.

It was really nice to have someone like Emma in his life, someone could to really depend on and
know they wouldn't let him down. He was still getting used to having her around to spoil him, even
with little things like breakfast in bed or making his favourite meals, although paradoxically he loved
to spoil her. It was always easier for him to give than receive but because he knew that she enjoyed
pampering him, he did his best to accept it gracefully.

He loved her, and Tony knew on an intellectual level, that she loved him too and with her caring
nature, she wanted to express it. But it was all such new and unfamiliar territory and it was scary for
him to accept.

He also knew there was a shop that she'd been talking about visiting when they were in DC to look
for her wedding dress. So even though she was supporting him, he knew that the possibility of
checking out another bridal boutique was also an irresistible lure for their trip, but he was okay with
that too. Emma was a highly practical person when it came right down to it, possibly her no
nonsense nursing side, he'd decided.

Not that he minded her having an ulterior motive for coming – it had gotten the job done, thank-you
very much! Nor was she one of those hysterical bridezillas, either. Their wedding was going to be
small and they were aiming for tastefully elegance, unlike all of the Anthony DiNozzo weddings to
date that had been grandiose and for the most part gauche. Which Tony supposed was fitting, since
Senior could also be gauche and prone to episodes of over the top grandiosity! They definitely didn’t
want a circus.

So, after dropping his soon-to-be bride off shopping with Lara and Breena, with Jimmy and an agent
acting as their protectors, he'd decided to just suck it up and get this over and done with. They'd
decided that both of them would tag-team Ziva to convince her they were fully committed to each
other, which worked out just fine. Well if you discounted the assaults and bail jumping that is, but he
knew he needed to tackle Gibbs solo.

Whatever happened, and he was under no illusions that it wasn't going to be pretty, Tony wasn't
going to subject Emma to the second B for Bastard in all his glory.

Getting out of the car outside the familiar house and heading to the front door, Tony climbed up the
stairs, gathering up his tattered self-confidence. Unfortunately, it had taken a mauling during his
stoush with Ziva when she pulled out the hurtful crap about his dad's abandonment. Low blow... but
then, it had always been her style to denigrate him.

He took several deep breaths, readying himself before he knocked on Gibbs front door. A 'post-
counselling' Leroy Jethro Gibbs, even with a few days in between to cool off, was never going to be
a good thing for a somewhat reluctant Tony DiNozzo to face!

Oh... he could think of a lot of reasons why not to do this.

He could hear Gibbs grumbling via a series of grunts and huffs about the door being open as he
stomped across the hallway, flinging the door wide before momentarily showing surprise. "You're
back, DiNozzo." He stated approvingly, before quickly reverting to stony-faced impassiveness.
Heaven forbid he should show some positive emotion. After all, it might just damage his bastard
image!

Gesturing him inside, Jethro walked to the kitchen to take two beers out of the fridge. The silence
hung heavy and awkward between them as Gibbs handed one to his former senior field agent, who refused it.

"I don't really drink now, apart from a medicinal glass of red with a meal." He placed it on the table.

"You good?" Gibbs enquired, feeling like finally things were going his way.

"I'm still in remission." Tony answered cautiously, and Gibbs noted that he was leaner than he'd been back in Baltimore. He was still to put back all the muscle mass he'd lost during his illness.

His closed off expression clearly telegraphed the message that he wouldn't welcome further inquiries into his health from his old boss. Tony was treating him like a stranger. Overly polite.

"I'm sorry about Jack. He was a good man." He offered, respectfully.

Gibbs nodded, remembering the gratitude and peace in that German pilot's eyes in his last few hours. Did Jackson ever find that peace in his last few moments before he passed on? He regretted that the old man died alone – fitting in a way - since he'd been on his own pretty much since Gibbs joined the Marines.

Ironic really, since his father was such a social person that he'd ended up living such a solitary life.

Wanting to change the subject, he stared at Tony. "So... when are you coming back?"

Tony sighed. "I'm not. I'm happy where I am, doing what I'm doing. My wedding will be in a few months." He saw the surprise on Gibbs face and figured no one had told him.

"But you have to come back and take over the MCRT. I trained you and I'm not handing it over to anyone else."

"Tough shit, Gibbs. I don't want to be your replacement. Once was more than enough. For a long time, I could think of nothing I wanted more. Things change! Balboa is going to do a fine job – he's a good agent and he deserves it."

"What the hell did you come here for then, if you aren't going to take the job?"

"Because I heard that you were throwing away everything you've achieved and demanding that I return so you could...I don't know...anoint me or something. I guess I want to know why you are doing this, since it was blatantly clear you despise me and have lost any respect for me – if you ever had it to begin with. Why do you suddenly want to hand over the team to me when you didn't trust me to conduct one paltry investigation, not that long ago?"

"Damn it DiNozzo, why do you have to hold onto grudges. It was one lousy investigation – let it go."

Tony could scarcely believe that Gibbs of all people, would accuse him of holding grudges. He always let everything go, it was one of his biggest flaws - being a proverbial doormat for the team according to Brad, Emma and his counsellor, Raffy. "Think you're getting me confusing with you, Mr Obsessive-Grudge- Holder."

Tony searched for a means of explaining to him why Gibbs giving McGee point on the investigation had hurt him so damned much, especially since he'd been so insubordinate. It was like rewarding a toddler for throwing a tantrum when told he needed to pick up his toys.

He was really floundering though, because Gibbs was definitely not an empathetic guy, unable to see
things from other peoples’ perspectives. Unless it involved Marines or their wives and or kids. And he was none of those things – therefore he was nothing! But then again, was that really empathy or Gibbs projecting his own experiences onto another person because they reminded him of himself or his family?

Surely empathy was more than that? It was about being able to put yourself in the place of another individual whose experiences were completely different from your own and then to imagine how you might feel and act in their situation?

As he pondered this imponderable, he chuckled mentally. He would have to eat much crow when he returned home and talked to Raffy for doubting her assertions that he hadn't put all this crap, this hurt behind him like he’d insisted. He was so sure he had but coming back here proved that wasn't the case or he wouldn't be so invested in making the bastard understand why he felt the way he did.

Maybe he should also buy Balboa a case of beer for persuading him to come back too, since it was painfully clear that he still had some rather substantial bridges to burn.

Where the hell was the damned flame thrower?

Finally, he chuckled when he realised that his seemingly incoherent mental rambling had yet again supplied him with the answer he was looking for. He needed to make his explanation concrete. To link it directly to a scenario that Gibbs could relate to so that he could then project his experience onto Tony like he did with the Marines and their families. Relieved to have an angle, he commenced his explanation.

Glaring at his former boss, he enquired. "Tell me Gibbs, how do you think you'd feel if Mike Franks had come back after resigning and taken the team off you after he’d told you that it was your team now? If Stan Burley was promoted from junior agent to senior field agent under you and you got a new probie that was working out fine, even if she was green as the green grass of Wyoming? Then suddenly, with no warning Mike decides he made a big mistake and makes up his mind to get his old job again. And you walk into the bull pen one morning and he’s chucked all your stuff onto your old desk, which is now Stan's desk 'cause Mike wasn't man enough to tell you he wanted the team back?"

Trying to keep the hurt and anger out of his voice, he continued. "Never even told you he was throwing your little green probie off the team? And ‘the powers that be’ simply let him, with no regard to you or the job you’ve been doing. Hell no one bothers to tells you, all you get is Frank grinning like a demented loon and sitting at your desk after telling you a few short days before that he wasn't coming back."

It was such a long time ago and yet… here in this moment, the pain, anger, hurt… the disbelief still felt so fresh and raw. Not to mention the malicious glee on Tim and Ziva's face when they realised Gibbs was back or Michelle's lost and hurt teary little brown puppy-dog eyes staring at him. Asking why...why was this happening to her? What had she done wrong? Why hadn't he protected her.

And the burning question that still haunted his nightmares some nights when Cate or Paula or Jenny’s ghosts didn't crowd her out. If Lee hadn't been cast aside like dog crap on Gibbs shoe, might Michelle have confided in him about her sister when she got into trouble or maybe he would have picked up signs that all was not well with her? Maybe persuade her to reveal that she was in trouble.

It was guilt that never went away because a little girl lost her sister/surrogate mother at approximately the same age as Tony when his mother died. Could he have saved Michelle?

Refocusing again he asked his former mentor...and yes damnit...his hero the tough questions. "How
would you have felt if once he was back, Mike treated you like a piece of shit for doing your job and stroked and praised Burley who’d fought you tooth and nail literally every step of the way when you took over? All because Stan thought that a Marine grunt like you who wasn’t EVEN an officer, simply wasn’t as qualified to be the team leader as a former senator’s aide. One who was well educated and had attended a couple of fancy colleges.

“A kid who’d never really gotten down and dirty like you did, serving his country. Someone who with barely two years field investigative experience. didn’t have the prerequisites for the SFA position, let alone to be a team leader. A rookie who despite this was appointed as senior field agent by the director, regardless of there being better other qualified agents she should have appointed to the job.”

Gibbs, sensed an opening and attempted to comment but Tony kept going inexorably over the top, sneaking a breath before continuing.

"An agent who was still so green that he couldn't even enter a crime scene to process it when Franks, working undercover, had been blown up a few days prior to resigning...oops taking a sabatical? The same agent who only weeks before that, made a honking huge tactical mistake (that even a rookie shouldn’t make) by wearing a pair of squeaky shoes out into the field during to a hostage situation. An error which so easily could have gotten him, and his partner killed, since the shoes telegraphed his position to any and all dirtbags who potentially may have been at the crime scene.”

Gibbs opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He seemed shocked, but Tony wasn’t sure if it was what he’d said or the fact that he’d demanded answers. He had to admit that it was uncharacteristic.

Ploughing on DiNozzo demanded, “The same agent who failed to perform his duties as SFA and let the liaison officer and Abby Sciuto slug it out in an all-out brawl in the lab instead of stepping in to breaking it up, because both women intimidated him. A senior field agent who questioned pretty much every order you as team lead gave him and ignored them of he didn’t agree with you.”

Gibbs looked upset, but Tony was far from done.

"This was the agent that the Director chose to step in if you were killed or injured in the field to lead the team - to make sure that the rest of the team survived. Thankfully it never came to pass… but it so easily could have, as we both know. So, then one day out of the blue, Mike showed up and even though you swallowed your pride and took the demotion back to SFA, he gave you all the crap probie work to do.

“Why, you ask yourself. Was he punishing you for replacing him? For not messing up the solve rate? Or was he trying to put you back in your place? Naw – that can’t be why because he had you doing probie work. So why?

“Who knows because Franks never had the stones to tell you to your face why he treated you like a piece of shit.” Tony said bitterly.

“Yet all the while that Franks was ignoring you or trashing you, he was praising and rewarding Stan, when in reality Burley had been in Mike’s absence and continued to be now that Franks was back, insubordinate and disrespectful to you. But then again, if Franks didn’t respect you or your position, Gibbs then why the fuck should Burley respect you?

Tony felt all the anger, all the resentment that he thought he’d laid to rest rise up and threaten to drown him in an emotional tsunami. Perhaps Gibbs felt it too and wisely didn’t try to placate him or debate what had been declared. Finally, he continued.
“But because you're a loyal bastard and you respected Mike (the miserable old coot) not to mention you knew how to follow orders and respect the chain-of-command, so you suck it up and have his back!”

Okay debatable that Jethro did respect CoC at least unless it was the Corp but moving on, Tony decided not to get bogged down in technicalities or he'd be here til Christmas. "Focus Anthony, you can do this."

"And like the stupid dumbass you are, you knock back multiple promotions and job offers… for seven freakin years. You let everything go – all the slights and insults, the constant put downs and disrespect because after all, Mike knows all your weakest spots and he loves to twist the knife and watch you squirm.

“You tell yourself that you've proved your worth and loyalty, that he trusts you. Hell, the joke around the bull pen is that you're Franks faithful and loyal Saint Bernard and his right hand. When people want something from him they come to you, cap in hand and beg." Functional mute that he was, Gibbs managed to squeeze in a grunt or two which Tony ignored. He was done listening and trying to interpret Jethro's pathetic monosyllabic attempts at language any longer. It was his turn now and by God he was taking it!

At least his former mentor had taught him how NOT to treat his own team; he guessed that they all owed Gibbs for that. He pressed on, coming to the crux of his monologue.

"But then one day Franks gets dragged off to deal with a family emergency. And when you perform your duties as SFA and tell Stan to search the police files to see if there are other robberies that fit the same MO as your homicide case, he gets pissy cuz he wants to follow up his own theory."

Leaning forward as if to impart something secret Tony continued. “You see, if Stan thought with just two years on the job that he was far more qualified to lead the team than a jarhead like you, well after a lot more years' experience, he's damn positive he's a way better agent and he’s much better qualified to lead the team.”

Tony grinned mirthlessly, “After all, you were just an MP. So, he whined about having to follow YOUR orders to Franks when he calls in for a sitrep, and Mike for some unfathomable reason tells him to take point on the case. He totally bypasses the chain of command, even though you were his SFA for nearly 12 years. His damned loyal and very competent SFA.

“Because let’s face it, Mike Franks doesn't put up with a SFA on his team that can’t do the job. If you weren’t up to the job, he’d have kicked you to the curb a long time ago."

Tony paused to take a breath after his diatribe slash, what-if scenario and speared Gibbs with a scowl as he stared him down – two glacial greenish-blue orbs of ice boring into Gibbs pale blue ones.

"So, tell me Gibbs, if Mike had done that to you, could you just let it go? The fact that Franks ignored the chain of command and treated you with such complete and utter contempt, not to mention a total lack of professional respect after 12 plus years of loyal service. More than a decade of having his back and a whole heap of dirty, stinking water under the bridge?"

After several minutes of silence, Gibbs shrugged. "It wasn't personal, DiNozzo."

"Bullshit. Gibbs. Complete, utter unadulterated FUCKING BULLSHIT!" He spat back at him, icily. Gibbs looked shocked, floored by the depth of emotion and Tony's unusual use of profanity. Despite his cop background, Tony wasn't a casual swearer. Gibbs could probably count on two hands the
occasions he'd let fly.

"It damn well was personal to me and if you expect me to believe it wouldn't have made you madder than a brown bear with a bomb jammed up his ass, then you're lying. Either to me or yourself." He accused Gibbs, his tone was scathing.

“I saw how furious you were when a similar scenario of a more junior agent being given point on a case affected you. It happened with the P2P killer when Vance appointed E.J. as lead agent over you, even though you had seniority and years more experience as an agent.”

Gibbs made an involuntary snarl at the memory he described.

“You took it damned personally and threw a ginormous temper tantrum. You were out and out insubordinate and you flat out encouraged the team to disobey her orders. But at least she was of the same rank as you, even if she didn't have your experience.”

Tony lowered his voice but somehow that made his anger all the more intense. “Your behaviour towards her was downright appalling. You constantly bullied and tried to intimidate her. You were not a team player, so don't you dare try to tell me that it wasn't personal or that you wouldn't have been furious.”

Tony was shaking, with anger. “Don't! You! Dare!” he yelled at his former boss.

Tony was heaving like he'd run a marathon and his nostrils flared as he tried to increase his oxygen intake to compensated. His pupils were mere pinpricks and he was trying to centre himself, so he didn't get up and hit something – preferably of the gunny persuasion.

*Wow, Raffy had really nailed it. He was still mightily pissed off!*

Gibbs obviously decided that silence was the most prudent option and let the tension dissipate. Finally, he spoke cautiously.

"You're right, I'd be pissed if Mike had pulled that crap on me.” He was silent as he watched Tony, still fuming. "But why would you think that I hate you? You're family."

"Gee Gibbs, I don't know. The constant belittling, the 12 years of undermining my authority and the way you let the others ignore the chain-of-command when it pertained to me, heck you actively encouraged them to disobey me. Practically patted them on the head and gave 'em candy when they did it. Not just Tim and Ziva but Cate too, from the day she joined the team. You came right out and told her to ignore my orders.”

He took a breath, trying not to lose him cool.

“Or maybe it's the fact that I sent condolences when Jack died, even though I was fighting my own battle to say alive, but you never bothered to acknowledged it. Which would have been the polite thing to do, even for an acquaintance, let alone someone who you say is family. You went to a whole lot of trouble to track me down but then never tried to find out if I was still breathing”. He pointed out, sardonically. “Damned funny family!”

*So, now I'm channelling Gibbs with the sarcasm, Tony thought, mockingly. Careful now, you don't want to end up a dried up embittered husk like a former employer.*

"You stole my personal journal from Brad, damn you you SOB, and I'm assuming you read it, since you never respected anyone's personal boundaries, except when they related to you of course.
“Does the phrase, ‘Touch my phone again and I’ll break all your fingers,’ mean anything to you when I was trying to trace your movements, so I could watch out for your six? Or how you fought me at every turn over the Maddie Tyler fiasco, which I might point out I didn't even rate a paltry thank-you for pulling your ass out of the fire?”

Shaking his head in disgust he asked, “What, is that like Rule 6-A: saying thank-you is a sign of weakness, too? Damn it, that's not the way family is. I might have had a practically non-existent on growing up but even I can see that.”

Tony leapt to his feet to expend some of the emotion that he was having trouble keeping under control. If this counted as being under control.

"Damn it Gibbs, family shares stuff with each other - like 'I got sent away to RIMA at 12’ or 'my mother drank my sea monkeys because she mistook them for mint julep’ or 'she dressed me up in friggin sailor suits way past an appropriate age.' But you never answer any personal questions about yourself. Not how old you are, even."

Snorting derisively, he demanded, “Hell, why is that a surprise when you won’t answer important questions about a case, let alone even the simplest of questions about your life. Any data gleaned about you has pretty much been acquired when your family or cronies turned up on a case and they’ve revealed details that you are at great pains to conceal. And then you were pissed off for weeks afterwards.

"Yet it's fine to tell the team about my being the Poo Boy so you can make me lose face, even if I told you that stuff in strictest confidence. That sure doesn't sound like family to me, Gibbs. More like a dictatorship."

Seeing the stubborn look on his former boss’ face, Tony stalked up and got into Gibbs personal face.

"Seriously, Gibbs, if you'd had even a modicum of respect left for me professionally, you'd have put yourself out to hunt me down and tear me a new one for all that stuff I dared to write about you and your precious team in my journal, criticising you all. Instead, I get the silent treatment, like one of the despised former Mrs Gibbs, or one of your cast-aside ex-girlfriends.

YOU just pretend like I don't exist – sucked into a black hole and never mentioned again. You don't go to all that trouble of ignoring someone you feel ambivalent about. Therefore, taking everything into account, why wouldn't I conclude that you must hate and despise me? QED."

While Tony hadn't shed bucket loads of tears at Gibbs pretending that he didn't exist, he wasn't going to tell him that.

And as much as he wanted, no he needed to make a fresh start which meant cutting all ties with DC, it still didn't mean that it hadn't hurt that Gibbs hadn't at least tried to see him or check that he was okay.

As screwed up as that sounded (and hey he was happy to admit it, he was after all a very screwed-up person) Tony was only human. But then Raffy had suggested that it said more about Gibbs inability to bend or admit fault than what it said about him and that really was a sign of Jethro’s weakness, in her opinion.

"Would it help if I apologised? Would you come back then?” Gibbs offered gruffly.

"Little tip for nothing, former boss. An apology means diddly squat if you have to ask the person
who deserves one if they want it. Worthless if the one that's being apologised to has to come and beat 'em over the head before they grudgingly offer to give one.

“So, FYI no, it wouldn't help, because I never should have had to chase you down to get it. Getting it now would be utterly meaningless, beyond meaningless…how 'bout insulting?"

"C'mon, DiNozzo. Y'know I'm a bastard. You worked with me for 13 years, what's changed?"

Tony looked really pissed, never a good sign in the even-tempered man. "That's such a cop-out, Leroy. 'It's not my fault – I'm a bastard.' That's as specious an argument as a killer telling us when we arrest them –' hey don't blame me. I've always been a sociopath, so what else did you expect me to do?' Well I'll tell you what I do expect. I expect to be treated with respect, consideration and common courtesy."

Gibbs just wasn't used to having his 'I'm a bastard - get over it,' line called for the shit it was. It had worked for years but all of a sudden it wasn't cutting ice anymore.

Tony shook his head. "It's partly my fault, I know. I should have called you on the BS years ago, instead of making excuses for you and letting you vent your spleen on me to protect everyone else. Should have made an official complaint if that's what it took.

Looking pained he confessed, “Thought it made me exceptional and tough to be able to take all your shit but that was a pile of crap. Truth is…it made me a pathetic little weasel who was used to being abused and that's why I could handle yet another bully."

Gibbs looked outraged, shocked by his response, but it was nothing compared to what was yet to come. Tony wasn't holding back…not any longer!

"Grow up and take responsibility for yourself. So, your life sucks – as do plenty of other people. People lose their families and they pick themselves up and move on. Sure, it sucks but what the hell gives you the right to act so precious? If it was a dirtbag using it as an excuse for the last 20 odd years, you'd rip them a new one and then reroute their colon through their nose with your size elevens. Suck it up and stop making everyone's life as miserable who've done nothing to deserve it."

Now Gibbs was struck dumb. Outraged. His fists clutched tight, knuckles white and jaw clenched in fury.

Tony realised this wasn't going to be pretty – oh well, might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, he figured so he forged on gamely (or suicidally). "You’ve chosen to be a miserable old bastard, instead of making the best out of the hand you've been given. Stop blaming everyone else."

Tough love sucked he concluded, though Tony wasn't sure if his feelings about Gibbs counted as such. Still he cared what happened to him in the same way he felt bad about Danny or even Senior – even if they didn’t deserve it.

Why couldn't he turn off his feelings for these people that had hurt him so much and continued to do it so damned casually? He was pretty sure they didn’t care about him.

Was Raffy right about that too and he needed to get this all off his chest with Senior and Danny as well? At least Danny couldn't answer back with lame excuses or outraged anger, if he did go to see him in Baltimore.

Gibbs couldn't believe that DiNozzo was singing from the same damned songbook as that bastard Stu Travers. "How dare you tell me that I don't have a right to grieve and be angry for my girls’ deaths? How dare you!"
Seeing the familiar fury and knowing he was going to blow, Tony decided it was a mistake to even try. He'd said his piece for all the good it had done though he heard Raffy's voice inside his head, telling him that Gibbs might be a lost cause, but it had still been good for him to let it all out… plenty good. *No regrets, Anthony!*

"Look forget it Gibbs. You want to be angry and miserable for the rest of your life, I won't stop you - hell I can't stop you. If you want to throw what's left of your career away, then go right ahead. Go ahead and have a miserable life."

Gibbs got right up in his face and Tony could see the wild-eyed irrationality of a guy on the precipice, even as he caught the pungent scent of bourbon on Jethro's hot breath. Clearly the beer was not his first drink, today.

"I don't have a fucking career. They're forcing me to resign!" He roared, all his anger forcing its way to the surface. Anger - a pathetic attempt to hide his confusion, hurt and pain because he was too much of a coward to face his emotions and deal with them. So much easier to hide behind anger all the time. So safe and oh, so predictable.

A smarter individual would get up about now and leave. Get up, run not walk right out the door and never look back. Tony had a wonderful fiancée who'd soon be his wife and he didn't need this shit in his life. He was finally happy, and he must have been nuts to let Balboa guilt him into trying to pull Gibbs' ass out of the fire. Let it burn!

Turning, he made for the door, determined to go but something stayed him. After all, as his former team had been so fond of pointing out repeatedly, no one had ever accused him of being smart. Just a dumb jock after all or just maybe it was that he was so used to baiting the bear.

Turning at the front door to state. "You still have a damned career… if you want it. So, you have to retire as a field agent. Well boo-freakin-hoo, Gibbs! You should have gone several years ago." Personally, he was of the opinion that one of the favours Gibbs had called in was altering his DOB.

"Just like everyone else in law enforcement when they reach your age, you have to retire from field work. What makes you think you should get to flaunt the god-damned rules, Leroy? Grow up! You don't want to retire?" he asked rhetorically.

"So, don't! Become a consultant, become a freakin lecturer at FLETC as a weapons specialist. Hell, go and re-train.

"Or sit in your basement and drink yourself to death. Your choice. Not like you aren't half ways there already."

Getting ready to leave, Tony found himself staring into the somewhat bloodshot whites of Gibbs eyes as he shouted at him from a couple of inches away.

"Interfering touchy feely types are saying I'm gonna get a 'fail' on that stupid mandatory anger management crap. They won't employ me without it." He sounded conflicted between having an excuse to sit in his basement and pickle himself and sorry for himself that no one wanted him.

Tony had helped set the anger management course up and done a similar program himself to cope with the debris of his anger over his years on the team and his upbringing. So, he knew that it was virtually impossible to flunk out of the program unless you physically threatened to hurt people. The only other way to fail was if you weren't taking it seriously and putting in the effort.

As long as you were trying, then the facilitators wouldn't ever give up on you. Somehow, he figured
that Gibbs would be fighting them every single step of the way. The idiot was his own worst enemy.

"Oh, for pity's sake, where are the damned violins?" Tony snarled at Gibbs.

“No one is flunking you out but you, by not taking the opportunity that's been handed to you to
finally get your shit together.” In the shocked silence he made his way to the front door.

“And here I thought Marines never left a man behind – cuz you sure as HELL left the best part of
Leroy Jethro Gibbs behind. I can't believe that Shannon or Kelly would like the 'you' you've
become.”

On that note, he slipped through the door, closing the door and walking away, knowing he’d slipped
the knife into Gibbs’ soft underbelly. Tony had tried but he was sure his rescue attempt had been an
abject failure. Gibbs would do what he wanted and there was nothing he or anyone else could do to
change that. No one could.

Gibbs was the only one who could change the inevitable but only if he wanted to.

Chapter End Notes

QED is an abbreviation of the Latin phrase "quod erat demonstrandum". It literally
translates as "which was to be demonstrated", and is a formal way of ending a
mathematical, logical or physical proof.
Bare Faced Cheek

Chapter Summary

With her superior Mossad training, Ziva assumes that slipping out of the US should be a piece of pie. It’s going to be a bad day for bail-jumping former Mossad operatives trying to flee the US.

Chapter Notes

This scene is another example of my muse writing high farce when it comes to Ziva David. I should caution that this chapter contains seduction and a soupçon of squickish content. Be warned if you're prone to nausea or for some reason you do take the character seriously (although if that is the case I would question why you are reading my stories).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ziva David, the former NCIS special agent and Mossad Officer scanned Dulles International Airport, automatically noticing and assessing the increased security personnel. Bovine shit! She wondered if the extra precautions had anything to do with her or if it was due to a heightened terrorist alert that occurred periodically.

They could be looking for a dangerous fugitive - it was just her bad luck to be trying to sneak out of the country at the same time as a killer or a lunatic. It would definitely make things more complicated but not impossible, she would need to change her plan just a bit. After all, she had been highly trained by Mossad and she was extremely capable – Mossad’s best.

She decided it had been worth the extra time it had taken to stop and collect fake identity papers and the cash that she had stashed in a number of safety deposit boxes when she was Liaison Officer at NCIS. Serving two masters, she needed to have access to the means for a neat getaway, should the situation arise. After the Iranian security forces attempt to frame her all those years ago, she’d vowed to make sure she was never trapped like that again.

She’d made sure she always had the means to make a run for it, should it be required. Well Ziva needed it now now and while she gathered cash and documents, she had to make several other stops, too.

Ziva had stopped off at a hair salon to change her appearance. She already knew from experience that changing a hairstyle wrought drastic changes in a female's façade. Now a few short hours later she was sporting a new cropped look and had opted to dye her hair flaming LOOK AT ME red.

Donkey's Butt had taught her that the best way to avoid detection was to not look like you are hiding – and you couldn't get more attention seeking that crimson red hair. While she opted not to change her eye colour she was sporting a rather eye-catching pair of glasses with plain glass replacing the
lens and teal green frames that set off her red locks.

Also, if they were really looking for her, then she was going to make it even more difficult for them. They would be watching out for Ziva David, Israeli/American travelling alone. But she was Fatma Marangoz, a Turkish citizen since the cretins couldn't tell the difference between one Middle Eastern accent and another. Plus, she planned to pick up a stupid fool who she could travel with him posing as a couple, which would also put them off the scent. It should be easy enough to find a mark to play her boyfriend.

It also went without saying that she wouldn't pick a direct flight to the Middle East. As long as she got out of the country, that would be main goal. Time enough to fly back to Israel later.

Still seething over the fact that the Israeli Ambassador refused to see her and declined to help her get out of the country, she resolved that along with her so-called American family, the ambassador and his staff had joined her list of people who'd wronged her. They would all get theirs once she was safe.

As she was plotting how she would take revenge on those who'd mistreated her, a potential mark waddled by with his wife/girlfriend/partner. He had a serious case of balding that he'd attempted to hide with the worst comb-over Ziva had ever seen. His cupcake gut was such that she doubted he could see his shoes to tie them up, let alone find his sex organs which she was sure were not large.

Her critical eye noted that the woman with him was a blonde in a bottle, her nail polish was chipped and needed reapplying, her breasts were saggy and her gluteus maximus was halfway to her knees. Most important detail of all though, was she wasn't carry any luggage which meant she wasn't going with him.

Oh yes, this was a perfect choice. She was probably staying at home to look after the ratrugs and he was going on a business trip. She remembered when Eli used to go on business trips with Orli Elbaz and a score of other beautiful women. He always came home in such a good mood – he would even agree to go and watch her ballet recitals. Most of the time he claimed ballet was a waste of time in their line of work. It was only her mother's determination that allowed her to continue, at least until her death.

Smiling as she observed Mr Potato Head, she was sure that he would leap at the chance of a trip with the likes of Ziva David. She was mentally rehearsing how to get him into the men's room where she could seduce him. From that point on it would be a simple matter to get him to suggest she accompany him to his destination.

Naturally, Ziva would make sure he’d think that he’d come up with the plan to take her with him. Most men would agree to anything if you knew how to massage their ego, not to mention massaging their sex organs. They were not all that complicated

That was why she thought it made much better sense for females to be agents and soldiers. It was much more difficult to corrupt a woman – of course, when she became Director of Mossad, she would ensure that any males wishing to work in the field must undergo chemical castration to make it more difficult to distract them. Unless their mission was seduction of course, but generally their sexual organs and libido simply got in the way.

Once in management positions, they could cease the chemical treatment. In fact, being easily manipulated was a highly desirable trait should you be the one doing the influencing. It was an attribute she would use to her advantage. She was not her Aba's daughter for nothing.

She smiled dreamily, Timothy McGee wasn't the only one with long-held ambitions to become
Director which was why she couldn't take the chance, unlikely as it was that she might be found guilty and jailed. For a while, she thought that she could make Aba proud by sitting in the director's seat at NCIS, but she now realised, thanks to Breena Palmer and her pleasant-weather friends at NCIS that it was not ever going to happen.

But how much more of a vindication would it be to stage a coup back at Mossad and chuck that home wrecking whore Orli out on her aging saggy -baggy tuchis. Oh, sweet revenge indeed!

Ziva was preparing to use the tried but true technique of spilling a sticky soda drink all over the mark. Donkey's Butt, if he was here, would have observed by now that he bore a passing resemblance to that ugly-butt looking actor Danny DeVito. The man reminded Ziva of a toad.

She hated toads – they never turned into princes, no matter how many times you kissed them. And kissing them was seldom a pleasant experience - they generally had bad breath!

Then she saw him kiss his wife and was pleased to see it was hardly passionate. From either of them - which boded well for her plan. He’d have no compunction about cheating on his wife/girlfriend, especially with someone who looked like she did. Even better it seemed to be her lucky hour, since he headed off towards the VIP lounge, promising to bring something back for the kids and the wifey.

As they parted ways she decided to forgo the soda since she stood a good chance of wearing some it too and she didn't need it now.

While the blonde in a bottle turned and headed to the exit, Ziva barrelled into the toadlike little man, remembering her Mossad training, not to mention her own rather vast experience and her instructor's advice. 'Picture not the disgusting amphibian in front of you - replace him with a favourite fantasy love. Then lie back and think of Israel.'

Except with many of these marks, she ended up having to do all the work so lying back as not exactly practical. So, she deliberately imagined that this vile creature, who’d barely reached her chin was in fact that rather dreamy Irish actor Michael Nouri with the silver hair, who somewhat reminded her of her Aba. The other actor, who also reminded her of her father and she had an easy spot for was the one in Dr Zhivago and Laurence of Arabia – the sexy Omar Sharif.

Her mentor in seduction techniques, Monique Lisson assured her that there was nothing wrong with having or indulging in sexual fantasies of her father. That they were normal healthy manifestations of the Electra Complex – just as long as she didn't act on them. Ziva later found out that Lisson was sleeping with Eli at the time, (like everyone else in Mossad it would seem). So, she wasn't entirely sure if her mentor's advice about not acting upon her fantasy was inspired by a desire to lookout for Ziva's welfare or her own.

Now, after knocking the toadie flat on his back, she began the seduction using tried but true non-verbal cues. Ziva was a maestro of the hair flicks, coquettish half hooded eyes and lip licking; featuring titillating glimpses of her tongue hinting at what it was capable of (and it was capable of amazing things). Ziva thrust her breasts against his flabby torso and his man-breasts and to really bring it home as she helped him to his feet, accidently brushed up against his sad little man-bundle.

Really, even one of her barely competent former NCIS team mates could have carried this off - it was that easy. With her training though, before she’d helped him back to his feet, she already owned him – body and soul. It was simple from that point on to win an invitation to the lounge as his guest. even while acting shy and reluctant.

Five minutes later he was leading her into one of the small shower stalls. Fortuitously the VIP lounge provided shower facilities, so their passengers could grab a shower – usually when flights had
been delayed or customers were waiting for connecting flight to arrive or depart.

Although hardly generous in size, they were better than an airport toilet or even worse the cramp space of the air plane wash rooms where pathetic losers flocked to join their kilometres high club. Ziva didn’t understand the attraction of copulating in a cramped space in a commercial aeroplane.

Honestly, she much preferred going at it like hares in a military transport to doing it on a commercial flight. Plus, the non-pressured air also brought erotic asphyxiation to a whole new level. It was actually a pretty popular way for Mossad operatives to prepare for missions rather than sitting around waiting to arrive. It passed the time and relieved frustrations.

She and Michael were frequent fliers long before they’d became real lovers when she allowed him into her bed, although she relieved her pre-mission sexual frustration with other agents as well as Michael over the years and missions. It was just sex, there was no emotional engagement. It was merely serving a biological function, and therefore any male operative would do.

At a pinch, even other female officers were more than capable of serving as sexual partners because they’d all had been taught how to pleasure another woman for field work. After all, it wasn’t just straight women who needed to be compromised or classified/ sensitive information obtained from them. With their exceptional training it would be completely illogical for female Mossad agents to abstain from having their needs sated just because there wasn't a male around.

As far as Ziva was concerned, just because one might prefer a turkey sandwich over roast beef, if turkey wasn't available and you needed to eat then it was stupid not to accept the beef. It was the same with sex!

Luckily, Mossad didn't have the same moralistic, hypocritical hang-ups about relieving the sexual needs of one’s colleagues. Not like she'd encountered in her US counterparts, most obviously Gibbs' ridiculous Rule 12 – never date a co-worker. If she'd been able to relieve her needs with her teammates, perhaps she wouldn't have been forced to silence that suspect in the lift during her early days. She did not cope well with abstaining from sex – it made her cranky.

Although, she did have to wonder if Jethro included rutting in that edict if there was no emotional attachment. Perhaps not! Gibbs was more like her than he realised. He'd admitted candidly in the bull pen that he also used sex as a tool to gain information, aside from which, with three ex-wives and plenty of girlfriends, the man was hardly a monk.

Generally, the attitudes of Americans to sex were much more puritanical than theirs. It went without saying that with their dangerous and stressful occupation, sexual needs were a given and was just considered to be just another biological drive, like eating or sleeping. The team all ate and slept so she didn’t understand why they didn’t relieve each other’s physical needs too. It was no big deal.

In Mossad rather than deny the need for physical release, Ziva had even on occasion had sex with male agents whose sexual orientation was for other men when no heterosexual men were available. Again, for pragmatic reasons, she'd been taught how to get these men off as indeed had they with female partners too.

When they were on the job, sexual orientation was not important – getting information or compromising a subject was all that mattered. And when a Mossad agent was spikey before a dangerous mission all that was important was achieving orgasm – the sexual persuading or gender of the other agent wasn’t material. It was just a physical act, like running or drinking a cup of tea, with the right training, everyone ended up happy following pre-mission sex.

Although Ziva had drawn the line at copulating her half-brother, even if she was his handler.
Although that was usually considered to be one of the handler’s responsibilities - as obviously a horny agent going out looking for someone to scratch an itch was asking for trouble. Instead, with Ari she’d acquired a selection of prostitutes she's fully vetted who came when required and Ziva felt as if she'd done her duty. Just like she would go out and find him a hamburger in the middle of the night if he was hungry, she would supply him with a whore, too.

As she stepped into the shower with the toad, Ziva decided that it was probably too soon to use Michael Nouri or Omar Sharif for a sexual fantasy since she was still mourning the loss of her father. Despite Monique's judgment that it was healthy and normal to desire men that reminded her of her Aba, it just wasn’t helping her to get into the mood, which after all was really the point.

As she looked at the man who seemed to have so much body hair that it was no wonder that he was practically bald head (with just a little fringe of hair around the bottom part of his head) she was reminded of Michael Rivkin who was also a very hairy individual. Of course, Michael had a great head of hair too and it went without telling that he had an admirable physique. On Michael, unlike this pug-face toad, his body hair had been extremely sexy, and so she decided to fantasize that she was here in the shower with Michael.

Closing her eyes, she recalled a marathon session together in the shower in her apartment before that dolt Hadar destroyed it with a bomb. Focusing on the shower sex they’d shared because if she thought about Donkey's butt killing Michael she would get far too uptight, she fixated on the mark’s hairy chest of wiry black hair that thickened to a pelt as her extremely talented tongue descended down his abdomen.

**ISHT**

Metro P.D Patrol Officers Jonathon Moretti and Carrie Frazier had been sent to Dulles International Airport to identify a suspect being held by airport security after attempting to board a LAN Airlines flight to Chile. As the arresting officers when Ziva David had broken into the Palmer's apartment a month before, they'd definitely know if the woman claiming to be a Chilean citizen was Ziva David or just an unlucky woman who looked a lot like her. Officer Moretti conceded after looking at photos emailed to the precinct of the suspect, that Constanza Rojas shared a spooky similarity to the mug shot of Ziva David.

At the change of shift after roll call they'd been preparing to go out on patrol, when they'd received a summons from the Lieutenant. Always a cause for trepidation, they wondered if they were about to get their butts kicked.

"Yo THP." The Loo had yelled, running the letters together to produce a word, summoning the pair to his office.

The squad had nicknamed the Scottish born Frazier and Moretti, the son of Italian immigrants, Team Haggis Pizza or THP for short when they'd first partnered up, nearly three years ago. While Frazier rolled her eyes and pretended to hate the sobriquet, she knew it made her one of the guys.

Personally, Lieutenant Bates thought the idea of putting haggis on a perfectly good pizza was highly offensive, even in jest. When it came to one of the staple food groups of the squad room all-nighters, he was most definitely a pizza purist. Hell, he didn't even think pineapple had any business being in the vicinity of a good pizza base and he had absolutely no patience with the so-called gourmet pizza crap like chicken satay or goats’ cheese and garlic, rosemary potatoes.

And don't get him started about the fusion pizza crap his wife had tried to force him to eat the other night. Braised beef and broccoli with cashews, for the love of Mike? Pizza was Italian and Chinese takeout had no place on his pie. He didn't care if it was healthier for him – it was just wrong!
The thought of haggis made him wanna puke but thankfully it was just a joke amongst the squad. The most gourmet any of the squad got in ordering pizzas were vegetarian or seafood, praise the gods!

Yeah, it was just a gag - all the patrol teams had their inimitable nicknames. He encouraged it, knowing it cultivated a sense of camaraderie amongst the teams and within the squad and went some way to helping everyone combat the gruesomeness of their jobs. To outsiders it might appear somewhat juvenile, but Bates thought his officers deserved to behave a little childishly with the demands the job made on them.

If nicknames, banter and some mild hazing and pranking all help them cope, then that was just fine with him. For people who chose to criticise, let them walk in his officers' shoes for just a day and see how they handled dealing with the depravity that people could inflict upon others that were strangers or that they knew.

Ignoring the cat calls that were evoked by the summons, the pair had headed to his office mentally cataloguing their performance. Both were trying to anticipate if they were in trouble and came up empty. Shrugging, they presented themselves, hoping their transgression had been a minor one.

"Yeah Loo, you wanted us?" Moretti, as the senior partner usually did the talking for THP with the higher-ups, unless Officer Frazier was specifically addressed, that is.

"Yeah, that crazy former Mossad assassin, Ziva David? Looks like she's in the wind. NCIS put out a BOLO and the FBI as of three hours ago, has gotten involved, too. They've just had a federal judge issue a warrant for her arrest on several more counts of assault, including sexual assault of a federal agent as well as attempting to flee while on bail."

Frazier and Moretti exchanged exaggerated eye rolls. Kramer sighed. "Yeah I know. We keep locking them up and the courts keep letting them get away." He sympathised with his officers. "Someone matching her description was spotted at Dulles boarding a flight to Santiago out at Dulles on a Chilean passport. Airport security detained her til we can ascertain if she is Ziva David and if so, arrest her. I want you to drive on over there, make the ID and if it's positive, bust her damned ass.

"Are there any questions? Good, oh and I don't need to remind you both that the woman is dangerous, do I?"

"No Sir," the pair of patrol officers had responded. They would not be taking any chances with the suspect. She had bragged that she knew multiple methods of killing with a paper clip.

On arrival at the international terminal, the pair made their way to the Airport Security offices and asked to see Shelly Whately, Assistant Director of Dulles Security. Within 15 minutes they'd managed to ascertain that Ms Rojas was who she claimed to be and not Živa David. As they apologised, the young woman remained seriously unimpressed.

"Are you all stupid or something?" Constanza demanded. "I mean, how can you not tell the difference between an Israeli and a Chilean citizen. And now I've missed my flight to Santiago. I'm supposed to be at my cousin's wedding and it will take a miracle for me to get there," she complained bitterly.

Carrie nodded sympathetically. "I understand, Ms Rojas. Unfortunately, the woman we're looking for, who bears a rather uncanny resemblance to yourself has been known to use fake passports. I'm sorry for your being inconvenienced."
Constanza nodded, slightly mollified but still annoyed that she had more than likely missed the family wedding. A security guard escorted her out while the cops stayed back for a few minutes to talk shop with Shelly. As Carrie and her partner were making their own way out of the office a few minutes later, they walked past a large bank of security monitors. Moretti noted automatically that the security staff could monitor literally every nook and cranny of the airport.

He couldn't help but stare at the shapely and very naked body of a red headed siren as she joined a guy in a showers stall, who as far as he was concerned, was built like a gnome. Jonathon shook his head, wondering how the Gnome had scored such a hot girlfriend. She clearly worked out a lot, while he, obviously, did not. He wondered idly how average Joe and Jane Citizens would feel if they realised that post 9/11 the airport had security surveillance cameras literally covering everywhere.

He suspected that just like this couple or coupling, they might be a little pissed off to find out they were under constant surveillance. As he averted his eyes, somewhat queasy at the sight of the odd pair um pairing off, Moretti noticed his partner Carrie watching the same monitor, wide eyed and open mouthed. Okay, he would never have taken his no-nonsense partner for someone who would get off on watching others... well getting off.

Tugging her to move her along, he joked. "Never take you for someone who was into voyeurism, Patrol Officer Frazier. Time to get back onto the mean streets of DC."

Turning to her partner, she glared before turning back to the monitor, pointing. "That's her. That's Ziva David...I'd recognise that butt anywhere, Jon."

Staring intently at the pair who seemed to be banging like bunnies... like the Energiser bunnies. He examined the red-head's ass minutely, now he had a legitimate excuse. "How can you be sure, Officer Frazier?" He asked, trying to keep this bizarre conversation professional. They had witnesses... ah witnessing it, after all.

"Because of that there," Frazier responded, pointing to a strawberry coloured birthmark on the redhead's right butt cheek. "When I arrested Ms David and accompanied her to hospital to get treatment, Officer Moretti and I had ample opportunity to observe her butt. In fact, she made some rather disparaging remarks about mine in comparison."

Truth be told, initially Carrie hadn't realised what the assassin had meant when she taunted her about all the trash in her trunk. It was til later she'd figured out she'd meant junk. Luckily for her Officer Frazier had been clueless or she would have asked Claudine back at booking to do the rectal search when they charged her. She was not renowned for being gentle.

"Are you sure?" Moretti demanded. He'd also seen Ms David in the buff but didn't remember the distinguishing mark, but then he hadn't really been looking, he'd been damned busy trying to avoid taking unnecessary kicks and elbow jabs to his crown jewels while cuffing her. Even with a fractured jaw she'd been a real spitfire, until Carrie had come and sat on her legs.

"Positive. She's dyed her hair and chopped it off and hooked up with a Teletubbie but she's the right body type. I can't tell her height from the screen. But it's her."

"Okay, let's go and get her then," he commanded hoping his partner was right.

Turning to the security guard monitoring the surveillance feeds, Frazier demanded, "Where is that camera situated?"

Checking, he replied. "The VIP Lounge of Air France, Officer Frazier."
Whately who’d been escorting them out of the department, now crossed swiftly to a computer terminal and summarily drew up a schematic of the airport. The 2IC of Dulles security, deftly highlighted the VIP Lounge, she looked at the cops, awaiting a response. After a quick call to their lieutenant, they informed Shelly that Lieutenant Bates had ordered them to detain the woman until they could verify her identity and he confirmed that it had been noted on the arrest sheet under distinguishing marks - medium sized strawberry birth mark on right buttock.

They quickly proceeded to formulate a plan with Whately about how they were going to take both her into custody without endangering anyone. Shelley was keen on calling in reinforcements to make that happen.

A mere five minutes had elapsed since Carrie had made the discovery that the suspect was right under their noses. Now they were standing outside the showers and preparing to arrest her. After a quick consultation, it had been a unanimous decision to take her down in the showers before she had a chance to dress and conceal any dangerous weapons or take innocent bystanders as hostages.

No one was looking forward to taking into custody a known Mossad assassin but with her buck naked, at least it meant there was less chance of facing concealed weapons. As they burst into the showers, they were relieved to see that the pair had already extricated themselves from their ‘coupling’ and were both wrapped in towels.

Ziva stepped out of the shower and dried herself swiftly, wrapping a scratchy towel provided by the airline around her body as she congratulated herself on getting an invitation to accompany Larry Chomsky aka Mr Potato Head aka the dumb-bum mark to a sales conference in Brussels. Not that there was ever any doubt about it, but it was still nice to know that she hadn't lost any of her skills whilst on her pilgrimage to search for her lost self.

As she reached for her clothes, four security guards burst through the door accompanied by two uniformed cops. Although shocked to have been detected, the ex Mossad officer was confident in her ability to ditch this bunch of keyhole cops.

They were no match for a highly trained Mossad officer and Kidon assassin when all was said and dusted. She grabbed Larry (aka The Toad) and propelled him violently, so he cannoned into one of the security guards and the male cop, causing them to go flying. Ziva heard a loud crack as heads collided and winced involuntarily. Hopefully they weren't too badly hurt since an accidental killing was a sign of a sloppy assassin.

Refocusing, she immediately followed up the move with a vicious scissors kick to the sexual organs of another security guard who dropped like pebble, yowling pathetically, while swivelling on the balls of her feet and getting in close enough for a choke hold on the third guard. She quickly rendered him unconscious.

Letting him go suddenly, she knew would act as a distraction to the female cop and the remaining guard when they took their eye off her for a split second. Involuntarily, they watched their unconscious and incompetent colleague as he dropped to the ground with a thud. What they should have done was keep their attention focused on her instead of the pathetic guard. Not that Ziva was surprised, she expected it.

She was depending on it. These people's training really was woefully inadequate, but she was more than happy to exploit that vulnerability for her own gain.

Grabbing the complementary talcum powder provided by the airlines, grateful she didn't use the
stuff, Ziva flung it at the two remaining threats to her freedom. Instantly she created a fine mist of particles in the air, making it disorientating to her attackers, although definitely not impossible to see.

The point was to keep them from anticipating her next move which was to run towards them on the offensive. She delivered her palm to the cop's nose in an upward motion, effectively breaking her nose, noting dispassionately that it was probably the cop’s best feature. Had been her best feature...oh well!

Everyone knew that you couldn’t make an omelette without breaking a few legs.

Finally, she snatched the last guard's gun, using it to give him a Gibbs’ slap to the head before dropping it under a bench since she had no intention of using it to shoot. She also relieved the female cop of her weapon before tossing it away too, not wanting to get shot.

Her only aim was to escape, and she proceeded to do just that. It had taken her but a few seconds to neutralise the six fools who thought that she would give up meekly and go to jail. She had literally seconds until the first guard and male cop managed to extricate themselves from Mr Potato head since she could hear them moaning, so they were stunned but not knocked out. She took off out the door and raced across the VIP Lounge, ignoring the shouts as people noticed her wrapped in just a towel, running towards the exit.

Improvising quickly, she screamed, "Help, he tried to rape me,” as she disappeared from sight out into the terminal.

Smirking, she continued to put distance between her and the misguided fools who wanted to take away her freedom. Hopefully that would slow down any of her pursuers even a little. She knew that she needed some clothes to cover up quickly, since being swathed in a towel made it difficult to blend in and therefore to evade and escape.

This was her priority – to blend in, evade capture and escape the airport. Ziva automatically proceeded to the baggage carousel, figuring that it would be the quickest way to find clothes. She knew that she had very little time. Apart from the six boobs that had sought to detain her, she knew that more would be on her tail very soon.

Spying a suitcase that was obviously owned by a female and quickly discounting another that was likely to contain children's clothing, she leapt onto the carousel to reach the case more rapidly. She didn't have the luxury of waiting for it to come to her as Ziva knew that every second was precious in terms of her escaping successfully. This was not an impossible situation, she had gotten out of much worse scraps over the years. She had made it out of a terrorist camp in Somalia after all.

Unfortunately, despite years of ballet helping her to move with stealth and grace, she fumbled her landing onto the conveyor belt. She was so focused on regaining her balance she let go of the towel and never noticed initially. Oh well no matter, she would have had to shed it to get dressed, eventually.

Ziva David was definitely not ashamed of her body – she worked out religiously and knew that she was in exceptionally good shape even if she was not in ‘Mossad field-ready shape’ - she had gotten soft. Still she knew she looked good naked, unlike that female cop back there who obviously had a few spare wheels in her trunk. As she gained possession of the suit case and focused on opening it, she ignored the shocked exclamations, wolf whistles and kitty calls and focused on her goal of acquiring clothes.

Seeing a summer dress and sandals she snatched them out and decided to don the dress immediately and hang onto the footwear til later. Then she could move to the second priority. When clothed she
could start evading the security guards, airport cops and all the mucho men who fancied themselves as Rocky Rambos and try to make a citizen's arrest. Standing up to slip on the dress, she was shocked to see the female cop coming up behind her, her face all bloody. Damn!

"Give yourself up, Ms David."

_Idiot, it's Da veed. Why can't you Americans get it right? And as if she was going to give up. Mossad never gives up... you fool._

As she glanced around quickly, Ziva was relieved to see that she was the only opponent to have followed her and as far as she could see, she hadn't retrieved her firearm. She also knew that the basic garden variety cop never carried backup guns or even a knife, so Ziva was confident that she could evade her. She was after all just a cop. She was not well trained, and she was not self-disciplined - her podgy body was testament to this fact.

While Ziva was incorrect about her carrying a backup weapon, the officer did in fact carry a knife, she was acutely aware of the fugitive’s reputation as an assassin whose favourite weapon was a knife. The cop thought it would be foolish to try to take her down with a weapon David was so skilled with. Carrie rightly decided she was no match for the highly trained assassin and needed to surprise her instead.

In the second Ziva took to check out her position for other threats, Carrie Frazier had spied a hockey stick on the baggage carousel and surreptitiously grabbed it. She'd learnt her lesson well and had no intention of letting this psycho assassin get within spitting distance of her or anyone else. While she'd not done serious harm to any one yet, if backed into a corner Officer Frazier was certain she would be extremely dangerous.

Carrie wouldn't trust her an inch and knew she had to fight fire with fire. She’d reached for the Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) Foam which had been issued by Whately prior to their attempt to arrest David in the Air France terminal. Although she and Morretti had already been armed with their own Pepper Spray it was not foam or gel-based OC, it was the stream spray model which was far more likely to result in cross-contamination should it enter the building’s ventilation system. Aiming the OC at the perp’s face, Frazier let her have it.

Ziva suddenly found it difficult to breath and her vision blurred as she began to shake uncontrollably, disorientated as she fought the overwhelming desire to drop to her knees. She knew if she did she would never get away from that bitch who’d sprayed her. While she was trying to fight off the effects and failing, Carrie took her out with a sweeping motion around her ankles with the curved hockey stick, causing her to fall heavily off the carousel. Ziva face planted, a terrible cracking sound caused bystanders to flinch. Officer Frazier whipped out her cuffs and approached the suspect with extreme caution.

Ziva, who'd landed forcefully on her face, felt her still fragile jaw shatter and she cursed this wretched country. They could not even manage to create effective stem cells, apparently. Why on earth had made her want to live here in this backwards country, anyway? She must have been possessed.

Too late to worry about her stupidity. _She needed to get up now and get away. Evade and escape, it had been pounded into her head enough times when she was training to become Mossad. She had to get up and run away._

Even with the agony of her shattered jaw, Mossad trained officers do not give up. Her father would deliberately break bones in her hand during her hand to hand combat training, so she learned to ignore pain and focus on getting the job done. Ziva was incredibly grateful to Aba for that
preparation. It made her better and stronger than all her team mates and had extricated her from numerous life-threatening situations in the past. Trying to breathe through the pain she attempted to rise, when a heavy weight landed on her back. No doubt the chubby cop. As she began to buck, preparing to throw her off, Ziva felt another weight land on her legs and another fall across her butt as they effectively pinned her to the ground.

As she continued to struggle futilely, an excited voice proclaimed. "Bloody oath mate, this is just like catching crocs back home in Darwin. Maybe we should tape her mouth too, I reckon she'd give someone a nasty mauling if she got the chance."

"Maybe Dazza, but do you have any duct tape onya?"

“Damnit Robbo, I must have left it in my other bag, along with spare pair of Reg Grundies and I think I might need them too after laughing so much!”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to the technical expertise of Acrwdof1 an OCAT (Oleoresin Capsicum Aerosol Training) instructor for his information on the use of Pepper Spray/ Oleoresin Capsicum Spray in law enforcement situations.

FYI Regs Grundies is Aussie rhyming slang for undies (i.e. underpants).
Chapter Summary

Emma finds her wedding dress in DC and Gibbs ruminates on his discussion with DiNozzo.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Fans of Caitlin Todd will find this chapter offensive as will Tim McGee fans. Also Brides who are into OTT froth and bubble are probably sharpening their hair pins as we speak.

My good friend and Beta (I guess that makes her a Freta) beat my punctuation into submission for the chapter, so thanks Arress for the beta. You always make my chapters so much more polished. Any faux pas are due to my chronic reworking. Thanks to everyone supporting this story by leaving kudos and comments.

The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.

James A. Garfield

Emma Ingham thought about the elegant yet simple white dress with small panels of antique lace she'd decided was perfect to wear when she married Tony. It was exactly what she wanted, so she bought it and it was now hanging up in Lara's side of the closet in her and Brad's bedroom, so Tony wouldn’t snoop. Her fiancée was incurably nosy.

She never wanted a froufrou wedding dress or big gaudy nuptials; even as a little girl she was something of a tomboy. While definitely not a tomboy any more, she still favoured clean simple lines and sophistication over fairy tale concoctions and endless miles of tulle and sequins.

When she saw the dress, there was no good reason in her mind to keep on looking, just in case she encountered something more 'perfect'. This was it, so in her eminently practical fashion, she'd switched focus to looking for something equally stylish for Lara Pitt to wear. And perhaps it wasn't traditional, but Emma wasn't going to ask Lara to wear some nightmare of a bridesmaid or a prom style dress that made her feel uncomfortable.

Emma wasn’t some silly insecure bride, afraid of being upstaged by her Matron of Honour and needing her to look hideous.

She hoped that Lara really did like the ecru coloured, cocktail length, strapless dress that had a lace three-quarter sleeved, over-jacket. She thought with the lace detailing, it complemented her full-length dress nicely. Add in some dusky pale pink tea roses and shoes in antique pink to match her flowers and it would be beautifully elegant and timeless. Emma even thought it was the type of ensemble that wouldn't be out of place for a romantic dinner in the future or for one of the boring
medical dinners Brad got invited to, courtesy of her fiancé's miracle survival of the plague. All Lara would need to do was add some nude coloured shoes and a clutch and she would look fine. They'd decided ages ago that Lara was going to be her Matron of Honour and Brad was going to be Tony's Best Man. It was going to be a fairly quiet affair with some of the New York field office coming and her hospital workmates. Plus, they'd invited a few of her and Tony's old college friends, and a few of their former colleagues from DC.

Perhaps the biggest source of contention would be who to invite from DC and who to leave out. Strangely, one Delores Bromstead from HR, who was severe and seemed singularly bereft of a sense of humour, was a surprise inclusion on Tony's list of DC buddies. They'd met her today on the way down to Autopsy to see Ducky. Delores and Tony seemed like such an unlikely pair to become friends, she appeared taciturn and humourless, angular and harsh, and Tony was mercurial with joie de vivre that after the slings and arrows he’d encountered the last few years, while a little bit battered, was still very much apparent. That's when he revealed it wasn't his charm or good looks that had won 'Fair Maiden's' heart – it was his sneaky investigative skills.

"It was Christmas and I was Delores' Secret Santa and I was in a funk over what to give her. I couldn’t imagine giving her what I usually give women, like chocolates or gift vouchers for a manicure or facial…"

"Or honey dust," Emma interrupted jokingly.

Tony grinned and gave a mock shiver. "Yeah… no. Somehow I think I'd have gotten my balls handed to me if I'd done that."

"Oh, she might have thought you were coming on to her."

"Or laughing at her, which was why the beauty treatments were a no go, too. And chocolate seemed to say – I really can't be bothered or last-minute panic unless it's for a date. So, Nurse Emma... you see my dilemma?"

Giggling and rolling her eyes, she asked him, "So what did you get her in the end?"

"A toy…” Seeing Emma's raised eyebrows he playfully slapped her wrist. "Behave yourself, wench! Not that sort of toy. A doll that she'd wanted when she was a little girl and Santa never brought her. Know how it feels to want something for Christmas so bad and never get it."

Emma seethed, but tried not to reveal how much she'd like to hurt Tony's parents for being responsible for putting that expression on his face and the melancholy in his voice.

He saw her expression and misinterpreting her reaction, he chuckled somewhat bitterly. "Yeah, people always assumed that because we were rich I got everything my spoilt-brat’s heart desired. Truth is, neither of them ever bothered spending time enough to ask what I wanted. One year when one of the staff took pity on me and took me to see Santa, I told him what I wanted for Christmas was my mother to hug me and for her to smell like flowers."

"She was never a demonstrative type, even before the drinking got out of control, but on the odd occasion she did, I learnt to hate the smell of spirits. Guess that's why I use to delude myself about Gibbs' head slaps being a sign of affection. When you have very little, you can construe a lot into something."

"So, how did you know about the doll?"

"I'm not an investigator for nothing, Buns."
"You investigated her?" Emma asked, incredulously.

"I take the fifth on that. Plausible deniability. What you don't know can't hurt either of us. Especially me!"

Smiling as she recalled their conversation, she resolved to give him extra hugs tonight a) because of what he missed out on as a kid and b) because he was such a sap sometimes under that brash and cocky exterior of his. The story of the doll touched her, and she could understand why it had moved Delores Bromstead, too.

Poor thing, even her name was the antithesis of warm and approachable.

Still, she seemed like a nice enough woman; plain and no nonsense. The sort who, once befriended, would become your staunchest of allies. If Tony decided he wanted to invite her to the wedding she'd be fine with it.

The elephant in the room in terms of people in DC to invite or not would have to be Gibbs. For so long, his opinion had meant so much to her soon-to-be-husband, but he'd been incredibly hurt and angry by the fool's behaviour. He seemed to have found some resolution going to tell his old boss he had no intention of becoming his lackey and taking over his dynasty simply because Gibbs decreed that it should be so.

Emma knew that if he ever accepted the team he'd coveted for so many years, it wouldn't be because Gibbs anointed him. He wanted it free and clear of any perceived nepotism. He said that if he came back, he would come back not as Gibbs' poor replacement, but worthy of the job in his own right. The problem was, he concluded darkly, he just wasn't sure if he wanted it any more.

As they got ready to go out to dinner with Brad and Lara, she thought about the complexities of her soon-to-be-husband. He'd returned from his showdown with Gibbs looking as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and no doubt it had. She was glad for him, but she'd also wanted to give his former boss a piece of her mind. She hoped that Tony hadn't let him off too easy, something he had a tendency to do.

He'd also come home sans his journal, and while she was furious that Gibbs hadn't given it back, she was also happy in a way. It gave her an excellent excuse to go over there and take it back later.

Deciding to wear her LBD, Emma decided it should be a fun night. Dinner with her fiancé and the Pitts, and for dessert - Gibbs a la Flambé.

I Shouldn't Have To

Gibbs was in a state of shock. No one, not even DiNozzo, had ever dared to speak to him so damn harshly or bluntly, if it came down to it. Not even back in boot camp, and he'd come across some real pieces of work during his time in the Corps. His former senior field agent had totally let him have it (with both barrels) just now – not shrinking back in the face of his unbridled fury.

Essentially saying what that butt hole Stu Travers had said about his attitude, and a whole heap more. Both of them refusing to accept his reasoning that he deserved a leave pass since he'd endured a life bereft of Shannon and Kelly. Why couldn't they leave him alone like everyone else? He'd paid his dues, they owed him for having to sacrifice his loved ones, and he was pissed off that they seemed to feel otherwise.

And also causing a slow burning in his gut, chest, and his head was the accusation that he'd undermined DiNozzo's authority in the team. What a crock of shit – how could anyone in their right
mind accuse him of that? He was a Marine for Pete's sake, and they damn well lived, slept and pissed by the chain of command. What the hell nonsense had DiNozzo been babbling about before when he asked him why the fool thought he hated him?

"...The constant belittling, the 12 years of undermining my authority and the way you let the others ignore the chain of command, heck, actively encouraged it. Practically patted them on the head and gave 'em candy when they did it. Not just Tim and Ziva, but Cate, too, from the day she joined the team. You came right out and told her to ignore my orders..."

Yes, that was his accusation, which unfortunately also rang a distant bell for him from somewhere else. Where had he heard that phrase recently? After several more beers, including the one DiNozzo had declined, Jethro was feeling maudlin enough to want to find it, and he had a pretty good idea where to look, too. He'd been too much of a coward to go searching for it until he had several beers under his belt, just like he'd been too much of a coward to track him down and make things right between them in the months since he'd left DC.

But now in his current state of mawkishness, it felt utterly appropriate to inflict further misery upon himself. So, he went in search of DiNozzo's journal to find that passage about Caitlyn Todd and the CoC that he was sure he'd read.

He descended the stairs with a carefulness commonly adopted by the inebriated who were trying to appear sober. It wasn't even 1700 yet and he was wasted, but he was still trying to convince himself he wasn't drunk. Gibbs reached the bottom step unscathed and crossed to the worktable and opened the drawer where he'd left the journal the last time he decided to have himself a pity party and read it.

The reason why he kept it down here was because he only ever read it when he was at least partial intoxicated, since it was the only time he could read the uncensored handwritten thoughts of his former senior field agent. DiNozzo had been the one person who'd given him unquestioning loyalty for 12 years, even longer than his marriage to Shannon, and he'd stupidly chased him away.

It made him wonder about Shannon if she hadn't died – would she, like Tony, eventually have gotten fed up with him and left him too? He always thought they were a match made in heaven, but he'd thought he and DiNozzo were solid partners too. Then again, of their decade long marriage, he'd been deployed an awful lot and when at home he'd worked most of the time.

Maybe if Shannon hadn't had a baby or if she'd had to spend as many hours with him each day as his team, she might have been more inclined to divorce him like his other spouses had. And what of his beloved daughter? Would Kelly still think he was perfect, would he still be her invincible hero?

Gibbs had to hand it to DiNozzo, it had been one hell of a wakeup call accusing him of leaving the best part of himself behind. Pondering where it was he'd lost himself, he wondered if it had been at the front where he'd first heard the devastating news of their passing. Maybe on the grassy hillock in Mexico where he'd taken the sniper shot that killed Hernandez, or at the gravesite where his wife and daughter lay for eternity. And then to exit asking what his girls would think of the Leroy Jethro Gibbs he'd become – ballsy!

He made mental inventory - angry, vindictive, cruel and manipulative, and those were just his good points. Add to the list, afraid to open himself up to friendship and love, so he'd become bitter and lonely. Determined that those around him should be miserable too.

If he dared to think about it, he knew that Kelly and Shannon would be so disappointed in what he'd allowed himself to be. Which was why he'd been determined to drink, knowing that enough alcohol would wash away all those painful insights come tomorrow.
And he was well on the way to that desirable destination; that was until that dang passage from the journal ate its way past his blissful oblivion like acid corroding into the strongest steel. Now, finally he found himself leafing through a handwritten book which had brought him nothing but soul-deep pain.

Surely, he was a masochist for putting himself through this. Better to seek an alcoholic haze where he didn't have to hear the accusations or see the disappointment and bitter recriminations on the faces of the people he thought of as his friends and family. But those words of DiNozzo's, it was like they'd been burned into his brain… burned into his memory, and he couldn't rest until he'd found and read them once more.

Ah, finally… he'd found it:

8th October 2003

Our second case working as a team of three (Todd, Gibbs and I) involving a dead Naval officer, Cr Brian Farrell, aka Sea Dog to the kids he mentored. He was caught in the middle of a gunfight by terrorists, intent on blowing up the electricity grid. Coming after the terrorist plot to assassinate the President, this was just a bit too close for comfort. Plus – oh joy - I got to see that bastard Fornell again who thought he was oh so amusing when he joked about tossing me out on the beltway in a body bag. I'm damned lucky not to have been killed, but I guess at the very least Gibbs and Fornell would have got a laugh out of it.

Thankfully, we managed to save the day and stop the terrorist taking out the electricity grid but honestly, the most noteworthy thing about this whole case was that Gibbs just set me up in my role as SFA to fail with our probationary agent, Caitlin Todd. She's already pretty damned full of herself, thinking that she knows everything about investigating; I'd hardly describe her as being unassuming or accepting of any training advice that I try to offer.

So, I was pretty pissed when Gibbs told her that I don't get to tell her what to do, he does. I mean sure, he is team leader and he does have the final say. Yes he can override me but I do have supervisor powers over her as senior field agent. There was no need to emasculate me like that, and at a crime scene with others around too. And she just couldn't wait to tell me exactly what he said, her smug look made me wish I could slap her silly. Of course, even though I was escorting Diane Fontaine off the crime scene, with my acute hearing, I already knew what the second B for bastard said about me.

Oh, I get that he wanted her to do something else, but he could have dealt with it in such a way that didn't make her lose what little respect she had for me. It would have been the professional thing to do. It would have preserved the appearance that he observed the chain of command or at least encouraged her to do so.

And all that was needed was a simple 'Yes but now that I'm here, I'll take over and you go process the boat.' Hardly rocket science!

I just don't get it. He never undercut me like this with Vivian Blackadder or Dobbs. Nor the plethora of other agents that flitted through the MCRT over the last two years.

But then maybe it was Gibbs’ intent to make sure that she doesn't follow the chain of command. While he told me back when he hired me that 'you don't waste good', he doesn't seem to be exactly happy to have me on the team anymore. Feeling rather like the unwanted maiden aunt that no
one wants living with them, to be perfectly honest. He and Todd have joined forces to belittle me every time I open my mouth.

Maybe he plans for Cate to take over my job when her probationary period is up. Wish he'd be up front about it, though.

She sure seems eager to neuter me. Gibbs reckoned Todd had balls when we worked the case with her on Air Force One, but I think she's more of a ball breaker myself. I could see her being employed at one of those no-kill animal shelters where they neuter and castrate every animal they take in. I reckon she could do the castrations with just her tongue - it's so damned sharp.

It probably should be registered as a lethal weapon. I can just see it…”Hey there doggy… call those testicles? I've seen bigger ones on hamsters." And Mr Testicle and his best buddy would shrivel up with embarrassment and die.

She's already accused me of sexual assaulting her when I was searching around in the truck for my seatbelt. Considering the reason for her hasty resignation, it's a bit rich to be acting like a blushing virgin because I accidentally touched her. I wonder how she'll handle the close quarters aboard the ships when we have to conduct investigations.

If I was an asshole like she thinks, I'd call her bluff and ask for her complaint to be investigated and watch her make an idiot of herself. But because she is new I'll try to cut her some slack and not make hr look more stupid.

However, it seems that she has decided I'm a sexist pig. In light of her profile, my comments (even the case related ones) seem to be an open invitation for her to make me feel like an idiot, especially in front of colleagues, including those from other agencies. On just this one case she's already been disrespectful to me in front of Fornell and that DEA guy, Fuller. Gibbs meanwhile does diddy… no, not true. He grins or worse – he joins in!

Not sure how a profiler can make such an inaccurate assessment about a co-worker after such a short time, but I'm finding myself giving her what she expects. If I'm going to be hung out to dry for being a sexist pig, then why shouldn't I act like one? So, when she tells me in her oh so sarcastic voice when I have managed to find out information about the van that the terrorists are driving that helped identify their target, that it was really smart, I can't help myself. I bait her by saying that it was nothing - any guy could do it and then watch her scowl.

And I'm still not sure what she based her profile on, but as a profiler she should know better than to make snap judgements about people. Individuals are complex - not cardboard cut outs!

I wonder was it that I used a magazine with a girl in a bikini on the cover to explain to her why at a crime scene we took measurements and made sketches as well as photos. I'm mean, I just used a teaching aid that happened to be on hand to demonstrate the principle… it wasn't mine, it was one someone had left lying around.

And if I'd been most feds they would have told her to get lost and kept on working, but I tried in the spirit of interagency co-operation to maintain a good working relationship with her. More fool me.

Still with her Secret Service contacts I guess I can see why Gibbs would want her as his SFA.
He’s had two years to realise that I’m not so good after all. I guess it's time to be moving on soon. It wouldn't be professional to go until Todd is a special agent, so I'll hang around til her probationary period is over, I guess. I hope she has post graduate qualifications as it is a prerequisite for supervisory roles.

I wonder what it is about me that people find so abhorrent. And here I thought Gibbs was different, but I guess the fault must lie with me; disowned, dumped at the altar, betrayed by Danny – Gibbs can't stand me, yep it's me, it has to be…

Gibbs, despite the numbing effects of the beer plus the Jack he’d consumed, felt like a mule had kicked him in the guts. Damn, DiNozzo was right! Reaching for the bottle of Jack, he poured another slug of the amber liquid and thumbed through the journal until he arrived at the case that still gave him nightmares since he’d been so focused on finding Ari he’d developed target fixation and he’d almost lost DiNozzo.

6th May 2004

Another case closed. I was drugged with Bron, a combination of speed and codeine, ended up locked in the sewer with a rotting corpse and our UA Marine, Sergeant Bill Atlas. A man who was more dead than alive, but I managed to get us out of that terrible little room and was trying to find our way out of the rabbit-warren of tunnels when Gibbs and Cate turned up. I remember not making a whole lot of sense by that point – asking him what he was doing there.

Stupid idiot, of course they were there to save Sgt Atlas – after all Gibbs would never leave a Marine behind. It’s a point of honour.

I also remember acting totally off my face in the elevator when we got back to the bullpen. Damn fool - I was trying to make Gibbs admit he was worried about me. Clearly, I had to be still feeling the effects of the drugs because I know damned well that you don’t ever try to force him to do anything… not if you want to live that is. I really shouldn’t have been surprised that he made me pay for it, either.

And let’s call a spade a spade. With Gibbs, no one does psychological torture like he does. He has this almost psychic sense of how to deliver a killing blow and boy did he execute it.

Coming to a stop, he turned towards me and grabbed my face with both hands, and I still remember the light reflecting of his silver ID bracelet, before telling me I was irreplaceable. I admit in my drug induced and post adrenaline rush I was floating on the biggest endorphin high imaginable to hear those words. Of course, if I’d been sober, I never would have begged for the affirmation since I know damned well that Gibbs would regard it as a sign of weakness and vulnerability.

Still that didn't mean that I didn’t desperately want to hear those words in a Utopian universe – simply that I'd never have tried to make him say them. I'd given up thinking that the man who’d recruited me more than two years ago thought I was worth it. My usefulness was limited, and I reckon I'm well and truly past my use by date. Yep, I'm definitely on the nose.

So then to be astounded by his apparent effusive praise combined with the effects of the Bron… well it left me as high as a freakin’ kite with euphoria that made me feel I was flying, which I guess was his objective. Without a doubt Gibbs knew what effect those words would do to
someone never considered indispensable in his whole damned life by anyone, not even my parents… especially my parents.

And the feeling of indestructibility, of ecstasy, of being able to conquer the world… well it was as fantastic as it was short lived when Gibbs made me suffer the ultimate price for thinking I could force his hand. Serve me right for being such an idiot!

Gibbs then called out to address Timothy McGee, the Norfolk computer guy we call on to help out sometimes, who was currently sitting there at my desk with a huge shit eating grin plastered across his probie mug. ‘Forget about it, McGee. He's still alive.’ The boss then headed to his desk and sat down, smiling that famous half grin of his at the awesome smack down he'd just delivered.

And there it was – I was so damned irreplaceable he’d already offered my job to McGeek before they'd located my body. Before I had the bad manners to turn up alive of course, but it really shouldn't have been such a knock-out blow. I'd been baiting him and Cate pretty much the whole case. Seeing that our psychological profiling probie had such a poor opinion of me, I couldn't help but play up to it. Telling her that all men lie to women and asking her if she really thought she still looked 25 had been a little bit of revenge for her scorn… and well it was the truth.

As I explained to her after flirting shamelessly with the waitress Vanessa, pushing the boundaries is what I loved about the job.

Well okay, it used to be having Gibbs' six and helping people and being the best damned investigator, I can be to live up to his faith in me. But ever since Gibbs had thrown out the whole following the chain of command, rendering me impotent and made it pretty damned clear that Cate would soon be his 2IC, I live to push the boundaries. After all, I was just holding the place open since a probationary agent couldn’t be SFA.

Of course, after telling her I loved to push boundaries, I couldn’t help adding the bit about beautiful women. Even though she had already made up her mind that I was a sexist pig, it was fun to see if I could exceed her expectations. Sure, it's juvenile to play up to her misconceptions but seriously, between her elbow jabs and personal attacks and Gibbs joining her in the character assassination and his head slaps, basically they've rubbed me up the wrong way. When I'm rubbed up the wrong way I get obnoxious, petty and juvenile.

In the elevator, I guess it was inevitable that I finally pushed Gibbs too far and he decided to show me just how tenuous my job is and who holds all the power. As if I was ever in any doubt – which of course I wasn’t.!

And it also seems pretty clear that Gibbs would rather have two probationary agents watching his six than a dumb cop like me. Still Cate guarded the President and McGee went to MIT – how can I compete with that?

I CAN’T!

I only wish I didn't feel like it would be unprofessional to resign in the wake of the terrorist that took our people hostage and shot Gibbs and poor Gerald. I was going to leave when Cate's probationary year was up in a couple of months, but in good conscience I can't leave until we get the bastard. Gerald nearly lost his arm, probably only saved it because Ducky was a hell of a lot more than just the medical examiner.
Meanwhile… if I could only get the smell of death out of my hair. That corpse was really ripe, and I know from past experience that even after the physical traces has finally dissipated, the psychological odour will linger much longer, haunting even my dreams. I wonder how it is possible to smell death when you are asleep…perhaps I am crazy.

At least it looks as if Sgt Atlas will recover… at least physically. Doubt he’ll ever really be the same.

Reading that entry, he couldn't help it. He found himself imagining what he'd have done if Franks had been a total A-hole and treated him like that. He'd have probably decked the bastard and requested a transfer asap, but then again, he hadn't endured the childhood that DiNozzo had.

Sure, he'd butted heads with Jackson growing up, but he'd always known that he was loved by both his parents, and until his mother got sick, they acted like his parents and made sure he was taken care of. He got to be a kid. DiNozzo had pretty much reared himself, and he was a darn sight more forgiving and caring about others, regardless of the way he behaved in public.

Curious in spite of himself about if the chain of command issue had resolved itself when they went from three to four, despite what DiNozzo had said, he searched for the entries written after McGee joined the team as a probationary field agent. Surely, things had gotten better? Three was an awkward number, but four was balanced, right?

8th December 2004

Rapists or even would be rapists lie… they will always blame the victim… say they were asking for it… they were sluts… they dressed like whores… she invited them in… didn't say no.

It was all pretty standard stuff really, just Rape 101 as any cop could tell you. Just like in most cases of murder it was generally the spouse/partner who committed the crime and most cases of children being molested - it wasn't a stranger but a close friend or family member that was the perpetrator.

All just statistical facts and ones that the lowliest beat cop know damned well since they get to see so many cases of rape, molestation and violence, so they soon learn that the statistics (at least as far as these crimes are concerned) are correct. And on this case even though I knew that, because I am that lowly cop, I let the absence of the Chain-of-Command, the team's blatant disrespect and Cate's emotional involvement and sexual hang ups all distract me from truths I learnt the hard way.

And I failed to protect the victim… I let Laura Rowens down.

I tried to explain to Todd and McGee that rapists lie after she bonded with the would-be rapist in the hospital. He'd spun her a cock and bull story about how he and Mrs. Rowens were having an online affair and she'd invited him over for sex. But it seems that the probie and our profiler know better than I do about how to investigate sexual assault.

They know better, even if I have 9 years of experience and worked on countless rape cases and they've worked on… oh wait, this one was their first one!

So, when Probie decided to lecture me about not ruling out Mrs. Rowens as a suspect I saw
red. I get that they both think they are smarter than me, but in the normal Chain-of-Command they would at least keep those thoughts to themselves. I mean even when they think Gibbs is full of crap they wouldn't dream of telling him that. They shut up and follow his orders, but not with me.

Cate and her totally unprofessional practice of taking something that is case related that I've said and turning into a personal insult has seemingly rubbed off on the probie, as well. When I delivered my rapists lie 101 lecture and asked him, 'do you really think we should traumatise Laura Rowens because she's been through enough crap already,' he tells me I'd know, since I'm the master of crap.

And I snapped, knowing that if he'd said that to Gibbs he'd kill him after he tossed him off the team, but hey he said it to DiNozzo, no worries! So, I told him to watch his lip when I really wanted to tell him that his behaviour was insubordinate and unacceptable and that I'd write him up for it.

But I didn't because I knew that Gibbs wouldn't do anything about it because...aw hells bells HE NEVER DID. He just acted like it was a big joke when Cate came in acting like the senior field agent to tell me what was going to happen.

And from that point on - because I lost my temper I dropped the ball.

Then when the boss and Todd found the so-called emails to Jeremy Davison that Laura was alleged to have written, it all began to snowball, and I messed up badly again. Cate's refusal to let me see the emails, and as her supervisor on any other team I would have had her ass for that act of insubordination since she had no right to block my access to evidence, meant that I screwed up.

I should have investigated the emails further since she's so damned squeamish about anything to do with sex. Sometimes I have trouble reconciling how she managed to sleep with the President's ball carrier which was flagrantly against the rules when she was Secret Service. (Bet she did him in the dark, with her eyes closed and said a score of Hail Marys afterwards.)

Because of my failure to follow up, there was a shift of the team's perception about the crime that meant that we began viewing all the evidence with the confirmation bias that Laura was the guilty party and Davison was the poor chump who was set-up. It was a return to the bad old days of investigating sexual assaults where female rape victims found it impossible to get people to believe them... the law was totally biased to favour the male offender.

Once we (the MCRT) took the viewpoint that the woman was a predator looking to blame the poor male, then when the faked emails and webpage emerged, the degree of scepticism demanded in modern day law enforcement processes was absent. Which, not surprisingly, resulted in us making mistakes that in turn caused irreversible damage. Not just in the investigation process but much more importantly for the victim...Laura Rowens.

Already traumatised by her would be racist, our ham-fisted treatment further traumatised that poor woman.

What else but attribution bias could explain how both McGee and Abby, two supposed Michelangelos of the computer keyboard, could fall for the faked-up evidence? Or how the
team could be taken in by Michelle and Jeremy Davison the rapist and his 'sister'. You can't tell me that those two perps are smarter than the two geeks with their genius IQs.

And yet, they fooled us all and put an innocent Marine's wife through a living hell – all while her husband was deployed overseas and she was alone. Job well done, Anthony! You must be so proud of yourself.

A perfect example of why chain-of-command exists in the first place - to provide checks and counter checks against such basic mistakes and human biases occurring. No one expects rookies not to make mistakes, but that is where supervisors are supposed to provide the checks and balances to stop them going off in the wrong direction.

But since I'm senior field agent in title only and I was pissed that neither McGee or Todd could see that I had experience in rape cases, in fact were openly disrespectful, I lost my focus and let the team go off on the wrong tangent. I WENT OFF ON THE WRONG DIRECTION TOO instead of listening to my own intuition and experience. Since when did I start doubting myself?

I became a cop to help people in trouble. Well great job today... you can be so proud of yourself.

Guess Senior was right all along about you, Anthony.

You're nothing but a screw-up.

Gibbs closed the journal, unable to stomach more, even in his drunken masochistic state.

What if that had happened to Shannon? If he was Rowens, he'd have ripped his asshole a mile wide and then shoved his head up it. No, not true... he'd have shot the NCIS SOB that did that to his wife and then he'd go find the rapist and kill him slowly and painfully. Yet Jethro never even thought about her after they closed the case, or how the way he led the team contributed to the monumental screw up.

And it was a screw up, but as the team lead it was his FUBAR because the buck was supposed to stop with him. He'd accepted the findings of his team unquestioningly.

Sure, they'd arrested the dirt bags in the end and their close out stats weren't compromised, but DiNozzo was right. The damage they'd caused to the victim couldn't be undone. Now he wondered what had happened to Major Rowens and his wife.

He remembered her telling him that she didn't fit in with the other Marine wives since she didn't have kids. Did the other Marine wives support her afterwards or did they think that because she was under suspicion that there was good reason for her to be arrested? The old 'where there's smoke there's fire' chestnut?

Here he was - a former Marine charged with protecting Marines, sailors and their dependants, and his team had caused a traumatised wife to be unjustly accused when she had done nothing wrong. Well other than defend herself and survive. The truth was that he should have let DiNozzo have point on the case since he'd worked a shit-load more rape cases than Gibbs had, even in his brief incarnation as an MP.

Hell, even if he'd just allowed Tony to do his job as senior field agent instead of cutting him off at the knees and making sure he was ineffectual, Laura Rowens might not have had to suffer the trauma of
a hostile interrogation by him or been wrongfully arrested by the MPs for suspected murder.

God what a bastard!

Reaching for the bottle, he poured the last of it into his coffee mug and slammed it down, wanting to forget.

Chapter End Notes

In Sea Dog - her second case - Cate called Gibbs a sexist pig twice, Tony three times and also accused him of groping her when he was searching for the seat belt in the truck. Her total tally of insults that she makes against Tony for the episode is more than ten, plus she is openly scathing when she makes them. Hardly the playful banter that most people claim takes place between the pair. Most of the time Tony looks surprised, hurt or fed-up.

And let's not get started on her vicious taunting over the Amanda Reed/Voss kiss that she persisted with for over a year after Dead Man Walking. Tony never once retaliated as he could have done, reminding her she’d had to leave the Secret Service due to sexual impropriety. Plus, I don't know about anyone else, but when I start a new job I wouldn't dream of making vitriolic attacks on my co-worker. I'm too busy trying to learn the job and create a good impression - after all as Fornell points out when she pisses off Gibbs, she is running out of places to work.
Gibbs wasn't able to face staying in his basement so he'd somehow managed to stumble upstairs and collapse on his sofa, promptly falling asleep. When he woke up, he had a headache. Not a hangover – he rarely got those. This was more of a 'slept funny with my neck cricked' sort of headache.

Hangovers were for wimps, not badass Marines like Gibbs.

It had gotten dark outside in the interim. He really wished that they had a case that he could lose himself in, but the MCRT wasn't on call. Unless something really big broke and Tyler's team needed an assist, there was as much chance of that going down as the elephant that was in the room, donning a pink tutu and dancing Swan Lake.

That image of elephants performing Swan Lake earned a snort, but it inevitably led him to thinking that Swan Lake was one of Shannon's favourite ballets. That in turn made him think about the question posed by DiNozzo as he exited his house this afternoon about how his wife and daughter would feel about who he'd become.

It totally hit below the belt, but then DiNozzo had never shied away from forcing him to pull his head out of his ass. Too bad he'd never thanked him for having his six, not just in the field, but when he was too fixed on a target to consider the bigger picture.

And then he found himself thinking of his team and DiNozzo. Though real young for a detective, he'd already been an exceptional cop, and when he joined the team they had a great partnership, meshing together like no one he'd ever met before. Although Tony had trust issues (which weren't all the result of his partner Danny Price being a dirty cop) he'd slowly started to trust Gibbs, relying on him on the job, and forging an odd kind of friendship. Odd, because Gibbs didn't let his barriers down enough for anyone to get close to him, not anymore.

He wasn't saying their partnership had been perfect, but for someone as asocial as himself to be paired with a guy that craved social interaction like it was oxygen, they had been pretty damned close.
So, what happened when he finally found two other people he handpicked to join the team? When finally, he had what he'd always craved but didn't think possible because of TPTB. It should have been the perfect team, yet looking at it from DiNozzo's perspective, it certainly hadn't been The Dream Team. Quite the opposite - he'd gone out of his way to ensure Tony couldn't do his job properly.

When it was just the two of them, they'd been magic together, and even with Blackadder and a bunch of other agents, he'd always allowed him to fulfil his function as his 2IC.

Why then with Cate and McGee and then later with Ziva, did he suddenly go out of his way to emasculate DiNozzo and ensure he wouldn't have the team's respect? Was he that damned petty and insecure about his new Dream Team he'd created that he felt threatened by his 2IC’s talent and his personality? So insecure he’d sabotaged his senior field agent and ultimately when you looked at cases like the Laura Rowens FUBAR, undermined the team he’d sought to create.

He had no desire to re-read any of the damning indictment/journal any further. No, he wasn't tempted, not at all! He knew it was only going to get worse and he had no wish to read again how DiNozzo destroyed himself over the failures of others to have his six.

Gibbs guessed that he'd hadn't bothered to read the early bits before, or if he had, he'd skimmed past them, and a part of him wondered what else he'd missed, but he couldn't face reading any more right now… perhaps not ever.

How the hell was he supposed to live with this damned insight? He hated insights! He didn't apologise… it was a sign of weakness. But he couldn't just pretend like it hadn't happened now that he'd acknowledged it, or could he? Could he just bury it in his subconscious?

He wished sometimes he'd never taken the damned journal in the first place. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but then so had three marriages, and look how those had turned out. Unmitigated disasters and a shit load of alimony.

Still, there was a tiny voice that sounded a heck of a lot like his beloved Shannon whispering that Marines didn't leave anyone behind, and clearly, he'd done just that with DiNozzo. No, he needed to redeem himself… not let this be his legacy.

Trouble was he had no idea how to even begin. Maybe he should ask that stupid shrink, Dr. Travers. He was into all that redemption crap!

I Shouldn't Have To

Brad pulled up outside the address in Alexandria and looked at his friend and his long-time colleague - that is til she left his employ for another guy. Twice! Except this time around, God willing, he reckoned it might be the real deal.

"Are you sure this is such a good idea, Emma. Tony is going to go ballistic when he hears about it. How 'bout I at least come with?"

"It'll be fine, Brad. You know I know how to look after myself. I just want to go and get his journal back, that's all, and really, I could have easily driven myself, you know."

"Well, it's my fault he managed to steal it. I should be the one to get it back."

"Nonsense, I'm so looking forward to making him squirm. I shouldn't be too long. Just have a few things that need to be said."
Brad groaned, knowing her idea of a few things. It could get ugly!

"Thought Tony already had it out with him this afternoon?" Brad argued, trying to change her mind.

"Yeah, he did, but there's stuff, as you well know, Bradley, I need to say to the jackass."

Brad was reluctant, but then again, Emma was no shrinking violet, and he knew her mind was made up when she called him Bradley. "Okay, but holler if you need help and I'll be right there. Take care, please. If anything goes wrong, it will be my butt that Tony kicks, not your alluring one, Ingham."

"Not Ingham for much longer, Mr. Brad 'No Relation' Pitt." She giggled as she hopped out of the car. She made a point of wiggling her admittedly very shapely ass to torture him and headed for the front stairs.

As he watched her go, he was mentally preparing.

Oh, I'm so getting killed when Tony hears about this stupid stunt.

But maybe he won't find out about it.

Yeah right, dumbass. How are you going to explain the sudden appearance of his journal?

You are so dead meat!

~o0o~

It was late, and he was suitably bourbon buzzed. He heard banging on the front door. Impatient much? Gibbs thought as he climbed the stairs.

Who the hell could be knocking at 2357. Not many people came a-calling at midnight, and those that did like Fornell, and DiNozzo back in the day, knew to just come on in.

Grumping as he made his way over, he opened it to find a young woman dressed in a sexy black dress and heels standing on his front step. He gawked at her since she was glaring at him, but he didn't know her, did he?

"Yeah, can I help you?"

" Are you Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs?"

Uh huh. Who's askin?"

"My name is Emma Ingham and Tony DiNozzo’s my fiancé."

Gibbs was surprised. She wasn't anything like Paula or Ziva and didn't project any of the lethality that they or E.J. Barrett had exuded. Nor was she shallow and empty headed like Tony's ex-fiancée Wendy. She sort-of reminded him of that reporter that he'd been besotted with and he'd broke his heart over when she got poisoned by ricin a few years back… Daria, no Dana. She was confident, pretty, softly spoken with a musical quality to her speech, and she radiated an aura of calm competence.

And clearly, she was ready to go to any lengths to track down the wayward DiNozzo. He must have given her the slip now that he was in his old stomping grounds.

"DiNozzo's not here," he declared, misunderstanding her reasons for standing outside his house.
"I already know that," she replied. The you're a dumbass part remaining unspoken but implied nonetheless. "He's in our bed where I left him after we got back from dinner. I came here because I have something I want to say to you."

Okay, now he was curious. Gesturing her to come inside and sit down, he waited expectantly, smirking just a little. "Yeah, and what might that be?"

"Well, there's this for starters," she stated firmly and slapped him emphatically across the face.

Damn, that smarts!

Gibbs was real glad this… this avenging fury, this wingnut didn't have a baseball bat or a golf club or she might have done some real damage. Glaring back at her, he sank down into a chair, but didn't get too settled in case she decided to slap the other cheek.

"Just so we're real clear, that was totally meant to be humiliating!" Emma stated calmly.

"What the hell is your beef, Lady? You don't know me from a bar of soap. I get that DiNozzo is pissed off at me and why. He's had 13 years, but you, you've never met me before. What did I ever do to you that you wanna kick my ass?"

"First off, Agent Gibbs, I have met you before. Twice! Granted we weren't properly introduced, but then you aren't really interested in observing the social niceties, now are you?"

Okay, she has me there. I hate making nice with people. Not about to apologise for that, Lady!

Quirking his eyebrow to indicate she should continue, Emma scowled.

"The first time we encountered each other was at Bethesda and I was a Navy lieutenant working with Commander Brad Pit, my boss, trying to save a desperately ill NCIS special agent. He'd been infected with pneumonic plague. You came charging in when Tony was drowning in his own fluid, and you were too busy worrying about how you felt and what you thought. You never even bothered to find out what his condition was... just went storming in, throwing your weight around and yelling orders. And there it is in a nutshell, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, that's what I'm angry about –it's always been about you, you arrogant SOB. That's why you ordered him not to die. You didn't want to deal with the paperwork if he didn't make it, or was it you didn't want to ruin your perfect record of not losing anyone?"

Gibbs was shocked. What is this psycho's problem? "He was my agent."

"That how the Marines teach you to command a platoon, Gunny? Without learning the facts and formulating a plan or finding out about your opponent. Just rushing in headlong before knowing the situation? Didn't you ever wonder why Tony, whose oxygen saturation was dangerously low, was only on nasal prongs?"

Seeing his blank look, she explained furiously.

"He was cyanotic – blue to the likes of you – and by rights should have been on a ventilator to help him breathe, but when he learnt how badly scarred his lungs were and his chances for survival sucked, he requested a DNR. He didn't want to live if he was going to be permanently tied to an oxygen tank for the rest of his life and a burden."

Okay, so I didn't know that, but it all worked out fine. What the hell is she yabbering on about? "But he didn't end up like that."
"You came in like a rogue bull elephant bellowing and ordered him to live without bothering to find out the facts, and because he was desperate for your approval, he gave in. You used emotional blackmail to get what you wanted, you never bothered to ask him what he wanted. And then Mr. Smug Bastard, you walked out the damned door and left him to it, left him alone with Brad and I, who were complete strangers, to support him. So arrogantly confident that Tony wouldn't dare disobey your order."

"And. I. Was. Right. He didn't disobey. He recovered. He's fine. Why are you crawling up my ass? If I hadn't ordered him to live, then you two wouldn't be playing grab-ass or getting married." He stared at her incredulously.

Gibbs decided she was mad as a hatter. *DiNozzo, you sure can pick 'em.*

"I'll tell you why, you stupid jackass; because he could have been permanently incapacitated with the amount of damage to his lungs. It was a distinct possibility. We also had no idea because of the genetic modifications to the strain if he could suffer relapses, and I don't think you understand just how much he was suffering.

“According to you, you've never had a cold or the flu, or even allergies. So you're clueless about the herculean effort it took to come back from both the plague and double pneumonia, yet you got off on taking the credit for him surviving it."

*Hysterical female, much? "What?"

"It only seems fair that since you took all the credit, that you should also try to imagine what he felt like, surely? Think about the time you drowned in that car in the Potomac when you couldn't escape. Then imagine what it would have been like to have to go through that for seven days. The fear, the pain, the lack of oxygen and the inability to get enough air in your lungs so all your organs are screaming out for oxygen. Think of the courage it took to not give in, and you trivialised it. Claimed credit for it."

He had no intention of remembering that day when he'd screwed up monumentally. Trouble was that when Emma mentioned it his traitorous brain gleefully flashed back to the day upon the docks when he drove the car into the murky waters. Gibbs remembered the crushing pain that he felt when his organs were all screaming out for air before he mercifully was released from Hell by slipping peacefully away. How he welcomed it as a release from the torture his body was going through.

As if somehow reading his mind, Emma taunted him. "It only took you a few minutes before you gave up."

*Damn it, he had good reasons to let go and not fight.*

"Tony said if he did recover but not enough to come back to work, you'd have dropped him like stale doughnuts and I don't doubt him. You weren't there as he was fighting his way back, inch by agonising inch. Instead you made light of it… like it was a false alarm or something to that other agent, Cathy, Crissy, no Cassie. Told her he'd make it, like it was just a damned case of the flu, and then turned your back on him and went back to work. If you'd bothered to get all the facts about the state of his lungs, you'd have known it was always going to be touch and go if he survived."

*Typical female, makin' mountains outta molehills. Drama queens – all of them.*

*Did she really expect him to hang about and mop DiNozzo's fevered brow?*

*Whisper platitudes like he was his nanny?*
"If you'd cared enough to find out all the facts, you'd have recognized after he survived how damned dangerous it was putting him in peril like you did. Forcing him to spend hours in the pouring rain looking for evidence after Caitlyn Todd was killed, while he was still recuperating, all because of your own damned grief and guilt. Brad had a cow when he found out, and the only reason you weren't dead then was because of his Hippocratic Oath."

Yeah, yeah, okay… putting it like that does make it sound pretty bad, but it wasn't my fault. There was a ruthless killer to catch.

"Or how about forcing him to dive into the filthy waters of the Potomac to haul ass for you and a civilian who just happened to be a family friend of yours. All because you couldn't follow procedure due to your guilt and grief and had to play cowboy. He was incredibly lucky not to end up with pneumonia again.

“As it was, he battled a nasty case of bronchitis for weeks because he refused to take time off work or tell you he was sick. He was afraid you'd think he was weak, and since you've never even had a cold, he's probably right. You'd probably have told him to suck it up and get back to work."

Damn it, why is she making me out to be an unfeeling monster. Okay, I'm no fuckin Tibbs, group hugging and ruffling hair, but I'm not as bad as all that.

"I'd have been sympathetic if he told me," he declared, grumpily.

"Yeah, you keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better. After all, it is about you. You do know that the stress and crap you and your team put him through helped create a perfect environment for cancer to develop.

“His immune system was already damaged by the plague. He was under tremendous stress with the working conditions on your team - long hours, and the tension on the team. Research has demonstrated the effects of stress on the immune system's ability to function. It's why Tony's so passionate about reducing stress in the workplace."

Emma stared at him like she was inspecting a microbe under a microscope. "Did you ever wonder why he never told you… any of you that he had cancer?"

"Of course, I did, but he always says he's fine."

"Tony's learnt that the people who are supposed to be there for him can't be depended upon. He didn't tell any of you he was having trouble with his lungs, and he went through the biopsy and waiting for the results without support. No one! Got his test results and told no one on your damned team he was probably dying, decided that there wasn't any point in treating it. He was all alone, like usual. Figured none of you would care."

"Of course, we care."

Emma raised her eyebrow in disbelief. "Really? Not buying it. He said once when he was freaking out about contracting haemorrhagic fever due to piss-poor work safety procedures, you told him you were fine with him dying as long as he did it silently. Such a courageous CO! He suspects he's exposed on your watch and is nervous, and with good reason after the plague, and you flip him off. One hell of a boss and so-called friend you are."

"I didn't mean it, it was a joke and I had my mind on the case."
"I didn't… I had… me, me, me. It's always about you, Gibbs, isn't it? What about him? Do you ever stop to consider how someone else is feeling? No, don't bother answering. It was a stupid question."

So, I'm not a touchy feely kumbayah sort of guy. I get the job done. "It works, damn it!"

"You never even bothered to call while he was fighting the tumour, to ask how he was. Did you ever stop to think that he gave his all for you for twelve years? He sacrificed his health and any semblance of a social life for the job, for the almighty Gibbs. Then when he was no longer of any use to you, he didn't even rate a simple phone call or a letter inquiring into his health or wishing him good luck with the fight he was going through."

Emma leaned forward to confront him, jabbing her finger in the air at him.

"You're a user! By rights he never would have made it, except Brad got him into a clinical trial of a new drug and he clawed his way back. You were too damned busy to even ask if he was still alive. He could have died, and you couldn't manage to talk to him. So, yeah, you've done plenty to piss me off, Gunny!"

Glaring at her because she was right, he grudgingly admitted that he should have called to see how Tony was doing, even if he couldn't face going to see him. He'd been a coward… couldn't admit he was wrong, just like he couldn't say it today when Tony ripped him a new one. Couldn't admit it to her now.

"But the real reason I came here tonight wasn't to tear you a new one or slap you silly, although it feels mighty good, I have to say. Still, I'm not sure how much good it's done since you don't apologise for fear of being seen as weak.

"But I'll tell you something for nothing, Gibbs. People already see you as weak because it takes a real man to own their mistakes, to say they're sorry and mean it. I hardly know you, but I already know your weaknesses, so you can bet your bottom dollar that people that actually know you and work with you catalogued your vulnerabilities a long time ago.

"Fact is, your Rule Six is a joke, heck, even at Bethesda in the doctors' lounge I heard them chuckling over it, and let me tell you, doctors can be pretty damned arrogant. Surgeons are the worst, but even they have to attend M&Ms when they screw up, cuz they do, we all screw up."

Well, crap! Why are they all intent on making me mad? And what the hell is an M&M – I thought it was candy. 'Look, Emma…'

"But anyway, I digress. Back to the purpose of this oh so charming little tête-à-tête. You see, I also got to see you in all your glory for a second time, not that long ago. Once again back in Bethesda, when you came steaming in and harassed Brad, hit him, and then stole Tony's journal."

She glared at him like an avenging angel.

"I want it back!"

"Want what back?"

"Tony's personal journal which you took without his permission. I. Want. It. Back." She emphasized all four words of the sentence.

He nodded mutely and left the room, returning from the basement with the leather-bound book, and stony faced, handed it to her. She nodded, her head cocked to one side, considering.
"You know, you shattered Tony when you stole it. He was at an all-time low and then afterwards in the middle of puking his guts up from the chemo, he kept expecting you to turn up. Dreaded it since he was so weak, and he was so hurt and angry, but when you didn't come, didn't call him, that hurt even more. But being the bigger man, he reached out when your father died, since he couldn't attend his funeral, and you gave him nothing. But I get it."

Emma leaned forward confidentially,

"You were ashamed when you read his journal. It isn't always pretty reading about ourselves through someone else's eyes. Seeing us as other do; our lapses... our weaknesses...our failures. I don't know what is in the journal apart from a few things that Tony's shared after nightmares. What I do know about what had happened came mostly from Agent Balboa, and I guess he held back on stuff too – professional courtesy.

"So, I can only guess what's in the journal was confronting and difficult to come to terms with, but then isn't that the true measure of courage, Gibbs? Not to run off headlong into danger and ditch your team to try to save your daughter's best friend."

Emma flashed him a look of pure contempt.

"Anyone can do that, thanks to adrenaline and a side serving of macho stubbornness. But to put someone else's wants and needs before your own feelings for a change, even if it means having to face what a miserable SOB you are, to me that's pretty damned courageous. You should have done the right thing and checked on him, instead of being such a pathetic coward – you owed him that much."

Oh, words wound. Emma could give Diane a real run for her money in the sharp-tongued shrew category. "I got caught up. I meant to."

"But then, like I said in the beginning, it's always about you, what you want and need – how the case affects you. You never stop to think about things from other people's perspectives, and that's why Tony's journal knocked you right on your ass. You couldn't handle it since it was such an unaccustomed experience.

"Hell, even now, Agent Gibbs, it's not about you inviting Tony to come home and take up leadership of the team because it is something HE might want or deserve. It's all about you again – as far as you're concerned, you, as a leader, and he is an extension of you. You trained him up to be the agent he is today, you inculcated him into your precious rules. He's a mini-me, right?"

He stared at this woman, wondering. How could I ever have found her benign? She's trying to assassinate me, but with words, and doing a bang-up job of it too. How deadly she could be, and yet lethal. "Look..."

Emma ignored him, not really interested in anything he might say. "But you're wrong, very wrong about making him who he is, Special Agent All-About-Me. Tony is who he is as an agent, as an individual, in spite of people like you or damned Anthony Senior. Oh sure, you contributed, but with a whole lot of negative as much as positive junk for him to have to lug around as emotional baggage.

"AND he was already a damned fine cop before you recruited him. He wasn't like all the others with no investigative experience, he was already a homicide detective and undercover specialist. You were just the frosting on the top.

"Maybe... but I taught him how to be an agent and I taught him my rules. I made him into the best young agent I've ever work with."
Emma snorted disdainfully. "Listen to yourself – I, my, me, and myself seem to be your favourite pronouns. Well, let me tell you something else for nothing, if Tony was to take over the team, he'd do it his way and your rules be damned. He's his own man and would do things very differently. He's not your and Mike Franks' puppet.

Gibbs scoffed at that. "Please, Tony knows the rules, he wouldn't dream of ditching them. He wouldn't know how to lead without them and he ain't stupid. He knows they work and they get results."

"I'll say it again, Leroy Jethro Gibbs. You. Are. Wrong! He would never tell you this because in spite of what you think, he was probably the only one on your team who wasn't a narcissist. Apart from the fact he's able to feel empathy in bucket loads, if he truly was the narcissist you all thought him to be, why doesn't he go around bragging about the little boy he saved from the fire?

“Why doesn't he ever let you forget that he saved his two teammates from a car bomb or saved your and Maddie's lives?” She demanded. “Yet he never mentions them.”

“Nor would a narcissist turn down his own team in Spain and hang around to watch the six of the asshole who came back without bothering to tell him. Turn down a plumb promotion for the jerk who dumped his belongings on someone else's desk, demoted him and tossed his probie off the team just because he was worried about him. If he was the narcissist you accused him of being, he'd be on the first flight out of DC because he deserved the promotion and his own team."

What the hell was he supposed to do? Beg DiNozzo for his old job again. Like that would ever happen. Marines don't beg.

"And since I'm sure he didn't mention it, I will. Tony leads a really successful team in New York and does so with his own set of rules. Most of your rules, apart from always carry a knife, he tossed out the window. He's doing things his own way and he's never looked back."

No, he wouldn't do that? He always followed my rules to the T. He memorised them quicker than anyone. He wouldn't simply throw them all away – all the time... all the years I spent training him up in my methods.

Aware she had stabbed him in the guts, now she seemed intent on twisting the knife too. Leaning forward again, she confided softly, sweetly.

"And you know all these new ideas and innovations that have been pissing you off so badly? Most of them are Tony's – some like the campfires and the organising of the crime scene trucks are older ones from his time in charge of the MCRT. Some of the newer ones came about as he fought back from the cancer, like all the stress reduction stuff or things that he'd wanted to do for ages.

“For instance, the mentoring groups for female agents and gay, lesbian and transgender agents. Vance finally realised that his experience and his creative thinking were assets to the agency and started asking him to contribute."

"The team building crap and Tai Chi –that was DiNozzo?"

"Yep, and the more nutritious food choices in the vending machines and the decaf coffee after midnight. The better range of vegetarian and vegan options for staff in the cafeteria."

"He's the one that decaffeinated my coffee?"

"You bet your boots, and he developed the new anger management course. Said the old one was a joke."
"He decaffeinated my damned coffee and he's responsible for the goddamned anger management course? I'll kill him!"

Something suddenly occurred to him.

"Wait, it wasn't his idea to recruit that bastard of a Marine psychologist?"

"Oh, yeah, inspired in a Machiavellian way. And the meditation… the yoga, too. So, you see, he does things his way, he isn't your 2IC anymore, Gibbs. He's more than capable and ready to be his own person. To lead his team on his own terms and his team think he's great. They all have successful personal relationships and still manage to get the job done with a success rate that rivals the old DC major case response team."

"My way works."

"Yeah, maybe, but the price is too damned high, and he's proved that there's more than one way to skin a cat, and with his way, the benefits to the agency are both immediate and long term. It's a win-win scenario that Leon wants to roll out across all the field offices.

"That explains why he's Leon's golden-haired child all of a sudden." Vance had been whining for ages about the mess the New York office was in. "And letting him try all these hinky schemes out on the agency. Nuthin' wrong with the old ways."

"Yeah, you keep on telling yourself that, Gibbs, and that the Easter Bunny is real, too," she mocked him.

Frowning slightly, she thought about how Tony was still a bit wrong-footed by the director's dramatic change of attitude to him and the leeway he'd been given to try new things.

"Vance does love his closure rate and he pretty much gave him carte blanche in cleaning up the New York office. I just wish he'd been man enough to stand up to Ziva David instead of guilt-tripping Tony into telling her she wasn't welcome here anymore. I guess when he conspired with her to assassinate the person you all decided murdered Jackie and Ziva's father, the director left himself wide open for her to blackmail him."

"So, that's why she was at NCIS today?" Gibbs nodded to himself as the piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"Yep, she got an awesome slap down from Tony, and she wasn't happy. You know, she might just pay you a visit to put a flea in your ear," Emma warned with a touch of wickedness. She knew perfectly well that Ms. David was already in custody for trying to flee whilst on bail, but there was no reason why he should know that.

Who said nurses couldn't be a little bit Machiavellian? After all, not all enemas in hospital were strictly necessary. Asshole patients generally seemed to require more.

Gibbs looked thoroughly vexed at the thought.

Oh, damn it. Had enough uninvited guests already. Can't deal with Ziver, too. All I need now is Fornell to turn up, wanna braid his hair and talk about Diane. Maybe I should just head out to the cabin for what's left of this FUBAR weekend.

"Ziva's not a happy camper cuz he told you about them turning off the mic and her attacking him in Israel. Probably needs to chat," Emma revealed, enjoying her taunting immensely. She'd been waiting a long time to have her pound of flesh and she was going to savour it fully.
If she's smart she won't, or she'll end up on her ass! Don't hit women, but just might make an exception in Ziver's case. I still can't believe she'd do that after all my training.

He grunted, in reply.

"You know, I can't help but wonder, the way you let her back on the team after Tel Aviv, what does she have on you, Gibbs? Something like Leon, possibly? Did you go all Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver on a case and she's holding it over your head too?

*Okay, that movie reference I understand. Damn it, what had Tony told her about me? "DiNozzo say that?*

"No, he said very little about you - because I think you hurt him worst of all… though he told me pretty much the whole kit and caboodle about Ziva. I think mostly so I could understand their extremely internecine partnership and history and to reassure me she wasn't competition.

Emma cocked her head as she considered her words. “Told me enough about what happened to Eli David and Jackie Vance, so I understood how it ended. Ironic, though, when you think about it, you let Ziva who was indirectly responsible walk away scot free, even while allowing her to unleash a selfish and entitled vendetta. She killed a person who may well have been innocent of her father’s death."

Sensing his denial, she countered neatly.

“There wasn't a whole lot of proof that the guy was the killer, except he was next in line for the top job. Perhaps you should have looked more closely at the person who ended up filling the role that was supposed to be Bodnar’s. She got rid of the director and deputy director in one fell swoop and landed the much sought-after director's job. Seems like a damn good motive to me," Emma stated baldly.

Yeah, got a point there. Orli had a lot to gain from what went down and she must have had a pretty good idea what would happen when Ziva's father was killed. Like father like daughter – wind her up like one of those yappy mechanical dogs and she goes off snapping and snarling. Ziva was however, nothing like Eli when it came to Machiavellian plots – she was very predictable.

"What do you mean about letting her off scot free?"

"Well, yeah, Special Agent Gibbs. Maybe if you hadn't broken rule 10, you would have seen that Ziva was complicit in Mrs Vance and her father’s death. She knew her father killed that journalist and yet she remained silent about his crime. If she'd reported her suspicions to you or Vance immediately or arrested him when he admitted killing the journo, as she'd sworn an oath to do when she became a federal agent, Eli wouldn't have been sitting at Jackie's dinner table. Leon’s wife would still be alive.

“Now I’m a nurse, not a cop but in my book, she aided and abetted her father in getting away with murder. Just like she was an accessory after the fact when Rivkin killed a federal agent, she once again was an accessory to murder. In my book, that makes it partly her fault two children don't have their mother anymore. She’s also responsible for the fact that the family of the murdered journalist never got justice or closure, but SHE felt entitled to chase down her father’s killer to get ‘justice’. Hypocritical much?"

Emma looked at him as if he was a piece of detestable dogshit as she stated baldly. “NCIS let her get away with accessory to murder, which is still a pretty serious crime, especially for an agent or a cop. He might not have been the most upstanding individual, but the journalist didn't deserve to be killed
Okay, put like that it does sound bad, but it's complicated. Ziva had been like a daughter to me – the one I share the most in common with. We're both trained assassins. Perhaps, in hindsight, I should have been tougher on her. That mess over the death of the suspect in the elevator should have made me toss her out on her ass. Stupid!

But she just made me feel like I had my daughter back again. Damn it, is this what I get for refusing to grieve and let go of Shannon and Kelly – vulnerable to the manipulations of every wretched female that reminds me of my daughter?

"Rather ironic when you think about it. The director of a federal agency and his most experienced team leader let a favoured employee off the hook, not once, but twice, as an accessory for the death of two US citizens, one who was a federal agent. Yet her undoing was a simple break and enter and two counts of sexual assault. It was a mild-mannered embalmer who didn't care about her law enforcement connections, but was determined to hold her accountable for her actions…"

"Two counts of sexual assault?" Gibbs interrupted. "I thought she was charged with only one count."

"Methinks precious little Ziva has been reading too many chapters of 50 Shades of Grey." Seeing the confusion on his face Emma elaborated.

"She seems to fancy herself a dominatrix- thought it would be a good idea to try and seduce Tony this morning, right in front of me no less. Expected he'd lean on the right people and have the charges dropped. He told me he thought she'd attack him again like she did in Tel Aviv, which was why he wanted a witness, hence my presence.

"Never expected and I quote, 'his jewels to be jostled', although if I was honest, it looked to me like she gave them more than a mere tweak. Probably shouldn't be shocked by such a blatant sexual approach, after all she did climb into what she thought was his bed, buck-naked and tried to have sex with him."

Gibbs grimaced at the thought of Ziva manhandling DiNozzo's equipment. Some things are just sacred!

What the devil is 50 Shades of Grey- a hair dye? What the hell does it have with BDSM?

Unaware that Gibbs still was out of his depth over her mentioning the contemporary book title, she couldn't help pondering one final comparison.

"Like father like daughter when it comes to their selfishness and ruthlessness for anything or anyone that gets in their way. Anyway, thanks to Breena Palmer and Tony, Ms. David is about to learn that no one is above the law. No. One!"

On that note Emma Ingham took her leave – leaving him gobsmacked.

Long after she'd left him speechless, he swore he heard a sardonic chuckle that sounded like his beloved Shannon. Imagination or not, he had a feeling that his fiery redhead would have approved wholeheartedly of Nurse Emma Ingham. Slap to the cheek included.

But god damn it, his cheek still stung!

Maybe Emma was really a redhead.
In this context M & M is a Morbidity and Mortality Conference, not candy.

Disclosure time here. With the exception of Emma and Brad, I hate SWAK. If only I'd known that ordering someone not to die would have saved them, I could have saved my loved ones's lives. Bet doctors feel pretty damn pretty stupid too. All those years of study wasted!

And yes folks, I'm well aware that my view of Gibbs' actions flies in the face of much loved and well entrenched fanon where the fatherly leader patiently and gently nurses Tony back to pre-plague/pneumonia rude health in his own home after his release from the hospital. But honestly, if he had done that, do you really think he would have been so cavalier about sending Tony out in the pouring rain for hours when he was still recovering? Or been so nonchalant about his dip in the Potomac to save Gibbs’ ass? Actions speak louder than words.
They left DC on Sunday afternoon to head home to New York after promising to get together with Brad and Lara Pitt to see a show on Broadway before the wedding. Who'd have thought a proud Buckeye would ask a Wolverine to be his best man - really what was the world coming to?

Tony was driving this time and Emma was on her iPad, probably something wedding related he figured, glad that they were keeping it small. She was pretty laid-back about it all, praise the gods! He recalled the circus that a couple of his stepmothers had insisted upon when they'd married Senior. Tony remembered thinking at the time that they didn't look as if they were having a lot of fun but then neither did anyone else in the Long Island mansion.

It seemed enjoyment and fun were not the main aims of a society wedding. No -impressing and outdoing everyone else was the name of the game or die trying, his newest, soon-to-be-trophy-step mom had informed him witheringly, when he dared to express himself. Young Tony had thought at the time that she'd actually seemed to be trying to kill everyone else. Fortunately, Emma wasn't like that and he was actually looking forward to their wedding.

He couldn't wait to show her off to everyone, especially on the dance floor. Emma was an awesome dance partner.

As he drove, he was replaying the highlights of the trip and had to admit that it had been good to catch up with Brad and Lara again. He missed not seeing them regularly after sharing an apartment with them in Milan.

It was good to see Ducky, Jimmy and Breena too. It had been difficult cutting Jimmy and Ducky out of his life when he left DC, but he needed to make a clean break, at first. After Jimmy and Breena moved into his apartment when he decided to transfer to New York, he'd been in contact with Jimmy by phone and email, but it wasn't the same as being together.

Of course, being face to face with Ziva hadn't been exactly pleasurable but it had gotten Director Vance off his back and he'd made sure that he got something in return for this trip, aside from Raffy's much vaunted 'closure.’ Although he had to say, in his humble opinion that any so-called closure was considerably over-hyped since he now had to go back and testify at her trial. So, it was more like half shutting the door than closing it completely.

Still he knew what his psychologist would say – that this was old business, left over from when he let her get away with attacking him in Israel and look just what that had achieved. He knew she was right – that he should have put a stop to it to DC then. He hadn't done that and now it was time to pay the piper, before his insane former partner managed to get herself shot by someone. The way she was carrying on, it was only a matter of time.
His 'chat' with Gibbs had gone about as well as he thought it would – no actually it had gone better. He said what he needed to say to someone who'd been an important part of his life for well over a decade. He was shocked he'd been so forthcoming with Gibbs – let him have it with both barrels but then there'd been a lot of ammunition he held back over the twelve years they'd worked together. A lot of occasions he'd had to bite his tongue.

Oh, Tony was under no illusions. It wasn't like Ziva or Gibbs would listen to a thing he said. Both blessed or should that be cursed, with an unshakeable belief that they were right and if you disagreed with them that automatically made you wrong.

So, it wasn't surprising that they'd both discounted everything he said but it didn't matter. Raffy had said it wasn't about them, it was about him for once! He didn't need their approval anymore. He just needed to tell them some of the things he'd kept bottled up for too damned long.

His awesome therapist had helped him to see that he'd spent so long ensuring people didn't get close enough to know his weak spots by making everyone underestimate him that even he'd started underestimating himself, too.

It was one thing to downplay his weaknesses, since he'd learnt from childhood that it was how to survive but he did it at the cost of exploiting his strengths – other than hiding of course. Told often enough he was a clown and a jock, he's started believing it too, explaining in part why he let his old team treat him like crap all the time.

Until the cost benefit of hiding became too great and he'd been forced to break his cover and come out into the light of day.

Telling Gibbs and Ziva what he really thought about all the things he'd stayed silent about and taken one for the team for had been an experience. Cathartic! It had been like jumping out of a plane without a parachute, a little insane, totally exhilarating and ultimately futile. The threat of crashing into the earth at the end was uppermost in his mind since neither individual would give even a little, let alone admit that they might be wrong. They were the original immoveable force.

Accepting that, he pulled up short, landing on his feet so he didn't get splattered. And he’d walked away, head held high and no regrets. Then when he was sick and now when he’d regained his health and found his strengths. So, there was no point in him lamenting what is.

Still when it was all said and done, what mattered was getting it off his chest, not what Gibbs or Ziva did, said or thought. His psychologist Raffaella had been annoyingly on the money, he conceded grudgingly. He'd been holding onto a lot of emotions that weren't healthy. He felt much lighter now he let it all out.

And yes... the world hadn't stopped spinning because he showed weakness, not weakness he corrected, vulnerabilities and had the courage to express his needs and feelings. And looking across at the lovely Nurse Emma (who became all girly, giggly whenever he called her that) she'd found the closure she'd been seeking too.

She'd even got his journal back and was mighty proud of herself, even if he wasn't sure how he felt about having it back. It unsettled him, knowing that Gibbs had read it – it wasn't supposed to be read by anyone; journalling had always been his way to deal with hiding so much of himself, so he felt ambivalent about getting it back.

Someone else reading it was a bit like a thief entering your home and going through your underwear drawers and cupboards to discover you secrets. No Anthony, it was far worse because the only other thing in his apartment that had been personal was his piano – everything else was superficial
and irrelevant. They were all just parts of his cover.

But retrieving his journal had made Emma's day, so he wouldn't rain on her parade.

Emma suggested that he should talk to the others while they were still in DC, but he wasn't so sure it was such a good idea; for several reasons. He was pretty exhausted already – even the meetings with Ducky, Breena and Jimmy were a bit fraught and he was still learning to pace himself. Cancer had taught him he wasn't invincible, and he had to start listening to his body – all the meditation, relaxation exercises and yoga had taught him to be more in tune with himself.

He needed to go home. To hunker down and recharge for a bit. He didn't need to squeeze it all into one weekend and he wasn't even sure at this point he actually needed to talk to McGee or Abby, anyway. Time to go home and recharge AND re-evaluate.

Besides even if he did have a chat with McGee, this definitely wasn't the time or place – Ziva had screwed him over big time. He had to be hurting…all the times Tim and Ziva ganged up together to get one up on him or the time Tim helped her illegally track down Ilan Bodnar. Tim had pictured himself and Ziva as a team.

Sadly, the MIT genius had read too much into their partnership. It obviously never occurred to McGee that she wouldn’t hesitate to chuck him under the bus if it meant she emerged smelling like roses instead of shit. In Ziva’s world it was kill or be killed and she wasn’t about to sacrifice herself for a naïve American agent. Even if they were sleeping together, he doubted she would have put Tim’s welfare ahead of her own.

So yeah, Tim must be hurting, especially financially. Plus, Tony couldn’t help feeling a bit sorry for him since he seemed to have massively bad karma when it came to all things financial. Almost like there had to be some giant cosmic bullseye painted on his back since this wasn’t the first time he’d been taken to the cleaners. Who gets their identity stolen three times for heavens’ sake? And the last one was a girlfriend, who, despite her racking up $65,000 worth of credit card debt in his name, he professed to still have the hots for. Yeah... she didn’t see him coming!

Likewise, Ziva had always known she could manipulate the crap of Timothy McGee. She’d as good as told Gibbs so when she demanded to know what they were doing working all night when they were investigating Jenny Shepard. It was right before the lie detector tests that the CIA had tried to force the whole agency to take, just so they could catch the director out, to force her to back off her personal Great White Whale hunt for Benoit.

Good job with that by the way! The fact that Gibbs had capitulated and read Ziva in, spoke volumes to his acceptance of the fact that Tim would inevitably spill his guts to Ziva as soon as Gibbs walked out of the room. Great credentials for a fed! Not! So, it wasn’t exactly earth-shattering news to Tony that he’d been hustled by their former team mate.

After all, his girlfriend 'Bimby' had only been living in his apartment block for a few days and she’d had him by the dick. He’d admitted to Abby that he found her hot for screwing him over and didn’t want her charged. Seriously? Tony didn't want to imagine the intimate details of their bedroom frolics but then there was always more than just a tad of the dominatrix about Ziva and Abby when they messed with McWimpy.

And nope he wasn't going to go one step further down that particular path.

Focusing firmly on the question of timing and banishing his mental image of McGee writhing in ecstasy, bound and gagged as his 'Bimby' racked up more and more credit in his name as she cyber-shopped, Tony shook his head, trying to clear that sick little tableau from his consciousness.
Sometimes his imagination grossed out even himself when it ran away from him like that.

Getting back on track, even if McGee and he did ever talk, it wasn't a good time right now.

One of DiNozzo's rules for the care and feeding of probies was never kick a probie when he's down. He'd explained it to Ziva many years ago when she expressed shock that he'd praised Tim's skills to conduct what had amounted to an impossible search (more like looking for a needle in a haystack) to build up McGee's fragile Probie esteem. Tim has seriously pissed off the Boss in a wreckers' yard searching for a body and or a murder weapon for failing to report a 'so called' snuff video that he'd seen on the internet.

Gibbs had been definitely gunning for the probie's blood when it went viral and they got called out to the case and he'd found out about the video. McGee had gone around looking like a beaten puppy; since back then, Gibbs in a good mood on a good day scared the pants off the brand-new field agent, let alone Gibbs on a tear. Then Gibbs ordered that they leave him to search acres of wrecked cars without them as a way of punishing him.

The result had been one very dejected probationary field agent which was why Tony had offered him what encouragement he could. Tony had been incensed that Ziva expected him to put the boot in when he was already down, but he really shouldn’t have been. Particularly since Cate would have undoubtedly have thought the same thing. Despite her title as a psychological profiler, Cate had never understood that he teased when it helped to make McGee a better agent, to give him a much-needed spine since he was a jellyfish around alpha personalities. The fact that he was also fun to tease wasn't the point of the exercise – just a rather cool bonus.

As far as she'd been concerned, Tony had simply been abusing his position of power, not that it had stopped Cate joining in on the teasing plenty of times, mind you. Hypocritical much?

Nor would she or anyone else dream of calling Gibbs out on an abuse of power when he often joined in the teasing or played his own mind games on the probie, i.e. scaring the shit out McGee on a daily basis by stalking him and appearing unexpectedly when Tim had inserted his probie foot in his mouth. No one anyone ever dared to call him out because after all he was ‘Gibbs Almighty’ and it simply wasn’t done to accuse him of abusing his position of power.

Not if you wanted to live to tell the tale. He could do whatever the hell he wanted and that was fine because he was the Boss. There were different standards for Gibbs apparently.

Anyway, while Tim wasn't a new green probie any more and hadn't been for a long time, the philosophy of not kicking him when he was down still held true, even now as far as Tony was concerned. So... bottom line – no, Tony wasn’t going to talk with McGee because he couldn’t talk to him without addressing a few home truths.

And Abby… well back in the early days when he first started on Gibbs team, she'd treated him like an insignificant amoeba. In time they'd become friends… good friends he’d always thought. At least that's what she'd told him often enough but over the years there'd been betrayals. Nothing big like turning off a microphone or turning a gun on your partner after knocking them down while they were injured.

Still there were a lot of little stuff that just kept accumulating and he'd kept silent about it… and well they hadn't really been close by the time he left.

Not sure that he felt strongly enough about the remnants of their friendship now to have anything left to say to her. The last straw had been her need to manipulate him into apologising to his father after he'd thrown him out over Senior screwing Tony’s nympho neighbour in Tony's bed. Just because
Abby Sciuto would do anything to still have her dad, didn't give her the right to interfere in his relationship, especially since their paternal relationships were as different as night and day. Besides he would never presume to interfere in her relationships if the shoe was on the other foot.

Somehow, Abby always seemed to turn things around; it was all about her even when it was actually about you. Plus, Senior played her just like he played every other female he'd ever hit on. He was just glad she didn't have any serious money – because she would be his stepmom by now or more likely, an ex-stepmom and flat broke.

They say a fool and his money are easily parted and for Senior, it would be a simple as taking candy from a baby to con her into 'investing' in one of his once-in-a-lifetime deals. While Sciuto was one of the smartest people he’d ever encountered, she also had the emotional intelligence of a gnat.

As he reached the outer city limits and viewed the New York City lights, Tony knew that it was time to turn his thoughts back to the present and prepare for work tomorrow. He was looking forward to being back with his team again and if he was honest, he liked being in charge. It was certainly sweeter the second time around but then his team were a different kettle of fish. He liked helping to shape them, help them grow, as individuals, investigators, and agents.

Yep, his life was good and soon enough his life would be even better.

For carrying out Vance’s dirty work for him this weekend, Tony had managed to cadge a second week of leave out of Leon for his honeymoon, along with a promise that the director would hit SecNav up for a small favour as well. Okay, maybe not so small but he'd gotten down and dirty for them with Ms David –he'd earned it.

Looking at Emma busy on her iPad he grinned, knowing that she was going love his surprise. He could hardly wait to see her face when he told her. Yeah it was all good!

I Shouldn't Have To

Dr Travers reread the excerpts of some of his anger management counselling transcripts for the last couple of sessions, as was his habit to make sure he didn’t miss anything crucial. Most people would assert that when dealing with a functional mute like Gibbs that it wasn’t possible to overlook what he said since he mainly communicated via grunts rather than actual words.

Yet because he was so damned parsimonious with words, it became critical to analyse each and every one, also paying close attention to all the former Marine’s other modes of communication too, including grunts, huffs and the like. Non-verbal cues were a whole textbook unto themselves and Stu decided that filming their sessions might be a good idea, so he could analyse them later. He sighed and started reading the last few sessions, skipping over the preliminary greetings.

Not that Jethro was big on observing the social niceties anyway.

~o0o~

Employer: Naval Criminal Investigative Services (NCIS)

Employee: Special Agent L. Jethro Gibbs Senior Supervisory Agent


Anger Counselling Session No. 6

(Stu fast forwarded through the preliminary greetings and reflection on previous session)
"… Let’s talk about your unresolved grief, Gibbs…"

"Damn it Travers, hell's wrong with you head shrinky people. Why can't ya mind your own business? Told you…my business…not yours. Get your head outta your ass. Not grieving…I'm just fine."

"Really? So why so hostile…dare I say angry?"

"Don't want to talk 'bout it. Ya talk everything to death. I'm good. Just in a bad mood."

"Is that so Gunny? How long has that bad mood lasted…the last twenty odd years?"

"Sort of smartass comment I'd have head slapped DiNozzo into the next state for."

"Hmm. DiNozzo again. You do realise you mention him a lot, especially since last weekend when you two talked. And at the risk of banging my head against a brick wall, I'll point out what you know damned well. Head slapping is not an acceptable form of interaction or discipline between agents in a Federal agency. It's against DoD policies and is a form of assault. It's also a pretty juvenile form of interpersonal interaction, not to mention an ineffective way to manage personnel."

"Bite me, Stu!"

"As to your earlier deflection – your inability to find resolution of your feelings becomes agency business Gibbs, when unresolved or perhaps more precisely in your case, pathological grief not only affects your ability to function appropriately socially but impedes your capacity to perform your job. Since you have two jobs – special agent and team lead - it then becomes my business."

"I function just fine."

"Yep, a string of failed marriages, failed relationships, alienated, no social life, few social supports, cutting yourself off from the world, hobbies include drinking bourbon and burning boats, chronic insomnia and a workaholic. I can totally see you are coping. You are the poster child for closure. Why don't you write a self help book to pass on all ya wisdom?"

[Annoyed grunting can be heard on tape.]

"To an actuary, you are a catastrophic health related crisis or an accident just waiting to happen and it's a wonder you haven't stroked out or had a massive coronary already. You tick all the major risk factor boxes – some of them twice and just 'cause you exercise and are physically fit doesn't negate all the risk factors. Grief is one of the most traumatic events that we can face, and pathological grief just ups the ante."

"Not that I don't have a social life. I prefer to be alone."

"Same diff and the effects are still the same from an actuarial point of view. And it's your preference for no social interactions because then there's no one to place expectations on you or require emotional reciprocity. Inability to form new relationships or maintain established ones is a neon sign that you haven't moved on from your loss."

"I'm happy on my own."

"I doubt that. You're used to it, you prefer being alone because you don't have to make an effort to be social, but I don't believe you're happy, Gibbs."
"Define happy."

"What you felt when you held your daughter is your arms when she was born or made love to your wife. When you taught your daughter to ride a bike or read her a story. When you learnt you and Shannon were having a baby."

"You bastard!" [Stu reading this knew he'd come close to the edge with that observation.]

"You saying those things didn't make you happy, Gunny?"

"I'm saying that they're gone."

"Yes, you are right, but it doesn't mean that you have to punish yourself for not dying too. Doesn't mean that you can't be happy again. There are all sorts of different ways to be happy. Resolving grief is accepting that happiness doesn't mean being unfaithful to them or that you didn't love them enough. It doesn't mean that you shouldn't be happy now."

"Tried. Didn't work."

"No Gibbs, you tried to replace Shannon, so you didn't have to deal with the loss. That's why it didn't work out. You did it ass backwards. You're terrified to deal with your feelings, so now you make sure to keep everyone well away from your personal life, but that ain't gonna fly when you're working. Trying to avoid getting hurt again – still makes you vulnerable. You might as well paint a target on your back."

"Bullshit"

"You weren't targeted by a terrorist who used the female members of your team to get at you? You weren't targeted by his father and his sister too, in order to get into the agency so she could pass intel to Mossad by becoming your surrogate daughter? You didn't accidentally kill your daughter's best friend because you refused to let her case be worked by agents who weren't emotionally involved in her disappearance, causing you to go UA? My bad!"

"Didn't kill her. She's alive and safe now."

"Yeah, I know that Gunny, but that's no thanks to you, is it? She was dead when your 2IC dragged her out of the submerged car after you drove off into the Potomac. All because you didn't want them delving into your personal life and because it was more important that it be you who saved her than it was for her to be safe. She was your redemption."

[Growling and spitting on the tape along with noising breathing.]

"And you're vulnerable because you over-identify every time you get a case with a wife and or child in peril or distressed. You keep hoping that if you save them, it will take away the guilt that you feel because you weren't there to save your own family, but it just doesn't work that way. You try to solve it even faster the next time, thinking that it might make a difference. You drive everyone on the team to exhaustion and well beyond, every single time you get this type of case, but it just feeds the guilt monster because you don't acknowledge it."

"It's my job."

"Yet you know as well as anyone that exhaustion leads to errors being made. Everyone's judgements are flawed, even yours – like deciding to drive a car off a pier into the river and still you continue to chase your ass every time you get handed one of these cases. So yeah, vulnerabilities that affect the
job are a direct result of your lack of resolution of feelings of grief!"

"Vulnerable because your pathological grief makes you a walking security risk for anyone wanting to compromise an investigation or a case. Organised crime and terrorists only need plant a woman with a child close to you, suggest her life is in danger and you won't do your job."

"Crap!"

"Layla Shakarji, Gunny? She could so easily have been a spy, but you didn't even bother to check. You let her enter the country illegally, and before you say anything, consider two cases not so dissimilar to hers that you worked, Gibbs. The one where North Korean operatives pretended to be from South Korea, married US Marines and entered the country to spy on us and set up a sleeper cell. Or what about the SEAL, a Lieutenant Arnett who ended up married to a terrorist from the Middle East who drugged him and tried to make him kill himself by jumping off that building and when it didn't work – she shot him?"

"You sayin if I mourned my girls I could have stopped those things from happening?"

"Don't be a dumbass, Gibbs. Of course not. But I was pointing out that we are supposed to learn from our experiences, where in this case wives /girlfriends /lovers looked to be the genuine deal and fooled their loving husbands. They were well integrated into the family unit and yet weren't what they pretended to and that experience should have made you more cautious, suspicious even. You should have done your job when Layla and Amira Shakarji entered the country illegally, but you looked the other way because of Mike Franks losing his son (a grieving father) and a sob story she was in danger. You have a massive blind spot!

"You ignored one of your own rules and it wasn't even as if Mike hadn't lied to you before. If she'd been a spy, the results could have been tragic. I'm saying that it would be different if you worked through your grief instead of shoving it into a bottle of booze in the basement and swallowing it down every night. People close to you, like Mike Franks and Ziva David wouldn't have been able to manipulate you every time they had a personal agenda requiring them to break the law or get away with murder. That's what I'm saying, Gunny."

"Go to Hell, you bastard."

~o0o~

Stu took a sip of his iced tea and a bite of his tuna fish sandwich before turning to the session from just two days ago. Gibbs no longer stormed out of their sessions but there were times when the psychologist judged that he was close. Yet he was still coming, and Stu counted that as a victory in itself. Turning his attention to the next session he sipped his tea a second time, finishing up the sandwich before wiping his hands on a moist towelette and picking up the page.

Excerpt from session No. 7:

"...okay last time we were talking about how anger is a crutch you employ to avoid facing up to your pain."

"I'm not scared, Travers."

"Sure. You keep telling yourself that, Gibbs. We can talk about denial next week. I'll pencil it in."

"Bastard!"
"Coming from the man who prides himself that the second B in Gibbs is for bastard I'll take that as a compliment, Gunny.

"Wasn’t intended as such!"

[Rustling sounds on the tape as Stu hands Jethro a piece of paper.]

"What's this crap?"

"It's a list of identifiers for people employed in a hostile work environment to help them recognize that they have a toxic boss. Read it. Out of twenty identifiers I reckon well over half could apply to you and it's one of the reasons why you find yourself in the anger management program."

[Snort on tape.] "Care to be specific Travers?"

"You want me to put up or shut up? I can do that Gunny.

"Let's see Number Two - arrogant and haughty in behaviour to others. Tick Number Three on the list - demands unquestioning obedience from you or their subordinates. I'd say both of those are accurate, wouldn’t you? Or how about Number Four – have a strong sense of entitlement – expecting special treatment at all times and in all things?"

[Pause that lasts well over a minute]

"You expect people to cop your crap, Gunny yet you aren't willing to make allowances for other people. 'My way or the highway’ ring any bells? [Hostile grunt can be heard] ‘And then we come to Number Five - feels entitled or empowered to bend rules or procedures, circumvent safety, or break laws. I don't think anyone could argue that one applies to you, Gibbs.”

“Yeah, so what?”

"Want more? There's plenty, so why don't I just pick some of the highlights. How 'bout Number Eighteen - doesn't seem to feel guilty for errors or wrongdoing; does not apologize for actions. Again, I think that one's a slam dunk. Then there's Number Nineteen - preoccupied with success or power to the point of alienating others. Success I'd define in this context as being driven to successfully close a case. [Another pause] ‘Or maybe obsessed with closing the case is probably more accurate. And re power, you break out in hives if you don't have the lead in a case with other teams – no my bad. You don’t break out in hives - you bully, you threaten and usurp control.”

“Can’t see a problem here. It works for me!”

"Of course, you don’t. Okay let's see – just the Cliffs Note version since we don't have all day! Number Thirteen's a goody - treats others with contempt or publicly devalues others as being inferior or lacking. Your team is publicly dressed down by your good self all the time and your behaviour and attitudes re LEOs and agents in other agencies, in other teams is infamous!

“Moving right along...”

“Okay, there's this one - the word "I" dominates conversations. This person is oblivious to the frequency of self-references he or she uses. Another fair cop, I'd say!”

“I don’t see a problem.”

“Exactly... and that’s the real problem, isn’t it and why you’ve found yourself chewing the fat with me. Here's another one - has ignored biological, physical, emotional, and/or financial needs of
underlings. As I said, you are case driven and not exactly ‘Mr Sensitive’ when it comes to making sure your people achieve a work/life balance. Not even sure you know what it is or is you care. Hell Gunny, half the time you tell them they can't even eat til they solve the case. They're lucky you let them go to the head.”

“'It's their freakin job. Don’t like it, find a new job!'”

You would say that Gibbs, and let's round it off with this one. Is hypersensitive to how he or she is seen or perceived by others and appears to always contrive a performance to ensure being in the spotlight. I know a lot of people would say you don’t care what people think, but you and I know that’s a pile of horse hockey. You're always working so hard to seem omnipotent to your team, never showing vulnerability. Plus, you don't share the spotlight or credit even if it is a team effort.

"'Hey, so what if I do? Why's it a bad thing, keeps them afraid of me? And by the way, Travis, that was only ten things and there are twenty items on the list. When I learnt math wasn't well over half, Doc.'"

"Oh, don’t worry Gibbs, there are more that I didn't list. And as for why it's a bad thing? It's a bad thing because people don't want to work in a hostile environment, Gunny. They aren't there to bolster your fragile ego – it's unhealthy and against DoD guidelines and therefore both you and the agency are open to a law suit. It is also an inefficient and ineffective use of resources. People deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.”

"'The people we serve deserve to be protected and know that we’ll solve their cases. Far from ineffective, I have the highest solve rate of any team in the agency. It works!'"

"Perhaps on paper but, Gunny as a Marine you damn well know that your personnel are a resource that you manage carefully. You don't ignore their needs, you don't belittle them or make a higher rank compete with a subordinate. You don't ignore the chain of command or you run into deep shit.

“You don't play favourites, you don't ream out your 2IC in front of his subordinates, you give praise when due and no, praise accompanied by insults doesn't count. A good leader recognises that they're only as good as the people who stand behind them in the trenches, ready, willing and able to follow them out onto the field of battle. A good leader shares the credit and shoulders the blame. Otherwise they find that they lose valuable team players."

"'My team is fine. My team, my rules.'"

"Come on, you talked about how DiNozzo tore strips off you for a whole bunch of those transgressions I’ve mentioned. It cost you the agent you had groomed for years to replace you. And Stan Burley who was your previous SFA - he left your team because you gave the guy an ulcer and he literally couldn't stomach you anymore."

"'Stan was weak. He couldn't hack it.'"

"He hacked it for five years. Seems like he was far from weak. And like DiNozzo, he showed you incredible loyalty – again, that does not suggest weakness to me. Actually, when you're in a hostile workplace, knowing when to leave, like on the battlefield and knowing when to call an orderly retreat before you incur too many casualties? It's a sign of intelligence and strength…”

[Huffing heard on the tape.] "No cojones!"

"At least Burley left before it progressed to stomach cancer."
"Oh what! So now ya gonna blame me for DiNozzo getting cancer- is that it?"

"No but in actuarial circles there is a strong correlation between stress, toxic environments/workplaces and illness. Plus, we know that with cancer, stress decreases the effectiveness of the immune system and one of its crucial roles is to be able to recognise rogue cells in the body and destroy them before they start to divide. Why in Hell do you think DoD cares about all of this stuff so much. Their number crunchers wet themselves when they talk about bosses like you…

A phone call from a colleague about a referral of a patient interrupted Stu’s review of Gibbs session. After it was terminated Travis signed as he reviewed the transcripts of their session. Gibbs was unapologetic about his leadership style, refusing to admit that his team was toxic due to his ridiculous approach to managing his people.

The smug bastard seemed to be almost proud of his abusiveness and the fact that he’d been able to have so much power over his agents – like that was something admirable. As if the people they were fighting to protect would expect them to forgo food and rest, ignore partners and relationships.

YET… Gibbs had discussed the explosive confrontations he’d had with Special Agent DiNozzo and his fiancée when both had taken him to task for many of the same issues. And clearly at the time of the confrontation he’d been penitent up to a point and yes - highly affronted by being held accountable as well.

Special Agent Gibbs was an infuriatingly tough nut to crack!

Chapter End Notes

End Notes: If anyone is curious to see if their boss qualifies as toxic and is interested in the list referenced above, it was compiled by a former profiler and FBI veteran of 25 years, Joe Navarro MA and is taken from his book Dangerous Personalities. Co-written with Toni Sciarra Poynter (Rodale)

Thanks Faldo for your grammatical assist.
The Glass Half Full

Chapter Summary

Tony’s plan to help Abby act her age is not well received by the Goth lab rat and Stu Travers wonders about consequences of Gibbs’ charismatic personality on those around him.

Realising that he only had another fifteen minutes or less before his next patient arrived, Dr Stu Travis made a quick trip to the head to relieve himself. Sitting back down at his desk he turned to the last session he’d had with Leroy Jethro Gibbs. He was due to write a progress report for the NCIS Director on his progress.

"...let's talk about cults. You had much to do with cults, Gunny?"

"Had a few cases, over the years. Sometimes families of service personnel have been caught up with em."

"Why do you believe that happened?"

"Lonely, isolated. No strong family or social supports. Resentful of their partner serving, the long absences, deployments and the crappy pay. Frequent moves for the family and having to be both mother and father and raise the kids, added up to a whole lot of unhappy.

“Cults took advantage, played on their need to belong somewhere. Sucked 'em in at the start by being kind and caring then once they were hooked, kicked their knees out from under them. Made them think they were useless pile of crap... wouldn't make it on alone.

“My experience...but I reckon they all work pretty much the same way.”

"Interesting analysis. Remind you of anyone?"

[Short bark of laughter on the tape.] "You got to be kidding, Travers. You not suggesting that I'm at high risk of being brainwashed into joining a cult?"

[Wry chuckle on tape.] "Well hardly, Gunny."[Silence] "Not unless you happened to find one that consisted of an abused or distressed wife with small children as the cult leader. Then I might be alarmed about you being at risk. But no, I don't lose sleep over the prospect."

[Growl evident on tape.] "Anyone ever tell you you're a prize prick, Doc?"

"Yeah. You, Gunny, quite a few times each session!" [More amused chuckling by Travis and cursing by Gibbs]

“See Jethro, this is why they asked me to do this job. Most mental health professionals would be pretty offended to be referred to as a prick. While I don’t wear it as a badge of honour like you do with your double B for bastard, I take it as a sign of progress that you're learning to express you rage in a more socially appropriate manner. Not that most people would agree with me, but at least you're not yelling. Plus, you've stopped physically threatening me with your foot inserted in a piece of my
anatomy, so I view it as progress.”

[Deprecating laugh] “I'm just a glass half full kinda guy, I guess.”

[Snort] "Sounds like something DiNozzo would say."

"Perhaps that's why you're still here…”

*Travis thought it was significant that Gibbs didn’t deny it.*

"So, who's it supposed to remind me of, Stu?"

"Well elements of what you described - lonely, isolated, no strong family ties or social supports, frequent moves, strong need to fit in and belong. Lotta resentment about their family, which as you rightly pointed out, adds up to a whole lot of unhappy."

[Humph on the tape.] "DiNozzo's not gonna get sucked into a cult."

"I agree. Not now. Not after he spent over ten years in the Cult of Leroy Jethro Gibbs and finally managing to extricate himself, he's not."

[Hissing on the tape.] "You're so full of shit, Travers."

[Chuckling on tape.] "Hardly. Let's look at the facts. You set out to lure him onto YOUR team, told him he was good and taught him Rule 5 is 'you don't waste good' and then once you had him here you treated him like shit, made him think he was crap. Kicked his knees out from under him so he wouldn't leave you.

“And it surely can't be coincidence that the people you recruit share at least one commonality – they've all have troubled relationships with their significant male role model or father. Even Dr Mallard was a child from a failed marriage and raised by a strong maternal figure, and there was an absence of a strong male role model, which drew him into your orbit even if he is less influenced by your authoritarian qualities.

“As for your agents, either they have a troubled father/child bond like McGee or DiNozzo or like Ms Scuito and the former director Jenny Shepard, their fathers were dead, and they haven't fully come to terms with that loss."

"So... explain Cate Todd? Her father was alive, and she had a good relationship with her family."

"Ah yes, on the surface she was what statisticians refer to as an aberration/anomaly or a deviation, but she was one of five children – the baby of the family. Todd chose to pursue a career in psychological profiling in addition to her protection role in the Secret Service, suggesting there may be an extremely strong sibling rivalry and need to out-perform her eldest sister- who as a first born is customarily a very high achiever. More than likely she chose profiling in an attempt to outshine her sister to earn her father's attention and or approval, since her sister was already an established, successful psychologist.

"But let's talk about how you recruited her. You waited to offer her a job until after she had failed quite spectacularly. Not only was she forced to admit to fraternization with a colleague, which was strictly forbidden in her job. Her profiling skills and reputation had also suffered a very severe blow when she failed to identify the terrorist posing as a journalist. It resulted in an attempt on the president's life that came far too close for comfort."
“Luckily for the POTUS and Todd - you took the bastard out or she would never have worked in law enforcement again. As it was she was tainted. The point is, that her esteem had to have been rock bottom, then you come along with a job just after she hands in her resignation. Earned you a lot of credit in the loyalty stakes, Gunny.”

[Silence on the tape except for heavy breathing.]

"Good job, Gunny. Nice deep breaths."

[Coaching continued until Gibbs breathing quietened and Travers resumed.]

"You used an identical modus operandi on DiNozzo. You didn't offer him a job or express interest in hiring him during the case but waited until he learnt of his partner's betrayal and hence he decides to walk away from his dream job as a detective.

“Then you swept in and drag him back to DC when he was feeling alienated and undoubtedly incredibly foolish for not seeing his partner’s corruption sooner. You already had carried out his background check – knew that he valued loyalty and honesty above everything else and had issues with trust. Knew that offering him a job had to add up to him giving you a dog like devotion but then later on, when you treated him like dirt – he had to secretly always be wondering if it was pity, not ability that made you offer him a job.”

[No verbal response on the tape but more spluttering and hissing.]

"Okay… you catch your breath and we can visit this issue more fully at a later time when you've had time to process this. Why don't we talk about…"

Stu was jolted by his intercom buzzing and his receptionist Lucy informing him that his next appointment had arrived five minutes early. Sighing he indicated that he wasn't ready and to wait five minutes before sending them through. Packing away the transcripts in Gibbs' file, he locked it in his filing cabinet and he began to prepare for his next client.

I Shouldn't Have To

Abby Sciuto was not a happy Goth at the moment. Tony had come home, and he hadn't come to see her. What's more he was supposed to fix up their shattered family – everything had fallen apart once he left.

Instead when he returned to DC, he made things worse. Ziva was supposed yo have gone totally batshit crazy. Abby had heard some really outrageous scuttlebutt about her gallivanting around Dulles International, karate chopping LEOs buck naked before being attacked by a psychotic Dirty Harry type cop with a hockey stick.

As if!

The assassin ninja (who could kill with a paperclip) would hardly have fallen prey to a garden variety cop. She was Mossad’s finest and Kidon trained to boot!

BUT, Abby reminded herself, Ziva had run out on Timmy and that wasn't nice after everything he'd done for her.

It would never have happened before the team got split up for the second time because of the weasel-esque Richard Parsons and then Ziva being bratty and refusing to come back home to the team again.

Poor Timmy! He had Ziva’s six, putting up her bail when others turned their backs on her and now
he could lose it all because she absconded.

Of course, Timmy was trying to argue that by reporting her absconding immediately and her being detained because of him, he shouldn't lose his surety. His lawyer had been somewhat hopeful they might catch a break – especially if Ziva absolved him of blame.

Unfortunately, instead of having McGee’s back, she'd insulted the judge’s mother and been charged with contempt of court - all because he refused to grant her bail after she’d tried to flee the country.

And Gibbs was in a terrible mood. Tony had gone to see him and made him mad too.

He'd also told him that he wouldn't come home and take over the team if her Silver Fox retired. Abby was so mad with Tony – he was ruining everything!

He could have gotten the charges dropped against Ziva seeing he used to be a cop but no... he was too precious. It was no coincidence that after talking to him Ziva jumped bail and Timmy was facing financial ruin.

Plus, Gibbs hadn't brought her any Caf-Pows for days, all because he was in such a terrible temper at Tony. He was acting like such a brat!

Wandering into her office from the lab she decided to deal with her mail to take her mind off her woes. There were at least a half a dozen Fairy Amy fan mail letters that she threw in the trash in disgust. They were never ending it seemed, and they made her even more short tempered. Just when she was starting to get over that stupid telemovie crap and stop feeling the urge to slap Timmy silly, she'd get more fan mail and it would send her over the edge again.

Spying an official looking envelope, she noted it bore the address of Bethesda Naval Hospital. Squealing with excitement, Abby ripped it open, hoping they wanted her to present a paper at a medical or scientific conference - she loved conferences. Scanning the contents, she flung it down, screeching at the top of her lungs.

Jimmy Palmer, who’d walked into her lab to sign over a piece of histopathology from an autopsy, came running into her office to see what was wrong. He found her jumping up and down on a letter that he retrieved surreptitiously while she was momentary distracted.

He was intensely curious (in a David Attenborough ethnological kind of way) to see what sparked her latest childish tantrum. Honestly, she seemed to grow more childish every day!

He read it quickly as he waved the evidence in her face to get her to sign for it since it was critical that they maintain chain of evidence. Once that was taken care of, Jimmy broached the subject of the letter.

"Oh, wow Abbs, this is so cool isn't it?"

Abby scowled at him. "What's cool about it, Jimmy?"

"Asking you if you'd like to play Fairy Amy for the Clown Doctors is a huge honour. Brad's on the board supporting their work in the DC, Virginia and Maryland districts hospitals. You've heard of the work of Patch Adams, laughter therapists and Clown Doctors. You know what they say about laughter?"

"Best form of medicine, yada, yada, yada!" Abby conceded grumpily. "But Timmy turned uber cool, edgy, Goth-lab-chick Amy into a freakin sideshow clown. This just proves it! No one ever asked me to join clown doctors before McGee turned me into a freak."
She moaned in self-pity, picking up her cloth figured McGee doll off her desk. It was dressed in a cream coloured polo-neck sweater, slacks and a tweed sports coat complete with real leather elbows patches and a pipe in his pocket. The attention to detail recreating Thom E. Gemcity was impressive and he wondered where the doll had come from.

He watched as the Goth plunged a hat pin into his mid section, twisting it viciously and Palmer figured it was as good a displacement for her anger as anything. Better than her punching Tim’s chest or his bicep – two of her favourite targets. Speaking from painful experience, Sciuto really packed one hell of a punch.

Jimmy winced at her enthusiasm to inflict pain, even if it was by proxy but reasoned that she seemed to have pretty good control of her anger today. When she was really mad she always by- passed the gut region of her Timmy doll and went straight to the head or crotch. Freakily, it always seemed to coincide with sharp stabbing pains in a corresponding region of McGee’s anatomy, but Jimmy maintained it was purely a coincidence or all in the agent's head - no pun intended.

Ducky on the other hand, wasn't so sure, claiming to have seen many strange things that defied scientific explanation or logic in his travels.

"No Abby," Jimmy insisted forcefully. "You didn't read it properly. Brad is saying that there are a lot of kids that are scared of clowns. Adults too." Seeing her sceptical expression, he hastened to assure her.

"No really, it a very common phobia called coulrophobia. And after seeing Fairy Amy and how much the kids loved her, they decided to start a new sub-section that would run alongside the clowns but be fairy doctors and they want you to be Head Fairy. You could give fairy hugs and Bert could be your familiar or um that's witches isn't it? My bad!" Palmer rambled, before getting back on track.

“But you get the idea,” he enthused. “You could blow bubbles and well I'm not all that clued up on fairies and what they get up to but I'm sure you are. I think you'd be awesome Abby, you love volunteering."

"Yeah but they want Fairy Amy and Timmy made her blonde and ethereal, not dark and ballsy."

"Er Abbs, I don't think that was McGee. It was the producers of the movie." Jimmy tried to reason with her even though he wasn't cool with what Tim had done with his character either. He was pretty sure that a deviant, nympho autopsy attendant having intercourse with cadavers was far more offensive and damaging from any normal person’s frame of reference that a Goth scientist morphed into a fairy.

What was done was done and Abby was a broken record. If she was that upset about it, she needed to consult a defamation lawyer asap!

"Same diff, Jimmy. If he hadn't used us all without permission and sold us off to them like a bunch of cheap whores, again without permission then my identity wouldn't have gotten high-jacked." She whined petulantly.

"Well you can always be a raven-haired fairy. You don't have to bleach your hair or anything drastic."

"But I do…not bleach my hair – I dye it black. I have done since my teens." Abby babbled.

"You're kidding? I had no idea, Abbs. I've never seen a sigh of regrowth." Jimmy observed, who working in autopsy and married to an embalmer knew more about such matters than the average
male.

Jimmy privately concluded that it might explain a lot about her behaviour – the Goth was frying her neurons with toxic hair dyes.

"You're sweet, Gremlin," Abby cooed sweetly. "That's because I retouch the roots every week. I must say though, that lately I've become allergic to more and more dyes. Returning to my own colour might not be so bad."

Are you kidding, Abbs? You'd make a stunning blonde Head Fairy and you'd still be ballsy. I also bet you'd be much more popular than the freaky old clowns."

He looked around to make sure Gibbs or McGee hadn't wandered in before continuing. "The big feet were what used to freak me out as a kid. I'd heard someone say that you could tell a guy's penis size by how big his feet were. Never could look at clowns again after that without freaking out and having nightmares," he confided, turning pink.

Shrugging bashfully, he smiled. "Anyway, I guess I'd better get back before Dr Mallard sends out a search party."

Waving to her, he left her deep in thought. Abby loved charity work, but she especially loved kids and giving people hugs. It was an irresistible combination and she was rather partial to wings, the more diaphanous the better.

Big wings wouldn't give anyone a fairy phobia surely and everyone needed a make-over now and then.

Maybe she'd think seriously about it – she needed a new focus.

I Shouldn't Have To

Dr Stu Travers was updating his case notes on Special Agent Gibbs. The senior supervisory agent was still in a tussle with the Agency over their edict that he retired from being a field agent. Things had reached a stalemate with markers called in by Gibbs to former comrades that reached high up on the Hill. There had seemed to be a resolution in sight when Jethro had agreed to step down on the proviso Anthony DiNozzo return to the MCRT to replace him but DiNozzo had refused to play ball, choosing to stay in New York.

Not only had his 2IC refused, he'd come storming back to refuse Gibbs' long planned ascension plan in person and while there, he'd let Gibbs have it with both barrels. Stu was still dealing with the fallout from that confrontation!

Unfortunately, Jethro promptly rescinded his offer to retire and renewed his determination not to be removed as team lead of the MCRT.

Frankly it had surprised the psychologist just how Gibbs had managed to dig in and avoid being summarily removed as the SSA of the Major Case Response Team. The guy was 57 years old after all, so there should not be this battle to make him step down. He was past mandatory retirement age...well past it.

Yet he seemed able to call in favours which had even Vance, who was his boss and SecNav weirdly reluctant to pull rank.

The real question that fascinated and worried at Travers consciousness was how Gibbs had so much influence when, a) he was a relatively lowly SSA, outranked by many grades in terms of
management. That included agent-in-charge, associate and assistant directors yet the SSA had stood in as acting director once when Shepard was still at the helm and overseas attending a conference. And b) was such a bastard to people, so how on earth did he manage to engender so much blind loyalty in people?

Ever since he took on the gig with Gibbs, these rather substantial questions niggled at him, driving him mad and he spent hours studying this enigma, this contradiction in terms. He poured over Jethro’s jacket, his Performance Evals from superiors, peers and his team, combining all the data. Eventually a picture had begun to emerge - a somewhat dark one.

He’d remembered reading a book a while ago that a colleague had sent him, written by a former FBI agent entitled Dangerous People. Navarro was an expert in Body Language. Since Stu was a former Marine his interests didn’t lie in new-age, touchy feely therapies – preferring practical, measurable, observable psychological theories and it was that no-nonsense personality and approach which helped him to develop a rapport with people like Gibbs where other psychologists failed to get out of the gate with him.

Anyway, something he read in the myriad of data on his client had triggered a passage he’d read in this book about dangerous people and he gone back and looked it up. There was no doubt in his mind that Gibbs was dangerous but not just in the usual Marine trained-to-kill or because he was a trained sniper or worked in Black Ops kind of way. It was in his ability to influence people as in charismatic, guru or cult leader type of ’dangerous person.’

Navarro’s own findings about cults and their leaders seemed to bear out his own gut feelings, which wasn't necessarily comforting. It was also how he'd found the other list identifying attributes of toxic bosses which he'd brought up in one of their sessions. Basically, he’d been laying the prep work for the more serious conversation he wanted to have with Gibbs about cults.

It hadn't gone down well when he'd suggested that Gibbs own little cult existed within the agency. He'd back off…for now but hopefully he'd left him with enough for him to think about. On an allied matter, Gibbs was endeavouring to use his anger management skills more – at least in their sessions, which was certainly pleasing. At least now when he mentioned Shannon and Kelly, Jethro didn't storm out or attack him – well not physically and fortunately Stu had a thick skin. It was still a highly emotional subject, but he'd at least began talking of them. Granted his threshold of being able tolerate reliving stories about them was fairly short-lived but still, it was progress.

Pathological grief of such magnitude and extended duration didn't get resolved in a few weeks.

Travers kept returning to a list of 50 traits that the 25-year veteran FBI agent, Joe Navarro had collated from research data combined with his professional experiences with dangerous cult leaders. Without getting into deep analysis of the fifty traits, Stu recognised at a quick glance, many that Gibbs also possessed. Some, not surprisingly were also common to the list for toxic bosses too so it wasn't that surprising that he would score high on those ones but scoring high on the extra thirty as well was a worry. It disturbed him that the number of traits he'd cursorily identified could potentially be even higher as he'd erred on the side of caution.

Still the fact remained that Gibbs had quite a bit in common with leaders of some of the world's most dangerous cults who were able to persuade followers, many of them highly intelligent individuals to do things that they'd probably never thought possible. It explained though how he seemed to work for a federal agency that had a clear command structure and yet was able do pretty much what he wanted, despite having only a moderate level of authority in the organisation.

Stu looked at the list and considered the association between Gibbs, NCIS team leader and a cult which in his opinion seemed a little too close for comfort. He had to wonder how the command
structure had let it all get so out of hand. That's where these small federal agencies fell through the cracks. Their record on accountability wasn't flash – too many becoming enclaves of power for charismatic and ambition individuals.

He perused the list again that Navarro compiled which in the FBI agent’s expert opinion shouted ‘caution, get away, run, or if possible avoid all together’. Stu was trying to come to terms with how a former decorated fellow Marine and an experienced federal agent had been able to seize so much influence.

He took a photocopy of the traits so he could scribble his thoughts and impressions across it, sat back down and picked up his pen. He decided to categorise each trait with a N for no, a Y for yes, he believed Gibbs possessed a particular trait or U for unsure and tally up the results in the end.

He already knew that based on Navarro’s criteria, Jethro certainly fit the profile for a toxic boss, but he was concerned...that he was dealing with a pathological cult leader. He wasn’t sure if he was up for that challenge.

He started to read and take notes:

- **He has a grandiose idea of who he is and what he can achieve. Y**

  *J is so sure of himself and his own infallibility that only in the last few years did he create a rule that states that ‘sometimes you’re wrong.’ That kinda say it all.*

- **Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, or brilliance. N**

  *In his black and white viewpoint, you're either with him or an obstacle to be removed. Does not tolerate being questioned or forced to justify himself.*

- **Demands blind unquestioned obedience. Y**

  *Tough one. Despite acting like he doesn't care what people think of him, he seems to thrive on Dr Scuito's hero worship. Reports were that Agent DiNozzo also exhibited a similar attitude when first joining the team and J revelled in it. Enjoys being thought of as a bastard and making people scared of him. So probably!*  

- **Requires excessive admiration from followers and outsiders. U**

  *Doesn't think that rules (other than his own) apply to him. Expects his team to simply accept him no matter how bad his own behaviour yet didn't offer the same tolerance for others’ foibles.*

- **Has a sense of entitlement- expects to be treated as special all the time. Y**

  *Eagerly waiting for the same tolerance for others’ foibles.*

- **Is exploitotive of others by asking for their money or that of relatives putting others at financial risk. N**

- **Is arrogant and haughty in his behavior or attitude.Y**

  *Not just yes, HELL YES!*  

- **Has an exaggerated sense of power (entitlement) that allows him to bend rules and break laws.Y**

  *Is the Pope Catholic? This one was on the toxic bosses list and it was an emphatic check on that list*
• Takes sexual advantage of members of his sect or cult. N

Definitely not! However he does control sexual behaviour to the degree of demanding abstinence between team members that’s not in keeping with agency policy. Calls it Rule 12. Absolutely OTT; controlling.

• Sex is a requirement with adults and sub adults as part of a ritual or rite. N

• Is hypersensitive to how he is seen or perceived by others. U

Puts a lot of time into appearing to be all knowing or psychic. Equally is afraid to show vulnerability other than anger to his team - not understanding that anger is also a weakness, not a strength.

• Publicly devalues others as being inferior, incapable, or not worthy. Y

Famous for dressing down and humiliating subordinates and other law enforcement professionals in public. Also, the master of cutting and acerbic comments to his team but rarely gives praise to balance it out.

• Makes members confess their sins or faults publicly subjecting them to ridicule or humiliation while revealing exploitable weaknesses of the penitent. Y

His team seem convinced of his omnipotence which frequently leads to confessions or he will demand answers in public that ultimately leads to humiliation, acts of contrition and embarrassing acts of submission. Revealed to the team a private conversation he had with his 2IC about a painful childhood incident – goal appeared to bee to make 2IC more vulnerable to underlings’ ridicule and undermine his authority.

• Has ignored the needs of others, including: biological, physical, emotional, and financial needs. Y

Doesn’t permit them to eat on occasion (illegal) while taking very frequent coffee breaks himself. Often, they are not permitted to go home and get adequate rest for days on end during active cases.

• Is frequently boastful of accomplishments. N

• Needs to be the center of attention and does things to distract others to ensure that he or she is being noticed by arriving late, using exotic clothing, overdramatic speech, or by making theatrical entrances. Y

Loves a dramatic entrance, especially sneaking up on people and scaring the crap out of them and uses overdramatic speech. "Ya think!" Which is also a passive aggressive put down. Loves to steal people's thunder when they are reporting facts in investigations to one up them.

• Has insisted in always having the best of anything (house, car, jewellery, clothes) even when others are relegated to lesser facilities, amenities, or clothing. N

• Doesn't seem to listen well to needs of others, communication is usually one-way in the form of dictates. Y

Definitely not the sort people seek out for a heart to heart. Gets impatient with touchy-feely info sharing. The exception would be Abigail Sciuto who he seemed to be willing to listen to her
emotional woes and boyfriend problems. General consensus is she is a surrogate daughter for Kelly

- Haughtiness, grandiosity, and the need to be controlling is part of his personality. Y

Do pizza and beer go together? Jethro had it in spades. Especially when dealing with higher ups or LEOS/other alphabets.

- Behaves as though people are objects to be used, manipulated or exploited for personal gain. U

Could be argued he sees his team as a means to an end i.e. to solve the case. Shows a distinct lack of care for the physical and emotional needs of his team.

- When criticized he tends to lash out not just with anger but with rage. Y

His tantrums in the bull pen are legend, as was his former SFA for getting in the way to protect the junior team members from his rages.

- Anyone who criticizes or questions him is called an "enemy." Y

Example - Richard Parsons who was doing a job and raising some legitimate concerns. Plus, on occasion his superiors when they dare to pull rank. I also had found various references to a bitter relationship between him and a SSA Lara Macy who seems to have done nothing to earn such hatred.

- Refers to non-members or non-believers in him as "the enemy." U

Subject was certainly scathing about other agencies and PDs during their sessions...

~o0o~

Stu’s intercom rang and laying down his pen, he flicked the switch. Julia wouldn’t bother him unless it was important.

“Problem?”

“Troy Bailey is on the line; he says he has a gun and he’s going to kill himself. “

Yep, Stu conceded...that was definitely a problem.

“Put him on, Julia. And then I need you to call 911. Did he tell you his location?”

“No but it sounds like he might be near a highway – I could hear traffic I think.”

“Okay, well pass that on.” Picking up his phone, he took a deep breath and said as calmly as he could, “Troy, this is Stu Travis. I hear you’re having a bad day.”

As many times as Travis dealt with patients who were suicidal, each and every time Stu felt like a newbie psychologist fumbling around in the dark. After all it was someone in crisis whose life was on the line. It would be wrong not to feel the overwhelming burden of responsibility that went with his job.

Settling into his ergonomically designed office chair, trying to get comfortable for what could be a long conversation, he tried to project a sense of calm over the phone line.
Tony was ecstatic to be back with his own team in New York. His weekend jaunt to DC had been tumultuous to say the least. Yes, it had been nice to catch up with Jimmy and Breena and he’d had a chance to talk to Ducky – albeit while he was collecting evidence but overall it had been really stressful. That wasn’t to say that he wasn’t glad to finally have had the chance to tell Ziva and Gibbs all of the emotions and thoughts he swallowed down over the years. It had felt damned good, but it was also emotionally exhausting to have to rehash all the past again and he was glad to be back home with the agents who have become his team.

Unfortunately, with the agency being so small, news and gossip spread like wildfire. Which meant in the case of the former NCIS agent (who’d returned to Israel before returning to the United States) ending up on sexual assault charges, everyone was agog with her latest exploits. Fleeing or attempting to flee the country while she was on bail and being charged with a second count sexual assault of one of their own was huge news and obviously everyone wanted to know what had happened. Details of her capture at the airport were so outrageous that everyone immediately assumed they had to be a work of fiction.

He got that it was intensely interesting to the other agents since the former Mossad agent had built up quite the reputation in their small agency. Still it was not something Tony really wanted to discuss. For all her hubris, outrageously entitled behaviour, not to mention her abusive crap he’d endured over the years, Tony still had empathy for the ‘child’ who’d been used as a weaponised tool by her sperm donor.

Seriously, Eli and Senior were probably line ball when it came to Worst Father of the Decade Awards.

Luckily, Lisle had his back. His senior field agent had obviously already coached the junior agents not to ask him about the fiasco with Ziva David. He must remember to buy her some expensive Belgium chocolates to thank her. He’d really lucked out with his team, he was grateful to have three top notch people on his squad. Still Lisle couldn’t prevent all the staring and whispers for the rest of the staff, so Tony was relieved when they were finally called out on a case.

Although, not for long. It turned out to be a nasty one.

They were called out to investigate a sexual assault at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The victim was obviously emotionally and psychologically traumatised but physically only suffered minor bruising and lacerations. During the investigation, several other women were attacked to, and they suspected that the same person was responsible. As the investigation proceeded several other victims decided to come forward to report similar attacks although the assaults weren’t as severe.

As they created a timeline of attacks, it became clear that the perp was escalating with each attack. Evidently, each assault which he carried out without being caught, was emboldening him to go for more high-risk targets and locations. He was also decreasing the time frame between each attack and each assault was becoming increasingly violent. Tony was concerned that it was just a matter of time before the perpetrator ended up killing a victim.

It was abundantly clear that they needed to solve the case before that happened. A complication was that among their pool of suspects were international students from the Staff Naval College, making it more difficult to question witnesses or persons of interest without getting people’s backs up.

It was a difficult case and time sensitive. Tony ended up requesting assistance from one of the other field teams in questioning the students and staff. He knew that Gibbs wouldn’t have done that. He’d
have forced his agents to work around the clock to get the interviews completed rather than let another team assist but Tony was more concerned with finding the predator than who got the credit.

Bottom line – he was afraid they were running out of time before a victim ended up dead.
A Star is Born

Chapter Summary

McGee’s popularity with his team mates is about to tank, along with his bank balance. Meanwhile Stu deals with a suicidal patient and finishes his ad hoc appraisal of Gibb’s personality in between dealing with a crisis.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: More examination of cults and traits displayed by cult leaders.

Larry Cousins and Mary Gilchrist were studying the ratings for the last six months. They were in charge of developing new projects for the company and the pair painstakingly dissected and analysed the results of the past seasons ratings on the Hallmark stations, which including the Hallmark Movie channel. It was upon their say-so that new projects got green-lighted, placed on probationary status and monitored so closely that no one on the project could blow their nose without approval or they rejected it out of hand with no further avenue of appeal. To that end, when reaching decisions, the two execs liked to go back and review all the ratings data, not just their own.

It was one hell of a lot number crunching, but it was helpful nonetheless before making decisions about projects for the upcoming season. It helped to identify current trends - what had worked and what hadn't and sometimes they'd go back to review data collected from focus groups. They looked at how well the quantitative and qualitative data managed to reflect, and more importantly, predict what shows and movies succeeded, and which ones tanked.

Both individuals were deliberately mild mannered and rather harmless looking in appearance – some might say average middle management types, but their reach and power was absolute. And there was nothing harmless and benign about this pair of number crunchers other than their mien. Come contract negotiation time or season renewal Larry and Mary were as merciless as Great White sharks. Neither saw anything wrong whatsoever in being implacably ruthless, even if they worked for a corporation that liked to exploit cloying sentimentality and champion totally unrealistic portrayals of human inter-relationships.

Just because the saps would pay good money to watch this mind-numbing twaddle, didn't mean a highly successful corporation would employ people who ascribed to such claptrap. If they did, they'd go broke and then the pair would be out of a job. There was no way they were about to let that happen if they could help it, thus their cutthroat attitude to doing their job.

"There's this one, Larry," Gilchrist muttered, highlighting one of the new proposals and it was one she was looking at favourable, championing it since she thought it had real legs. "This one rated well, was popular with the focus groups."

"I agree that we should make a pilot episode, Gilly. Need to come up with a new name though. Deep Six: The Adventures of L.J. Tibbs is too unwieldy for a TV show plus market research was rather
mixed on it. Let's call it 'Family Tibbs' for the moment and see if we can brainstorm something better if we pick up the pilot."

Mary nodded. "Okay, that's fine. I have a couple of issues before we give the go ahead, what about you?"

Larry nodded. "Yep. They who must be obeyed have 'requested' we write in an additional character, a chaplain or a minister that also solve crime."

Mary groaned loud and long. "Oh no! Not the God Squad, Larry. Please - say it aint so!"

"Look, it keeps certain investors happy and you can't deny that there is a market out there for it. Maybe Agent McGregor could be a lay preacher instead of a techno genius – they already have the lab fairy to do that stuff, so he's sort of redundant." Cousins suggested reasonably. "Or he could be the computer nerd and the chaplain, and we forget about him going out in the field. There's three others who are field agents already."

Mary shrugged. "Point taken and then we don't have to write in a new character and we can spend more on production. Okay good call. Just a couple more issues then we're good to go.” The exec. Decided to pick her battles, and this wasn’t one of them.

Looking at her notes she continued, “We got a couple of complaints of obscene language via email from pissed off wowsers for using the term 'piss test' so TPTB have decreed it will henceforth be called a 'pee test.' I know,” she said holding up her hands to forestall a heated rant. "It's not what it's called but so what? They pay our salary, Larry."

"Fine. Whatever!" Larry knew it wasn't worth digging his heels in over a petty minor detail. Not like real military types would watch this crapfest anyway.

"Great, that was simple." Gilchrist muttered since Larry could get a real bee in his bonnet at times, especially since he'd served in the infantry.

"What else?"

"Yeah the Pimmy Jalmer character. There's some confusion about him." Mary frowned.

"Oh yeah I agree, Gilly. Do you think we can just cut him out? He doesn't seem like he does much apart from cart bodies and make inappropriate dead people jokes.” Cousins argued, forever a number cruncher who had his eye on the bottom line.

Gilchrist shook her head exasperatedly. "Oh, c'mon Larry. He's the Steve Erkel of the show – clumsy – socially awkward and always putting his foot in it. And look how popular that character turned out to be with audiences. He was massive – no he WAS the show! Without him it's doubtful that the show would have lasted a season.

“No,” She averred, “We aren't gonna cut him – I actually think we should make him and his character bigger – bring in some physical comedy even. Have him trip over stuff – pair him with Tibbs. They'll be the perfect foil for each other."

Cousins remembering how some of the most successful television characters started out as minor characters or guest stars like Steve Erkel or The Fonz, he nodded grudgingly. "Okay fine, sounds like a plan, Mare. But for heaven's sake, can we do something about that name? Who in their right mind would come up with that god-awful name – Pimmy Jalmer? Sounds like an item of clothing!"

"He's Polynesian," Mary explained helpfully.
"Well I don't care. The Polynesian demographic aren't going to pay the bills, are they? Anglicise it. I do not want an accidental star character named Pimmy. It's dorky!"

"What should we call him then?"

Larry thought hard. "Probably should keep it close to the original because of the telemovie. With luck, no one will notice apart from the Polynesians – let's go with Jimmy – Jimmy Palmer. Can't imagine what Gemcity was thinking when he wrote that character."

"Maybe it was a family name like his god father or something, Larry."

"Could be Gilly. Could be!" Cousins agreed, already moving on to the next issue. “Okay…all done? Then give them the go-ahead to make the pilot but with these changes we discussed.”

A faraway look in his eyes, he observed buoyantly, “With a little bit of luck from the ratings fairies, we might just have a smash hit on our hands. I'm thinking a cross between The Waltons and Seventh Heaven with a little bit of a crime whodunit thrown in on the side. But I'm not gonna commit to a whole season til after we see the pilot."

Mary Gilchrist nodded her head with satisfaction. She just knew that the pilot was only the beginning. Her gut was telling her that this thing had legs. Let Larry be cautious – it was the nature of the beast, but she wouldn't be a bit surprised if it was an instant and long running world-wide hit.

~o0o~

Stu was waiting on word from the operating theatre about his patient, Troy who’d been threatening suicide. He'd been on the phone with the young Marine private who had been battling crippling flashbacks from his post traumatic stress disorder, culminating in his suicide attempt today. Stu had been on the phone with the distressed Marine trying to talk him down for roughly an hour before he’d managed to convince the young man to put down his weapon. After a tense sixty minutes or so, Bailey had agreed to lay down the gun.

Travis' assistant, Louise had been correct, Troy been driving on the freeway when he had a flashback about an ambush while he’d been on patrol with his platoon in Afghanistan. After he’d almost crashed his car, the private had reached the conclusion that it was all too hard and would be easier for everyone if he was dead. Fortunately, the psychologist had extracted a promise, Marine to Marine that if he ever did contemplate taking his own life, he would call Stu first. After talking to him Travis had been able to point out that Troy’s parents would be totally destroyed if the young man pulled the trigger and killed himself.

It would seem that luck was not on Private Bailey’s side because a stolen car had careened into his car, parked on the side of the freeway as it attempted to evade the police who were chasing the teenage joy rider. The impact had flung Troy through the windscreen, ending up with serious internal injuries and concussion. Right now, Stu was seated in the doctors’ lounge of Bethesda Hospital, waiting to hear if Troy was going to pull through.

Pulling a face at the bitter coffee he’d been drinking, he decided to return to the exercise that he’d been conducting before he’d received the emergency call from Private Bailey as a way of passing the time. Waiting for news of a patient in surgery always seemed to slow down time – but thinking about something else often helped.

Pulling out his list which he’d automatically shoved into his briefcase as he left his office when he realised he would be heading to the hospital, Stu pulled his ball point pen from his shirt pocket and settled down at the table. He looked at the next trait often seen in dangerous cult leaders and
continued to note down his impressions of Special Agent Gibbs, trying to ignore his worries about Private Bailey’s fate.

- **Acts imperious at times, not wishing to know what others think or desire. Y**

  G often exhibits a poor view of the opinions of others. Definitely displays an imperious demeanour in our sessions and on the job.

- **Believes himself to be omnipotent. U**

  That would require time and structured interviews to establish although Rule 51 is cause for concern. Most individuals wouldn’t have to create a rule to acknowledge it and if they did it would not be so far down the list. Certainly, he gives people the impression he sees himself thusly, which frankly is a bit scary.

- **Has "magical" answers or solutions to problems. Y**

  The whole all seeing, all knowing persona he promotes which is obviously horse hockey. Or that bullshit that he’s psychic and turns up in the lab when Abby’s got results.

  The team certainly does believe that he knows whenever they dare to criticise him or do something he wouldn’t approve of – like Santa Claus is supposed to know who’s naughty or nice, for the love of God.

  Then there’s that whole Gibbs’ Gut crappola. I’d guarantee a proper statistic analysis would show his famous gut is wrong at least as often as it’s right. In other words that his intuition or gut feelings weren’t any more accurate than flipping a coin or chance.

- **Is superficially charming. Y**

  When it achieves G’s goals he can definitely be. Has female workers libido's racing.

  N.B. I seriously doubt he’d get away with half of the shit he does if he didn’t have movie star good looks. Attractive people can get away with a lot of stuff, average and unattractive people get castigated or thrown in jail!

- **Habitually puts down others as inferior and only he is superior. Y**

  Rarely gives praise to team members except for Abby who gets praise/affection frequently. His way of fuelling envy and discord???

  Almost never praised his former SFA and only then with a derogatory remark to negate any positive ones. According to other agents he ridiculed him in front of the team constantly.

  Scathing of the FBI – genuinely believes he is better than them.

- **Has a certain coldness or aloofness about him that makes others worry about who this person really is and or whether they really know him. Y**

  New recruits are terrified of G and he keeps even his closest colleagues at arms-length to preserve the mystique he is special/different/super-human.

- **Is deeply offended when there are perceived signs of boredom, being ignored or of being slighted. Y**
G definitely hates to be ignored. Very apparent in our sessions.

- Treats others with contempt and arrogance. Y

Infamous within the other Alphabet agents for displaying both traits.

Much disliked amongst his peers and definite schadenfreude over his recent troubles by many people in military and law enforcement circles.

- Is constantly assessing for those who are a threat or those who revere him. Y

G possesses an extremely healthy dose of paranoia (pathological???) and seems to have a preference to employing sycophants or people who are weak.

So that he can dominate them?

- The word "I" dominates his conversations. He is oblivious to how often he references himself. Y

Lots of 'I' and 'my' pronouns during our sessions. My team- my rules,

Stu looked at his watch, wondering how much longer it was going to be before he received news on his patient. After stretching and taking a couple of laps around the doctor’s lounge he was preparing to sit down again when he received a text message from the theatre sister.

Dr Travers, Pt Bailey is being prepped 2 go 2 recovery ward, next 5 mins.

He sighed, hoping that he’d get to talk to Troy’s surgeon soon and find out about his prognosis. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too long now. Settling down he decided to try to finish off his task and settled down in his seat, refocusing his attention on his most infuriating client.

Picking up his pen he looked at the next trait on the list of Joe Navarro’s common traits of dangerous cult leaders, determined to complete what he’d started. He admitted that he was becoming increasingly disturbed at how many traits could possibly apply to Gibbs.

- Hates to be embarrassed or fail publicly - when he does he acts out with rage. Y

G doesn’t like to fail - well who does? Yes, but he deals with it by tantrum throwing, pouting or flies into terrible rages.

- Doesn’t seem to feel guilty for anything he has done wrong nor does he apologize for his actions. Y

G has Rule # 6: never apologise - says it's a sign of weakness. Could be argued that it inevitably follows that it results into not needing to evaluate his actions. One notable exception is his guilt over his wife and daughter’s death - which ironically wasn’t his fault.

A prosaic example of not feeling guilty is that despite it being against the law to strike another individual – not to mention against Dept of Defence rules and regulations but G is totally unapologetic about his head slaps. Isn’t only example.

- Believes he possesses the answers and solutions to world problems. U

Doubtful although I can’t rule it out. Would need more time to investigate?
- Believes himself to be a deity or a chosen representative of a deity. N

Definitely not! Well unless G considers a Gunny a deity!

- Rigid, unbending, or insensitive describes how this person thinks. Y

OH YEAH! From our sessions so far, I’d say all three apply to G.

- Tries to control others in what they do, read, view, or think. U

G has his 50 plus rules that he’s created, and they are certainly designed to try to control what the team does.

Possible that he attempts to control what they think – that head slap is every ready to correct bad thinking – thinking. Anything which doesn’t conform to Gibbs’ opinions.

- Has isolated members of his sect from contact with family or outside world. Y

Hmm...not physically but psychologically? I’d say YES!!!

No one on G’s team has achieved a work life balance let-alone a successful long-term interpersonal relationship because of the hours he expects his team to put in on cases. This means they are almost totally dependent on each other for social support and interaction within the team.

This is not healthy nor desirable especially since G also plays his agents off against each other – creating a highly toxic work environment. Also refuses to let them date each other – effectively meaning that they are likely to have short lived emotionally empty affairs – not long-term relationships.

- Monitors and or restricts contact with family or outsiders. Y

G doesn’t allow his agents to make personal calls at work - which is really unreasonable considering the outrageous amount of overtime hours he demands they work. They don’t have time to make personal calls at home so basically it amounts to the same thing preventing them from having a normal social life with their friends/family.

- Works the least but demands the most. Y

Perception of those around him (not his team of course) is that G mostly delegates, collates data from other team members, networks with his FBI contacts and goes to get lots of cups of coffee for himself but does not bother bring any coffee back for the rest of the team.

I question that he does in fact even delegate since one of his rules is that his team anticipate his needs and wishes - so the team do most of their own delegating.

- Has stated that he is "destined for greatness" or that he will be "martyred." N

G doesn’t fish for compliments – not exactly. Seems to abhor them, but he gets off on insults by others - practically preens. Plus he wears his reputation as a bastard – as a badge of honour. Does seem to enjoy his agents idolising him despite how badly he may treat them.

- Uses enforcers or sycophants to insure compliance from members or believers. Y
Abby definitely fit the role as sycophant and hero worshiper. There are rumours that he used his agents as enforcers to scare interns and other agents/LEOs into fearing him.

- Sees self as "unstoppable" perhaps has even said so. Y

His reputation is almost one of a super-hero. G frequently goes off on his own to deal with dangerous situations that require backup. For example, when he killed his daughter’s best friend trying to save her, or when his former CO was having a psychotic break so clearly sees himself as invulnerable.

- Conceals background or family which would disclose how plain or ordinary he is. Y

Colleagues didn’t know G had a wife and child. Claimed his father was dead was false.

G tried to prevent contact between team and ex-wives when they came into contact during cases.

- Doesn't think there is anything wrong with himself – in fact sees himself as perfection or "blessed." Y

G certainly expressed in our sessions that others have the problem not him i.e. Burley was weak because he got an ulcer and left him. DiNozzo couldn’t hack it.

Has taken away the freedom to leave, to travel, to pursue life, and liberty of followers. U

Definitely not physically but I would argue again that he probably has done so psychologically.

- Most teams wouldn’t remain together for eight years unchanged (until Ziva David’s departure)
- Even longer for the two other agents - DiNozzo and McGee
- Nor do whole teams turn down promotions or accept demotions (like DiNozzo had done twice – SSA and Agent Afloat before going back to SFA)

Change and growth is a healthy natural occurrence, especially in a team. Even children leave home and move on but not Gibbs’ team. Stan Burley was vilified for leaving... even though he requested a transfer for stress and medical reasons.

Hmm... on further consideration, he discourages agents taking vacations or days off. Makes it extremely difficult for them to pursue hobbies or interests. Impossible to have a normal home life.

Has isolated the group physically (moved to a remote area) so as to not be observed. N

Although????? G does appropriate the office lift to conduct business that he doesn’t want to be observed by anyone who might interfere with his plans (or he doesn’t trust).

He has effectively isolated the group psychologically. Worrying!!!!

~o0o~

Almost one hour later, Private Bailey’s surgeon finally entered the doctor’s lounge, grabbing a cup of coffee and sinking down at the table where Stu had just finished his self-appointed task. Smiling wanly, he quirked an eyebrow at the list.

“Am I interrupting?”

Stu laid down his pen. “No. Actually I was just finishing up. Your timing is impeccable. How are
you doing, Bob?”

Dr Robert Jensen groaned. “My feet hurt, and my wife has me on a no-sugar health kick. Apart from that I’m just peachy, he replied. “What about you, Stu?”

Stu smirked. “My latest lady-friend won’t let us eat gluten but there is still gluten free beer so I’m going along with her for now. So how is Bailey?” he asked Jensen anxiously.

“That guy needs to stop walking under ladders, Bob joked. “Seriously, that was a long dicey surgery. He lost a kidney and I had to repair a laceration in his liver, nearly lost him once. And you know about the concussion.”

Travis sighed. “Yeah. Thanks for taking care of him.”

“No problem. I hope he is okay. PTSD is a bastard.”

They chatted out their patient’s prognosis and treatment for several minutes before Dr Jensen finished up his sugarless coffee, rinsed out his mug haphazardly and took his leave with a, “Stay in touch, Stu.”

The psychologist decided to wait until Private Bailey was moved to ICU before heading up to see him. It would probably be tomorrow before he could assess him properly, but he wanted to touch base with Troy and let him know he was there for him.

Turning back to the list, he contemplated it sombrely, rereading all the various annotations he’d made on it. They consisted of his own impressions and his observations during his professional dealings with Gibbs, plus information gathered by talking to other agents and co-workers. There was some additional data gleaned from perusing psych evaluations and mission reports. And finally, comments by a variety of HR trainers over the years when Jethro even bothered to attend mandatory training courses, which wasn’t too often he conceded.

Stu wasn’t sure if some of the traits identified by Navarro applied or not but then it wasn’t an in-depth psychological assessment. Nor was it a valid assessment tool.

Still, even taken at face value the psychologist found it a very worrying enumeration nonetheless.

Most average individuals reading through that list would probably be able to tick a handful of the 50 traits as applying to themselves, since no one is perfect, and everyone has personality flaws. Stu sure as hell had plenty of flaws and he could even check four or five off Navarro’s list too.

Still, to have been able to check off well over 30 of the traits with just a cursorily run through was freakin scary. Combined that with another nine or ten traits that were line ball and that made Stu extremely nervous.

Then when you combined the identified traits with the similarity between Gibbs’ methods of recruiting his team and those employed by cults, it was definitely of concern to the mental health professional. But it did go some way to explaining how an individual with narcissistic tendencies could persuade so many people to turn a blind eye to his often-unacceptable behaviour or make excuses for it.

It wasn't surprising to the psychologist that Gunny was resisting giving up his little fiefdom. What was startling to Stu though was that Richard Parsons from DoD had him in his sights for a raft of cases where he bent, straddled the line, if not out and out broke the law. He was already at retirement age for field work and that should have been that for his career since Parsons had pretty irrefutable evidence.
Gibbs hadn't even bother to defend himself against the charges - which was telling.

That was until someone obviously influential tossed him a very major get out of jail free card in return for going on a Black Ops mission. One which from what Stu could discover from scuttlebutt, ended up being pretty much a furphy, anyways.

Yet in typical cult-like fashion - his team had been the patsies, handing in their resignations. Taking responsibility for the various crimes and misdemeanours he’d been accused of, to save their leader's career (that should have been over- due to his age, anyway). Although two agents had subsequently returned to the agency (and Gibb’s team) the whole issue made little sense to Travis. Parsons suddenly dropped his strident disapproval of Gibbs and how his team operated because... why?

It amounted to pretty much giving Gibbs carte blanche to do whatever the fuck he wanted…until one of his team had bailed.

Then things changed. Well actually one disciple had already left or more accurately stayed gone. Former Mossad operative Ziva David had failed to return after handing in her resignation. Now Gibbs had only one of his followers from that time left on his team.

Looking at what had precipitated DiNozzo's long overdue departure, Stu also recognised yet another fairly common tactic used in cults to create paranoia and uncertainty right at the top. In the military or an organisation that operated stringently within a chain of command, repaying your second in charge (who only months before had fallen on his sword to save your six) by appointing someone subordinate to DiNozzo to lead in his absence should never occur. For damned good reasons!

It was utterly unacceptable behaviour for a team leader, yet no one had said or done a thing to stop it. Not even to condemn him when he had done it. Gibbs, it seemed, really was untouchable.

Yet as a tactic used by a cult leader to cut his successor back down to size, to create doubt and uncertainty about the chain of command and who would succeed him, it was also extremely effective. So damnably predictable, as most cult leaders were incredibly paranoid, believing that their subordinates were constantly plotting for a chance to take over. By calling into question the order of succession, it kept everyone off balance and caused fighting in the ranks. To a paranoid leader, it all added up to less time their rivals would spend plotting to overthrow them.

As for the offer to retire, now rescinded, the psychologist was unsure if it had been a genuine one or not. Gibbs was such a Machiavellian type - a brilliant strategist, it may well have been a very clever bluff. He might have already been positive that DiNozzo wouldn't return to D.C. under any circumstances. He had after all worked with the man for longer than all his ex-wives had been married to him put together. Gibbs seemed to have very quickly sussed out his strengths and weaknesses.

He doubted that Jethro had predicted the ass kicking that DiNozzo delivered him though – he seemed genuinely shocked. Not to mention the slap down delivered by Anthony DiNozzo’s fiancé. Gibbs was still smarting – as well he should be!

The second alternative was that a part of Gibbs psyche acknowledged he was out of control and wanted to be stopped because he was incapable of stopping himself. From that perspective, the offer to retire might have been a genuine one. Stu was hoping that this second scenario was true and while it seemed improbable, Stu saw little indications that gave him hope. After all, an out of control child revels in running amok on a lot of levels but what they really want, deep, deep down is for someone to come along, to ride their ass, impose clear unambiguous boundaries and not allow them to be breeched no matter what.
Perhaps if Stu was right, it would also explain why Gibbs' dangerous, charismatic ability to seize control had been kept firmly under control and why he thrived in the Corps. It had a most rigid command structure and was made up of a lot of powerful and equally charismatic types. More importantly, if he even put a toe over the line he got his butt well and truly kicked for it. He wouldn't be able to break wind without someone riding his ass, which was exactly what was lacking at NCIS.

What made Travers that 'glass half full kinda guy' was that he took some comfort in the fact that Gibbs was still coming to their sessions, albeit it kicking and screaming. At least he’d made some progress in talking about his dead wife and daughter and in trying to control his pathological rage. Well he did in their anger management sessions.

Stu really hoped that there was a side of Gibbs that was tired of trampling over top of everyone and everything simply because he could. That Jethro on some level was reaching out for help.

Otherwise, Stu wasn't sure how NCIS was going to dynamite Gibbs out of the field unless someone had the cojones to stand up to him and tell him no. Tell him no and actually mean it!

If not, at this rate Leroy Jethro Gibbs be still out in the field as senior supervisory agent, bagging and tagging evidence, interviewing witnesses and photographing crime scenes using a Zimmer frame.

Chapter End Notes

The information about dangerous cult leaders was also taken from Joe Navarro's book Dangerous Personalities. which I cited in a previous chapter.
Tony was at his desk working late almost a week after his return from DC. He’d been waiting somewhat impatiently for the director to get back to him about his request to SecNav re Emma's surprise. He was hoping to pull this off – it would make his fiancée happy and making her happy made him happy too. *Okay so that sounded totally sappy, but it was the truth, nevertheless.*

Besides, Emma had her heart set on a wedding in an intimate chapel by the sea and it was pretty much the only thing she’d been set upon. When she hadn't been able to find one that fit the bill in New York or that wasn't booked out, she hadn't thrown an enormous tantrum, pouted, or going all bridzilla on him. Nope, she'd simply shrugged and started looking at alternative venues with an aplomb that probably stemmed from the fact that in her profession, she knew that sweating the small stuff was a waste of time and energy.

She told Tony that her dream wedding wasn't in a seaside chapel, it was getting married to the man she loved and who she'd thought she was going to lose in Milan. Tony knew he didn't deserve her – for a lot of reasons but since she refused to let him push her away, he'd finally accepted it and embraced her gratefully and graciously.

So, it grieved him that something as simple as getting married in an intimate little chapel by the sea was out of her reach. He'd started doing some research and scheming – figuring the old adage where there's a will there's a way applied to this situation too. If he could make it through the cancer treatment, then he could sure as hell find a way to make this happen too.

One of Tony's strengths had always been his innate problem-solving ability and it was this intelligence and creativity that he employed to find a way to make his fiancée's dream come true. He became engrossed in the search for wedding destinations that had seaside wedding chapels – many of them purpose built. The most spectacular places were overseas, many in exotic tourist destinations such as Thailand, Bali, Fiji, Australia, Montego Bay, Bora Bora and the Maldives. The Maldives was a favourite destination for Senior which took the gloss off that particular location and he crossed it off the maybe list.

He found several seaside chapels on picturesque Greek Isles and remembering the idyllic week they’d spent there following his remission after the drug trials, he'd thought it was an absolutely perfect place to get married. Okay so call him a closet romantic but their week after they left the hospital which they’d spent just the two of them exploring quaint little islands had been very special.
The only problem was that most of the churches were Greek Orthodox and well… Tony and Emma weren't, obviously. Tourists generally were forced to have their wedding ceremonies conducted outside the actual chapels, granted with breath taking views of whitewashed chapels against the blue of the Aegean Sea. Totally picture postcard photographic opportunities for wedding photos but it didn't quite meet the brief he'd set for himself. Emma had wanted a wedding in a church, not outside it.

He did discover one particular seaside chapel that was Roman Catholic and would let tourists get married there as long as they were of the faith. And that was a problem, too because Emma was RC but contrary to what most people assumed, he wasn't.

This was a good illustration of Jethro Gibbs' Rule 8 – never assume. People saw only his name DiNozzo and leapt to the conclusion that coming from a good Italian family, of course he was Catholic, but they would be wrong. Tony was half English on his mother's side and his mother's family came from very serious money – North Sea Oil money. Bottom line, they were filthy rich, extremely bigoted bluebloods.

Tony still wasn't sure, despite Senior's declaration that his mother was the love of Anthony Senior's life if that was indeed the truth. He suspected rather cynically, that a good deal of her allure had been that she was a young, very beautiful and very rich heiress. Her exceedingly rich father threatened her with disinheritance following her engagement to Senior if she converted to Catholicism, married in a RC Church or raised any children as anything other than Anglican. Senior agreed with alacrity to the conditions, and Tony figured that spoke volumes about what was really important to him.

His Uncle Clive had explained it to him in the summer of his seventeenth year when he stayed with him. Tony’s maternal grandfather Charles Paddington felt that his only daughter, Arabella was shirking her birthright in not keeping the family's blood line pure by marrying an Italian. To 'adulterate' it further by converting to Catholicism was simply a step beyond the pale for him to countenance, hence the threat to disinherit her.

According to his grandfather, even though the offspring of their union didn't carry the Paddington surname, they still had half of the Paddington genes and he wouldn't stand for them being brought up Roman Catholic.

Tony reckoned that both families, in their own way, were as bigoted as each other since he was also looked down on by the DiNozzos because Senior hadn't married a proper Italian wife. Tony was used to being ostracized at snooty, prep boarding schools by his peers, taunting him and telling him to go back to Parochial School where he belonged with all the other wops. The rich WASPs looked down him and so did the Italians for not staying true to his roots.

The truth was that even before Senior disowned him, he’d never felt like he fit in anywhere but none of that was relevant to the current situation, except that it seemed to rule out them getting married in Greece.

There were several closer options in Mexico that he thought Emma would like, with gorgeous views and stunning blue waters but they were also situated in resorts where there would be a lot of tourists and they both wanted to keep their wedding small, intimate and private. Having a lot of strangers around, even if they didn't attend the actual ceremony, gawking at them would take away from the intimacy and make it feel like a circus.

Tony knew that his former team mates would scoff at his stated desire for quiet intimacy over showing off his bride to the whole world but surviving a life-threatening illness had changed him on a fundamental level. Tony no longer felt he had to prove anything to anyone else but Emma and himself. He was afraid of many things…not being around to grow old with Emma, not being good
enough for her, of hurting her in some way but he was no afraid of being intimate with the woman he was going to marry.

Shrugging, he looked at the other options in the US, specifically in Florida, Georgia and the South Carolina Coastline but none were exactly right. He chuckled, *since when did I turn into Goldilocks?*

Tony had even found several absolutely stunning seaside chapels in Hawai'i that were magnificent. Perfection really. But... something in him baulked at the notion of getting married in Hawai'i, beautiful as it was.

He supposed it was because it was where Senior had forgotten him and gone home. Paradoxically, Tony had never forgot his twelve-year-old self being left alone in the hotel for two days after Senior dragging him there on a business trip. Tony had always made it sound as if it had been a huge joke when he recounted the trip to his former team but in truth, it had been a traumatic event. Especially since within months of being abandoned in the tropical paradise, his father disowned him and packed him off to military school.

Both events were traumatic and painful and became inexorably linked in his memories and he couldn't imagine getting married there even if it was the paradise on earth that people said.

In the end, he hadn't found anything that was either doable in the time they had or exactly what they wanted. He was feeling despondent, until he stumbled upon it and it seemed perfect, but he would need some assistance to pull it off.

A year ago, the idea of asking someone for help would have him hyperventilating in a panic but he was okay these days with admitting he needed help. Cancer has a way of sweeping away stubborn DiNozzo pride when you couldn't even take a shower by yourself without collapsing in a heap. Asking for help to make Emma's dream come true was simply a no brainer.

Yep so he might owe favours to some people but looking at the chapel it was going to be well worth it. Emma's eyes would pop out of her head when she saw it...well if he could make it work. So, he decided right then that failure was simply not an option. That had been before he'd agreed to return to DC and clean up the mess with Ziva David for the SecNav and the director. Wimps, the pair of them but convenient timing for a quid pro quo favour.

Yep the gods were definitely smiling on him and his wedding.

Deciding that all the planets had aligned, while he was in DC he went to see Leon Vance to explain his little problem face to face. He'd hit the director up for a second week of unpaid leave for their honeymoon, which he'd been given. Plus, he'd also had the director ask Sarah Porter if Tony could use her private jet to fly his team and Emma out for the wedding.

He'd been politically savvy enough to invite SecNav and Leon, plus the Vance kids to the wedding as a carrot. Now, all he was waiting on was word about if he had the go ahead to use the Gulfstream, so his team could come too, since they only were cleared for a four-day weekend. It wouldn't be the same if Lisle, Jodhi and Dane couldn't be there to share it with them.

Plus, he was impatiently waiting to book the chapel, but he was getting a little bit antsy. He'd made a cogent case for utilising the government owned resource that he thought was creative but rational. He didn't understand what was taking her so long to reach a decision. How hard could it be to say yay or nay?

Meanwhile he was finishing up the report for the case they'd closed today, making sure they'd properly documented everything so there was no way an expensive lawyer could cry foul over
anything the team had done. It had been a tough one, investigating a number of sexual assaults at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. It had been one of those delicate investigations that they hated since several persons of interest were International Students from the Staff Naval College.

It had required extreme discretion to discover the rapist without ruffling too many International feathers in the process. The upshot was that the perp was a Colonel from one of their South East Asian allies who'd decided that American females were loose and ‘asking for it.’

Tony and his team had determined who was responsible and collected the evidence required to gain a conviction, but he'd been told not to arrest the perp until after The Powers That Be had been consulted about how to handle. The complicating factor (other than the fact he was a high-ranking officer in someone else's military) was that in the course of their investigation, Tony's team had also discovered that the Colonel had links to a terrorist cell they'd uncovered in New York.

Now Tony was getting his ducks in a row in anticipation of an MTAC call to Leon where he knew they would want to know every last little thing.

He knew from previous experiences that Vance would call him out if his report was incomplete in the slightest detail. Tony was also preparing to advocate for the female rape victims, so their voices got heard and weren't lost in the 'BIGGER' picture of diplomatic relationships or terrorist investigations.

During the hook-up Tony delivered a succinct sit rep of the case as it stood. The video conference call included both SecNav and Sec Def as well as Leon. They listened to the report and the questions and answers between the director and his agent and said little, apart from stating emphatically that they would need to take this higher up the food chain before a receiving a decision on how best to proceed.

Tony acknowledged this fact but pointed out to them that the rapist was escalating, and his last victim had been severely beaten. He wasn’t surprised, although he couldn’t say he wasn’t disappointed though. The seasoned agent was concerned that the decision would be made to watch their perp to see if he would help them to locate more terrorists in the cell. He bluntly expressed the view that the ME and himself were concerned that a woman was overdue to be killed if the rapist continued the current level of escalation and they failed to act.

SecNav Porter and the Secretary of Defence Geoffrey Collier didn't like it, but they acknowledged what he was saying. They had a duty of care to protect all of the female personnel who worked at the college, military or not, not just focusing on catching more terrorists.

As much as they tried to depersonalise the issue by referring to the victims' collectively and generically (which Tony took as a bad sign) he made sure to speak about each of them singularly and by name. He presented before and after shots to remind the politicians that they were living breathing survivors, even though he feared if they didn't stop the monster that the next one wouldn't survive.

After SecDef had signed off to go and read DHS in on the situation, Sarah Porter sighed then swiftly changed the subject.

"I hear that you want to borrow my plane, Special Agent DiNozzo? I must say I appreciate your wedding invitation and I would love to attend. As you pointed out, I'm yet to visit that particular naval base – should take a few days of inspection at least to be thorough, which I have always prided myself on being. I decided that your team will act as protection for the director and myself since they will be there already. That's if I have your permission to borrow them."
Tony grinned. He’d organised for his team to have Thursday and Friday off, plus the weekend, so Porter was basically giving them an extra three days. Hopefully the others who were coming from NCIS would be able to swing a couple more days as well. If not, it was still doable.

"Have at it, Madam Secretary," he smirked. "But two VIPs needing protection into three agents won’t go. Perhaps a couple of agents from DC who are also attending might consent to join the protection party," He suggested innocently.

Vance coughed, unsuccessfully hiding a chuckle. "Send me an email with suggestions, Special Agent DiNozzo. I'll handle the logistics."

"I trust you're not planning on getting hitched on Base after all this hoopla, Tony. I'm looking forward to putting on some glad rags, so I'm expecting a good spread." SecNav cautioned.

Tony chuckled and pulled out his phone and sent her the link to the website for the seaside chapel and Cc'ed it to Vance too. "Hope it meets with your approval, Madam Secretary."

"Oh my, it's really exquisite. Quite the romantic, aren't you, Tony?"

"Glad you like it and I try. Now all I have to do is get Emma's boss to grant her an extra week's leave and everything will fall into place. Ducky's got a friend, some medico who invented a revolutionary endoscopic surgical device or something – became a billionaire.

“Anyhow… the guy owes him one and is going lend our Dr Mallard his Bombardier BD 700 Global Express to fly there. Seats 19 but if we need any more butts on seats, can NCIS staff hop a military transport?” Tony asked, not sure if it would be needed since they were not invited a crowd but wanting to be prepared just in case.

Vance whistled. "Nice! That's some favour. Is there anyone Ducky doesn't know?"

Tony nodded his agreement. Ducky seemed to know everyone and if he didn't then he knew someone who knew someone.

The SecNav grinned. "That shouldn't be a problem if it's required, Agent DiNozzo, especially since the naval base shares its location with the Air Force. I'm definitely going to need a new outfit for this, maybe some new shoes. Be in touch. Good job."

Tony smirked; that personal titbit was not something that Jarvis or Davenport were likely to share over the video link but then again, there's no way he'd have dreamed of inviting either one of the former SecNavs to his wedding, even if he did have an ulterior motive for issuing the invitation. He liked Sarah Porter – so far, she hadn't tried to screw with him and that earned her a whole lotta brownie points in his book.

Vance signed off too and Tony went home but not before calling Emma's supervisor to secure a second week of unpaid leave. Mission accomplished he indulged in some juvenile fist pumping – now he could confirm the booking for the chapel, which he did immediately.

At this point they could begin planning where to spend their extra week of honeymoon. They could fly back with SecNav on the Gulfstream and head off from the States or simply head straight off from their wedding to somewhere local. He'd leave their destination up to his better half - he was all out of planning inspiration and it hadn't been that big a deal to either of them.

He headed home, calling Emma to let her know he was running a bit late but on his way and that they were going out for dinner. He'd booked a table at an Italian mom and pop style eatery that had great Mediterranean style cooking and seafood they'd discovered not long after their arrival and had
quickly become a favourite.

Even over the phone he could tell something was up with her, she seemed a bit distracted. Getting home, he discovered that SecNav's answer had come just in the nick of time to save his ass. Emma had opened a refund cheque from the reception venue in New York today, less the deposit of course.

Oops! Tony had already gone ahead as soon as they returned from DC and cancelled the reception and the church in anticipation that SecNav would agree, since he'd given her an excellent reason to fly out there. Luckily his gamble had paid off, but he wasn't completely crazy. He'd made contingency plans for a wedding ceremony in Georgia on a private island if need be.

Happily, that wouldn't be needed now.

After they ordered dinner, deciding to share an entrée of calamari and also ordered a seafood platter for their mains - since Tony mostly tried to follow a Mediterranean style diet – he decided not to prolong her suffering any longer. Pulling out his smart phone, he called up the website for the Crystal Chapel and handed it across to Emma whose eyes nearly popped out of her head as she looked at the photos and watched the video.

Personally, he thought the emo music was more than a touch overdone and if he hadn't seen the stills first, it might have been enough to turn him off the place. But then again, he doubted the video was aimed at mere males – Emma didn't seem to want to puke after watching it. Must be a Venus/Mars thing.
"That's why I cancelled the reception and the church. I wanted to give you your seaside chapel wedding since I wouldn't be here if you hadn't bullied me into fighting. I hope you like it." He kissed her chastely on the cheek since she was looking stunned. He hoped it was a good stunned.

When she finally found her voice she asked, "Where is that? I've never seen it before.'

"It's on Guam - an island in Micronesia in the South Pacific. It's an unincorporated territory of the United States and home to the Chamorro's people, the indigenous population who have inhabited it for 4000 years. It also houses a strategic U.S. naval base and is home to Submarine Squadron 15, the U.S Coastguard and it is the home base to dozens of Pacific Command units that include: United States Pacific Fleet and Seventh Fleet.

" SecNav Porter is going to coincide an inspection of the naval base with our wedding. She authorised the rest of my team plus a couple of other agents from our guest list to act as her and Director Vance's protection detail during the trip. We're flying over on SecNav's Gulfstream and our guests primarily are getting flown over by private jet, too. If they won't all fit, then NCIS personnel can hop a military flight - since the Naval Base is also a joint one with the Air Force."

Emma had totally lost the harried look she'd worn since learning about the cancellations, even the stunned look was fading fast. In its place was what Tony decided that the romance writers would probably describe as radiant happiness. All he knew was that his normally pretty fiancée was lit up with an inner glow that easily made her the most beautiful woman in New York.

"How did you manage this?" She queried incredulously before kissing him enthusiastically, making explanations all but impossible since there was nothing at all chaste about her kisses.

Certainly, it wasn't practical to carry out a conversation and if her behaviour was anything to go by, Tony figured he was going to be getting very little sleep tonight. Even if it was a so-called school night, he didn't give a damn that he'd be heading into the office tomorrow sleep deprived. It seemed he'd hit a home run with his surprise and made her happy, which made it all worthwhile.

By the time that their entrée was served, she was all but sitting in his lap and Tony was more than a little flustered. Of the two she was much more inclined to indulge in personal displays of affection in public, bordering on raunchy since Tony was definitely not accustomed to expressing real emotions and tended to be more reticent when others were around.

Their server, Delphine who was also the owner smiled coyly at them, having adopted the pair who usually come in to eat a couple of times each month. Putting their pan seared calamari down in the middle of the table so that both of them could share, she quipped that it was as well they hadn't ordered the oysters, before sashaying off chuckling. Well as much as a stout, middle aged Italian mama could be described as sashaying, he supposed.

As they discussed the island and the accommodation options, Emma's smile refused to dim. By the time Tony had announced that he'd managed to get them a second week of leave, albeit unpaid, and he broached the topic of honeymoon destinations, she was high on happiness. He pointed out that they could head out to the Greek Isles, Europe or someplace in the Caribbean or they could head off to Fiji, Thailand, Bali or the Barrier Reef in Australia which were all just a hop, skip and a jump away from Guam.

Emma seemed dazed by the subject and Tony told her to think about it and decide so they could organise accommodation and flights. Judging by her expression when he'd mentioned heading off somewhere from Guam he had a feeling that he'd needing board shorts, shades and sunblock. It would make for pretty light packing, but he was finding it hard to focus on the finer details ever since she murmured in his ear that he was getting really lucky tonight. He knew what that meant alright,
Emma was probably going to be donning her French maid outfit and her barely-there underwear.

When people found out that he was living with a nurse, there'd be much ribbing and suggestive comments. Often when he'd leave the office at night he'd get asked if he was going home to play doctors and nurses with his fiancée? Fortunately, Emma understood his horror at anything faintly resembling medical procedures and hospitals and since she rather enjoyed roleplay had bought a naughty French maid's outfit – not that she was ever in it for very long.

Yep, he was a very lucky guy.

Two months later:

McGee sat alone in a darkened apartment getting progressively drunker. When he'd received notification that the corporation were planning to turn the farce of a telemovie of his book Deep Six into a weekly TV show that consisted of 12 one-hour episodes plus a two-hour pilot he'd been horrified and kept pinching himself, believing it had to be a nightmare. Unfortunately, his lawyer confirmed it was very real.

In fact, he'd just returned from an appointment where he’d been told the bad news that the contract he's signed for the film rights to his book Deep Six had indeed contained a clause that included an option to turn it into an ongoing television series. There was nothing he could do to prevent it going ahead except remember to get a real lawyer to read any contract he signed next time, he been told portentously by his legal representative. Arrogant prick!

They'd outline a few changes that were planned for the series – that was in addition to the wholesale massacre they'd already carried out on the book, including the title for the show which at the moment stood at 'The NCIS Family' or 'The Tibblets.' Seems that they weren't satisfied with the saccharine sweet rewriting of the characters they'd already done. No... now they'd decided they needed a chaplain to appease certain interest groups and picked the McGregor character to be it.

McGregor was no longer a field agent, he was a computer IT genius with a theological degree.
gained whilst at MIT in his spare time. He mostly wandered around the set, spouting off homespun homilies and quoting scripture at everyone. McGregor was no longer bad ass although to be fair, no one was, which was kinda the problem with Abby and Tibbs um Gibbs, who were pissed with their characterisations. Even the term 'piss tests' had been censored to become 'pee test.'

How ridiculous was that? plus they'd decided that Pimmy Jalmer should be anglicised into a WASP character called Jimmy Palmer and given a significantly larger part as the comic relief. He wasn't just recurring cast but now was in the opening credits.

This was bad – really, really bad. Was Jimmy going to make trouble about the name change? Not as if he could get blood out of a stone and Tim was all tapped out. His lawyer said he'd approach the producers about the name change, suggest they avoid a law suit by going with Jack Palmer or Jamie Chalmers. He warned there'd be financial repercussions from this mess and suggested the next time McGee wrote a book to be a bit more creative with character names if he was going to base them on real life people.

Tim didn't appreciate the patronising lecture. He acted as if McGee was an idiot or something, which of course was far from the case. Idiots don't earn bio-mechanical degrees from Johns Hopkins plus a Masters degree from MIT in computer science. Hell, if anyone was the dumb one it would be the lawyer because Tim was pretty sure he had a much higher IQ. How dare that ambulance chaser treat him like he was as dumb as a box of rocks!

As he contemplated the prospect of Deep Six becoming a weekly show, Tim’s stomach began to churn, as he briefly wondered if he might be getting a stomach ulcer. He had to admit that the future looked grim. He'd barely weathered the fallout from the telemovie but a weekly TV show? Gibbs would kill him even if Abby or Jimmy didn't.

He glumly envisaged endless hours of dumpster diving and gassing of the truck, bagging and tagging twice the average sized crime scene perimeters, especially when they got cases in Rock Creek Park or downtown alleys. McGee didn't want to think about all ways Gibbs could torture him in the gym or on the firing range – resolving to carry a cheap throw away phone with him on visits to the range so he didn't end up shooting his smart phone.

If only Delilah was here with him so that she would help take his mind of his woes but no, she was pouting! Everyone in the office had been all abuzz with excitement about DiNozzo's stupid wedding when she'd stopped by the office for lunch earlier than week. Since her return they often ate together, and it was most definitely a case of really bad timing running into DiNozzo’s guests while they were clucking like a bunch of teenage girls about their invitation to the wedding.

Ducky, Jimmy, Marc, Balboa, and that grumpy old shrew from HR who hated his guts, Delores Bromstead had all been invited but not one of Tony's former team mates had been invited. How petty could you get!

Delilah had been alternating between pleading and haranguing Tim to make peace with Tony ever since Tony started being mentioned around the various alphabet water coolers as being Director Vance's eventual successor and his personal pick for the job. As if! Personally, Tim thought it was a pile of horse hockey – DiNozzo didn’t have the brains to be NCIS director.

Delilah had been really pissed at him for blurting out about her making fun of DiNozzo with her girlfriends, telling Tim several times how stupid he'd been not to bite his tongue. She urged him to apologise to Tony and renew their friendship. Tim had refused, not being able to move past the fact that DiNozzo had cost him the senior field agent position he'd coveted, basically ever since he joined the team.
That he’d earned!

That he deserved but had lost!

Just because five damned years ago, he and Ziva had turned off a radio when he got tired of listening to DiNozzo’s drivel when he was collecting stupid voice prints for comparison in a swanky gated community.

Talk about an overreaction!

It had been a joke; nothing bad had happened to the prima donna, apart from losing his voice because he was such a motor mouth.

Even DiNozzo’s voice had clearly been pissed off with having to spend so much time with the incredibly annoying agent and decided to take a vacation too.

There was no way McGee was apologising to him since Tony should be the one offering an apology for thwarting his career – screw Rule 6. Delilah didn’t understand how annoying Tony was!

She also didn’t understand that not only had he become a pariah for the comms incident but he was also an object of mirth in the office, all thanks to DiNozzo. Whatever happened to Rule 1 – never screw over your partner?

Yeah right! DiNozzo didn’t know the meaning of the word loyalty. Talk about holding a grudge!

Delilah had calculatedly pointed out that if he had any hope of salvaging the career he’d invested over a decade in, then he really needed to just bite the bullet and repair his relationship with DiNozzo. If speculation about Vance’s successor was correct, there was an excellent chance that he could be Tim’s boss one day and it was the smart thing, not to mention, the politically expedient thing to do to suck up to him. To apologise.

She also told him bluntly he was damned lucky not to have lost his job after he and Ziva David stopped listening to DiNozzo during a domestic terrorism case. Adding that he’d clearly chosen the wrong partner to side with since Ziva stiffed him for the surety he paid to get her out on bail. *Yeah, Delilah was really pissed about the money they’d lost over Ziva’s bail.*

He’d ignored her advice, even knowing that what Delilah said made good sense. He just kept thinking that if DiNozzo had been a friend, he’d have kept his big mouth shut. After all, whatever happened to no harm no foul?

If DiNozzo had just kept his big fat mouth shut, Tim would be the senior field agent now and with Gibbs battling to hold on as SSA, McGee would be staring down the barrel of getting the job he really wanted. After a decade, he should be leading his own team – leading the MCRT – which would put him one step away from the director’s chair.

When Delilah heard Ellie and Palmer discussing the details of DiNozzo’s wedding and going gaga over photos of the wedding venue, she’d reacted badly. Okay so he had to admit it did look like something out of a fairy tale, what with the wedding taking place on an exotic pacific island, she was pissed… mightily. She claimed that they could have been heading off as guests too if he’d done what she wanted, swallowed his damned misplaced pride and apologised for not backing up his superior.

Jimmy had been so childishly excited about flying to Guam aboard the private jet of some billionaire buddy of Ducky’s. He’d also let slip in Delilah’s presence that the bride and groom were flying to Guam aboard the SecNav’s gulfstream, along with his team, Sarah Porter and Leon Vance.
Delilah had been furious about missing out. She’d also pointed out that if DiNozzo was cozy enough with SecNav that she was going to his wedding and flying him there on her own plane, DiNozzo had sway and was a bad enemy to make.

She still wasn’t talking to him and he really needed to get laid. Unfortunately, that was no on the cards as she told him that he didn’t deserve it. Since he’d been getting sex fairly regularly since she’d returned stateside, he was really not appreciating this dry spell at all.

Cold showers and jerking off weren’t in anyway relieving his tension. It just wasn’t the same as having sex with Delilah and thanks again to Tony and his stupid wedding, his life officially sucked!

And all that had happened before he’d gotten the bad news about the TV show. Could things get any worse?

I Shouldn't Have To

Abby was sitting in her lab, hugging Bert for comfort. She'd blown it big time.

Ever since Tony had left them she'd tried to fix things between them. Admittedly, some of her attempts had been less than smart, she concluded, thinking of the foolish plan to bring Ziva home so that their Gibblet family would be reunited.

That had turned into nothing short of a disaster!

Still Abby took heart that when Tony came home to DC to read the riot act to Ziva and Gibbs, since scuttlebutt had it that he'd told Gibbs to take his job and stick it where the sun didn't reach, he hadn't ripped her or Timmy new ones. Perhaps all was not lost, and she could mend fences with him.

She'd sent a congratulatory card acknowledging his engagement but otherwise had respected his need to maintain his distance. Ducky had even broached taking her to the wedding as his plus one since he knew how much she missed Tony. Tony had called her one Sunday, stating if she was to attend then Emma wanted an assurance that she not try to outshine the bride. She wanted understated elegance, an intimate ceremony and reception and had vetoed guests wearing black, leather or over the top outfits.

Abby thought that Emma seemed rather anal and controlling but had decided that she would wear a Barbie doll outfit if it meant that she had a chance to repair their relationship.

She really should have heeded the warning when she asked about Anthony Senior attending the wedding by Tony's growled. "Just drop it Abby. I've got to go. I'll talk to you before the wedding." And hung up abruptly.

Still Abby couldn't let it go. Anthony Senior was so much like Tony, handsome, suave and could charm the pants of anyone he wanted, but he was old and alone and that was just so sad. Who knows how much time Tony's dad had left but she knew with every fibre of her being that when he was gone, Tony would regret not inviting him to his wedding.

She'd give everything that she owned to be able to spend just one more day with her own father; she had to save him from himself. Bitterness over past mistakes would just lead to more tears and guilt when it was too late to reconcile.

Besides, Senior seemed nothing like the stories Tony had let slip over the years. He might not have been Father of the Year, but he was hardly the devil incarnate, either. Tony did have a tendency towards being a bit of a drama queen and Abby suspected that much of Tony’s grievances were inside his head. So, she called Senior to let him know that Tony was getting married.
"Abby, to what do I owe this great pleasure?" She shivered a little at the way Senior accented the word pleasure.

She was not sure how she felt about being aroused by Tony's dad, although she had to admit that he'd almost charmed the pants off her on several occasions. She was after all attracted to older men – always had been – even Gibbs, which was just plain hinky since she saw him as a father figure.

"Well we haven't really talked for a while, not since Tony went into remission and came home. And I thought you might like to know that he's engaged to a Former Navy Lieutenant, Emma Ingham."

"You're a real doll, lovely lady. I appreciate you thinking of me but Junior already informed me. He was wanting to borrow some of his mother's jewellery for the wedding – a diamond choker and matching earrings plus the tiara Arabella wore on her wedding day."

"Oh, that's awesome. She'll make a beautiful bride, I can't wait to see her dress and tiara," Abby gushed.

"I'm afraid you won't be seeing it Abby. I told him I sold all his mother's jewellery after I disowned him when he was twelve and used the money to build a resort at Vail."

Abby felt as if someone had karate chopped her in the solar plexus. Tony had said once or twice that his father disowned him and sent him away to school, but she'd thought he'd exaggerated or made it up. It seemed just too much like a bad soap opera, especially after meeting the 'Real Anthony DiNozzo.'

"OMG how could you do that, Tony? He was just a little boy."

"Oh, don't fret that pretty little head of yours, my dear. You'll end up with wrinkles. I didn't sell my wife's jewellery, I may have been drunk back then but not that drunk," he chuckled cynically.

"I just didn't want to lend them to that gold digger he's marrying. She's a nurse you know, not worthy of the DiNozzo name. This is what comes of him working in a job below his station. I knew he would end up in the gutter."

Abby gasped, hardly able to believe her ears but Senior wasn't finished unfortunately.

"I told him he should dump her and marry Ziva. She comes from quite a wealthy family, even if they are nouveau riche. She inherited her father's estate recently including a lot of diamonds. Quite the catch and although she's a Jew, she isn't practising, so I'm sure she'd convert to Christianity for the sake of any Anthony Junior Juniors." Senior waxed lyrically.

"I meant, how could you disown your own son, a little boy, especially one that had lost his mother?" Abby spat, her teeth gritted to keep from cussing him out as only a Louisiana gal could when she belatedly realised that Senior wasn't as bad as Tony had always hinted…he was a hell of a lot worse.

Senior really was a monster, all dressed up in his nice clothes who'd charmed them all…fooled them and they were supposed to be crack investigators. Now she was going to be scrapping egg off her face for the foreseeable future, thinking of all the earnest lectures she'd delivered to Tony about making peace with Senior. Ever since Senior started turning up at NCIS and embarrassing Tony in front of his work mates.

Abby defended Emma to Senior even if she barely remembered her from those dark days in Bethesda when they almost lost Tony to the plague. She’d stuck by him when he’d been battling cancer and his friends and family all but abandoned him. Emma obviously made him happy and that should be all his father was concerned about.
Unfortunately, while defending Emma to Senior, she'd also accidentally let slip that Ziva was currently incarcerated and facing some serious time in jail for her exploits and was not such a good catch after all. And that proved to be a fatal error since Senior had started using his considerable influence to have the charges dropped and Tony heard about it and confronted him.

That had led to a bitter argument between father and son, with their Tony (except he wasn't theirs anymore) telling Senior if he thought Ziva would make such a good wife then he should ask her to marry him. Of course, Senior dropped Abby in it about how he'd come to learn about Ziva's situation and Tony immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion, thinking that Abby had been trying to interfere and have Ziva set free. That or stop his marriage to Emma.

He'd been mad at her - so mad but in a scarcely, icy cold way that was worse than being yelled at. She'd tried to explain but she couldn't blame him since she'd been the one responsible for calling Ziva back to DC in the first place. It made sense that he would think she was trying to free her but to be honest, even if he had believed that she wasn't siding with her, the alternative wasn't a whole lot better.

She'd been arrogant enough to interfere in the relationship between Tony and his father on this and other occasions. She had known Tony for at least twelve years and he'd saved her life and the lives of everyone on the team more than once. He saved the lives of countless victims over the years. He was a cop and an agent – even saved that kid Jason who was an arson investigator when he'd been just a college kid.

He was kind and cared about people and been a good friend to her, to all of them. Yet she'd been seduced by Senior’s charm after one freakin visit and discounted all Tony had let slip about the man over the years.

Dumb ass! If he'd been exaggerating like she'd convinced herself after meeting and spending time with Anthony Senior for a handful of visits, why had he been so sparing with the details over the years, laughing them off as a joke?

That was the behaviour of someone who was a victim…survivor she told herself. Tony was a survivor, brave, resilient and when he was in pain he always denied it. It was only when some minor irritant like a paper cut or a scratch occurred would he make a production out of it, pretending to be a drama queen.

How many more horrors from his childhood had he never revealed, not wanting to be pitied?

Then after Senior had done such a bang-up job of hi-jacking Tony's workmates – his family – of course there was no point in sharing since they wouldn't have believed him anyway.

Abby couldn't believe how incredibly stupid they'd all been when it came to Senior and how much they must have hurt Tony when they all took his father's side.

She remembered the Christmas Senior came to visit. The Goth cringed at the thought that Tony had finally overcome his innate tendency to turn the other cheek and forgive no matter what.

How he'd stood up to his dad when he abused his hospitality and couldn't keep his fly zipped up and they'd been arrogant enough to second guess their Tony. They'd dragged Senior back after he got his marching orders, bringing him along to the screening of It's a Wonderful Life when Tony was at his most vulnerable since the movie was one of the few memories he treasured about his mother.

They deliberately guilted him into a reconciliation with his father, thinking they knew better than he did about how he should act.
And now she'd pushed him too far. Her Tony used to forgive them for anything the team said or did. All they needed to do was say they were sorry and even if they did it again, they knew that Tony couldn't hold a grudge to save his life. He was incapable of it.

But that was then….and this was now. He'd changed. Abby wasn't sure if it was his fiancée or his illness, but he was no longer quick to turn the other cheek.

*Which was smart since they'd always repaid his tolerance by slapping it too.*

This time Abby recognised that her meddling was a step too far, even if she hadn't meant to cause trouble. This time she was sure that it was the end of their friendship. The last time he'd talked to her it was to tell her she was no longer welcome at the wedding.

That adage *you don't know what you've got til it's gone* was never more apt when applied to this situation. They'd all taken Tony for granted for years and now they were suffering the consequences.

Most people would probably say that it was not before time. Abby sighed. Most people would be right!
The Impossible Possible

Chapter Summary

Tony, Emma and guests plus a idyllic location in which to hold their special ceremony.

Chapter Notes

Okay... biting the bullet with this chapter since it is well outside my comfort zone. Just putting it out there - there's a reason I don't write romance or focus on ships - I suck at it lol. Seriously, it makes me feel like I'm in an all pink boudoir, including the white Persian cat and the teacup poodles on the pillows. I hate pink - it reminds me of calamine lotion and mozzie bites!

Anyway, fwiw I'm issuing a warning for any diabetics out there reading this that the chapter contains extreme sappiness. I'm also unapologetic about avoiding the heavily used cliché of TV script writers in which everything that can go wrong with the wedding does go wrong.

E

Emma was getting ready for her wedding. Lara Pitt was carefully taking out the heated rollers and
finger combing her hair into soft curls while the bride applied her own makeup. To finish off, Lara weaved scented jasmine through her hair to complete her look and fastened a white lily to an upswept section of her silky locks. After much consulting with her Maid of Honour, Emma had decided not to bother with a veil or other more orthodox adornments. As she worked her magic on the bride's hair Lara prattled on about how gorgeous their guys looked.

Emma grinned, picturing the groom and Best Man in their wedding garb. When they were going to get married in New York, Tony had intending on wearing his Armani tuxedo. He'd worn it on several occasions when he'd taken her to the ballet and Emma's knees went weak when she'd seen him in it, he looked so damned good. But with the change of venue – the glass and white walls contrasting against the blue water that the chapel overlooked, a black tux just seemed inappropriate – too formal and heavy.

Emma and Lara had initially suggested white tuxedos for Tony and Brad or even white linen suits. Tony had rolled his eyes in mock horror, muttered something about Fantasy Island, Riccardo Montalban and 'the plane, the plane' but had agreed good-humouredly.

She knew that her fiancé would agree to wear whatever she wanted simply because he wanted her to be happy, but Emma wanted him to be comfortable too. It wasn't just her wedding. Lara had giggled and suggested that Brad could wear his Navy Dress Whites. Tony smirked and suggested white jeans and Magnum Hawaiian shirts.

At that point Emma started tickling him until he fled the room and left the two women to it. Lara started giggling somewhat lasciviously and Emma looked at her friend curiously.

"What?"

"I just had a vision of the guys in white leather pants and vests."

"And shirts?" Emma smiled coyly.

"No shirts."

Emma moaned. Brad and Tony as former college athletes were tall, and both had classic broad shoulders. Of course, Tony had lost a lot of weight including quite a bit of muscle mass from his surgery and cancer treatment and though he had gained back some of it, because of his careful diet he was still a bit underweight. Tony had never been a muscle-bound type, shunning hours spent pumping iron in a gym, preferring more active forms of exercise including pickup games of basketball. After getting sick and the hours of yoga, Tai chi and exercise – mostly running and swimming, he was toned and strong, if thinner than normal.

Much as the thought of them in leather was a nice fantasy, straight out of a trashy romance novel, she knew that neither man would be comfortable dressed like that in front of their friends and colleagues.

Emma sighed a little wistfully. "I think that perhaps we have to leave that look for the honeymoon."

"Yeah I doubt we'd convince them. Pity!" Lara lamented, half seriously.

Perhaps it was thinking about trashy romance novels, but Emma realised there was something she found even hotter than the thought of Tony in leather and to be honest, she'd probably prefer him in black leather anyway.

She went totally weak kneed for an athletic guy in a voluminous white shirt with full sleeves tucked into well cut slim trousers showing off a nice butt. Of course, the hero usually sported long flowing locks and sometimes an eye patch or a parrot but maybe the guys would be persuaded to go for it,
sans the eye patch and parrot of course. That is if they approached them cautiously, pointing out how manly they'd look.

She outlined the suggestion to Lara who was an artist and quickly sketched the look and then fiddled on her iPad. Don't tell them it's a Fabio or Mr Darcy look. We'll pitch it as a Clark Gable 'Mutiny on the Bounty' look. Emphasise Clark's virility. She pulled up some stills from the movie and grinned. We'll make the shirts a bit fuller than Gable's but essentially they'll be the same," she gushed excitedly.

Lara had been correct; when their partners outlined their idea, their guys were initially a little reluctant. That was until Emma mentioned Clark Gable in the movie "Mutiny on the Bounty" and Tony rapidly got on board with the idea. He started raving on about it being totally apt since the mutiny of the Bounty took place in the South Pacific on Tofua Island. Brad not being a film buff wasn't quite as enthusiastic, so Emma suggested that Tony set up the DVD and they could watch the movie and she made popcorn. Lara and Emma kept making not so subtle comments about how sexy and virile Gable was and Brad agreed that he was extremely manly, and that the Bounty look was better than white tuxes.

Lara had an up and coming fashion designer friend of hers take care their outfits after she supplied her with the drawings. She made up their shirts and had a tailor make the trousers. Although they both went in for a final fitting and had the wedding clothes for a few weeks, Brad and Tony had both stubbornly refused to model for Lara and Emma unless they reciprocated. Obviously, they'd refused to, saying it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride's dress so neither of them had seen the men wearing their wedding clothes.

Now as the groom and best man had heading off to the Crystal Chapel, Lara had sneaked an opportunity to check them out and she'd reported to Emma that they both looked mighty fine. "Better than Gable." She opined, and Emma had no trouble believing her.

Tony looked at Brad and had to admit that he looked rather dashing, although the shirts the girls had made up for them were a little bit fuller than Gables's in Mutiny. They were more like the swashbuckling sword fighting heroes in movies that Tony used to love as a little boy.

He didn't grumble too much, he was just glad that they hadn't gone with the romantic crap of Pride and Prejudice and Wuthering Heights - shirts with frills and puffed sleeves. Not that Basil Rathbone as Zorro and Errol Flynn as Don Juan weren't romantic too but in a totally testosterone laden, daring yet manly way, not the chick lit, girly Mr Darcy way.

Yes, the sleeves were a bit fuller than their women led them to believe but they tapered masculinely at the wrists so luckily, they were just normal cuffs and fastenings. Lara and Emma suggested since Guam had an average temperature of around 85 degrees Fahrenheit that they roll them up instead of wearing them fastened, to which Brad and Tony had agreed gratefully.

What Emma hadn't told them was that nicely defined forearms peeking out of crisp white shirt sleeves was a heck of a lot sexier to her than a hulk with bulging biceps. She didn't want Tony and Brad to think she was viewing them as eye candy. They were so much more than just easy on the eye but there was no reason for them not to look like something out of her fantasies either.

Yeah, all things considered, their wedding get-up could have been a lot worse, Tony had confided to Brad. White tuxes were so 80's or as Emma confessed a few days ago, white leather pants and only a matching vest that sounded like it was straight out of an erotic novel or porn movie.
Yep, they were classic, cool and comfortable so he was a happy camper.

Hell, he would have married her in leather if it had made her happy and he knew that she knew it too, but he was glad, really glad she'd decide to spare him that indignity. His team would never let him live it down.

As people started to arrive and take their seats he looked around at his team who'd offered to act as ushers and show people to their seats. In his wildest dreams a year ago, he would never have seen this coming. He'd have expected if anyone gathered for him it would be at a memorial service and now here he was, twelve months into remission marrying the beautiful Emma who, despite his statistically poor life expectancy, seemed to think he was worth the risk.

And that was why he would have agreed to marry her in a loincloth if she'd wanted him to because she thought he was worth investing in. There’d been precious few people in his life that had seen him as worthy of an emotional investment and one of them had called off their wedding at the eleventh hour. The other he'd hurt so badly that she’d given him an ultimatum and he knew in time the hurt and guilt would drive a wedge between them and so he'd let her go.

The crap with Jeanne had messed him up but good for a long time. Raffy asked him once if he'd let everyone crap on him so much because he was trying to punish himself for hurting Jeanne. After pondering that insight for a bit Tony had to admit there was probably some truth to the idea.

It still really bothered him how much he'd hurt her when her only sin was being the daughter of Rene Benoit. So perhaps all the shit when the team put him through when they found out about his undercover mission was what he felt he had coming to him. His therapist was usually right about most things although he wasn’t about to admit that to her.

Emma though had seen him at his worst, first when he almost died a decade before with the plague and he’d flirted with her, much to Cate’s disgust before all too soon he was too busy coughing up all the crap in his lungs and fighting for every breath. Then during his fight against his tumour she’d watch him puking up his guts during his treatments. Seeing him so weak and vulnerable, there really hadn’t been a whole lot more of himself left to conceal from her. Plus, the fact that she refused to be banished when he pushed her away, proposing to him even if they might not have a long-term future meant that she was a precious gift. He'd decided that sharing whatever time he had left with her was fair recompense for giving him back his life and had vowed to stop worrying about things he had no control over.

And speaking of saving his life, although they’d invited his oncologist Giovanna and his absolute favourite nurse Alessandro, neither of them expected the Italians to make the journey. Yet they’d both come – marvelling at how well he looked. Of course, his doctors in the US had been sending reports back to Milan and Raphaella as Giovanna’s cousin had kept her informed. Yet both lovely ladies kept giving him hugs and grinning like loons. Both were sitting up front next to Sec Nav and the Vance family. Looking out as the chapel began to fill up, he saw Ric and Lynn Balboa, Ducky, Jimmy and Breena Palmer, Delores Bromstead and his three closest frat brothers Steve, Greg and Jonas and their wives or girlfriends.

On the bride’s side were her aunt and uncle and a couple of cousins. When it came to family she wasn’t a whole lot better off than he was. Plus, there were two friends from college, nursing buddies from Bethesda and several colleagues from her current hospital Columbia University Medical Centre, plus Emma's boss who had given her the extra week's leave. Tony congratulated himself on his foresight in inviting Janice Kershaw.

For their honeymoon, they decided to head off from Guam to Australia and the Whitsunday Islands in the Great Barrier Reef. Emma had said that since they were so close to one of the natural wonders
of the world and the reef was in danger of dying, they'd be mad not to go see it while they were here.

When Sarah Porter discovered they were going to Australia, she'd offered to pay for them to fly from the Barrier Reef down to Sydney and spring for a few days accommodation at a city hotel so Tony could train the NCIS office in several of their programs, including information sharing. She'd even approached Kershaw, requesting an additional three days leave for Emma, couching it in terms of national security which was exaggerating just a tad. Still it was difficult for Emma's boss say no to the Secretary of the Navy.

So now they had three extra days in Sydney, although Tony would have to visit the office and do some training. They could still do some touristy things like attend the ballet at the world-famous Sydney Opera House and Tony wanted to do a night climb of the equally famous Sydney Harbour Bridge, climbing over the arch. Emma was going to visit the zoo while he was working, making the trip across the harbour from the Sydney Observatory Hotel by ferry and there were shopping, galleries and restaurants to keep her amused while he was working.

Back to the present, his team came up to wish him well. Dane Larsen shook his hand, wishing him luck with a grin that left most of the female guests, married or not, feeling weak at the knees. The female agents gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek to wish him well. His team were all upbeat and excited to be invited, not to mention rubbing shoulders with the director and Sec Nav. Meanwhile his probie Jodhi Crisp was seriously crushing on Brad and Tony was a little concerned that if she didn't stop drooling, Lara was going to rip her throat out.

The probie had told Lisle Zabinski, his senior field agent, how dreamy he looked, that all he needed was an officer's sword since he was a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy.

Tony recalled the case he'd worked on years ago involving officers' swords on the USS Forster with the two MMROPG gamers who had illegally acquired officer's ceremonial swords. The pair of idiots had decided to take things to another level and were duelling aboard the ship hence his trip to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico undercover to obtain one and discover who the second suspect was. It was one of the first cases Cate worked on with the team after she joined them, and it also marked the beginning of the end in terms of Gibbs treating him as a professional.

He felt a pang of regret – Gibbs had told him when he hired him Rule 5 – you don't waste good and he'd made him think that he believed in him and his abilities. Tony had trusted him which was a rare thing for someone who'd effectively been alone for most of his life. There was a tiny part of him that wished that things had turned out differently and Gibbs had been here with him today – the Gibbs that he'd been years ago who'd been Tony's partner and not the boss.

Nonetheless he realised that regrets and what ifs just got in the way of making the most of the present and he made a conscious decision to banish the melancholy thoughts. He tried not to become maudlin about his life expectancy because everyone dies and whether his time was short, or he defied the odds and lived for years, time was still too precious to waste. He refused to let regrets hijack what was a celebration of life and love.

Somewhere along the way he'd lost Gibbs’ respect and trust, but he'd found Emma and he was going to appreciate her every day of the rest of his life because Gibbs was right about one thing. You don't waste 'good' and Emma Ingham was damned good. As he and his Best Man took their places in front of the incredible expanse of blue waters of Tumon Bay and the Pacific Ocean beyond, framed by an impossibly blue cloudless sky and the massive glass arched windows, he glanced at Brad.

"Hate to sound clichéd, Wolverine but you do have the rings, don'tcha?"

"Relax Buckeye, I have them. For what it's worth, I think your frat brothers are a bit miffed that you
chose me as your best man. They keep giving me the hairy eyeball."

"I know how they feel, Doc. Sometimes I have to pinch myself too. I'm mean a Wolverine? What the hell was I thinking?"

"Idiot."

"Hey, is that any way for the Best Man to speak to the Groom? You're supposed to be keeping me calm and provide me with manly support." Tony joked.

"I'll keep it in mind. And it's alright to miss him, Buckeye and wish that it had turned out differently."

"What…?" Tony began.

"You had a certain expression. One you get when you're thinking about Gibbs. You care to share?"

"Nothing important, just a case that we worked. Third one after Cate joined us. Had to do with officers' ceremonial swords and MMORPGs."

"And you were reminded of it when your little probie was lusting after my virile Wolverine body." Brad smirked, and Tony rolled his eyes.

"You heard her too?"

"Not exactly subtle, DiNozzo."

"True, but she's young and we've been guilty of drooling in the good 'ol days, you know. She'll learn." Tony laughed. "And thanks Brad."

"No problem and look." He nudged his friend as Lara started walking down the aisle looking stunning.

Brad's wife was a willowy blonde with eyes that were a pale iridescent blue. They were rather stunning and reminded him of that woman Melissa Dorn who'd killed her half-brother and another Marine for the insurance money. And flirted with Gibbs, much to Cate's indignation. Actually, Tony decided that Caitlin Todd’s sense of outrage was more to do with the fact he’d reciprocated and obviously been attracted to her too. Dorn’s mother had been a seemingly sweet little old doc who wore Estee Lauder perfume but went around murdering Marines and slicing and dicing them.

Fortunately, unlike Melissa, apart from her eyes, Lara was a real sweetheart with no homicidal tendencies. Well okay she might be a tad territorial when it came to Brad. Tony figured though that it went along with being married to a doctor since it seemed to be SOP for patients to fall in love with their doctors, even if it was also super clichéd. According to Lara it wasn't just the ladies that she was beating off with a stick, either. Apparently, the combination of a sailor and a medico made Brad Pitt irresistible to many of his patients – the late Caitlyn Todd included.

As the wedding march rang out from the sweet strains of a viola played by one of the Bethesda contingent, his Fiancée appeared, her Aunt Sandrine and Uncle Tom on either side of her. While being something of a traditionalist but also an avowed feminist and not seeing that as being incompatible, Emma had asked both her uncle and aunt to walk her down the aisle. She’d also opted for traditional vows although Tony had requested that they tack on their own at the end and Emma agreed good humouredly with his request.

As he stared at her as she made her way up the aisle to the raised altar where Brad and he waited, Tony couldn't take his eyes off her. Her ivory dress was simple yet stunning and in the last couple of
days on the island she'd managed to collect a sun kissed golden hue to her skin. The dress was sleek and stylish and totally Emma and the antique lace inserts were romantic but understated. She glowed with happiness and as she made her way up the aisle towards him, she beamed at each one of the guests, including everyone in the ceremony and making them feel special.

Typical of his Emma, her makeup and hair were elegant but not too formal. Tony decided that the flowers that Lara had woven casually through her soft curls were beautiful and much more appropriate to the chapel - all modern glass arched floor to ceiling windows and white arched ceiling. He'd thought initially the something borrowed could have been his mother's jewellery and asked Senior about them. He’d claimed he'd sold them after his mother’s death.

However, looking at the radiant woman approaching him, the besotted groom decided that she didn't need anything more. Lara had loaned her pair of simple diamond earrings and around her neck she wore the ruby and diamond pendant that Tony gave her for her birthday, explaining that diamonds were her birthstone and rubies were his. Em had rarely taken it off since.

His only worry had been that Senior might decide to crash the wedding and make a scene in a drunken rant, but he had it on good authority that his father's liquid assets were currently all tapped out. Plus, it was rather a long way off the beaten track thankfully, even if he learnt the location. Of course, Tony wouldn't put it past Abby to buy him a ticket, but it looked as if they were going to be spared the honour of the REAL Anthony DiNozzo's presence at their wedding.

Emma was composed as she made her way to the chapel. She was looking and feeling radiant and relaxed after a couple of days soaking up the sun and surf. It had been a long trip from New York to the South Pacific but the pain of such a marathon flight had been greatly ameliorated by flying on Secretary Porter's private jet. Having plenty of leg room and the ability to stand up and move around certainly made life a lot more pleasant. As did the bathroom facilities where you didn't have to cram into a shoe box to pee or freshen up.

Of course, sipping the chilled crisp white wine that Tony had brought with them and the appetisers that Lisle had picked up at some gourmet deli had certainly been highly civilised too. The company had really helped pass the time pleasurably. Emma had always got along well with Tony's team and Leon's two kids were sweet, so the time had passed very pleasantly. Being able to stretch out and sleep on comfortable seats hadn't hurt either.

Now she was waiting to be walked down the aisle by her aunt and uncle and she was feeling mostly joyful, tinged with a little touch of sadness that her parents weren't alive to see her so happy. Still the day was too special to dwell on what couldn’t be, so Emma made a conscious effort to put thoughts of her parents’ absence out of her head and enjoy the next few hours. She smiled, looking at Lara who was checking outside into the chapel, indicating that they were just waiting for a few more people to be seated. Emma couldn't believe they'd finally made it – it had been a traumatic year, but the results had been so much better than either of them had dared to hope for when they'd first gotten together.

This place was so stunning – the whole island was of course but this purpose-built chapel was perfect. She could hear the sweet strains of Angelica's viola as the guests took their seats. She'd been a good friend of Emma's for a long time – they'd worked at Bethesda together although Angie was a highly sought after surgical scrub nurse. She turned down a chance to join the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra when she graduated college, wanting to practice nursing and done several tours of Iraq. She'd even written her own arrangement of the Wedding March for the viola, especially for Emma who was a bit of a traditionalist at heart and wouldn't dream of walking down the aisle to anything
else.

Seeing that Lara was agitated, the bride wandering over to the door to see what had her in such a
snit. She peered out and saw that there were still a few people making their way to their seats. Emma
had noticed that one of the effects of this island was that everyone seemed to relax, slow down and
smell the roses, metaphorically. Or should that be smell the hibiscus, lilies or orchids? Whatever… it
was good, but they needed to get a move on and sit down already so the wedding could get
underway.

Looking at Tony and Brad standing at the front of the chapel framed against the blue waters of the
Pacific Ocean caused her to stop breathing. Oh man did they look really handsome and strong and
she realised how clichéd, how mundane it would have been to have dressed them in white tuxedos.
Still it took someone masculine to really do justice to those outfits and while a tux covered up a
multitude of sins and made most men look dashing, there was no hiding in their Bounty get-up.
Which was when she realised what had put a scowl on her friend’s face as most of the female guests
were checking out two fine looking butts. One particular fangirl was practically drooling all over
Brad and Emma chuckled.

"Hey Girlfriend, bet you're glad that Brad's not wearing tight white leather trousers and vest right
about now? Looks like someone has a bit of a crush."

"Oh, hell yeah! Who is that little hussy, anyway?" Lara demanded half-jokingly although she was
definitely more than a little piqued.

"That's Jodhi. She's Tony's probie on his team. She's still a baby and hasn't learnt the art of subtlety
yet. Don't worry, Lisle will take her in hand. Besides the guys look good enough to eat. We have to
expect a few lustful females."

And sure enough, Tony's 2IC wandered over and sent Jodhi to round up the last couple of stragglers
who were just entering the chapel. Tony's SFA looked up and saw Lara and Emma peering out at
the guests and smiled before heading back to talk to them.

"Are you good to go, Emma?"

She smiled. "Yep, I'll just get my Aunt and Uncle and we can get started when everyone's seated."

Lisle looked at her admiringly. "I love your dress, it's gorgeous. You look so beautiful and serene.
And the guys look amazing too. I thought you'd get them togged up in their Armani tuxes, but this is
like something out of a Pirates of the Caribbean movie. Awesomely yummy if it isn't completely
inappropriate to say that about my soon to be married boss and his most definitely married Best
Man."

Emma giggled. "It's Mutiny on the Bounty with Clark Gable actually Lise, but you get the drift. And
you can drool over the guys a little but fair warning - Lara's very territorial.

Lisle chuckled too. "I'll keep that in mind and admire them from afar. More importantly, I'll pass that
little snippet along to the probie who is drooling over the Doc. She's got it bad but to be fair, what
did you expect dressing them like that? Every woman loves a pirate." She gave them both a mock
glare before changing the subject.

"You know I'm used to being around Tony, obviously. Used to his humour to keep us going when
the going gets tough plus that smile that lights up a room and gets hearts thumping but I can't believe
how truly happy he looked when I wished him well before. It suits him… you suit him. I'd wish you
good luck, but I don't think you'll need it Emma, so I'll say be happy." Kissing her gently on the
cheek, Lisle left and went to give the heads up to Angelica.

After Lisle had left the room Lara bustled around collecting their flowers. They'd decided to ditch the more traditional bouquets of roses for white lilies that seemed more in keeping with the location. Her Aunt Sandrine kissed her affectionately before handing her over to her uncle.

He whispered in her ear, "My sister would be so proud of you, Emma. You look really beautiful, but she would be even more overjoyed with how happy you are on your wedding day. You're glowing." He hugged her carefully, not wanting to mess up her hair and with her aunt and uncle on either side of her, she nodded to Lara to let her know that she was ready.

As she heard Angie glide into the Wedding March she entered the intimate little chapel that seated fifty guests and made it a point to smile and acknowledge each one of their guests as she made her way up the aisle. With the exception of their bosses, everyone else was a close friend or family and she wanted to share her joy with them all.

As she proceeded up towards the altar she stole a glance at Tony and saw that Lisle was right – he did look happy. She could always tell by his eyes if he was wearing his mask or if his happiness was genuine. Today there was a contentment in his eyes that made her euphoric. She also saw the love and awe and felt overwhelmed.

Emma had been a little concerned that ghosts from the past might make an unwanted appearance and was grateful for the stunning location which was a distraction and also so different from the 'almost' traditional wedding to Wendy Miller that never happened. It was one reason why she had tried to keep everything low key, hoping to avoid bringing back painful memories of that silly piano teacher practically leaving him at the altar. Being abandoned was one of his greatest fears and Wendy Miller had just been one in a long line of people Tony had loved and lost – either intentionally or because of fate.

It was also why in spite of opting for a fairly traditional wedding she'd flat out refused to spend the night before the ceremony apart from him. She knew damned well if she did that many of his doubts and insecurities would make an unsolicited appearance and he'd be plagued with doubts. Besides, they'd been living together anyway so it seemed a stupid ritual. Emma was determined to get him to the altar without ripping open old wounds if she could.

That meant not leaving him alone the night before they married, and it wasn't a totally altruistic act on her part either. While his ghosts included the memory of being left at the altar and being abandoned in hotel rooms by Senior as a child, she had ghosts of her own she was determined would remain exiled on this special day. Emma hated it when they were unable to sleep together in the same bed. Sometimes when she was working the graveyard shift, or he pulled an all-nighter they didn't go to bed together or if Tony had to go away on a case.

She absolutely hated it. It brought back some really bad memories of leaving him alone in a hospital bed in Milan and how damned close they came to actually losing him several times. The first few cycles of chemo were horrendous, he was so damned weak, and their relationship was still so new she wasn't even sure if he'd fight.

Having seen how determined he was to survive the plague she knew straight away that he'd all but given up when he was diagnosed with the lung tumour. Life had convinced him there wasn't anything worth fighting for. Events at work had broken him down, robbed him of his joi de vivre – he'd been a shadow who was just going through the motions but without any real conviction. It had taken every bit of strength Emma possessed to make him fight and leaving him at night had been damned scary. She would go home each night to the apartment she shared with Brad and Lara wondering if he'd still be alive the next morning.
So, while she thought traditions were nice and mostly comfortable, spending the night before their wedding separated - never going to happen.

Her Uncle Tom and Aunt Sandrine hugged and kissed her and hugged Tony before heading off to sit in the seats next to her cousins Riley and Tara and their respective spouses. She took her place alongside Tony and their hands sought each other out without conscious thought. Tony communicating his feelings through a series of hand squeezes as they exchangedtheir vows. Vows about sickness and health that had a particular poignancy considering what had brought them together and had left a lot of their guests choked up with emotion as well.

Finally, the Naval Chaplain called for rings to be exchanged before Tony reduced her to tears with his emotion filled declaration.

He gave her the smile that she liked to think was reserved especially for her; an almost shy can this really be happening and not just a dream smile that she cherished because he wasn't hiding from her. She'd seen most of his smiles and many of them made her sad, knowing how much he concealed, ranging from you've really hurt my feelings but I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of knowing it smile to okay this is bad, but I have to hold everything together for you all grin plus everything in between.

This one was the real Tony – open, vulnerable and sharing his true self with her family and their friends. He squeezed her hands and stared at her with his incredible green-grey eyes before reciting the words he'd prepared.

"Emma Sharon Ingham, there's an Indian proverb that says that it is love that makes the impossible possible. I believe that we are quintessence of that sentiment since only twelve months ago I was effectively planning my funeral. If our paths hadn't crossed again I'm not sure even with the drug trial or my amazing doctors and nurses that I could have made it without you." He smiled gratefully at Brad, Giovanna and Alessandro before continuing.

"The Chinese philosopher and poet, Lao Tzu said that 'being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage'. Even though I didn't want to love you I couldn't help myself and you gave me the courage to not give up, even when I thought the well was dry. Being loved by you gave me the strength to believe I could survive even when everything looked hopeless."

He paused and smiled as he stared deeply into her clear blue-grey eyes, saying things with his own that were too intimate and intense to share with anyone else before he resumed. "To paraphrase Robert Heinlein – our love is the state in which the happiness of the other is essential to our own. My vow to you is that I will cherish that love each and every day."

And if she was too overcome with emotion to respond with anything more coherent than tears of joy when he was done, Emma didn't think that anyone held it against her. Especially since many of their friends were trying not to break down themselves. Lara discreetly handed her a crisply starched white lacy handkerchief to mop up her tears whilst surreptitiously dabbing her own and the chaplain pronounced them husband and wife. She fell into his arms and kissed him with her usual enthusiasm, never shy about displays of public affection and seeing no reason to change what worked on such a joyous occasion.

This time Tony seemed oblivious to the people surrounding him as he responded tenderly making her forget everything and everyone else in the room until the applause brought her back to the present. She was pleased to see that Tony wasn't regretting letting his shields down and sharing his feelings with their guests. His illness had brought about so many changes and while she wouldn't have wished anyone be diagnosed with cancer, Tony had still managed to grow in ways that were
positive and for that Emma DiNozzo was eternally grateful.
Chapter Summary

Chapter summary: Ric Balboa has left DC and Tony is persuaded to return, although he has a very personal reason for coming back too.

Chapter Notes

Someone argued with my statement that if you were in full remission - no sign of cancer cells remaining - for five years - that you could consider yourself cured. They argued about the five year amount - saying it was dependant upon what type of cancer you had. All the medicos I've talked to say that five years is generally used as a guide but it is just that.

I just did some research online and found this from NIH National Cancer Institute ... "If you remain in complete remission for 5 years or more, some doctors may say that you are cured. Still, some cancer cells can remain in your body for many years after treatment. These cells may cause the cancer to come back one day. For cancers that return, most do so within the first 5 years after treatment. But, there is a chance that cancer will come back later. For this reason, doctors cannot say for sure that you are cured. The most they can say is that there are no signs of cancer at this time."
https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/prognosis

The five years is just a general guide - based upon statistics and definitely not definitive. The point is - as I make throughout the story, Tony is pragmatic about the term cured - he's aware that even if he makes it to the five year mark, he will still not consider himself cured.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two years later:

The DC office was abuzz with anticipation. Anthony DiNozzo was returning home to replace Special Agent Balboa as the senior supervisory agent of the Major Case Response Team. There were still plenty of people in the office that remembered him from his years on the team as SFA when Gibbs had ruled the roost. Everyone knew that Gibbs had been grooming him for the team leader position – he'd even taken over once as team lead for four months when Gibbs retired before he came back again.

So, it was a shock to everyone that when Gibbs retired for real this time that Tony didn't return and take up the reins. Balboa stepped up instead. There was a lot of scuttlebutt around about why that was but mostly people believed that he'd settled down in New York and hadn't want to leave his new
Now speculation was rife that Tony had his sights set on Leon Vance's chair and the innovations he was credited with introducing to the agency suggested that for once scuttlebutt was on the money – that he had ambitions for the top job. Most people agreed that the innovations were long overdue - like the mentoring programs for female agents and gay, lesbian and transgender agents. And then there were the wide range of stress reduction initiatives that had been implemented which DiNozzo was credited with implementing. It hadn’t escaped notice that staff stress leave requests were way down right across the agency and everyone reckoned that was a damned good thing.

Of course, while scuttlebutt was right on the money on occasion, most of the time it was just plain wrong. Leon Vance, once the most ambitious of individuals within NCIS and determined not to moulder away in a two-bit federal agency when higher office was calling to him, had mellowed considerably. Now he appeared to be happy with ending out his career as NCIS director.

The prevailing wisdom was that it was probably the death of his wife and finding himself in the role of a single father that brought about the change. Although equally people whispered, it may have been the realisation that his negligence and ambition is what cost his wife her life and robbed Kayla and Jarrod of their precious mother which had tempered his career aspirations.

Leon knew there was a certain amount of truth to those rumours. Losing Jackie had definitely been a wake-up call about what was important in life and that sure as hell wasn’t a job over family. He regretted every day that his job cost him his beloved wife, and he obsessed over every wasted minute, regretting every time he’d stayed back to finish paper work instead of going home to spend it with her. It had made him reassess his priorities and focus on his children.

So, he was no longer in any great hurry to continue rising up the food chain although he was aware of the rumours surrounding him and Agent DiNozzo. Just as he was equally aware that Tony was coming back to DC not because of a newfound ambition to kick him out of the big chair but partially because of a sense of obligation to Balboa.

However, DiNozzo’s return to the capital was mostly for personal reasons that had little to do with his job. His brush with death had similarly caused him to reassess what was important to him and once again it wasn’t his job. It would always run second place to his commitment to his wife, Emma.

Plus, when it came to his job, he preferred to get his hands dirty. While DiNozzo was extremely adept at schmoozing politicians and managing people (which was an essential requirement for the top job) his investigative instincts were far stronger. He lived to be out in the field, using his mind to solve crimes. In that respect Leon resolved, he was a lot like Gibbs used to be.

So, Leon expected that the rumour mill would leap into overdrive with him returning to take up the mantle of the MCRT, however neither he nor DiNozzo were going to be making any more major changes – not for a while yet. When Kayla and Jarrod went away to college he might dust off his ambitions and make a tilt at a political career but until then, he was happy with the way things were. Still, Vance knew that it wouldn't stop the scuttlebutt but then it wouldn't be DC without it.

Staring down on the agents working below him he was aware of the air of expectancy across the floor. It hummed like a maddening undertone and no one was focusing completely on their work. Leon could see that the MCRT in particular were practically jiggling in their seats as someone called up from security.

Special Agent Eleanor Bishop hung up her phone and announced. "He's arrived and is on his way up in the elevator."
The probie of the team chuckled at something and Leon wondered what was so funny. She'd only been on the team for a few weeks before Balboa left, and the trio had been working cold cases for the past week while they awaited their new SSA. Hearing the elevator ding, announcing its arrival on the floor all eyes turned to it expectantly. When the doors opened it was empty!

I Shouldn't Have To

Roy Howie finished his weekly shakedown of the prisoners' cells looking for contraband. As per normal he'd found a wide variety of smuggled and illegal goods that never ceased to amaze him no matter how long he was in the job. There were a plethora of homemade weapons, drugs and cell phones and this week he'd busted an illegal still making rot gut that left him shaking his head at the women’s’ resourcefulness.

If only they dedicated as much effort to rehabilitation and education, he wondered at the tangible differences it might make. Wandering into the duty room with the seized goods from the search he and his junior prison officers had found, Roy began to log the evidence and make recommendations re appropriate charges for the miscreants.

Prison Officer Kyra Greene looked up from the report she was typing. "How'd it go, out there?"

Roy shrugged. "Oh, ya know – shivs, knives, brass knuckles. Found a still that looks like it would have caused alcoholic poisoning and 15 cell phones."

"Drugs?" Kyra enquired.

"Yeah, isn't that a given? Mostly weed and what I think is Ecstasy but what also looks like some Ice and Rx* and OTC* pills."

"They're persistent, I'll give them that much!"

"That's one word for it," Roy deadpanned as he continued logging the evidence.

"Anything from our Mossad assassin?" Kyra enquired curiously.

Her ability to palm innocuous items and turn them into items to commit acts of violence were notorious in the women's prison and for months had driven the POs to distraction. When she had been sentenced, the former federal agent was shocked by the verdict and incredibly angry. She had absolutely no compunction about lashing out whenever she was irritated which was pretty much 24/7 - at least initially.

Administrative segregation had managed to take the wind out her sails, but the prison officers and the warden remained acutely aware of her propensity for violence. No one would ever let their guard down with her.

Frankly David scared the crap out of most the staff because of her really short fuse, although personally, Kyra thought her sheer unpredictability is what made her so dangerous. Sure, David routinely taunted them with how weak and inadequate they all were, compared to her own hand to hand abilities and extensive Mossad and military training and realistically, Greene agreed. In fact, they all did which was why they didn't want her in their prison in the first place - she was dangerous!

It was the sheer volatility of the woman that made Kyra wonder if she was all there – she'd heard on the grapevine that the former Mossad officer had killed a man who’d annoyed her simply because he refused to stop talking. If it was true, what that said to the PO was that she was a sociopath with a lot of dangerous training. Apparently, David had also had friends in high places because the whole incident had been hushed up, so she was never charged.
Since her incarceration they tried very hard to rehabilitate her, if for no other reason than it was in their own best interests to try to help her deal with her anger issues in a more appropriate manner. The prison shrink had tried to get her to open up and deal with her anger but she'd either wilfully misunderstood the man or she was thick as a brick because she ended up beating the crap out of him and he’d resigned – refusing to press charges. He’d claimed that he fallen down a flight of stairs – the dolt.

They'd sent in a spiritual advisor who'd been rebuffed but while she'd been way too angry to listen to Rabbi Levi, ironically, she had responded positively to a sermon delivered by one of the prison chaplains. He been preaching to the women, urging them to channel their inner hostilities into cerebral rather than physically aggressive behaviours, exhorting that the pen was mightier than the sword.

Although he had been talking about using the legal system and the appeals mechanism to fight their battles for them, David had taken it to mean something completely different. Taking the advice to heart, she began putting pen to paper with a vengeance.

David started keeping a journal about her time in Mossad and Kyra wasn’t sure how that would go over if she ever decided to publish it - probably about as well as an ex- CIA or MI6 agent would fare with their previous employers. But so far, she made no attempt to turn it into a book. Therefore, it was deemed as good therapy for her anger issues and they left her to it.

She also began a campaign of retribution against those people who she felt had wronged her with a racy book with the protagonist a femme fatale/dominatrix in charge of a stable of male gigolos. In reality, her escort business was a front for a global spy network in a story that was cross between an erotic novel and an Ian Fleming thriller. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was at least semi-autobiographical.

David’s alter-ego in the story, Cat O'Nine-Tails travelled the globe with her highly skilled assassins disguised as harmless gigolos. Their raison d'etre was tracking down and terminating terrorists, in turn making the various Intelligence Agencies of the world including Mossad antsy because Cat made them look like amateurs by beating them to successful kills. Each of her underlings had a role to play on her team, as did Cat. She was the ultra-deadly spy who the world at large saw as a very high-priced whore/ Madam taking a step up the management ladder by starting up her own agency.

Kyra often wondered if that was how David saw herself or how others had made her feel (as opposed to how the world at large viewed her) but then she wasn't a shrink, just a humble PO. One thing she was sure about – the inside of Ziva David’s head was a very scary messed up place!

Every week during the search for contraband the guards would collect her latest chapter, so it could be checked over before sending it on to her agent. Technically, prisoners couldn't earn money while serving a prison sentence over and above what little recompense they were offered for performing certain menial jobs in prison. Those 'wages' paid for little luxuries, such as shampoo purchased in the prison commissary by the inmates. So, David had her lawyer set up a trust fund for families of her assassinated targets with any monies earned if her book was ever published, paid into it for their benefit.

Apparently, she was seeking not just revenge but also absolution from her own life as an assassin, working for her father who'd been head of Mossad before his own assassination several years ago. Of course, checking her work to ensure that it didn't contain any highly sensitive intel. related to prison security or classified intel didn't technically require that the entire staff of the prison to check over each chapter as it was completed as it was checked out by a representative from Homeland Security.
Well okay, not quite everyone on the staff read it…due to its smutty overtones the chaplains refused to read it, and it was a one or two-person task at best, but it had become a guilty pleasure. One that everyone else on staff looked forward to each week – there was much excitement when reading the latest instalment of David’s manuscript.

Each of the POs' had their own favourite character, even if they wouldn't admit it to anyone. There was Silvio who was an incredibly arrogant Dom with ice blue eyes. He wore black leather chaps, a whip and little else in the boudoir and greatly enjoyed punishing his clients and they enjoyed being punished, apparently. His background was a former Marine trained sniper and a deadly assassin.

Then there was Jock, a former cop, a dumb, pretty boy who wore an athletic supporter and letterman sweater while he was working as a gigolo. He appealed to a wide variety of women of all ages possessing middle of the road, white bread sexual appetites. Naturally his popularity gave him an ego the size of Texas, even if he was way too dumb to spell the state.

And last but not least of the gigolos was Mac, the submissive who graduated from MIT in computer forensics. When he worked as a gigolo he wore a collar and leash and set of fluffy cuffs and his clients, who were predominately Doms, just loved to humiliate and punish him. His cheeks were permanently red!

Kyra was quick to admit that most of the attraction in the book was in reading about the sexploits of the three male assassins in their undercover roles as high-priced gigolos and of course, there was Cat O'Nine-Tails. Her ability to control men and even women using her sexual skills was pure escapism since Kyra thought David was either deluding herself or it was all a gross exaggeration but still it was entertaining. And yeah, it was pure titillation.

Yet the authenticity provided by David's background as a former spy and highly trained assassin lifted the manuscript, at least in the prison officer's opinion, well beyond the realm of a pale imitation of books in the genre of Fifty Shades of Grey. The chapter where Cat tutors her gigolos/assassins on the 18 different ways a seemingly innocuous paper clip can be used as a murder weapon was scary, yet utterly compelling. It also rang true in a way that the smut didn't – it oozed authenticity.

It also served to remind the staff just how dangerous this woman was if her energy wasn't diverted into harmless pastimes like writing her smutty novel or her journal. Another chapter that had been quite fascinating was the examples of how to kill a target and make it look like an accident. Kyra was amazed who many variations there were and also pretty creeped out by it too. Probably the most noteworthy example although not the scariest was the bisexual terrorist who was killed during a sexual encounter with Cat and her dumb as a rock but libidinously insatiable gigolo Jock. The target expired when the pair caused the target to stoke out from having too much sex, but the cause of death identified by the ME had been natural causes.

Of course, as completely absorbing as the content of the book was, it was also wholly unreadable from a structural perspective, what with the mishmash of metaphors and the murdering of idioms. If anyone did decide to publish it, they would need to hire a ghost writer to rewrite it to make it comprehensible for the general public.

It wasn't quite as difficult for the staff since they had become somewhat used to David's idiosyncratic use of the English language. Still it had definitely become the highlight of the week for the staff to see what she came up with next and it helped to keep David docile - so a win-win situation for all of them.

At this rate, the next few years would fly by as she served out her sentence and would be deported back to Israel upon her release. Naturally her citizenship would be revoked because of her criminal conviction.
Tony made his way through security and reflexively headed into the elevator before giving himself a mental scolding. Back here barely five minutes, Anthony and you're already falling back into bad ways. Get a grip! Just before the doors shut he ducked out of the elevator, slipping into the stairwell as had been his habit when he was in New York.

He had to watch out, so he didn't slip back into less healthy habits now he was back in DC. Plus, by taking the stairs it would let him arrive unannounced and he could discreetly check out the office that had been home to him for so many years. Yes, technically he was coming home, yet it didn't feel like home after three years away… maybe in time. So much had changed. He'd changed since he worked here.

He was still in remission – three years now and only another two to reach the big number five. Truthfully, Tony knew that even though it was generally considered to be the point at which one could use the 'C' word instead of the 'R' word, he'd probably never see himself as being cured and continue to think of himself as being in remission. A part of him would always be half expecting the tumour to come back or more likely for it to re-emerge from hiding somewhere else in his body. It meant he needed to stay vigilant, maintain a healthy lifestyle and try hard not take a single day for granted.

Really it wasn't such a bad way for anyone to live their life, as long as they lived it to the full without taking unnecessary risks. As long as they also didn’t swing to the other extreme and wrap themselves up in bubble wrap and stop experiencing life, either. It was all about finding a balance.

It wasn't just his attitude to life that had undergone a drastic makeover since he left the DC office, though. He'd been married for the last two years, together with Emma for three and at long last he was blissfully happy and content. She was so damned good for him, he felt settled - well apart from the fact that they had just relocated cities.

They'd decided not to move back into his old apartment, opting to sell it since Jimmy and Breena had moved out several month ago into something bigger for a young couple with a toddler. Returning from New York, they’d both grown a little tired of apartment living and made a decision to buy a house in a quiet neighbourhood.

Tony was still tripping over boxes that hadn't been unpacked and they hadn't finished all the painting yet. The cats weren't happy although he was sure that once they got everything squared away they would love the extra space. During their engagement, he'd promised to buy Emma a Burmese kitten and on his first trip back to DC several months before his wedding, he and Jimmy had slipped away to a cat show to check out Burmese cat breeders since The Gremlin was the animal expert.

'Jimony' was the portmanteau they'd adopted for their team collaboration when they went looking at scores of kittens and an assortment of adult cats of every colour. Frankly, Tony didn't see the need for it though since he already knew that his fiancée wanted a lilac or a lilac tortie Burmese.

Jimmy had patiently explained that they were checking out the temperament of the adult cats that reflected the type of pets the kittens would mature into when they grew up. Coat colour wasn't a factor since it generally didn't affect temperament – at least for desirable traits such as docility and sociability.

The former veterinary tech did concede that for more minor attributes such as mischievousness, problem solving and energy levels some people emphatically believed there was some minor differences in torties. They were frequently perceived to be more full-on and prone to getting into trouble. Tony decided that torties sounded like his kind of cat and Jimmy laughingly agreed that if
Tony was feline he'd probably be a 'naughty tortie' – or if not, most definitely a chatty Oriental breed like a Siamese or Tonkinese.

After several hours Jimmy gave his stamp of approval to two breeders whose cats passed the stringent standards he'd set, including conducting genetic testing and breeding to improve the breed, not to make money. The Autopsy Gremlin insisted that if you were doing it right, there wasn't a lot of profit to be made, that it was more a labour of love. He also ditched anyone who didn't make prospective customers fill out a questionnaire before agreeing to hand over their kittens, declaring that there were too many unwanted cats for breeders to be cavalier about the people they sold their kittens to.

In the end Tony went with a litter of kittens who were barely three weeks old, over a litter that was six weeks old. He put down a deposit on the only lilac tortoiseshell, a female who at three weeks old, to his untrained eye, looked more like a baby rat than feline. Having interacted with kittens, juveniles and adults who were all surprisingly sociable with humans, it presented him with a problem. Tony couldn't help worrying that with Emma and him both working long hours and the kitten shut up in their apartment alone, he might get lonely.

When he mentioned his fear to Jimmy, the breeder Gareth responded. He explained that especially with inquisitive and active breeds like the Burmese, getting two kittens from the same litter worked out well for everyone. He advised picking a kitten of the opposite sex though to help keep the peace. Remembering how lonely it felt to grow up an only child, Tony had readily agreed to take a second rat-like baby.

Having three males to choose from, he ended up putting another deposit down, this time for a kitten that they thought was going to be a red colour as she matured since his grandmother, Sassy was red. In fact, she'd been super friendly with Jimmy and Tony at the cat show. Neither of them cared about the blue ribbons adorning her cage but they loved her cheekiness. Gareth warned them that distinguishing between reds and creams was difficult at such an early age but even if the kitten ended up being a cream he wouldn't be too distraught about it.

To be perfectly honest, Tony had always thought cats were aloof and standoffish - until now. He'd been perfectly happy to get Emma a cat, but he'd never expected to form a strong emotional attachment to it himself since animals and kids never seemed to like him much. After playing with Gareth's cats, before he knew what hit him Tony was totally thinking in terms of his and her kittens! It was a decision that he'd never regretted.

Apart from ensuring that their cats, Liliana and Zac settled into their new home with the minimum of disruption, one of the first things he'd organised to have moved from his apartment was his baby grand piano. After the contracts had been exchanged on the house he'd organised the piano movers - he couldn't wait to be able to play it again. He'd really missed being able to play whenever he wanted and spent many hours getting reacquainted with it once more.

Meanwhile even though they still had a way to go til they were finished fixing up the interior, Emma already had great plans for the gardens and the yard. Tony was also going to plant an herb and vegetable garden since he was still really careful about what he ate.

The truth was that it had become second nature to eat holistically and avoid unnecessarily processed food. By the time his tastebuds had recovered from the cancer treatments, he also discovered that the cravings for processed foods had diminished to the point where it was easy to resist their lure. Especially when he actually began to enjoy food again instead of forcing himself to eat for fuel.

Eating a piece of fruit, something he'd taken for granted before he got sick was a revelation now. Tastes were so much more complex once he eliminated processed foods and Tony found that he
appreciated even the simplest dishes. He'd always had acute eyesight, hearing and sense of smell and now his sense of taste was much more sensitive as well.

He recalled how being able to detect Estee Lauder perfume had helped solve a murder. Maybe one day his sense of taste might be equally useful on a case but in the meantime, he drove his team crazy nibbling on his seeds and nuts during cases. In the course of his recovery he'd learnt that approximately 70 percent of the immune system resided in the gastrointestinal tract. So, it made a whole heap of sense to Tony to feed his gut wisely, so it was able to do what it was supposed to.

Even without his cancer scare, he should probably have been babying his somewhat questionable immune system and eating better. Emma had for the most part adopted his careful diet too, knowing that avoiding highly processed and chemical laden foods made sense and she'd noticed she had much more stamina. Both of them were looking forward to being able to grow some of their own herbs and vegetables and planned to plant a number of fruit and nut trees too.

Perhaps the most surprising change of all though and certainly not one he would have predicted three years ago, was that Emma was five months pregnant with fraternal twins – a boy and a girl. To say that she was overjoyed was a gross understatement. He on the other hand was a little more ambivalent since he hadn't been sure he was good father material, given the DiNozzo genes and then there was the question of his life expectancy. He really wasn't sure how fair it was to bring life into the world knowing that he might not be around to rear them – it was a little too close to his own childhood for comfort.

Before he'd departed for Milan three years ago, Emma had bullied him into storing his sperm before he underwent the chemo treatments. He'd done it more than anything to convince her that he wouldn't give up but since their relationship was still so new and he honestly didn't expect to survive, he'd never envisaged needing or using it. It had been a token gesture at best and he'd barely thought about it later with so much going on.

Yet once they were married Emma had mentioned the possibility of starting a family several times. He'd always persuaded her to wait because he was half expecting to relapse but as time went on, it became clear that if they waited until the magic five-year mark it might be too late for Emma to fall pregnant.

Tony worried about what would happen to her and a baby if he died and she'd shrugged and said, the same thing that happened to other cops or agents who were killed in the line of duty or parents were in the military. That she'd fall apart but that their friends would be there to help put her life together again and, in the end having a piece of him to hold on to would help her to move on. Brad and Lara vowed to be there if they were needed and Jimmy and Breena too. Plus, he knew that his frat brothers would help if need be.

So, they moved back to DC to be closer to their friends and he'd increased his life insurance, consulted a Buckeye who was now a stockbroker about investing part of what they had left of his trust fund from his mother's side of the family. He'd recommended Tony purchase a mix of conservative blue-chip investments and more speculative high yield stocks. Finally, Tony had created trust funds for the twins' education since Emma had become pregnant on their second attempt.

And that had been a real shocker. When they decided to attempt IVF, they'd decided to use two fertilised eggs for each attempt, not because they wanted twins but to maximise the chances of the pregnancy taking. Emma was thrilled when she found out about the 'what ifs.'

What if he died? Bringing up two children would be much harder than one child for a single parent,
but Emma's joy was so self-evident that he tried to stay positive. Tony had used guided visualisation during the cancer treatments and now he used it again, visualising seeing himself attending his son and daughter's college graduations and their weddings, trying really hard not to play the 'what if' cards. Emma had always been adamant that he was going to make it and she claimed falling pregnant so easily and with twins was an omen that everything would work out fine. He found it harder to believe that they would have a long-term future though.

Seeing her happy had always been really important to him so Tony tried not to borrow trouble. He had enough to worry about already – namely not messing up two impressionable little people. Emma as usual had given him a metaphorical kick up the ass, pointing out how much strength it took to defeat the tumour. She reminded him how much work he'd done with Raffy to overcome his own childhood before demanding that he quit obsessing and go finish painting the nursery.

So, there had been a lot of changes – he'd changed. He was more confident, less brash and cocky since that had been an act to divert attention away from all his inadequacies – perceived and real. He'd grown into the leadership of his team over the last three years – they'd made him a better agent with their trust in him.

He still used humour to diffuse tension and conflict, but it was less manic than it used to be. Not so much a defence as it used to be, but old habits die hard. Tony didn't think that he would ever not use humour to deflect when he was uncomfortable, though.

As he climbed the stairs to the MCRT bullpen without breaking a sweat or puffing he thought about his new team. Some people might be surprised that Marc Mendez, the MCRT's current senior field agent wasn't promoted to team lead. Balboa and Vance felt though that while Marc was an excellent 2IC, he still needed some more blooding before he was ready to lead a team of his own. According to his performance evals, Marc's thinking was at times lacking in imagination and he was prone to be a bit pedantic. His goal was to work on thinking more laterally.

Balboa freely admitted that he had similar deficiencies himself and hadn't been in a position to mentor Marc in these areas. Ric, Marc and the director all thought that by working under Tony for a couple of years he could encourage Marc to think more creatively. Then he would be offered his own team.

The second member of the team was Ellie Bishop and according to Balboa she was a real sweetheart – a little odd at times but an asset to the team. She was a team player, great at information analysis and pretty competent on the tech side of things as well. Tony had met her when she'd come up to New York to be trained in the information sharing techniques. He'd thought she was a promising probie and despite being super smart, was still very eager to learn and was also self-effacing. In his book that was a winning combination.

Since Balboa's transfer had been announced and Tony's appointment to replace him was declared, Ellie had been emailing him frequently, excited to be working with him. He suspected that with her unorthodox memory and thinking, she was looking forward to working under a team leader who was infamous for out of the box thinking. He was looking forward to working with her too. It would be interesting to see what they came up with.

His third team member Tony was extremely well acquainted with since she'd been on his team for the last three years. His probie Jodhi Crisp had leapt at the chance to join him in DC when he asked her and had already taken up her assignment several weeks ago. Tony had deliberately left the team to their own devices for a while so that she could gel with Marc and Ellie without his presence interfering with their team dynamic.

Tony really wanted to avoid the new MCRT team developing an 'us versus them' dynamic. Crisp
was replacing Balboa's former junior agent Jake Dunstan who'd transferred onto the team when McGee resigned almost eighteen months ago. When Jake applied for a job transfer to the Singapore Office because his girlfriend had been transferred there by her company and he wanted to join her, Tony offered his place to Jodhi. He thought she would be a good fit - plus she was a crack shot, having come from several generations of cops. He'd become used to trusting her to watch his back in the field.

While Jodhi wasn't technically a probationary agent any longer, nor was Bishop. They both had the same amount of time at the agency although Ellie had superiority because of her extra years as an analyst at NSA. Vance had told him that the former incarnation of the MCRT was a thing of the past where agents spent far too long after obtaining valuable skills and the agency hadn't benefited from all that training and experience being passed on to other teams. So, from now on, there would be a limit on the amount of time an agent could spend on the team before being forced to accept promotions and passing on what they had learnt to a new generation.

Meanwhile, his old team in New York had been shaken up by their departure too with Lisle Zabinski, his former SFA taking over as the team leader after serving as SFA on the team for six years. Dane Larson had been promoted to senior field agent and they would be assigned a new probie and junior agent. Plenty of changes ahead for both teams but Tony had every confidence in Lisle and Dane. He would miss working with them both, but he knew that they were ready for their promotions – they needed them to keep on growing as agents.

Tony stepped out of the stairwell, knowing that this time, no one would question his fitness to lead the MCRT. He wasn't Gibbs' questionable replacement, appointed with a cursory throwaway comment 'you'll do.'

He was returning to the MCRT with three highly successful years as a senior supervisory agent and had full confidence in his own leadership abilities this time around.

Nevertheless, it was gratifying if surprising to exit the stairwell and be greeted by applause, especially from a lot of familiar faces of the other SSAs and SFAs. Hometown boy made good.

So much for sneaking in quietly!

~o0o~

Tim approached Ray Henson, the director and showrunner of The Tibblets, frustrated but then again that was nothing new about that unfortunately. Still he would do his job to the best of his abilities even if they kept putting obstacles in his way.

"Ray, the team didn't clear the crime scene." He stated without preamble, feeling disgruntled at having to explain this simple fact to him yet again.

"That would never happen in a real-life situation where they storm the premises. They could get shot by a dirtbag because they didn't make sure no one was hiding in a cupboard or shower. Plus, it's SOP to put on their bullet proof vests before they go in." McGee explained to the director for the umpteenth time since he became the technical advisor for the TV show.

Henson rolled his eyes and nodded. "Yes, yes Tim. I remember you explaining," in a long-suffering voice. "But we've already got the scene in the can and it isn't as if the fans get worried about a minor technical detail. Trust me, they are more interested in the characters and their private lives. Are Lisa and Tommy going to make out again in the elevator? Is Tibbs going to catch them playing tonsil hockey and go all Papa Tibbs on them? Are Fairy Amy and McGregor going to get back together?"
"Wearing a bullet proof vest is hardly a minor technicality and I was hired to be the technical advisor because of my experience as a trained NCIS agent." Tim huffed, feeling increasingly irritated with the thick-as-a-brick director.

"Yes, I know Tim. You tell me that all the time, but you also must understand that I have time constraints here, as well as budgetary ones. Compromises must be reached. No one cares about the finer details of police procedure.' He grinned at McGee and advised him, "Take a chill pill, dude."

"Other agents and cops care, that's why! Why the heck did you hire me since you ignore everything I say?" McGee demanded angrily.

"Truthfully? So, the publicists can claim that we have a technical advisor – Timothy McGee, a former NCIS agent. We have him because we're a procedural drama and care about authenticity."

"B-but you don't care. You don't take my advice on technical matters," McGee objected, stuttering with frustrated fury.

"Not the point, Tim. The viewers don't know that and as long as they think that we do then everyone's happy." Ray explained slowly as if McGee was developmentally delayed.

Sighing he tried to explain the facts of life to the naïve technical advisor yet again. "The viewers don't care, you might think they do but they don't. They might think they care too but trust me they don't give a flying fig either. As long as they think it's realistic, then everyone's happy."

"Do you really think that in real life a Mossad Officer would be permitted to question or arrest suspects in the US? Any convictions would be tossed out of court on appeal, even if they got a conviction. But people only want to see the hot looking Mossad chick kicking some serious bad guy ass – they don't want her standing around like a boring wallflower. So as long as they think it's realistic, then everyone's happy."

"I'm not happy!" McGee objected strenuously.

"Okay, you're not happy but no one else cares. Take my word – I've been doing this a lot longer than you. Just suck it up, accept your pay check and go write a new book!" Henson advised him wearily. He hated having to work with technical advisors – they were always so damned self-important and totally inflexible.

McGee stormed off set, totally pissed off with these imbeciles. For eighteen long months, they'd been ignoring him and disrespecting his expertise. Wasn't it enough that they'd taken his literary work and shredded it completely? They completely ruined his character – how dumb was it to turn McGregor into a lay preacher instead of a field agent?

Then in the second season Henson suddenly decided they needed a psychological profiler and seized the opportunity to write a role for his wife's daughter from her previous marriage.

Then he had his wife make cameo appearances as Tibbs’ mysterious love interest. Just to add insult to injury!

Tim admitted to himself that he'd been a fool to take on the job as the technical advisor of the Tibblets but when he first resigned from NCIS he'd thought it would be the answer to his problems since he’d had difficulty finding work. He’d also thought being a technical advisor would be a piece of cake, plus it would give him plenty of time to write. He also assumed, wrongly that the writers would consult with him as they were writing the episodes (to ensure authenticity) since he was the technical advisor.
Of course, financial worries had been instrumental in his decision to take the job. After he resigned from NCIS he expected the other federal agencies to enter a bidding war to see who would hire him. His preference had been going to the FBI or DHS, so he was totally unprepared for them all to rebuff his inquiries about working for them. It seemed that they were all gun-shy about him writing another tell-all book using real cases and his colleagues as characters yet claiming it was a piece of fiction.

Having massive legal bills (which he was still paying off after being sued by Hallmark, he wasn’t in a position to remain out of work for too long. Hallmark had sued him to recoup their own cost after Jimmy Palmer sued for defamation of character, the court awarding Palmer a hefty sum in damages. McGee thought it was damned unfair that they’d sued him in turn – he wasn’t the one who’d decided to use Palmer’s real name, damnit!

Regardless of the unfairness of the lawsuit, he still had to suck it up and pay it. So, when the law enforcement community had effectively turned their backs on him, he’d gone looking for work in the private sector. Once again, he’d underestimated how hard it would be to get a job. Unfortunately, his impressive college degrees weren’t anywhere near as impressive to prospective employers since he hadn’t been employed in the computer world since college.

In the words of one recruiter (who was nine years younger than McGee) he’d been left behind in the constantly evolving world of cyber science. He was a has-been who would need to go back and update his qualifications if he was serious about a job in programming, software design or R & D. Highly affronted to be told he was past his use by date, McGee refused to take the recruiter’s advice onboard, insisting that his skills were highly valuable and extremely marketable.

Unfortunately, he’d found it wasn’t so easy to pick up work as he’d envisaged. No one seemed even the slightest bit impressed when he’d bragged in his CV about using Twitter to stop a terrorist attack. The recruiters pointed out that any self-respecting selfie obsessed pre-teen could have come up with that strategy, but they’d expected more of a MIT graduate. Another smart-ass cyber geek had pointed out that using Twitter to track the terrorists was just a natural progression from asking the public for information via the TV and before that via radio broadcasts, not some earthshattering breakthrough.

Which showed how much they knew. He got invited to the White House – something he doubted any of his detractors could claim on their CVs.

Unfortunately, in such an insular industry where everyone knows everyone else, word got around swiftly that Tim had lost his creative edge – had become pedantic and predictable. In hindsight, the Twitter thing and the visit to the White House probably hadn’t been the best thing to focus on and with the job interviews all but drying up, and with legal bills and rent due, he’d been getting desperate. Which is when he’d heard about the show looking for a technical expert.

It seemed like a logical short-term solution to his financial woes and the former federal agent also hoped to get time to write, having decided to pursue his writing career in earnest. It also made a twisted sort of sense to McGee that they would pay his wage which would go on paying off their stupid law suit, even if Delilah thought he was completely nuts.

He'd even thought that the show might eventually ask him to write some scripts too – particularly as the show was based on his books. How wrong can you get! They didn't give a damn about making sure that what they wrote was remotely plausible or accurate and despite him dropping a heap of hints about writing some scripts for the show, he was still waiting for them to read the ones he'd written, unsolicited.

Unfortunately, he'd lost any credibility he might have had with any federal agencies when he accepted the position as technical advisor – a job which was a total joke. He got hate mail from snotty-nosed law enforcement professionals pointing out all the procedural flaws in the show. Cops
were the worst, particularly hick deputies from back woods sheriffs’ departments who seemed especially insulting and Tim didn’t appreciate being lectured to by them. Okay, well the hate mail had actually been addressed to the Tibblets’ producers, but they dumped it all on him, which was so unfair since they refused to follow his advice.

Plus, the actors weren’t the sharpest tools in the toolbox. None of them showed the slightest interest in learning how to shoot accurately or even bothered to learn how to kick down a door correctly – not even attempting to aim at the lock for heaven’s sake.

He tried to explain how important it was to be authentic, but they were so frustrating he wanted to scream. They even refused to wear their bullet proof vests on shootouts, claiming that it made them look fat on camera. Idiots!

He’d thought that the fallout from the telemovie had been bad enough after the movie went to air (which compared to The Tibblets was a cinematic masterpiece) but the TV show made his position on Gibbs team increasingly untenable. Gibbs had always been a hard man to work for, but the boss was a pussycat in comparison to how he was after the series started.

Maybe if it had just been Gibbs’ wrath but Abby had been furious over the weekly TV series too. Tim could only take so much crap before he had enough, storming off in disgust.

He resigned from NCIS towards the end of the first season (which had only been ten episodes commissioned) certain that he was developing a Stan Burley Special. After his abortive attempt to get a job with another agency, he decided to lay low for a bit before applying to the FBI or DHS for a job. He admitted grudgingly that he’d expected NCIS to realise they couldn’t cope without his computer genius and beg him to return.

Tim figured that in the meantime, the technical advisor job would give him the time to write the new book he was busting to get to, which it did, so he guessed in a way it had served its purpose. His newest project was autobiographical, about a young boy with an IQ of 148 who was dragged around various military bases by an arrogant, domineering, emotionally remote father. The father, an admiral in the Navy wanted a son who was a warrior, not a thinker and his story explored how the father and son spent decades trying to reconcile before the old man’s death.

McGee figured that it was a universal story that most fathers and sons could relate strongly to and he was incredibly proud of his achievement. He honestly expected it to resonate with readers of both sexes and he expected it to be huge. Bigger than the Deep Six books and they had been huge.

Yet when he tried to get it published he was met with a lukewarm response from his own publisher and his agent, plus just about everyone else he tried to sell it to. The literary world was currently abuzz about a lightweight new author called Jeb Brogiths who was making a name for himself. He was some stupid hill-billy that could barely string a sentence together who’d somehow produced two novels in two different genres that had made it to the top of the New York Best Seller list and stayed there for several months.

Critics and fans alike were describing Brogiths as the love child of Tom Clancy, Lee Child and James Patterson. Publishers were now falling over each other to publish anything remotely resembling whodunits and espionage thrillers regardless of merit, since the hype over the hillbilly author had made these types of books the next ‘big thing.’

Apparently, no one was interested in a classic tale about the struggle for autonomy, unconditional love, acceptance and respect between a father and son. One publisher had the hide to call his manuscript hackneyed and full of trite clichés because it was a universal theme. Like they’d know true literary talent if it jumped up and bit them on the ass. McGee decided that Mark Twain himself
would struggle to have his books published in today's environment.

It was looking as if he would need to resort to self-publishing if he wanted to get his book out into the public.

Chapter End Notes

End Notes:
Rx – prescription drugs
OTC – over the counter medications (no script needed).
So, just curious does anyone else watch the extras on the DVDs apart from me proclaiming they have a former NCIS agent working on the show as a technical advisor?
Chapter Summary

Time to catch up with Gibbs and find out what persuaded him to retire from NCIS when he'd been so adamant about staying on.

Chapter Notes

As the story winds down, the good news is that I find that I'm slowly beginning to write again. Although I wasn't in a good creative head space due to four deaths in the family in the last six months and plenty of family dramas, I'm slowly getting back into the groove again. My main problem atm is time and solitude -I'm not getting much of either but plugging on regardless.

Leroy Jethro Gibbs looked out across the firing range at his FLETC recruits as they adopted a proper firing stance, took aim and commenced firing, while he wandered up and down behind them observing. He was busy taking mental notes to be discussed back in the classroom, cataloguing the smallest details when it came to posture and attitudes among some minutiae he'd found to be significant over his many years' experience. Factors that could give you a little extra edge when it really mattered.

After the firing sequence ended and everyone holstered their weapons and checked their targets, he grinned. He loved this next bit of the course!

It never, ever got old! And luckily, none of this group of recruits would pass on what transpired next to anyone else, so he'd be able to pull this stunt on the next group of green rookie agents and the next. He'd never actually told anyone not to discuss it – it just seemed to be one of those things that could be tacitly chalked up to secret agent business. DiNozzo would probably have described it as the Vegas phenomenon – what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas – or what happens in Gibbs' class stays in Gibbs' class.

Striding out forcefully, he started grabbing students’ smart phones, iPhones, iPads, and fancy-ass watches off the technology obsessed students. He duct-taped them to the targets in the precise spot where each individual candidate had been off target when firing kill shots on the dirtbags who were holding a hostage. It was extremely hard to simulate a hostage situation - to get the rookies really stressed over a paper target. Using their devices as hostages helped to amped up the negative consequences of them missing a shot. It helped feign the pressure of such a scenario, particularly the anxiety and the stress hormones.

Granted, shooting up an iPhone wasn't the same as missing the kill shot on the perp or accidentally/shooting or killing the hostage. However, missing the mark and destroying their property was a serious consequence and to this social media obsessed generation worshiping the gods of technology it was almost akin to losing a limb.

What rookies failed to realise in the heat of the moment when he seized their property and they were
furious at his arrogance, was it was an excellent simulation of firing under pressure. Being furious with him and anxious about destroying their precious crap made for an easily simulated situation as he’d proved when he replicated it on every course he ran. While it was far from perfect, it was a low tech and inexpensive method of simulating a hostage situation and inevitably the students all got pissed at him, especially if they ended up shooting their stuff up.

It wasn't just that he'd hit them hard in their hip pocket - it was the fear of being unplugged from the cyber world that seemed to be more terrifying for many of the younger agents. Not that Jethro could understand the sentiment at all, but he was Machiavellian enough to take advantage of it as a training tool. It was effective for a number of reasons, not the least of which was many a disgruntled owner of a dead phone would come back to the range in their free time to practice so they could show the old bastard (him) what they were really capable of.

As the rookies left the training session, grumbling at their shot-up gear and shooting hate-filled glances his way, he couldn't help chuckling. It was just so classic! At the beginning of each new intake he was always excited at the prospect of this particular training technique and looked forward to this session hugely. But putting this particular exercise aside, Jethro was proud of his students – they arrived without a clue, he worked their asses off and at the end of the course they were accomplished marksman – markspersons? Hell, they were all fine shots when they graduated.

He'd improved performance of new recruits leaving FLETC by almost six percent in the first few intakes and it was still rising. Much to his surprise he really enjoyed working with future federal agents, making sure that they were all competent. Actually, when they finished with his class they were much more than competent. He hoped that what he taught them would save their asses under fire.

As he wandered off to get some lunch in the canteen before heading back to his office, he considered his next class this afternoon. It was an advanced firearms course for serving agents. Since he first started out at FLETC as a lecturer and trainer in firearms almost two years ago, the college had also asked him to do a refresher course for agents who were in danger of failing their firearms quals or were only borderline passing. That was in addition to training baby recruits from scratch.

But when word got out that Gibbs was the new firearms instructor, supervisors from federal agencies started sending members of their team who weren't failing, just so they could get the benefit of his experience as a Marine trained sniper and former federal agent.

It was decided at that point by the powers that be that he should run yet an additional course in advanced shooting techniques and tactics for experienced marksmen, markspersons... oh hell shooters in addition to the two other classes. So now he had all levels of shooters to train. It was this advanced group that Gibbs would be working with this afternoon, plus it was a new intake - always fun. Gibbs studied the distribution of participants from the different alphabet agencies trying to get a feel for them individually and as a group.

It went without saying that this class of feds were all good shots, judging by their qualification scores but there were good shots and then there was a good shot defined by Gibbs' standards - which was a very different ball of wax. That was why their team leaders had sent them for advanced training – his standards. It was also one of the factors preventing Gibbs from getting bored, having so much diversity to work with.

He never would have believed two years ago that he would be so happy teaching when he was forced to retire from field agent status, yet he was. It was so ironic that people had been trying to force him from the field and he had been calling in markers right, left and centre, since he knew where a lot of the bodies on Capitol Hill were buried. He'd held them off successfully for more than
two years too and he was confident he could last a few more years, despite Leon Vance's
determination to force him out.

Frankly, Gibbs still couldn't understand what the big deal was. He was fitter than many agents half
his age, his physical qualifications were better than at least 75 percent of agents. Mentally he felt a
good twenty years younger than his chronological age, so he saw no good reason why suddenly he
should be forced to stop going into the field by arbitrary rules concerning biological age. Besides,
he'd never followed other people's rules since he had over fifty of his own personal ones that worked
perfectly fine for him. So, he'd seen no reason to start at this late stage.

Unsurprisingly, he'd dug his heels in, and he was winning the war – he really was since too many
people were afraid of him airing their dirty linen. When the axe fell, well to be honest he never saw it
coming and perhaps that's why it ended up taking him out because he didn't anticipate it.

He really couldn't believe that McGee's damn book would end up being the Jack-the-giant-killer
which forced him to retire. Unlike others on the team who'd resented Deep Six and McGee for using
their characters without their permission when he wrote his book, Jethro had always been pretty
amused by the whole to-do that it caused.

Maybe because he'd been portrayed as a power hungry, messianic bastard with delusions of grandeur
and he'd rather enjoyed the fact that it actually enhanced his reputation. After all he'd been carefully
cultivating his reputation as a bastard with two Bs over many, many years. Dirtbags and agents alike
feared him and that was how he like it - how it should be.

Then McGee sold the film rights to Deep Six to a bunch of do-gooders who made over everyone's
character into goody two shoes, until most of them weren't even recognisable from the books.
Perhaps his character fared worst of all, since they had him giving people group hugs and making
cocoa with fucking marshmallows, for Pete's sake. And while the movie had been bad enough, when
they picked up the option for a weekly TV series, he'd come close to killing McGee he was so
furious. Finally, he got why the others were so incensed that McGee made such a piss poor job of
obscuring their identities.

Those idiots on the box had turned him into another John Walton, Senior, damn them to everlasting
Hell and it ended up ruining his life - well killing his career, which amounted to the same thing.

Without his job, he had nothing. Nada. Zilch.

A bunch of dim-witted do-gooders living in La La Land ruined his carefully crafted reputation.
They’d achieved what hundreds of dirt bags, terrorists, idiot NCIS directors and pettifogging
bureaucrats had tried to do and failed.

For over two years they’d been trying to make him retire and short of C4, there was no way he was
retiring as he was still the best damned field agent and team lead bar none in DC, perhaps the
country. But a stupid television show on the idiot box changed all of that by making him over into a
freaking nice, touchy-feely buffoon.

Overnight he was a laughingstock in the law enforcement community and no one was intimidated by
BAMF Gibbs any more. NO ONE!

It was enough to make him long to string McGee up by his balls for selling the rights to cretins, along
with the dumb-as-a-rock idiots who rewrote his whole personality. Word also spread, quick as
wildfire in the dirt bag alumni about 'The Tibblets. Having suspects asking for a hug or a mug of hot
cocoa when he was trying (and failing) to intimidate them in interrogation or running them down out
in the field sent him into murderous rage.
Since so much of the Gibbs' edge was psychological and based upon the fear factor (due to his badass reputation) he found himself impotent without it. He also had never understood just how much DiNozzo had contributed to perpetuating his reputation either until he'd gone. By being the go to guy when people had to work with Gibbs and a people person, it was natural that they ask the SFA about his boss.

He enhanced Jethro's reputation by telling people that only half of the rumours about Gibbs were true but managed to avoid saying which ones were – creating more uncertainty and fear but done in such a helpful manner that no one caught on. Tony was all subtlety, Jethro was a sledgehammer!

Initially, he'd thought if he just stuck it out it would pass, and things would settle down, just as it had done with the movie over time. After all, the show was so freakin bad that it couldn't last for more than a few episodes. Who would ever believe that a federal agency would employ a lay preacher or let an autopsy assistant go out investigating crime with the team leader or solve cases on his own, like damned Columbo?

Jethro gritted his teeth and practised his second B for Bastard act on McGee who seemed to be the only one in the bull pen who was still afraid of him. He freely admitted to making the Elf Lord's existence as miserable as he possible could to extract maximum possible retribution. Plus, it also made him feel a little better. In his endeavour to punish McGee he was aided admirably by Abby who was as pissed off about it as he was. Unfortunately, his diversion therapy didn't last long enough because McGee resigned after a couple of weeks of his 'special treatment,' with his tail firmly between his legs.

Meanwhile Jethro freely admitted to being impossible to be around and his team – what was left of it - bore the brunt of his ill temper. No matter how angry he got, Bishop was nice to him, making him muffins and cookies and buying him coffee. It was so damned infuriating to roar at her and to be given a look of empathy and understanding along with a doughnut – he was expecting her to pat him on the head next. Plus, Mendez treated him with amused tolerance like he was nothing more than a minor irritation, like a mosquito or a flea.

He was Leroy Jethro Gibbs! He evoked fear and that on a good day. He aroused loathing wherever he went – at least he was supposed to - not compassion, pity or tolerance, god damn it!

He was barely hanging on by a thread. He lost his edge and their closure rate began to slip ever so slightly but also the time it took to close out cases lengthened. He hung on though – practising all the anger management techniques he'd been acquiring with Travers, convinced he just need to ride out the storm and when the crap show got axed – and it would – everything would finally get back to normal.

When Abby stormed into the bull pen, mascara streaked tears streaming down her face to tell him that the Hallmark channel had announced that due to overwhelming ratings from the viewing public (who were calling themselves Tibbies) they were commissioning a full 24 episodes for the second season of 'The Tibblets he conceded defeat.'

"Why did he do it Gibbs? I can't go into my nightclubs anymore without getting laughed at by my Goth friends. They all think I'm a freak! At this rate, I'll be kicked out of Goth community for bringing it into disrepute, plus professionally, Goth is edgy and cool. A freakin fairy is just plain whacked."

Bishop had hugged Abby consolingly. "I don't think its McGee's fault," she said, always trying to be fair to everyone. "It was the scriptwriters that are responsible. They destroyed McGregor's character too. He had to resign, Abbs."
Gibbs snorted mockingly and Abbs had stamped her foot in anger. "Yes, it IS his fault, Ellie. If he hadn't sold them the film rights this wouldn't have happened.

"If he hadn't written that stupid book about us, this wouldn't have happened.

"If he'd even bothered to ask us for our permission before using our characters in his book THIS WOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED."

Thus, it was that Jethro finally recognised Leroy Jethro Gibbs, second B for Bastard had been effectively neutered like the family dog.

He’d lost his balls and dick to a pathetic TV character, for fuck’s sake.

Brought down by a fucking Elf Lord!

He'd been prepared to try to weather the storm, because he didn’t appreciate being backed into a corner. However, it looked as if the stupid show was going to be around for a long time to come. It was futile to try to wait it out.

A good Marine always knew when to beat a tactical retreat - to live to fight another day and Gibbs had always been a good Marine.

Once he'd admitted defeat and tendered his resignation Vance and SecNav had offered him a desk job, which he refused - rudely. He may have suggested that they both fuck off.

Then they suggested that his skills could be put to good use training the next generation of agents using his experience as an agent and decorated Marine Gunnery Sergeant.

Gibbs was pissed off about having to resign from the field. He was so tempted to tell them to kiss his ass but when he talked it over with Travers he decided if he did, he'd be cutting off his nose to spite his face.

Not even he could spend twenty- four hours a day in his basement drinking bourbon and building boats for the rest of his life.

Flashback:

"I'm glad you decided to turn down the desk job, Gibbs." Stu revealed after Gibbs admitted he'd refused it.

"You didn't say that when I asked what you thought."

"You needed to make your own decision. Not my life - it would be unethical to tell you what to do."

"Fair enough. So why are you glad?" Gibbs demanded.

"Because you've been making progress lately, but I don't think you should be in a job where you have a lot of power over people. You'd fall back into old habits, and while you get results, that doesn't make you a good boss.

"Those personality inventories we did suggested that working independently or doing something with a partner – for instance opening a woodworking business would allow you to utilise your good qualities and not let the more negative ones get too out of control."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself, Doc."
"Well yeah. You’ve already proved it once already, Gunny. You and DiNozzo together as a two-
man team? All the reports and the people I talked to confirm it. You had a partnership – a mentor/
protégé relationship to be sure but still one of mutual respect. That seemed to fall apart about the
time you found the second member of 'your' team and well it deteriorated even more when you hired
on a fourth.

“Cooperation and respect were quickly replaced by competitiveness and fear as you forced people
to compete for your approval. You have to see just how childish that is.”

Gibbs had heard all these arguments before but still felt like it worked. Until it didn’t!

"But if I take the job I've been offered at FLETC I'm going to have lots of people under me. Aren't ya
worried that what you call my toxic crap is gonna be a problem?"

"Nope, because they aren't your team or your employees, they are students taking your class and
after a few weeks or months they'll move on. And obviously you're already a highly experienced
teacher since most of the people you took onto the team had little or no investigative experience and
you turned them into seasoned agents."

Gibbs looked a little disconcerted. "Ah no. Didn't teach em. Expected them to pick it up."

Seeing Travers' bemused expression, he elaborated. "How Mike Franks trained me. Worked out just
fine."

Travis rolled his eyes. "Special Agent Franks was a stupid old fool, Gunny. He behaved like an old-
fashioned gunslinger, not a federal agent. You do get that most of the shit he pulled wouldn't fly
anymore, right? Especially orchestrating a sanctioned murder by a grieving husband."

Gibbs shot the psychologist a sharp look which Travis returned.

"Psychologists are investigators too, you know. Trained to look for anomalies. We put puzzles
together to help us understand our clients. Your joining Franks' team – the man in charge of your
wife and daughter's protection detail. That is highly unusual behaviour – an anomaly to say the
least.” He said with a shrug of his left shoulder, stating the very obvious.

“Most people would have blamed Franks for not protecting their loved ones and wanted nothing
more to do with him. That’s human nature – even if Franks was blameless – grief requires someone
to blame – someone to hate. So there had to be something deeper that he did which earned your
loyalty.

Travers looked at his client, not speaking – although his measured silence spoke volumes. “The fact
is that Hernandez was murdered and if my police procedural drama knowledge is correct, that
made you the chief suspect. Franks too, since he lost an agent and the witness to a crime, and he
was a well- known proponent of the Old Testament.”

Seeing Gibbs puzzled expression, Stu expanded. "An eye for an eye, Gunny. So, where were we?
Franks had motive and the means to take out Hernandez but not the opportunity. He was working a
case at the time of the murder and had several agents who were willing to swear to that fact.

“Course they could have lied for him, I guess – although I don’t think they did. My best guess - he
conspired to kill Hernandez, but I think he used a grieving widower and father to carry out a hit
since said Marine had means, motive AND opportunity. The widower was on compassionate leave
at the time - he had no alibi and then suddenly, he joins Franks' team. Collusion much?"

Gibbs looked stone faced but he didn’t deny it either. He couldn’t lie.
Travers shrugged stoically and moved on. "Then years later the widower doesn't play nice with a superior while working a case in LA – NCIS Agent in Charge, Lara Macy who surprise, surprise was the young Marine Corps lieutenant in the Military Police who investigated the chief suspect of the Hernandez assassination. Many of the NCIS agents working under her (quick to protect her from any fallout over the joint operation’s cockups) mentioned the SSA from DC and belligerent and insubordinate attitude towards her in their reports.

“You were that belligerent and insubordinate agent, Gunny. Not that hard to connect all the dots.”

They were silent for a long time and finally Travers changed the subject, but Gibbs knew he’d come back to it later. He always did.

"Well then, look at this new job as a new challenge. You're good at challenge,s Gibbs. Study teaching texts, go and observe other trainers and lecturers. Figure out what works and what doesn't. Look at the lecturers that capture the students' interest and hold it.

Ask yourself, who inspires their students, who encourages them. Observe those individuals who know when to help their pupils and when to step back and let them try on their own. Good teachers understand that everyone needs to succeed and sometimes even fail and know when that is."

Gibbs admitted that Travers made it sound exciting and he did like to be challenged. It was one of the things he liked about cases. So, he'd agreed to become a trainer, initially for firearms but if it worked out successfully they would offer him the trainers slot in hand-to-hand combat at a later point in time, as their incumbent was looking to retire.

Which was how he'd come to be here at FLETC and while he still really missed being an agent, this was fulfilling in its own way too. Since he'd taken over training new recruits in hand-to-hand combat, beating the crap outta the green rookies enhanced his rather battered Second B for Bastard reputation that had been destroyed by The Tibblets and was soothing to his soul.

The bonus was that he felt as if he was still doing something worthwhile into the bargain, helping to train federal agents. In fact, now that Fornell had taken a desk job as an Associate Director of the 'Dark Ones' he'd sent a lot of Fibbies back for intensive or remedial courses, including that pompous ass Ron Sacks. Gibbs had thoroughly enjoyed whooping the jerk's butt. He reckoned DiNozzo would heartily approve too if he knew about it.

He hadn't spoken to Tony for many months and he missed him, but their relationship was still rather strained. At least they were finally talking again after he’d swallowed his pride, pulled his head out of his ass and reached out to him.

Recently Jethro had heard via the grapevine that he was returning to DC to take over the MCRT- Balboa's team. He couldn’t help feeling a little hurt. DiNozzo had refused to return to DC to take over the team from his mentor, but he’d done so for Ric.

Gibbs was hoping that with the closer proximity, they might be able to slowly rebuild their connection, or if not perhaps repair it, begin building a new one that was more equitable… a true friendship. One more along the lines of the partnership that had developed after he'd first encountered the homicide detective working in Baltimore. A partnership of colleagues, before he'd messed it up.

When the two agents worked together in the early days Gibbs couldn't afford the luxury of delegating – it had been both of them bogging in to get the job done. There’d been no time for all his affectations and mind games – they’d came along later when he added new team members. Really it was pretty ironic that he felt compelled to try so damned hard to impress and control people who were the least equipped to judge him, since Cate, Ziva, McGee – even Bishop had absolutely no
experience in crime investigation.

When it had been just the two of them, DiNozzo had respected his skills and experience without all the later artifices he’d adopted, despite being as experienced a crime investigator as Jethro. Although Gibbs was an experienced agent, he’d spent a lot of his time as a NIS and NCIS agent doing black ops. Tony had worked as a beat cop, transit cop, a narc and a homicide detective, plus his year undercover with the Mob, so he was hardly a rookie. The truth was that he was easily as experienced an investigator as Gibbs and he possessed talents that Gibbs didn’t have – like people skills.

Lately Jethro found himself questioning why the hell he developed into such a prick of a boss to DiNozzo when the team expanded. He hoped it wasn't too late to begin making amends for his shitty behaviour.

When Gibbs first began as a FLETC instructor he'd still been completing anger management counselling with Travers as a condition of his employment. He was still smarting over the fact that his and Franks dynasty had collapsed with his forced retirement – not because of the age crap but because of Agent Tibbs.

After Tony had torn him a new one several years ago, Jethro had used his contacts to spy him. DiNozzo's fiancée had told him that he'd ditched all Gibbs' rules bar 1 and 9. Although frankly, he didn't really believe her.

Why would anyone not use his rules once they learnt them? It didn’t make any sense!

How could DiNozzo possibly lead a team that was as successful as Gibbs without them?

Gibbs had been genuinely flummoxed by the idea of ignoring his legacy, and he'd debated the issue exhaustively with Stu. Travis had shaking his head and told him that he was a deluded and arrogant SOB and there was more than one way to skin a cat. Jethro had insisted that to replicate his success, DiNozzo had to be using his methods – even if he denied it – so he set out to prove his theory.

As unbelievable as it seemed, his contacts in the NY office confirmed that Tony's team was performing beyond expectations. They were achieving closure statistics like he had when he was a detective in Baltimore and later, when he had led the MCRT while Gibbs was in Mexico. The new team’s closure rate had increased a staggering eleven percent since he’d taken over the reins from Pete Thompson.

From Gibbs’ perspective, Tony acted damned oddly as the leader. DiNozzo didn't delegate the majority of the grunt duties or focus on just the high-profile investigative work such as interrogating and interviewing of major persons of interest in the case or chief witnesses.

He didn't keep the rest of the team in the dark about case details to make himself look all-knowing. Instead he encouraged brainstorming with those dumb-ass camp fires where people contributed like equals. WTF was he doing?

DiNozzo also continued to shoot photos, sketch scenes and do his fair share of bagging and tagging at crime scenes, just like a regular agent - despite having a SFA and two junior agents to do it all for him. Yet, according to his sources his team apparently still respected him.

Gibbs didn't understand why he would continue to do grunt work, but when he expressed his opinion to Travers, he’d suggested that an extra investigator who was actively working a crime scene would mean that the work got cleared quicker and everyone got to go home sooner. Although he might have had a point, Gibbs had to admit that that thought hadn't been high on his own agenda
back when he was a field agent since he had nothing worth going home to.

His contacts also swore that DiNozzo didn't creep around trying to catch his agents in compromising situations to embarrass the shit out of them or make them fear him. Even more confusing to Jethro, DiNozzo never tried to play them off against each other to wring an extra few drops of effort out of them. He didn't maintain an appropriate emotional distance from the rest of the team, socialising with them regularly outside of work.

Frankly, it made no sense at all to Gibbs that he was able form a team at all, let alone one that had a closure rate that was in danger of rivalling his own. It had a damned uncomfortable wakeup call to discover that Gibbs' Rules weren't the be all and end all after all.

Sighing, he stood up from his desk preparing to make his way back to the firing range. He noted, glancing at the class roll again, that there was only one NCIS agent in the group of agents enrolled in the advanced shooter’s training class – a newly arrived one from New York. He'd briefly hoped that DiNozzo had signed up to take his class but checking the class list he saw it was a female – a Jodhi Crisp who only had four years as an agent – three in the field. The rest of the students were from OHS, FBI and ICE and had a lot more years on the job.

Thinking about DiNozzo always made him feel melancholy but as he headed to the range he found his spirits lifting. He looked forward to the first class with the advanced group. It was always fun taking this group down a peg or two.

As the class progressed, Gibbs assessed the ten students. Most were cocky and while all of them were competent since they were signed up to take this high-level class, he automatically began cataloguing where their strengths and weaknesses lay. Often if they were experienced agents, their biggest stumbling block was the fact they thought they didn't need the advanced training – it was frequently their supervisors who signed them up.

So, with the advanced classes, he always liked to end the first session with them shooting up their electronic crap to bring them back down to earth. Conversely, with the new FLETC recruits, he always waited til the last few weeks before shaking their new-found skills and confidence.

It was just good luck that today he got to do it twice in one day. GOOD TIMES!

When he announced that they were all going to finish up by taping their 'important electronic crap' to the targets he felt his usual satisfaction hearing everyone's groans and cursing. Nor was he that surprised to hear a couple of people's cocky boasting that it was going to be a piece of cake. In his experience, the ones that were the cockiest and the most vocal were usually the ones that ended up falling flat on their asses and crumbling under pressure.

It never got old watching those individuals making fools of themselves. Cockiness in the field could easily get you or your partner shot or worse. It was better to learn the hard way in a class that no matter how good you were (or thought you were) there was always someone better than you; always something new to learn. Gibbs didn't feel any empathy for these bloviates who would soon look like buffoons...none at all.

He smirked looking at the array of expensive technology taped to the hostages. Smart phones and several iPads, numerous iPods and one clunker – a flip phone that was almost as old as Jethro’s beloved old cell phone. Sadly, his had finally died last year and he had to get a new phone, one with far too many bells and whistles. God, he hated the damned thing!

And the phone didn't belong to the oldest agent (as he would have expected) but the youngest one. Looking at the female's butter-wouldn't- melt-in-her-mouth expression, he smelled a rat. Someone
had tipped her a wink. Perhaps one of the recent FLETC recruits since she’d only graduated a few years ago.

Frankly, it always amazed him that recruits hadn't spilled the beans about the 'try not to shoot the crap out of your expensive electronic shit' portion of the course before now. He’d given it quite a bit of thought and talked to Stu at length about it too. They’d concluded that misery loves company, so the graduates decided not to warn the next intake, hoping they’d get their butts whooped, too. And their wallets!

Grinning, he watched the girl – young woman he corrected mentally, since she was old enough to be a federal agent - as she finished taping the flip phone over the two shots that had been slightly off target, winging the hostage in the fleshy part of the left arm. He was impressed with her; whoever had trained her to shoot had done a damned good job. Her grouping was nice and tight. He immediately decided to find out who her instructor was and congratulate them on a job well done.

She’d probably attended FLETC Georgia because someone had to show her the way to the range today, suggesting to him that she hadn’t been here before. Jethro didn’t know who the firearms instructor was down there – he was still getting to know all the staff here in DC even after two years, since his social skills weren't up to par with DiNozzo.

He was under no illusions that he would ever win an award for the most congenial FLETC instructor, but he was trying to get along with his colleagues, though. The truth was that he was lonely – having pushed all his NCIS workmates away, with the exception of Abby and Ducky. And then there was Tobias – but he was busy with work and Emily.

As the buzzer went off, indicating the class was to commence the firing sequence, the students began firing their weapons. This test for the advanced group involved a slightly longer time allowance than the baby agents had been given but the students were also required to empty their entire clip accurately before performing a rapid or emergency reload of their service weapon and then commence firing again. In reality, it actually worked out to be significantly less time to complete the exercise than the baby agents were allocated. Which made sense since all the participants were experienced agents, so it was expected that they were far more proficient.

Everyone was reasonably successfully in that they all managed the reload although for some, it wasn't as smooth or fast as it could be, or the second clip wasn't fired nearly as accurately. Gibbs noted all of the various slips and stumbles almost automatically – feeling vindicated - there were plenty of things for them to work on in the coming classes!

Fortunately, no one killed the hostage although some agent's hostages (the hostages being their devices) got beat up a bit but at least everyone did hit the dirt bag, even if they hadn’t managed the kill shots which would allocate them a perfect score. Most surprisingly, the youngster with the clunky old phone was the quickest to finish firing by a country mile. Gibbs was dumbfounded when she finished way before everyone else did.

Even more shocking though was when she pulled out a backup piece from an ankle holster, smoothly slipping a magazine into it and proceeding to fire off the full load, bar one bullet. All well within the time allotted.

She’d also managed to execute four kill shots as well!

Gibbs was willing to concede that it was a damned impressive piece of shooting, particularly for someone who was so young!

When the agents were cleared to check out their targets, he was pleased to see that his rule about the
most vocal agents falling flat on their asses had proved yet again to be true. The anguish, chagrin and ultimately anger before it was quickly displaced onto the bastard instructor who made them lose face in front of their peers, played out swiftly over the most arrogant of the agents’ faces and it was priceless.

Nope, this was never gonna get old, he smirked inwardly as he dismissed the group with a word or two, asking the clunky phone agent to stay behind.

As he inspected her phone to discover a crack right at the bottom corner, he handed it back. Practically all her shots had been kill-shots. Again, her groupings had been nice and tight. He felt excited to have such a promising student in his class. He wondered if she was a competent sniper too.

"That was pretty impressive shooting, Agent…"

"I'm Special Agent Jodhi Crisp, Gunny." She grinned at him mischievously.

Ah the NCIS agent. Most of them knew better than to call him Sir, although not many used his Marine salutation. Generally, it was only the veteran NCIS crowd that did that. Gotta give the kid points for her research!

"Well just make sure you don't get overconfident, Crisp. A fine line between confidence and too cocky. It can get you dead out there." He waved his hand to indicate the real world as he cautioned the agent who looked like she was barely out of FLETC.

"Yes Gunny. My boss tells me that all the time, too." She acknowledged, her face puckering into a pensive expression and Jethro decided that while she knew she was good, she wasn't egotistical, just very young still.

She needed experience and probably a few heartbreaks for her to mature. She had a confident aura that you can't help projecting when you know you excel at something, as he knew from personal experience. But that didn't mean that he didn't still practise and try to improve constantly either.

"What have I told you about showing off that backup weapon trick, Probie?" An extremely familiar voice from behind them asked teasingly, but with a touch of steel too.

Spinning around, Jethro saw Tony leaning languidly against the wall watching them both with amusement.

Jodhi looking like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, blushed before looking her boss in the eyes. "That showing off could get my team, myself or an innocent member of the public shot or much, much worse, Tony," She recited, abashed.

"That's right. And yet you still did it, Agent Crisp."

"I've been practising ever since I saw you do it, Tony. Besides, I wanted to make you proud of me. Didn't want to let you down out here with the Gunny." Jodhi indicated towards her instructor, crestfallen.

"Probie, I'm already proud of you. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone. You're a fine marksman, a crack shot. It's why you were chosen to take this course," he told her as she glowed from his praise.

He smiled wryly. "You know why I showed you that emergency reload of the backup which I know regret doing?"
"To prove that you had a lot to teach us, Tony?"

"Yeah maybe… but mostly so you’d start to realise that no matter how good you get, there’s always going to be someone better, faster, more accurate and it’s not always going to be a good guy. You can’t afford to get complacent just because you’re a crack shot, Johdi. One thing to be told it – whole ‘nother’ thing for you to start believing it!"

"Okay Tony. Got it."

"Good, now if you’re dismissed," he glanced at Gibbs who nodded, "Then don’t you have an interview with the lecturer in computer forensics?" He prompted her gently.

"Yes Boss, oops Tony."

"Thought I’d broken you of that habit a couple of years ago," Tony grumbled at her, pretending to be annoyed.

"It's the new team, they've caused me to regress." She admitted. "Sorry Tony. I'll try harder."

"Don't apologise, it's a sign of weakness, Crisp." Gibbs interjected feeling wrong-footed by Tony’s unexpected appearance.

"Actually Gunny, my boss says an apology is a sign of a person's strength of character, provided it's genuine and not a cynical device to pull your ass out of the fire." Jodhi corrected him politely before grinning at Tony, who grinned back and gestured with his head for her to get out of there.

If I'm not by the car when you're done, I won't be long." Tony informed her as she slipped away.

Gibbs looked at Tony and smiled tentatively. "DiNozzo."

Tony acknowledged him gravely. "Gibbs, or these days do you prefer to be addressed as Mr Brogiths?"

For just a millisecond a flash of incredulity showed on Gibbs' poker face before irritation took over. "How? Someone snitched?" Except he’d been careful to keep his identity under his hat. Only a few people knew. "It was the name wasn't it. Stupid!"

"Nope, even before I realised it was an anagram, someone insisted I read this whodunit and sent me a few pages to whet my appetite. Plus, the reviews from the critics – 'the pared back, frugal prose and the cracking pace, the attention to detail and the amazing realism.'

"Don't you think I've read enough of your reports over the years to recognize your writing style, Gibbs? A functional mute's not going to morph into a Chatty Cathy writer all of a sudden." Looking at the pissed off expression he offered reassurance. "Relax, your secret's safe with me. But just out of curiosity, why all the secrecy?"

"Let's go get a coffee." Gibbs suggested, not sure whether to be pissed that his identity had been penetrated so easily or proud that Tony had figured it out so effortlessly. He settled on being both, especially since being pissed off had been a default emotional setting for so long.

Once they both grabbed a coffee from the canteen and were seated in a private corner, Gibbs started speaking.” When I retired, Travers suggested I take a few courses at the local community college to keep my brain occupied.”

He paused and took a sip of his coffee, before he continued with his story. “I signed up for the
fiction crime writers' course as a bit of a joke, really. I missed using my brain to solve cases, so I started wondering if instead of solving crimes, I could plan and execute them instead.”

Both men ignored the elephant in the room, effectively making his musing superfluous. Gibbs had planned, executed and gotten away with murder!

"Found it was good fun and my lecturer told me I was good at it. The rest of the class never guessed who the murderer was in the stories I came up with. Never meant for it to be more than a hobby – it was relaxing but it turned out to be addictive.”

Tony snorted mentally – Gibbs had an addictive personality, so that was hardly a shock.

“Then when I wrote a novel and made the mistake of showing it to my lecturer she decided to send it off to a couple of publishers without my permission, typically female thing to do. No guy would act without permission." He grumbled sullenly.

"I couldn't believe it when one of them wanted to publish it. I never expected anyone would read the damned thing."

"Think your style is more popular with guys." Tony commented dryly. More of the action and less of the emotions. The narrative is pared back to the bone – which suits the male brain since it isn't as language oriented. Emma, Jodhi and Lisle weren't all that keen, said it needed more descriptive prose and introspection, but Dane really like it, particularly the action scenes.” Tony chuckled – there’d been plenty of those.

“And you?” Jethro quizzed, curiously invested in his former partner’s opinion of his novels.

Tony laughed noncommittally. “Gotta say the thing I really liked about it was that I didn't recognise any of the characters nor cases.”

Although he’d heard rumours that Ziva was writing a book about the team, a less than flattering one, Jethro decided not to touch that subject.

"Who is Lisle and Dane? Gibbs asked instead.

"My team in New York."

"Heard you came back to DC. What made you change your mind?"

Subtext – why did you say yes to Balboa and not me?

"Balboa and his wife wanted to be closer to their daughter and her kids. Plus, Emma's five months pregnant and I wanted her to be near the Pitts in case I don't stay in remission. They'll make sure the sprogs and her are well taken care of if I'm gone."

"Didn't know you were expecting. Congratulation." Jethro considered shaking his hand but held back, feeling it was no longer appropriate. Truthfully, he didn’t want Tony to refuse to shake his hand.

Then he realised what Tony had said, looking Tony over carefully. "Are you sick again? You look really well," Gibbs observed, holding his breath anxiously.

"No, I'm healthy at the moment. Just not taking anything for granted since I'm only in remission... not cured." Tony explained before changing the subject. He stared at Gibbs in turn. "You look different – more relaxed. Dare I say it…happier?"
Gibbs shrugged. "I sail my boat most weekends. Travers says I have a better work life balance these days. I also have my writers group."

Tony looked surprised. "Dr Stuart Travers? You still seeing him?" Tony asked curiously.

"I was. The powers that be wouldn't let me work at FLETC unless I completed the anger management program. It meant seeing Travers couple of times a week for what seemed like an eternity. Damned jarhead headshrinker; drove me crazy and I still saw him for about eight months after I left NCIS."

Jethro stared at his empty coffee mug. "Helped me see that my anger was way outta control. By the time we decided I'd finally begun dealing with my grief over Shannon and Kelly, realised I didn't hate him anymore."

"After another six months without him bugging the crap outta me and pissing me off, I realised I missed talking to him – not necessarily about the emotional crap. It was just that we had stuff in common and he sortta reminded me of someone I lost. Someone I never appreciated until I'd pushed him away."

"So, I finally got my head outta my ass and called Travers up one day. Asked him if he wanted to come over, spend some time, work on the boat, hang out and get a pizza. We were both Marines – had a lot in common. He came over a few times, helped out on the boat, discovered we both like sailing and fishing. Kinda hoped he might become a buddy since I didn't have many of those left that I haven't chased off, apart from Fornell."

Gibbs looked sad as he stared at Tony, making it plain who he was talking about. DiNozzo looked him in the eyes but remained silent, unwilling to go there. Gibbs sighed and took the hint.

"Asked Travers if he wanted to go sailing when she was done, and he came a few times. Said it helped him leave all the office crap behind. Now he usually comes out a couple times a month." Gibbs was silent as he stared at Tony before deciding to say what he needed to say, even if he wasn't getting all is forgiven, let's be friends again, vibes off his old partner.

"He sortta reminds me of you in a way – calls me on my crap when I get my head too far up my ass and I can't see daylight."

Jethro paused before deciding that his previous apology had been a lame affair in light of all his years of abuse. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I'm sorry Tony, I treated you badly and I don't blame you for leaving or for ripping me a new one. Deserved it!"

"Travers made me realise I was a asshole, that I used intimidation and manipulation to try and keep you weak and, on the team, even when you deserved your own team years ago. I should have supported you, instead I nearly destroyed you."

"Not about to argue with you, Gibbs since you're right on all counts. Have to say I'm shocked," Tony replied candidly. "Whatever happened to Rule 6?" Tony inquired, caught completely off guard by the unexpected although long overdue apology.

"Momentary regression, but damn your probie sure set me back on my ass."

Tony chuckled. "Yeah she's a good kid. Going to be one hell of an agent."

"You brought her with you?"

"Yep. She's a great shot, as you've discovered. Third generation law enforcement – been hanging
round the firing range with her father and grandfather since she was a kid. Didn't need to be taught to have her partner's back. Just a little over eager still."

Tony looked wistful. "Wish I could have brought them all back but Zabinski was ready for her own team and I needed to let her go. Lisle had already been a SFA for three years when I took over the team and Larsen will be a great SFA for her. One of the other agents will move into Dane's place as junior agent and Zabinski will get to pick her own probie to take for walks, feed and water."

Tony smirked, though he still looked sad. "I'll miss working with them. We were a great team and I was happy there."

"Had a great closure rate."

"Yeah we did but even more important for me than statistics was that they all had successful relationships too. Happy, contented agents make better investigators." He observed meaningfully.

Gibbs looked somewhat abashed. "Touché."

They were silent for a while. Gibbs had talked to Tony once or twice since the weekend that he'd returned to DC and tore strips off him. Made tentative steps to try to repair a small part of the damaged he'd come to understand that he'd done when he'd been out of control as the team leader. But the going was slow, and Tony was extremely cautious. He didn't blame him - he should have apologised to him a hell of a lot sooner.

"You're welcome to come out on the boat one weekend, too." He offered hopefully.

Tony stared at him unblinkingly, not giving anything away. "Maybe, Gibbs. We're pretty busy painting and fixing up the nursery for the twins and the rest of the house."

"You've bought a house?" Gibbs was surprised. "I thought you'd just come back."

"No, been back nearly a month in DC but only started at NCIS this week. Brad and Lara Pitt have been house hunting for us. Found a place not that far from theirs."

"If you need any carpentry work or repairs done, I could help," Gibbs suggested diffidently. "Talk to Emma. Better yet, come to dinner so I can apologise to her properly too. You've got yourself one hell of a woman, DiNozzo. Shannon would have liked her a lot. She used to kick my ass too whenever I got out of line."

Tony noticed that was the second time he'd mentioned Shannon in their short conversation. Travers was a miracle worker!

"Sure, I'll talk to Emma. I'll call and set something up since Emma won't turn down an opportunity to watch you squirm," he deadpanned before glancing at his watch. "Gotta go. Jodhi will be waiting," He shook hands briefly and strode off to the car park.

Jethro knew he had a lot to make up for, but it was a start and Tony seemed like he might just be willing to give him a second chance. One thing he did know after reading Tony's journal – he had caused his former senior field agent significant pain over the years they'd worked together. Which meant that if he blew it again there would never be another chance.

The old Tony – the turn the other cheek Tony was long gone. He was nobody’s whipping boy any longer.
Chapter Summary

Abby decided after the wedding fiasco with Senior that it was time to take stock. That said, making personal changes is not easy, so the question is, has anything really changed with the Goth forensic scientist?

Chapter Notes

Meant to post this chapter last week. Was supposed to write at least one chapter of my Quantum Bang entry last week too. I even told everyone I was getting back into writing again. Clearly the universe took it as a challenge and decided I needed my character built some more since I nearly lost one of sibs and spent the entire week at the hospital instead of indulging in the frivolous art of writing fan fic :(

Abby was nervous. She hadn't spoken to Tony since the fiasco over the wedding. But now he was returning to DC as the senior supervisory agent for the MCRT replacing Balboa, which meant that they were going to have to work together. The team wasn't on rotation yet, but he was in the building. They were working cold cases for the first week as Tony got acquainted with them and they acclimated to him. He had them doing team bonding sort of stuff. Yesterday it was a paintball challenge against a team of his cop cronies

Although Abby knew Tony was a professional and would treat her respectfully, she also knew that it would be awkward working together if they couldn't find a way to resolve what had happened. She was nervous about this new Tony who didn’t automatically forgive after someone said sorry. He was a stranger to her and she wondered how she’d cope with someone who looked like the old Tony but wasn’t.

Abby ran her hand through her short blonde coiffure anxiously. She wished he’d just come on down to the lab and get it over and done with, so she could stop obsessing. Sternly, she silently scolded herself, to get a grip, that she needed to stop focusing on herself.

It was what caused the frickin mess in the first place. Her wants and needs weren't at the centre of the universe, everything wasn't always about Abby. Tony would come down to see her when he was good and ready.

After he told her she was no longer welcome at his and Emma's wedding, along with the fiasco caused by her begging Ziva to come home, Abby thought that it might be time to make some changes. Well okay, to be accurate she’d decided it was time after falling in a wailing crying heap for a few weeks.

She'd ended up seeking advice from Balboa and Ellie, chastened that even Ducky was furious with her for calling Senior before the wedding, and they’d suggested that she needed to get some help to sort herself. She started seeing a counsellor to try to understand why she'd ended up hurting her friends – people she thought of as her family.
It was not what she expected – nothing at all like she expected, yet it changed her life in ways she couldn't have imagined. She thought going in, it was because she was adopted and acting out about it but as Jimmy pointed out rather bluntly when she used it as her excuse, she'd been obsessed about fathers and the team being a real family long before she'd known about being adopted.

The upshot of counselling was that it helped her to see that while she'd had a loving family and a safe and happy childhood, it wasn't without its challenges either. Abby and her brother Luka were brought up by two deaf parents even though both children could hear, meaning they'd grown up straddling two separate worlds with two very different cultures.

They had learned sign language and lip reading as their primary language since neither of their parents ever bought into the hearing world's opinion of them as being disabled just because they were deaf. The little Sciutos spent most of their time with other deaf people, it was perfectly normal to them and it exposed them to a rich culture that few hearing people had the opportunity to learn about. Still, growing up Sciuto wasn't all beer and skittles.

She and her brother lacked significant contact with the hearing world, apart from neighbours and casual acquaintances until they went to school, since most of her parents' friends belonged to the deaf community, too. Learning to communicate verbally had its own challenges for the two children since it wasn't their first language and they weren't hearing it from either parent - speaking was definitely a second language to them.

Although they'd learned to talk a bit because their neighbours had ensured that they were exposed to language, albeit in an extremely limited fashion. Still their exposure had been lacking in the richness and complexity of their immersion to sign language or the spoken language of their schoolmates.

Communicating via the spoken word didn't come naturally to the young Sciutos. They were much more fluent (and more comfortable) at signing, which disadvantaged them with their peers when they started school. Abby and her brother were often teased and called babies by the other kids because their language development lagged well behind that of their age mates.

Perhaps that was why the Goth ran off at the mouth now as an adult - she was making up for all that lost time during her early years when she didn't talk. Once they were in school and became increasing fluent in spoken language – essentially borne out of a really strong desire to fit into their new peer group, they began making friends in the hearing world. Hardly surprising, since they now spent at least eight hours, five days a week with children and adults who, like themselves, could hear.

This was highly significant for the junior Sciutos because at a young age they were forced into developing friendships quite separate from their parents. They couldn't share their new friendships with them because their friends couldn't sign, nor lip read, so they weren't able to talk to Abby's parents or their deaf friends in a meaningful way. Just like her deaf friends and her parents couldn't properly communicate with her hearing friends, even if they could lip read because their language couldn't be understood.

Communication is a two-way street and none of their hearing friends were motivated enough to learn to sign in order to interact fully with her mom, dad or other deaf friends. It created an enormous chasm between Abby and Luka's hearing world with their school friends and their home life where signing had been their dominant language up to this point.

It was a gulf that was not easily straddled. Not unless the two Sciuto kids constantly played interpreter between the two groups which got old, really fast. Not to mention that interpreting took away their ability to be fully immersed in a conversation because they were focusing on others and their own communication needs came secondary. Not a very satisfactory situation for a couple of little kids.
It was a similar situation when it came to any communications between their school teachers and Abby’s parents. The children were in the really weird situation of having to attend parent teacher meetings to translate what was being said, again setting them apart from other kids and making them feel different.

In a lot of ways, they became so much more mature than their chronological years because of it. Abby figured it might in part explain why she started acting infantile when she recreated her family at NCIS. That and the fact that everyone let her get away with it, so really, why wouldn't she take advantage of it?

As they became more enmeshed into the hearing world, the two Sciuto siblings also became aware that they were different from the rest of the deaf community, which had never really been all that apparent before. At the same time as they started noting these differences, they realised they couldn't integrate, at least not completely into the hearing community either, as their parents, and to a lesser degree themselves lived in the deaf community.

Their two cultures were so very different – for a start their values were worlds apart.

Their deaf friends and family viewed their culture and lifestyle as normal and were perfectly happy to live their lives without sound. Many of them had never experienced a hearing world and it was difficult to miss what you'd never known or understood.

Yet the rest of the world - the hearing world - saw them as disabled. They saw individuals who had a handicap, a deficiency that needed to be fixed so that they could contribute to the mainstream community – to fit in. While some deaf people did use hearing aids or considered getting cochlear implants to help them to hear so they could integrate into the hearing world and 'become normal' the Sciutos absolutely did not share this viewpoint. Nor did most of their parents’ friends.

Abby and Luka ended up feeling a bit like they had a foot in both camps but where they used to feel a part of the deaf community before, they didn't feel entirely comfortable in it anymore. In fact, the older they became the greater the differences seemed to them until it felt like they were doing the splits in trying to bridge the gulf between their two very different worlds.

Yet they also felt a sense of frustration. Their knowledge of the hearing world was still somewhat limited – so many things were beyond their knowledge or experience. For example, their exposure to music had been restrictive growing up. Nursery rhymes or learning to play instruments was not something they'd encountered in their parents’ world.

So as much as going to school had opened up a whole new world for them, an exciting one, it also exposed quite starkly just how different they were to everyone else. To kids, nothing is more important than fitting in and yet…Luka and Abby didn't.

As they got older it didn't get easier, it actually got harder as they realised just how different their family life was to most of the kids they went to school with. And it wasn't just the major differences but a myriad of little stuff which all added up to a whole lotta different. She and Luka were the ones who had to answer the front door when people came knocking because her mom and dad couldn't communicate with most of the people who knocked, since very few hearing people could sign.

Gibbs was a rarity, being fluent in signing and probably why she had taken to him so quickly.

It was the same with their telephone. Once again Luka and Abby had to be the go-betweens for callers and their parents.

The older the Sciuto siblings got, the more self-aware they became about being caught between two
very different worlds and Abby started to deal with the impasse, in part, by retreating into her own world. She started sneaking into the car yard near her home, exploring its wrecks, even though it was forbidden. She became obsessed as she tried to make sense of the broken and twisted pieces of metal with figuring out how they had ended up that way.

Her counsellor had pointed out to the forensic scientist, the possible connection between trying to make sense of the wrecked vehicles and her own feelings of her life being a car wreck. She theorised that Abby's attempts to figure out the twisted pieces of metal might be analogous to her attempts to make sense out of how her happy family life and caring, loving parents had still left her feeling alienated and unable to fit properly into either or both of her worlds.

Her counsellor Anya Tremayne explained to Abby her experiences were definitely not a unique experience since most children of deaf parents – up to 90 percent - weren't actually deaf themselves. In fact, the similarity of childhood experiences within the group of hearing children who had deaf parents had coined the terms CODA or Children of Deaf Adults for adult offspring and KODA to refer to Kids of Deaf Adults for those under age. Anya gave Abby the details for a CODA support group in Maryland which she attended and for the first time in her life, Abby felt like she was with people who really understood what her childhood had been like.

Only a CODA would understand the little things like her lying awake at night listening for monsters when she was little, since her parents couldn't hear them. Four-year-old Abby thought that they wouldn't be able to save her or themselves because they wouldn't hear the monsters coming or her screaming for help, so she'd decided it must be her job to save everyone from them.

Going to support meetings she was suddenly reminded of heaps of stuff she'd long forgotten from her childhood. Experiences which resonated strongly and seemed to be fairly universal to the CODA experience. How her parents would pass wind noisily when out in public and til she started school she thought it was perfectly normal (well it was a natural biological function of course) but she'd learnt it wasn't socially acceptable behaviour to let everyone hear when you let Fluffy off the chain.

Eating was another cause for embarrassment for Abby and Luka since when they went out to restaurants for a meal everybody stared at them disapprovingly. The Sciuto kids thought it was perfectly normal to make noise when eating. Lip smacking, chewing noisily and loud belches were all common occurrences during their family dinners.

Then someone mentioned how they had perpetually sore feet from stamping really hard on floors, trying to attract their parent's attention via vibrations and Abby was like – OMG that's sooo true! She realised it was probably why she first started wearing big, heavy, clomping boots, although she did come to love her platform boots. Especially the ones with buckles or the silver chains that clanked as she walked.

Joining the CODA support group also reminded her of things that were really cool about being a child of deaf parents, too. Her parents never told them to turn down the television or music because it was too loud. Luka was allowed to learn the drums when he was a teenager when most of his friends' parents recoiled in horror at the mention of a drum kit.

When she was a hormone driven teenager she was able to sneak boys up to her room and not worry about being discovered by making too much noise. Maybe that was why she became a screamer! Or when she was out on a date and missed her curfew, slipping in late wasn't all that difficult as she and Luka never had to worry about the squeaky tread on the stairs giving them away. Yep it did have perks, too.

Abby was so grateful to Dr Tremayne for helping her make sense of much of her childhood. Since she knew that she had great parents and a happy family life, especially compared to many children, it
had felt ungrateful to find fault with any of it. So, she’d always focused on just the good bits and felt guilty for feeling like her childhood had been less than perfect.

Anya pointed out this guilt probably had some part in her idealising anything to do with family. She told her it was okay to acknowledge that there were parts of her childhood that weren’t perfect, that it wasn’t being disloyal and ungrateful to her parents. Nor did it mean that she loved her parents any less to admit that their family hadn’t been picture-perfect.

When Abby expressed interest in research into CODAs Anya explained that most of the psychosocial research on deaf families focused on hearing parents raising deaf children, not the other way around. Anya knew that Abby, as a scientist was interested in empirical studies, so she mentioned that there was there were certain analogous features between CODA/KODAs and children whose parents didn't speak the language of the country they were residing in.

Like KODAs, immigrant and refugee children had to very quickly become bilingual. Not only for their own integration but for their family's survival as their parents used them as intermediaries and interpreters. They too had a great deal of responsibility placed upon their little shoulders, dealing with issues usually reserved for adults. Clearly there were differences between the two groups but nevertheless, there was a lot of useful data in the studies that Anya felt she would find meaningful.

Over the months that Abby was seeing Anya Tremayne, she also discussed her behaviour at work, including her stubborn refusal to work with anyone else in her lab. She revealed her limpet-like attachment to the MCRT, attaching herself to their team with an almost religious fervour. Anya observed mildly that designating them as family and Gibbs as her surrogate father in a workplace setting seemed to be quite contradictory, considering her insistence on solitary working conditions. A case of wanting her cake and eating it too - wanting autonomy over her work yet still wanting to be treated like Daddy's Little Princess.

During their sessions the Goth told Anya a great deal about the team and their behaviour, espousing their virtues ad nauseum, especially Gibbs who could do no wrong in Abby's eyes. That being the case, she also saw no reason to self-censure some of the less savoury incidents like other might who wanted to create a good impression of her team.

She just blurted it all out. The good, the bad and the ugly (and it was very ugly) in the certain knowledge that if her Silver Fox did it then it was perfect, as was he. Likewise, if it was to do with the rest of the team, if Gibbs allowed it to occur or he didn't stop others on the team from doing something – herself included, then it couldn't possibly be wrong either.

When Anya suggested that Gibbs might not have acted, not because it wasn’t wrong but because he didn't know what was going on, she vehemently denied the possibility. She insisted that Gibbs was all-seeing, all-knowing about everything that went on at NCIS. But most especially when it pertained to his team.

So, Abby dished all the dirt about it all in mammoth sessions reminding her counsellor of being bombarded by verbal diarrhoea. About Gibbs' Rules, his head slaps, most of them directed at her 'big brother Tony-bear,' who needed them to focus, the kisses and hugs for Abby from the rest of the team but most especially the ones from Gibbs that told her she was his favourite, plus all the Caf-Pows she commanded for doing her job so brilliantly.

How she went around hugging people despite what that dried up prune of a DoD trainer had to say on acceptable workplace behaviour - because everything can always be fixed with as hug. Abby then proceeded to demonstrate her theory to her counsellor, quite painfully.

She explained all about Gibbs berating of the team in front of their peers to make them better agents,
particularly Tony. She talked about his sneaking around spying on people, so he'd appear to be psychic because he knew exactly what everyone was up to. She rationalised any seemingly negative traits as him being a good Poppa Bear to his cubs and just looking out for them.

She talked about him a lot - his building a boat in his basement, getting half-drunk on bourbon most nights and falling asleep for a few hours each night under his boat. About his coffee habit that necessitated numerous trips to his barista even when they had a hot case… especially when they had a hot case or when a case was going poorly. His need for coffee when someone was pissing him off or his team didn’t have a viable lead for him.

Abby talked to Anya about the unreasonable demands he made of everyone and the outright threats of dismissal or physical harm when a case was going badly. How it inevitably was just the kick up the butt that everyone needed to get them over the line and save the day.

She shared her feelings about McGee and his Deep Six books that he based on the team without their permission. How she nearly died because some looney had decided she or her alter-ego Amy Sutton wasn’t good enough for McGee/McGregor and had stalked her, attacking her in the convent when she was all alone. But Gibbs had rode in on his white horse to save her.

Abby confessed quite freely, to how the team was constantly trying to one up each other just to earn Gibbs' approval and attention. Although she explained that even when they did good, her sexy Silver Fox rarely gave praise to the boys but was lavish with compliments for Abby and to a lesser extent to Ziva.

Anya looked stunned by the time she’d finished disclosing every miniscule detail about her beloved family. Then the counsellor had commented wryly that rather than the happy family narrative that Abby painted, it sounded more like an extreme case of Stockholm syndrome, brought about by brainwashing.

Of course, Abby scoffed at her, angrily. She’d defending her Silver Fox emphatically, even when Dr Tremayne insisted in only 72 hours, an individual’s psyche can be broken down. That it was as simple as issuing threats of death and or violence, followed up by random acts of kindness to create the right conditions for the so-called syndrome to flourish.

She explained it was first recognised in Sweden, specifically a bank in Stockholm where an armed bank robbery attempt went bad and hostages spent six days in the bank with violent criminals. When SWAT launched a rescue operation the hostages actively resisted being extracted and refused to give evidence against their abductors. Abby remained unconvinced, unwilling to hear anything remotely negative about her Silver Fox – he was no bank robber or criminal!

Well actually she may have clapped her hands over her ears and repeated la la la la over and over until Anya had finished speaking the first time.

Still, over many months of counselling she did come to accept that there was something needy in them all, which perhaps had drawn them together and possibly brought out the worst in them too. That rather than being forced to confront their flaws, deal with them and grow as individuals, their faults were allowed to flourish in a protected environment.

Abby was amazed as she was recounting events that she felt epitomised how much of a happy family they’d been over the years, how disturbed, how horrified Anya seemed by what she heard. Words like toxic, infantile, breaking of federal workplace regulations, cults and guru-worshipping peppered her observations.

The counsellor had become particularly frosty when Abby talked about the gay cowboy prank she
and Cate colluded on in order to blackmail Tony. Plus, there was incident with Jethro the dog that
Abby was so proud of, since she saved the heroic dog's life, against all the odds and with everyone
working against her.

Anyawas equally disapproving of her meddling with Tony's father and her obsessive need to fix his
relationship with his father. Taking Abby to task for her hectoring of him and Ziva about making up
with their estranged fathers without being asked for her input. To which Abby had argued that she’d
been proved right about that when Eli David had been gunned down and died.

Afterwards, she and Anya talked at great length about photoshopping the gay cowboy photo. How
she’d broken the law and a score of very serious agency rules and regulations in creating a
defamatory and fraudulent image, which by rights should have seen her dismissed from her position.
How it could have had extremely serious consequences for her so-called brother. Anya also
expressed outrage that she would treat someone she claimed was family with the callous disregard as
she had with McGee and then bullied him into rehoming the animal who'd attacked him.

Her counsellor also explored in great depth how non-CODAs would never be able to understand
exactly how it had been for her and her brother to grow up in her family. Abby agreed that other
people couldn't know how it felt to grow up a CODA. Then her counsellor asked Abby what made
her think she could make snap judgements about the state of the relationship between the other team
members and their parents?

Abby was shattered. It was true that she'd never lived with alcoholic parents or had a father who
disowned her when she was twelve years old. Her father had never left her or Luka behind in a hotel
room for two days, alone and forgotten. Her mother hadn't died when she was a little eight years old
kid. She'd never had to endure a string of step mothers, attend boarding school from a young age or
military school. She didn’t have to pay her own way through college.

Therefore, what right did she have to make value judgements about the state of Tony's father-son
relationship? Where did she get off ascribing blame to Tony and effectively take Senior's side against
her teammate, just because the guy came across as charming, old or because he was the father?

She'd never had a sociopathic father who groomed his children to become assassins from childhood.
She had no idea what it was like to grow up with a man who saw nothing wrong in manipulating
and lying to his own children or siring a son with a Palestinian woman to create a double agent
against his enemies. The Goth hadn't a clue how it must feel for your father to order you to kill your
half-brother. She didn’t know how hurtful it must be for a daughter to be deliberately place in harm's
way by her own father, all because of his own political agenda.

To be sent on a suicide mission by her own father – Abby couldn't even imagine that! To lose her
baby sister to terrorist bombing was something that must have been terrible and yet she really had no
way to understand how much pain it had caused.

Anyatold her in no uncertain terms that Abby really had no right to be meddling in situations she
didn't properly understand and was ill-equipped to deal with. That she should have been supportive
of their needs and feelings, listened to them and not imposed her own grief and guilt issues
surrounding her own parents upon them and their relationships.

The counsellor advocated that she needed to focus on learning to tell the difference between helping
and interfering in other people's lives. To remember how she felt when people had tried to convince
her not to do something she felt strongly about. Anya cited examples such as her often less than
savoury boyfriends or that Navy Lieutenant she'd mentioned to her, Clea Thorson when she had
become utterly obsessed with solving her murder and the scientific formula.
They also talked about how it seemed that the longer the team were enmeshed, the greater the negative dynamics of the team became over time, until eventually it began to outweigh any positives that there might have been. How Abby became more infantile, emotionally needy and egocentric as the team grew toxic. How the team pandered to her every whim since they knew she was Gibbs favourite and must be treated like a princess.

Anya pointed out that members of the team became increasingly arrogant and frustrated with still being the so called 'juniors' of the team. Anya explained that growth and change often went hand in hand with ambition - however with the team remaining unchanged for over eight years, that had thwarted ambition and growth. In Anya's opinion it was almost inevitable that with no room for advancement, frustration and ambition would find it's expression in cruel and unprofessional behaviour as individuals attempted to get one up over other team members.

Abby’s counsellor talked about the natural order – how it was normal for children to grow up and leave the nest and go out on their own. How at work, groups came together and formed a team but how it was natural and healthy, even necessary for changes within the team to occur. For new blood to come in and replace others so that the team didn’t stagnate but even more importantly, degenerate into in-fighting and petty jealousies.

Anya expressed emphatically why Abby was way out of line in badgering Ziva to come back when she’d found the courage to leave and explore what it was she really wanted. What she needed to be instead of what her father had forced her to be.

How Abby had to learn that if these people had really become her family as she was convinced, then that wouldn't have changed simply because they were no longer working together every day as a team. Just as her parents hadn't ceased to be her parents when she moved out of home – they’d simply renegotiated a new relationship as adult daughter and parents.

They talked about a lot of stuff and Abby did much soul searching. She thought about how Ellie had brought a breath of fresh air to the team, how she was sweet and kind, quirky and brilliant. Yet she'd never have met her if Ziva hadn't decided to go back to Israel and search for whatever she was looking for.

She thought about how much resolve it must have taken for Ziva to leave DC, NCIS and the team behind. It had taken her resigning to protect Gibbs and then a significant distance, one that spanned oceans and continents for her to finally be able to break away and do what she wanted.

Which Abby had to admit, in hindsight, did sound a bit like Stockholm syndrome because Ziva had never wanted to be a spy in the first place, she’d just had no say in the matter. So why didn't she leave before?

Or Tony for that matter. It had taken him thinking he was going to die to be able to finally leave the team behind, even though she knew that he hadn't been happy for a very long time. Any time he expressed a desire to leave she'd always played on his need to make her happy, crying, pouting and begging him not to leave, telling him that family didn’t run out on each other.

In her new found introspective mood Abby considered what she would have done if her parents had used emotional blackmail on her to stop her leaving home. The academic opportunities missed out on, the people she might never have meet who influenced her thinking, experiences and choices and she shuddered at the thought.

Abby was starting to see how little she’d grown in the last decade as a person. In fact, Anya suggested that she'd regressed, become infantile. She'd agreed that she was a whiney brat although she was pretty sure that without finding her support group, where she finally felt like she wasn’t an
alien, she wouldn't have been capable of achieving these unflattering and often extremely painful insights.

Truthfully, as the counselling process proceeded she began to feel torn apart and yet at the same time reborn and decided it was long past time for a makeover – she'd been stagnating for way too long. Anya had encouraged her to try new things, develop new friendships and interest's too so she'd decide to give the fairy stuff a go. She'd accepted Brad Pitt's offer to create a corps of Fairy Doctors to visit children in hospitals and help to heal them with laughter and love.

Desperately feeling in need of a change she stopped dying her hair black and had her pigtails chopped off, promptly falling in love with her new role and her new look. The kids were all so damned cute though many were seriously ill, sometime terminal and it made her realise just how self-centred she'd become lately. Hard not to make comparisons and come up really wanting when many of the children she met who were dying weren't bitter or angry, mostly just concerned about how their parents would cope after they'd gone.

Nothing like seeing true selflessness in the face of death to make you take a good long look at yourself. Well Abby did and didn't like what she saw. She wouldn't want herself as a friend, so she didn't just try to make over her appearance but also what was on the inside too.

She sent a letter to Ziva in prison, apologising to her for dragging her back to the U.S. instead of respecting her wish to pursue fresh goals and aspirations. She also apologised for presuming to tell her how to relate to her father.

She sent another letter to Timmy, apologising for manipulating him every time she wanted her own way, especially forcing him to take Jethro-the-dog home after he'd attacked him and not being sensitive to his feelings. In the spirit of her new-found maturity, Abby refrained from expressing her still far from resolved anger over the whole book/movie/television series.

Finally, she wrote a letter to Tony apologising for not being a better friend to him. For not supporting him over the years when he needed it, for not encouraging him to go and find new mountains to conquer and interfering in his relationship with his father because of her own unresolved feelings about her parents.

She acknowledged that she'd manipulated him that Christmas Eve when she brought Senior back to MTAC after he'd kicked him out. Abby explained that she'd been calling Senior to let him know about Tony's wedding. She most definitely hadn't been trying to stop his and Emma's marriage and had been shocked at how much ugliness Senior had revealed during their conversation.

She admitted that she'd been a fool, that he'd completely conned her with his charm and saying all the right things at the right time on the limited occasions she'd been around him. Based on which, she'd discounted everything that she knew about Tony, thinking all the bad/funny Senior stories had to be wild exaggerations, since she liked the man so much.

She told Tony she completely understood why he was so angry with her and didn't blame him. She expressed her hopes that one day he might be able to forgive her if not for how badly she’d let him down - if not for their friendship, then for his own sake. Abby finished up by saying she would respect his desire not to have further contact and any future interactions would need to come from him first, but she'd be hoping to hear from him.

That had been almost six months ago, but she'd heard nothing in reply and Abby had admitted to herself that there probably never would be, not that she could blame him. She’d tried to put it out of her mind and carry on with the present, until she heard that he was returning to DC.
She tried to figure out what that would mean.

Working in the same office, they would have to deal with each other, if only on a purely professional basis. She felt nervous yet hopeful – he wouldn't have come back unless he was willing to work with her again. Right?

Did this mean that he would want to be friends with her again?
Facing the Music - Movement Two

Chapter Summary

Tony and Abby finally talk and the SSA lays down some new professional ground rules for working together.

Chapter Notes

This is the penultimate chapter for this story. It was intended to be the final one but people wanted to meet Tony and Emma's twins and so I bowed to pressure and wrote an epilogue.
I'm hoping to get that up next week but RL continues to suck. I lost my last Auntie on Wednesday and I'm working on her eulogy this afternoon.
I'm posting this one without my usual obsessive 'just one more check' so if there are faux pas, I hope you'll understand.

Tony led his new team back into the bullpen where they dropped off their gear and settled down to work cold cases. They'd spent the entire morning out on the FBI Quantico site, training on a simulated hostage situation in Hogan's Alley.

It was a mock town, purpose built by the Fibbies in 1987 as a tactical training facility for law enforcement personnel. Set on ten acres, it consisted of a series of shops and business such as a laundromat, post office, bank plus homes on residential streets where scenarios could take place.

Actors' role-played parts in training scenarios such as bank robbers, drug dealers, terrorists, victims and witnesses who were just going about their everyday business. Simulated munitions were used in training situations which enhanced the realism of engaging with the 'criminal element.'

It had been a good session. Ellie and Marc were competent agents, although he knew that already, but he hadn't worked with either of them in the field, unlike Jodhi whose strengths, weakness and little quirks he knew like the back of his hand. On paper and in Tony's head, his new team were good already, except that they weren't truly functioning as one team, not yet. They all, himself included, needed to trust that their team mates – individually and collectively, would have their back in a crisis.

Trust was something that took time to develop. Familiarity played its part, how team members thought, how they reacted under pressure. Sure, training helped sharpen skills, but trust was elusive – you couldn't train it and you couldn't demand it. It had to be earned, it was organic and came – hopefully with time and mutual respect.

Still, you could help the process along with mock training drills in dangerous scenarios and becoming familiar and comfortable with your team mates. So... the shooting practise, the paintball games and their mock hostage situation all helped to demonstrate the proficiencies of the individual team members to one another. It fostered confidence and familiarity in the people who would be watching each other's backs, in the bullpen and the field.
And so far, things were progressing nicely. Tony was missing his old team, but he was happy with the composition of the new one.

In time he was sure the team was going to be every bit as good as past MCRTs, but he was determined that performance would not come at the expense of their wellbeing and that included their private lives. He, Ellie and Marc were all married, and he'd be damned if their spouses and families were going to be sacrificed on the altar of work. Especially if it was a case of swallowing his pride and asking for the assistance of additional agents or delegating of some control to other agencies.

He wasn't going to start being a micromanager now he was back in DC.

Now if he could just break Ellie and Marc of the habit of calling him Boss he'd be ecstatic, since it appeared that Balboa had preferred to be addressed that way as well as Gibbs. Tony had to say he wasn't thrilled with the sobriquet. He was trying to be his own person, not be a pale imitation of his former mentor.

Marc sauntered over to have a discreet word in his ear. "Have you been down to the lab to see Abby yet? Scuttlebutt has it that she's getting antsy, Bo…Tony."

"Hey Marc, planning on heading down there after lunch. I was curious about her level of self-control, so I've been deliberately avoiding her. The old Abby would be charging up here demanding to be acknowledged."

It wasn't the whole reason why he hadn't gone straight down there but he wasn't going to admit that he wanted to put Abby on the back foot. To see if her new more grow-up mien was a sham or really the result of personal growth, as she claimed. As a master of masks and latterly, an awful lot of personal growth himself, he considered himself well placed to tell the difference.

Plus, they needed to establish some new ground rules to work together professionally. He was determined that things would not go back to the way they were before.

He was not the same person anymore. Even if you could turn back the clock, Tony had absolutely no desire to go there.

He knew though that when he agreed to come back to DC and take over the MCRT he'd have to confront some old ghosts, even if the team itself was new. There were still some agents in the bull pen who'd bitched and moaned when he was the team lead years ago that he shouldn't have been given the promotion. Irrespective of the fact that he and the rest of the office hadn't been apprised of the fact that he was actually only 'acting' team leader at the time. Oh, sure he'd expected to be on probation, but it would have been good to know that Gibbs was only on sick leave and his retirement hadn't been filed.

If he'd known that his promotion was temporary Tony might have been more inclined to head over to the dark side rather than try to keep Frick and Frack in line. Not that he'd been terribly successful at it, of course.

The fact that Gibbs was so damned 'effusive NOT' in his praise for his abilities, not only with his parsimonious anointing you as my replacement speech – the infamous 'you'll do' public assessment. There was also a dearth of public acknowledgement of the preceding five years he'd been on the team, which hadn't helped people see him as a worthy successor. Not even the team's continued excellence with him in the lead had influenced his detractors’ opinions of him.

Of course, on some level he recognised that those people who considered they had seniority (and
should have been appointed over him) wouldn’t have acknowledged his qualifications no matter how good he was. Tony knew that confirmation bias was at play – only recognising factors that confirmed their opinion, discarding those that didn’t fit their narrative.

The fact that the chronically taciturn Gibbs suddenly turning voluble, immediately after the *blink and you’ll miss it* endorsement of himself, addressing McGee and telling him what a great agent he was hadn't gone unnoticed by the critics, either. That’s because IT did fit in with their narrative that Tony was undeserving of the promotion -unlike themselves who had seniority.

Nor was the barbed suggestion by Gibbs that Tony was badmouthing the probie (not true) and that McGee should ignore him in any way, helpful or appropriate. A foolish and thoughtless remark which so easily could have - and indeed was interpreted as tacit permission for Tim and Ziva to ignore his orders. And not just while he was leading the team but once he was demoted back to senior supervisory agent when Gibbs got bored and decided to return like the prodigal son.

The stark contrast in endorsements had given DiNozzo's detractors plenty of ammunition.

Thanks so much, Gibbs … one hellava endorsement! Damn me with faint praise, why don’t you?

So much for your precious Rule 1, you bastard!

The only good thing about that hated ‘You’ll do’ was that Tony made damned sure he publicly threw his unequivocal support behind Lisle when she was appointed as his replacement. Told her she was ‘one helluva outstanding agent who he was proud to have worked with.’

He also made sure he told the whole office that anyone who didn’t respect her position as team lead would answer to himself. Lastly, to Dane Tony had expressed how proud of him – that he was a good agent but that he still had much to learn from Lisle and he better have her back and follow orders.

Although sad to leave New York, he made it his business to let everyone know how much respect he had for his former senior field agent. He also knew he’d done a good job of training the team, including insisting that they respect the chain of command. He was confident that they would be okay.

Gibbs on the other hand had fostered a truly cut-throat environment within the team. He made Tony compete against the junior agents for his approval at every point in an investigation, despite his seniority. So, it had been inevitable that people, including Ziva and McGee, would compare the two diametrically opposed comments he’d made to Tony and McGee as he was leaving. Inexorable that they draw the conclusion that Tony was only getting the job because of seniority.

How could McGee (or anyone else) not interpret the paucity of his praise for Tony versus his effusiveness for McGee as anything other than 'you should really be leading the team, Tim because you are a good agent but 'You'll Do' over there has seniority, so my hands are tied?'

He'd practically stated as much down in the basement when Ziva's mess made him return from Mexico. Like it was Tony's fault that a rogue Mossad agent had set her up and that the highly trained operative (but highly predictably volatile liaison) had taken the bait. Nor was it his fault that she didn't follow CoC and come to him when she got into trouble.

Then the way Gibbs swept back in, returning to the MCRT and throwing him out of the job like yesterday's trash didn't help improve peoples' opinions of his performance. It merely confirmed the attitude of his critics that he hadn't earned the promotion legitimately or been good enough to retain it. After all, he’d been demoted back to SFA again.
This time however, Tony was the one returning to take up the job – after three years in New York leading a team he'd built up from nothing into one which was highly successful. Tony's team had a number of very high-profile collars and a close out rate that had rivalled Gibbs’ at its peak. Plus, in that time he'd brought in popular and successful innovations that had the support of many agents, not to mention the director and SecNav Porter.

Yeah, this time there would be no doubt in anyone's minds about him earning this promotion.

Stepping back into the bull pen just now, Tony no longer felt that he had anything to prove and knew old ghosts from the past had been laid to rest. Abby was the only other Spectre he was yet to stare down. He knew that she was integral to his successful return and he wouldn't have come back if he didn't think he could face her or they could work together as professionals. They simply needed to establish new ground rules to avoid slipping back into toxic ways of interacting. In part thanks to Raffy and the work they'd done, he was confident that he could do this. He wouldn't have put himself in this situation, otherwise.

When he finally took the stairs down to the lab, not to sneak up on her but because wherever possible he avoided using the elevator these days, he was able to stand quietly in the doorway, observing her. He'd heard from Ducky, Jimmy, Ric and Marc about her 'transformation' which had been gradually taking place after the last call between them before his wedding… but seeing was believing.

It wasn't the blonde short hair or the lack of Goth clothes and makeup. He noted though that she'd opted for office casual meets whimsical bohemian with black trousers and a t-shirt with an iridescent dragon hitching a ride from a beneficent fairy. He wondered where the hell she'd found that number.

He noted what was also absent was her frenetic inability to remain still, even when focused. She was usually so hyper and, in that regard, Abby and himself were a lot alike. Although he always wondered how much of Abby's inability to stay still was due to the unhealthy amounts of caffeine she ingested daily rather than her boundless nervous energy. But watching her, she seemed to have discovered an inner stillness and calm – even her music wasn't belting out at a level to rival a jumbo jet taking off on the tarmac. It was still…alternative but not threatening to burst your eardrums with its volume that reverberated around his synapses.

He'd often wondered if subconsciously she'd been trying to go deaf, like her parents.

Clearing his throat and knocking, he entered the lab. It looked much the same as before but then again, one lab looked much like another one. He'd always thought that the best feature in Abby's lab was the enormous arched windows that let in so much light and gave the place an airy feel. It gave you the opportunity to people-watch as they hurried by, preventing a sense of isolated that was a common feature of forensic labs.

Abby looked nervous as he walked up to her before speaking. "Hallo Abby." Not Dr Scuito but also not Abs either and he saw that she noticed. Abs was a nickname – one that good friends used as a sign of affection, therefore it was inappropriate.

"Tony, welcome back." She looked him up and down carefully, probably weighing up whether to hug him or not. "You look well, how's Emma."

"Thanks. It's good to be back, I think but I miss New York. And Emma and I are both well. She's five months pregnant and expecting fraternal twins." He announced. "She wanted to be close to Brad and his wife when she delivers."

"Wow, congratulations." Abby looked momentarily crestfallen by that snippet of information about
the reason they had decided to return, before smiling. She looked as if she wanted to throw her arms around him to congratulate him but wisely decided not to.

"Thank-you. I like your hair. Looks good on you, you look younger." It was true – the little-girl-look in the last few years had not been a flattering one on her; the bangs and pigtails adding years to her features. But with the new style she looked years younger than her actual age. Plus, no woman past the age of twenty-five minded hearing they looked younger than their chronological age, especially when you hit the big four zero.

Hell, he wasn't one to talk! He freaked at the appearance of any grey hairs or wrinkle.

She flushed with pleasure. "Felt that it was time for a new look. I started getting a new perspective and thought a makeover would complete the process." Changing the topic, she looked him in squarely in the eyes. Did you get the letter of apology I sent to you a few months ago?"

"Yes, I did. I appreciate the gesture. I'm sorry if I jumped to the wrong conclusion and accused you of trying to break up the wedding, Abby. But going on your past actions it strongly suggested that was your motive in talking to Senior."

"You had every right to think that Tony, especially since I interfered so much in your relationship with Senior. Still, even though I never intended to cause you or Emma harm or interfere with your marriage, I was still way out of line calling him to tell him about your wedding." She conceded contritely, and Tony was a little surprised at the insight.

"I had no right, it wasn't my place. I was interfering, but boy did I get a nasty shock."

Tony smiled faintly. "He wanted to get his hands on the David estate, especially Eli's stash of diamonds. He always checked out a woman's bank balance before he wooed her. It was the first rule of Financial Wealth and Happiness for Dummies."

"Eli's David's diamonds – weren't they an urban myth?"

"Not according Ziva. She told me about them on our trip to Berlin. It was how she knew where to find Bodnar – follow the diamonds.

"I'm so sorry I let a man I met on a handful of occasions blind me to the truth, particularly since we were good friends for so many years. Can you forgive me? Can we ever be friends again?"

Tony looked at her steadily. "Let's take this one step at a time Abby. Let's focus on being able to work together as two professionals to start with. I'm not sure if we can be friends but if we do, it will have to be a new friendship because from where I was standing the old one wasn't so great."

Abby nodded. "You're right, about both. We need to work together as professionals and I wasn't a good friend to you. I let you down."

Tony nodded agreement before getting down to business.

"Okay, so we are going to need to agree to a few ground rules that are not negotiable, Dr Sciuto. Here's how it's going to be. I've always respected your professional status, and never once have I questioned your competence. I expect the same courtesy from you. I'm not Gibbs, I never was, and it was a mistake to ever even try to be when he left. I'm me and I'll run the team my way and I'm warning you right here and now, there will be changes from how Gibbs ran things."

Tony took a deep breath as coached by Raffy before he continued.
"I won't be held hostage for results to Caf-Pows or polishing your ego. I will treat you with respect and gratitude for your efforts, but you won't be treated as the favourite child. You're no little girl – you're a grown woman; nor will I be walking on eggshells to protect your delicate sensibilities, either."

He stared at her sternly and she blanched, as if hit but nodded her agreement.

"Nor will I tolerate you manipulating my team to get your own way. You will not punch them either – it's against DoD procedures. I don't care about the hugs as long as you ask first. My probie may not want to be hugged and that is her right – you accept no for an answer."

Seeing the shocked expression on Abby's face, he reiterated. "Like I said, I have no intention of running the MCRT as Gibbs did – I have my own methods that work for me. I won't be trying to replicate the 'psychic stuff' and trying to turn up before you inform me you have something.

"I categorically will not tolerate you undermining me with my team or trying to make me look stupid. And I give you fair warning, you even think about slapping another trainee sticker on me, Abigail Sciuto and I will write you up for gross insubordination, just as I should have done the other times you did it. Are we clear?"

"Yes Tony. I understand." He saw the woebegone face – she didn't look thrilled… Well tough! It was just the way it had to be.

"Good. Now it's your turn. You have anything you want to say or any questions."

"Yes, first off, how do you want to be addressed?"

"Tony's fine. I'm trying to get Ellie and Marc to drop the boss." He grimaced.

"Okay and am I still able to participate in team campfires?"

"Of course, your participation is vital, as is Palmer's and Ducky's." Ducky was gradually working towards retirement – working only four days a week as Jimmy gradually picked up the slack. "The only proviso, which I'm sure you are fully aware of already is unless you're working on urgent evidence for another team. That will obviously take precedence."

She nodded agreement. "Thank-you. Oh, and I met your probie Jodhi when she started – she's really cool. But she not really a probie is she?"

"No. She was my probie in New York and she has about as much time as an NCIS field agent as Bishop, but Ellie has seniority over her because of her extra years as an analyst at NSA. Still she prefers to be called Probie rather than referred to as the baby of the team but don't let that fool you - Jodhi is a damned good agent. Her dad is a cop, as was his father and she's a crack shot – better scores than a lot of the other agents in the bull pen, for all her youth. She just needs a few more years to mature as an investigator."

Abby nodded. "She's nice. I like her. Oh, and Tony, about the Caf-Pows? I'm cutting down. Jimmy's making me cut down gradually. He says with the levels of caffeine I was ingesting that stopping suddenly is dangerous."

"Okay well I can't say that I don't think it's a good idea. Caffeine can be addictive but don't do it to curry favour with me because you've heard I've become a health nut, Abby. I don't try to convert anyone about what they put into their bodies. Considering what my diet used to be like that would be incredibly hypocritical."
He glanced at his watch, knowing he had to leave the office early today.

"I've have to go now and see where the team is at with the cold cases they're working. I'll talk to you soon."

Leaving the lab, he felt a little like he'd entered a parallel universe where everything was the same and yet different. Abby giving up Caf-Pows and losing the pigtails for starters. Then there was the radical change in her attitude. He'd been deliberately pretty hard on her, wanting to set the rules of engagement between them from the word go – no ambiguities, no wiggle room.

Yet in spite of his autocratic, harsh manner, there had been no pouting, protestations or histrionics. She'd flinched once or twice but he was expecting fireworks and foot stamping at the very least. Perhaps this turning over a new leaf, this personal growth was the real deal.

He came down here, fully confident that he could establish a professional working relationship with Abby, but she'd surprised him just a little. Perhaps, given time they just might forge a new friendship although like the tentative stirrings with Gibbs, he would never again surrender his heart and trust to either of them.

It would be really stupid to give Abby or Gibbs power to hurt him a second time and with his family now depending upon him, Tony had a responsibility to them not to put himself into harm's way if it wasn't absolutely necessary. To put it bluntly, neither friendship was worth the risk to his family. He might be willing to let them back into his life in a limited way, since they had demonstrated remorse and a desire to change but there was that saying – once bitten twice shy.

Tony knew that he was no saint and he'd had done a great deal of work on his own personal issues over the last three years. It would be pretty hypocritical of him to reject olive branches being extended by Jethro and Abby. Yet even if they managed to build new relationships other than professional ones, he had no intention of making himself vulnerable enough to give either one the power to break him down again.

Maybe that made him seem heartless or cynical but the old turn-the-other-cheek-Tony was well and truly gone. And it wasn't cynicism so much as realism. It was due to his own struggles to change his attitudes and behavioural patterns, formed over many years that he knew how freakin hard it was to achieve real longstanding changes.

He'd been through not just his own battles to change but witnessed all the attempts by his father over the years to stop drinking, which had to this point, all ended in failure. Hell, even simple stuff like taking the elevator instead of the stairs now that he was back in DC again was so ingrained in him that it was hard not to fall back into old 'bad' habits. Even when he had a truly compelling reason not to.

Tony had no doubt that if he didn't lay out boundaries, some set-in-concrete ground rules (Abby would probably declare them draconian rules) for their professional interaction on a daily basis, old patterns of behaviour and thinking would inevitably emerge over time. Just as Gibbs would always crave power and control and if placed in a situation where he was leading a group of people, would probably fall back into old ways.

It wasn't exactly surprising – as well as craving power, the guy was a natural leader and yet natural in this context didn't necessarily equate with good. There were plenty of powerful leaders throughout history that had been hugely successful and yet left mayhem and chaos in their wake. Tony knew there was more to real leadership than just focusing on results or the ability to inspire strong loyalty, almost religious fervour in your subordinates.
There were other equally critical attributes that were a part of being a good team leader. The responsibility to take care of those under you and not cause them harm. The ability to leave people feeling good about themselves and make sure that when they moved on, they were better individuals, better agents for the experience of serving on your team.

As a firearms and combat instructor Jethro could let his 'Evil Gibbs' off the leash without causing that much collateral damage to the agents and rookies he taught for a few weeks. Working solo helped keep some of his less admirable traits in check but Tony had no doubt that beginning to deal with his grief for his wife and child had not magically undone the ingrained behaviours of the last twenty odd years. Knew it with a certainty borne out of his own tussles to overcome his childhood experiences and how easy it was to fall back into destructive patterns of reacting.

Just like Abby, if she was permitted to manipulate people and act like an emotional vampire, would run roughshod over everyone she came into contact with. Sucking them dry with her neediness and childish need to be the centre of the universe. Old habits die hard!

Even with the very best intentions in the world, maintaining permanent change was always going to be a challenge. Regardless of how motivated that you might be, often other people tried to sabotage the changes that you were attempting to make.

He'd discovered that when he'd tried to cast off his class clown persona several times and the team had felt threatened by his suddenly ultra-serious mien and kept pushing him to go back to 'normal.' Sometimes being sabotaged by people closest to you occurred because people didn't feel comfortable with change per say.

Sometimes it was a more specific fear that individual change may show up other's shortcomings and although Tony had a new team, most people in the DC office remained the same, so he was quite sure some found his changes disturbing to their realities.

It was one thing to seem to acknowledge your own flaws, but it was another thing entirely to decide to do something about it. Your so-called flaws could and did become a crutch – an excuse to behave in a certain way and not be held to account. Like his fear of commitment letting him avoid taking a risk on a long-term relationship or Gibbs’ ‘second B for bastard’ excusing him for treating other people like shit.

Tony had put in a lot of preparation with Raphaella, his personal saviour back in New York in preparing for his return to DC so he wouldn’t just slip back into his former self-destructive ways. It was one reason why he and Emma decided to buy a new place – a house to help create new patterns – well, apart from the minor detail of two babies and two cats requiring more room of course.

Creating a new home helped Tony to set new boundaries and consolidate his new attitudes and habits in the face of so much that was familiar and comfortable in D, even when it wasn’t exactly positive influence. They’d still been comfortable to slip back into, like a pair of old worn out shoes.

Establishing new routines took a lot more effort and mindfulness - a house was about looking to the future and not the past. It was also about the expression of optimism – it declared that he expected to be around for the long haul with Emma and the babies.

As he made his way back to his desk from the lab Tony observed his new team hard at work on a cold case. He felt reasonably happy with how things were going so far but knew that at least for a while, it would be an ongoing battle for him to create new patterns of behaviour to replace former ones. He had after all spent over a decade in this office.

Sinking down into his office chair he opened up his inbox to check his e-mail, seeing that there was a
handful of new messages. He clicked on the first one from Balboa who was checking in to see how he was doing. Raffy was reminding him that they had a counselling session scheduled tonight via Skype and Lisle was asking his advice about which probie to adopt. She'd sent him three personnel files to look over and he emailed her back that he would look at them tonight.

He wasn't going to tell his former senior field agent what to do – she was more than capable of leading the team, she just needed to believe in herself. Of course, since she asked, he would assist her by looking over the files and point out any pros and cons that he saw since he didn't exactly think like most people. Then he'd encourage his former 2IC to trust her own intuition, which was excellent, and he'd tell her so again until she believed in herself like he did.

She'd already made a mature decision not to bring in two new team members at once. When he and Jodhi departed, she'd brought their new junior agent on board and let the three of them gel as a team before she even considered taking on a probie.

Zabinski had great instincts and would make a good senior supervisory agent even if it felt a little bit like a parent sending his kid out into the harsh cruel world to fend for themselves. Tony was going to miss her a lot, she had a really quirky sense of humour in addition to her other attributes that had made working with her a joy. Tony vowed not to forget to invite her and Dane to come to DC to spend a weekend as soon as they got the house sorted out. They were good friends as well as team members; he wanted to stay in touch with them both and he knew Jodhi felt the same too. Maybe when they had a housewarming they'd get together.

As he sent off his reply to Lisle he saw a fresh email arrive in his box reminding him that Emma had a doctor's appointment at 4.10pm (1610 he automatically converted) which required his presence. Tony felt a warm glow of emotion wash over him at the thought of Emma carrying his children and her insistence that he participate in the pre-natal appointments with her. His wife was a strong and capable individual and he loved that she wanted him – no she needed him to be an equal partner in their twins’ grand entrance, even if the thought of being a father was way more scaring than facing down a terrorist.

So he tried, as much as possible humanly possible to accompany her to all her appointments for their twins, who for some unfathomably bizarre reason they'd started calling Dewie and Louie a couple of months ago. Bizarre because they had absolutely no intention of calling the babies either name, but they hadn't been able to settle on proper names either.

One name had been most definitely ruled out though – there would be no Anthony DiNozzo III. He wouldn’t ever do that to his kid. No child should hav their father introduce himself as the original (i.e. the best) Tony DiNozzo. He may know zilch about parenting – but at least he knew that much!

Sending a quick text to Emma who had also returned to work this week (just some part time shifts for Brad) he let her know he'd meet her at the OBGYN's office at 1600. Brad had referred her to Lara's doctor and if there was one thing that you could depend on doctors for, it was that they always ensured that their family had the best health professionals possible when it came to medical care.

There were other benefits to having two doctors as buddies. At least between Palmer and his adorable toddler, Victoria and now Brad with the unexpected arrival of eight-month-old Brandon, he had some role model fathers to aspire to. And probably much more pertinent, to run to screaming whenever he got overwhelmed.

Tony was a realist - he figured that was going to happen a lot!

Plus, Lara, Breena and Emma already had plans to share child care so that they could all still work part-time. They hadn't figured out if that meant them all sharing a nanny or if they took it in turns to
look after Victoria, Brandon and Dewie and Louie.

While Tony wasn't thrilled about the concept of a nanny – shades of his own childhood – he recognised that this was a very different situation. They both planned to be hands on parents even if he kept having nightmares about dropping the babies or accidentally drowning them when he was trying to bathe them since according to a few of his frat brothers, they were slippery little suckers when wet. He just kept reminding himself he was an athlete with excellent coordination.

Plus, he had to be mindful of not allowing his job to become more important than Emma or his children.

Four more months to prepare for fatherhood, maybe less because it was twins – so there was a strong possibility that they could come early. He was equal parts anxious, excited and downright terrified. Tony pulled the ultrasound of the twins out of his wallet and stared in awe at his unborn children.

He only hoped he was up to the task and wouldn’t let Emma and the twins down. All the undercover work, the staring down crazed killers and dirtbags determined not to be taken alive was no where near as scary as the thought of screwing up the lives of two innocent infants.

He had to get it right. Failure was simply not an option!
Daddy Loves You

Chapter Summary

Tony decides to leave a literary legacy for his children in case he doesn’t live to see them grow up so that they will never doubt that he loved them both.

Chapter Notes

Well here it is – the last chapter of the story. Thank you to everyone who supported this story which is dedicated to cancer survivors and those who have fallen while fighting the good fight. I have nothing but admiration for you all, having watched a number of family members deal with this disease.

Plus, I owe readers a mea culpa. A reviewer asked me a question about Abby referring to a phone call between her and Tony prior to his wedding. I realised that part of Chapter 27: A Chapel By the Sea missed getting posted. I’ll update that one immediately after I post this epilogue. Sorry about that :)

Warning: Extreme sucrose alert of the tooth rotting variety. Have really outdone myself in this fiction – a ship, a wedding and baby cuteness – all things I usually avoid like the plague.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Epilogue

Three Months Later: 3rd January 2017

Selected Excerpts of the Journal of Anthony DiNozzo
To our twins,

I decided I'd start journaling again just in case the worst should happen and I'm not around to watch you grow into the amazing adults I have no doubt you'll be. That way, you'll be in no doubt whatsoever that I loved and wanted you both, even if I'm terrified out of my mind at the thought of screwing up as a parent.

When I become too frantic thinking that I might be a bad father and scar you for life, I remind myself that there's really no such thing as a perfect parent. Which is really very good because I'm so very far from perfect that it isn't funny.

Yet when I ask myself what I think is most important attributes of being a father, I keep coming up with three common qualities that I hope I can fulfil successfully.

I want to ensure you'll never have to wonder if you are loved and I hope to be able to tell both of you in person how much I love you, every single day.

I'll also try to the absolute best of my abilities not to make promises to you that I can't keep. I know that it isn't realistic not to disappoint you at some point in your lives – remember that I'm not perfect (far from it) but if I make you a promise I want you to know that I did my utmost to keep it.

And finally, I want for you grow up knowing that I desire you to follow your dreams, not mine and no matter what path you decide to take in life I will love you and be so proud of you.

In case you're wondering, your mom and I are still waiting to meet you, although we do have a few ultrasound photos of you already.

In four short weeks you're due to make your grand entrance into the world and I'll get to hold you both for the first time. I offered to record your birth for posterity however your sainted mother has ruled out that idea since I'm going to be too busy playing cheerleader and possibly receiving!

Have to tell you guys, I'm nervous since I've never had much to do with babies – well except for the fact I was one myself. I'm terrified I'm going to drop you.

So, my two little treasures, my little miracles...

Always remember that your Daddy loves you with his whole being. In this life and into the next. XXX

OOO

~o0o~

8th January 2017

To Baby Girl and Baby Boy DiNozzo,

Well my two very impatient little ones, it seems you decided to make your entry into the world more than three weeks early. You were born 12 hours ago after the doctors decided to induce your mother, since her preeclampsia was becoming too difficult to manage.

So here you are, lying there in your cribs, safe and sound and your mother is sleeping, recovering from your birth. All three of you are healthy and for that I'm indescribably grateful.

I just have to say that I'm in awe of how perfect you both are, even though you are so tiny and helpless. Which leaves me feeing rather confused because on the one hand, I'm frightened that you might break when I hold you in my arms but on the other hand, you're so fragile I want to bundle
you up and hold you. To protect you from all the bad in the world. Crazy huh?

When they told your mom and me that you were going to be born almost a month premature I'm not sure what I was expecting – that you'd be not quite done yet – maybe missing finger and toenail nails and hair and yet here you are. Perfect!

You both have a shock of hair – really dark and how did that happen? And perfectly formed, tiny little finger and toenails that I can't help kissing. (Sappy much?) I guess you're just smaller than average, but they say you'll catch up in time.

Everyone agrees that you are exceptionally beautiful babies – well, with the exception of your Uncle Brad and Aunty Lara who still think that Brandon was the most gorgeous child ever to emerge from the womb. Just between the three of us though, he was all scrunched up and tomato red in the face. Okay so it was because he screamed so much with colic, but I solemnly swear on my beloved Buckeyes that he didn't hold a candle to either of you.

If you want confirmation I posted a photo of you both a little while ago and your honorary aunts and uncles have declared that you are the most beautiful babies ever.

I'm sitting here watching you and your mother sleeping, hoping that we're ready for you at home. Arriving over three weeks early kind of threw our plans into disarray and of course your mom has been confined to bed for the last two weeks before you were born trying to keep her blood pressure down. So, things might be a bit disorganised when we take you home. Bear with us and remember that we're trying hard.

To our very special little twins – know that your Mommy and Daddy love you to the moon and back.

Hugs and kisses.

Daddy

11th January 2017

Welcome to the world Holly Ava and Jason Eric DiNozzo

Yep we finally decided on your names. So, no more Baby Girl and Boy DiNozzo or Dewie and Louie for our precious tiny twins. Oh wait... I never told you about that, did I? Well no biggie – it's just what we used to call you before you were born since we couldn't agree on names for you.

Jason, never believe anyone if they try to tell you you're named after Jason Bourne in the Bourne Identity – so not true. You're named after your mom's father, your grandpa Karl Jason Ingham who was a civil engineer. I wish you had a chance to know him. He sounds like someone to look up to.

And Holly, when you're old enough I'm sure your mom will share with you how we got engaged – very Breakfast at Tiffany's. You may not know this but back in 2012 the US Library of Congress decided this movie was 'culturally, historically or aesthetically significant' and they selected it to be preserved in the National Film Registry. Such a good choice as far as I'm concerned but I digress. Audrey Hepburn is one of my favourite actresses and in Breakfast at Tiffany's she played a girl called Holly Golightly, who you are named after.

Your middle names we picked because we liked them, and they sounded good with your first and last names. This is a very important consideration, my precious pair...can you imagine if your middle names were Heather and Justin? Yeah Holly Heather DiNozzo or Jason Justin DiNozzo would suck, right?
Hope that we haven't ruined your lives with our choice of names but just be grateful you weren't named Apple, Hash-Tag, Moon Zappa or something equally outrageous.

Anyway, Jason and Holly, not only did we finally decide on your names today, the other big highlight was that we also brought you home from the hospital. You'd think that between a big bad federal agent and a super smart nurse we'd be able to figure out how to get your baby capsules buckled safely into our car, wouldn't you? But after half an hour we had to call your Uncle Brad to come and show us how to do it. He's never going to let us live it down.

Just one thing Holly and Jase, I cannot emphasise how important this is – while Uncle Brad is a good man, if he ever tries to corrupt you over to the dark side with invitations to become Wolverines – run away as fast as you can and tell someone immediately. He's been known to suffer from Chronic Buckeye Envy. A wretched but serious disease that is problematic to treat since suffers don't understand how truly ill they are and will deny that they require treatment.

Nevertheless, after we finally got you both home and changed your diapers and then we fed you – okay your mom fed you as I don't have the right um equipment, we put you down in your own cribs and left the baby monitor on so we could hear you when you wake up. We decided to grab a cat nap since you sleep for only a couple of hours between changes and feeds (more high maintenance than a super model, kiddos) and yet I caught your mom creeping back in to check on you.

I know this for a fact only because I was sneaking back in for exactly the same reason. We're both terrified that you might stop breathing, I guess. You're just so little and vulnerable, such little defenceless miracles.

Right now, I'm on two weeks parental leave and I'm wondering how I'm going to ever be able to tear myself away from you and go back to work.

Never forget my precious little ones, how much your Daddy loves you. XOX.

~o0o~

8th July 2017

Well my adorable babies, it's time for me to chronicle your six-month milestones as I have done for every month since your birth. Of course, since you were born almost one month premature I haven't been able to get any of the docs to agree if you are really six months old now or five months since you weren't fully baked when you were born.

Anyway, you are both able to roll over now – if you're are on your back you can flip over onto your belly and then roll over onto your back again. Definitely not turtles then!

Jason, you're able to sit up unassisted and Holly you're nearly there too, little one. Any day now I'm sure.

Both of you have started eating solids. You ate baked pumpkin from our vegetable garden the other night and ended up with more of it in your hair than in your mouths. Don't worry, I took lots of embarrassing videos and pictures for you to see when you're bigger.

You can thank me later!

Let's see – you are both babbling non-stop and your Uncle Brad claims that you have inherited my gift of the gab. We should be so lucky! So far you have managed to utter single syllable consonants like - d, m, g, and b although you are really fluent when babbling in vowels. Not a huge vocabulary, I'll grant you but you both seem to make it work for you.
You hold the most amazing conversations with each other and anyone else who'll cooperate because now you understand that you have to take turns talking and listening – it's really cute.

As I'm sure I've mentioned before, when you were first born you both had a shock of dark, almost black hair which was a bit of a surprise since your mom is a honey blonde and I had blonde hair too when I was a child.

People told us that it would probably all fall out and they were right. You were bald as badgers for several months before growing your current crop of blonde locks.

Holly, your mom has a whole bunch of these little headbands that she matches with your outfits. I don't think she can wait until you grow enough hair for her to be able to tie it up with ribbons. Guess I'm going to have to practise making braids for when you get a bit bigger, Sweetie. Jase, don't worry I promise to throw away any sailor suits that any misguided people might give you, thinking it's cute.

According to my baby chart that lists baby milestones which are divided up into three categories that are 'mastered skills' - that most six months old babies can do, 'emerging skills' – that half of six months olds are able to do and 'advanced skills' - that a few babies can do, you're bang on target.

A lot of what you can already do is in the 'emerging skills category – eating solids, sitting unassisted (way to go son) and reaching for things and being able to put them in your mouths. Actually, that last skill is a bit gross in my book, but I guess it's building up your immunity, although your mom is obsessed with sterilising everything. Hey what do you expect – she's a nurse!

You guys are doing just great by all accounts, especially since you got taken out of the oven before you were finished baking. Just kidding! Bottom line, you're both healthy and happy and that's all that matters.

Okay... where was I?

Oh yeah! Today is my birthday and your mom’s throwing me a birthday party and has invited our friends over tonight, which means that you'll have plenty of people who you can both wow with your amazing feats of co-ordination.

Your Aunty Lisle and Uncle Dane can't wait to meet you in the flesh and will probably overwhelm you with their constant undivided attention. They were supposed to come to DC before now to see you, but cases came up.

They sent me a message before they boarded their flight to let me know they are on their way. Your Aunty Jodhi is meeting them at the airport soon and bringing them here. They're going to stay with us for the weekend, so I'll expect you two to be on your best behaviour and no colicky crying at 0330 in the morning.

You two - our precious little treasures are never ever going to know how it feels not to celebrate your birthdays – trust me on that. And yep that's a promise!

You're going to have such wonderful birthdays – not the over the top, throw a bucket load of money and invite lots of important people sort of parties. The sort where you invite some kids from your class or from the neighbourhood and you play pass the parcel and eat fairy cakes and eat lots of birthday cake.

Or we'll go to a theme park with your best friends or go bowling and a ton of other normal fun stuff that I never got to do when I was growing up. You will know how precious you are – how wanted!

So anyway, dear ones, for most of my life I never celebrated my birthday but since your mom came
into my life, she makes sure that it's a really special day for me, even if we have to work. Trust me – it's the little things that make it special, not the over-the-top extravagances.

This year - with our new house and your safe arrival she's going all out for this one with a party, since we have so much to celebrate. She sent out invitations almost six weeks ago, so no one would have an excuse not to be here, including invitations sent to the old team from New York, who you don't know yet.

Sidebar – I was born in New York and you were conceived there, so I'm sure you'll have a spiritual connection to the place and its people. Too much information? Sorry!

Where were we? Ah yes, party guests… there's my new team here in DC - Marc and his family, Ellie and Jake and Jodhi with her latest guy, Pete I think he's called. Actually, now I come to think about it, you have met one of my old NY team because Aunty Jodhi was in New York with me before we came to DC. She's looking forward to seeing her old team mates as much as I am. And last but not least, your doting godparents, the Pitts with Brandon, the Palmers and Victoria who thinks you two are real live dolls and Grandpa Ducky. No doubt he'll regale you with lots of stories – that is, if he can even get near you tonight.

I predict lots of snuggling in your future tonight but then again seeing I'm the birthday boy, I may just try to monopolise you both for myself.

Post Script:

Thought you might like to know how the party went last night my precious little cherub-bubs. Yeah, I know... too sappy but I can't seem to help myself.

Officially, I'm looking after you because your mom got called in to work an emergency shift for another nurse who wrapped her car around a tree. Unofficially, it's hard if not downright impossible to get near you, between Lisle and Jodhi – who also stayed here last night. Slept on the couch. Although Aunty Jodhi has her own apartment, she claimed to have drunk too much to drive home last night.

Truthfully, I think she wanted to stay here because she didn't want to waste a minute being with Lisle and Dane before they head back to New York this afternoon. And then there is the fact that both of them were awfully clucky with you two at the party last night – you stole the show as they say but then again, you're totally cute, so no surprise.

Anyway, Lisle and Jodhi have decided that we should take you two little sponges to the zoo today, so I have loaded up the car with your gear – how is it that two small people need so much stuff? Then when you two wake up and we get you fed and changed we'll head off to Rock Creek Park to the National Zoo because they have a Kids Zoo with miniature donkeys, alpacas, goats, pigs and all the usual suspects.

As if I don't spend enough time at Rock Creek Park already but never mind that now – I'm sure we'll have a wonderful time. Must remember to apply baby sunscreen – to you two as well!

But back to the party – You guys were the stars. When they could snatch you away from Lisle and Jodhi, everyone spoiled you rotten. Holly, you managed to sit up unassisted last night. I knew it wouldn't be long til you followed your brother. Everyone clapped and cheered when you did it and you got the biggest grin on your face and chuckled and babbled. You two are so close to stringing multiple sounds together, I swear.

Jason you created a stir when we were cutting my birthday cake. I didn't really want one since I
don’t eat cake or sugary stuff anymore, but your Aunty Lara made this amazing cake that was made without processed food or sugars especially for me, just so I could have a tiny taste. She’s a sweetie – even if she did marry a wolverine.

When she lit the candles on the cake and they were singing Happy Birthday, you frightened the heck out of your Aunty Lisle who was holding you up to watch, Jase. You were mesmerised by the candles I guess, or you wanted to face plant the cake, so you could put it into your mouth because of your oral fixation.

Well at any rate, you made this surprise lunge forward toward the cake and she nearly dropped you. Lisle turned white as a sheet and had to sit down but your mom and I got really excited since lunging forward is an advanced skill that only a few six months old babies can do. I think it means that you might start crawling early too. [Note to self to baby proof the house next weekend.]

Just so you know, you both had a taste of birthday cake – it was a yummy zucchini cake by the way, even if you spat most of it out. Your Aunty Lara was most offended.

Right now, I can hear you waking up via the baby monitor. Time to get you changed and fed so we can get out of the house.

Until next time and never forget how much your Daddy loves you.

Hugs and kisses.

The End
Chapter End Notes

So I just wanted to apologise for not posting this final chapter sooner. I have been writing a story for the Quantum Bang and with the various drama's I was in danger of having to pull out since I missed the first submission date. I'm hoping to make the late submission date for the first of May - hence my total immersion in the story I'm submitting. I've still got some way to go, maybe five chapters but hoping to finish it in time.

So it is a good news bad news situation. The good news is that I am writing again and finding my rhythm, but the bad news was I dropped the ball getting around to posting the epilogue to I Shouldn't Have To. Thank you for your patience.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!